

The Star Ledger

Striking a chord for Black music

Newark museum would play up Jersey's role in African-American sound

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From the raging jazz clubs of the 1930's to renowned singer Sarah Vaughn to rappers like Redman, Newark has played a key role in African-American music history.

Now, the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District is working with the Smithsonian Institution to help Newark make an even greater contribution — the country's first museum dedicated to the sounds and rhythms of the African Diaspora in America.

"Newark was an incubator for modern American Black music," said Clement Price, a Rutgers-Newark professor and board member of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District.

For many years, Newark was acclaimed for its gospel music. In the early part of the 20th century, Newark had more than 100 clubs where top flight performers entertained in the district known as the Coast, an area around Lincoln Park on South Broad Street.

The goal of the museum is to honor the New Jerseyans who have contributed to African-American music while providing overall context and showing the correlation between the many genres that define African-American music: blues, spirituals, hip-hop, rock 'n roll, gospel, house music, rhythm and blues.

"There are other museums that take a piece of African-American music like jazz, but this will span the entire diaspora," said Baye Wilson, executive director of Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District and project manager for the museum.

The new museum is proposed for a place on Broad Street near Lincoln Park. Using the façade of the old South Park Presbyterian Church, where Abraham Lincoln once spoke, the museum will preserve elements of Newark's past and look toward the future, organizers say.

Wilson said the project is at least two years from groundbreaking. Right now, the group is assembling an advisory board, developing a price tag and raising funds. "The museum will enshrine the musical titans of the past and inspire the musical talents of the future," said Newark Mayor Sharpe James, who has thrown his support behind the project.

Being associated with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., through its affiliates program will give the new Museum of African-

American Music access to the institute's extensive collections and professionals.

"Newark has a strong legacy of artists and musicians and they seem to have the right staff on board to get the project done," said Joanne Flores, senior coordinator of the Smithsonian Affiliations.

Over the last decade, the number of music museums boomed, said Rob Blount, president and CEO of the Tampa Bay History Center and vice president of the Music Museum Alliance.

Projects like the Experience Music Project in Seattle, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and the Buddy Holly Center in Lubbock, Texas, for example, have done relatively well, Blount said.

"Music is the growth industry in the museum business," said Blount, who was excited when he heard about the Newark project. "In many ways, our national character is defined by our music. People intimidated by an art museum will not think twice about a music museum."

The design of the Museum of African-American Music by Hillier Architecture aims to draw people into its doors, said lead design architect Roger Smith.

The design incorporates a new park called "Arts Park." A redevelopment plan also calls for new housing and shops in the area.

There will be a courtyard between the old façade of the church and the new 100,000 square-foot museum building that will be used for community gatherings.

A restaurant, a nightclub, a music studio and a dance studio also are planned.

Most importantly, Smith said, is that the museum will be a completely interactive experience. The front of the museum may incorporate projected images and collages of legendary music figures using video.

Inside, visitors will not only hear the music, they will feel and see it. Video and interactive displays where people can make music are under consideration.

"It can't be a static experience," Smith said. "If you are listening to music, chances are you are tapping your feet."

In addition to African-American music history, there will be a focus on the relationships between music genres.

"You want people to see the linkages between hip-hop and other forms of music. It's about the larger history and social and political conditions at the time the music was made. A lot of local communities are beginning to understand their history," said Smith.

Theresa Hooper Marshall, chairwoman of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, said the project will be "an opportunity for us to look at Newark and say it is not a wasteland as some people perceive. Look at some places where museums have been built and it changes the whole economy. It makes us mindful of the arts and it becomes a focal point."

Coming from Newark Liberty International Airport onto Broad Street, the Lincoln Park area and site of the proposed museum would be one of the first things travelers see. Having a museum there will make a huge difference, said Hooper Marshall.

"You make up your mind about a city as soon as you come in. This will make a grand entrance to Newark."

When the city's industrial engines were throttled by the Great Depression, so too were Lincoln Park and other Newark neighborhoods: the rich people left, and the decay set in. That downward spiral culminated with Newark's 1967 riots, which left Lincoln Park scarred by burned-out buildings and crime. The area remains a jumble of vacant lots, drug treatment centers, boarding houses and Victorian homes in various stages of rehabilitation.

But now Lincoln Park is finally joining the revival that has blessed the rest of downtown.

The first day of that awakening came yesterday, when developers ceremonially broke ground on the first phase of a four-year, \$150 million project that will transform 11 acres into an artists' enclave anchored by a 70,000 square-foot Smithsonian Institution-affiliated Museum of African-American Music. Eventually, the new district, bounded by Lincoln Park, Broad Street, West Kinney Street and Washington Street, will include 300 units of mixed-income housing, including two-family, live/work studios for artists, condominiums and apartments for low-income residents. There will also be art galleries, retail stores and other commercial spaces.

In short, the plan is to again make Lincoln Park a gateway to Newark's central business district.

"This place is a barometer of where the city is," said Baye Adofo-Wilson, executive director of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, which is spearheading the redevelopment effort. "So it's not surprising that during this period of transformation in the city — new housing getting developed, an arena getting built, an election going on — that this neighborhood is also changing and participating in the renaissance of the city."

Lincoln Park is one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. It was originally called South Commons and was rechristened after Lincoln's assassination. At the end of the Civil War, it became one of Newark's prime addresses, and the remaining Victorian homes make the neighborhood one of New Jersey's best examples of 19th-century architecture.

As African-Americans flocked to Newark in the early 20th century, an adjoining neighborhood of nightclubs, called the Coast, sprung up north of the park.

Talk about a Lincoln Park revival dates back about as long as the decline, but it didn't pick up steam until the nonprofit Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District formed seven years ago.

The first phase of the project, to begin immediately, is the construction of the 29-unit rental house project on Lincoln Park and a 25-unit condominium project on Washington Street that will include lofts and energy-efficient appliances and lighting.

Poet Amiri Baraka, who has been calling for a revitalization for 25 years, said the plan was to create an "indigenous" cultural community.

"This won't only be artists and low-income housing. We're also going to build a museum that will be unparalleled throughout the world," Baraka said in a ceremony at the City Without Walls gallery on Crawford Street, which is included in the new arts district.

For the groundbreaking, the ceremony moved around the corner, to a vacant lot at Lincoln Park and Halsey Street (the site of a later phase of construction). Representatives from banks that lent money for the project, corporate foundations that provided grants and city agencies that approved the project all talked about how important it was to revive a neighborhood that represents so much of the city's cultural history.

The Newark Boys Chorus, housed in the nearby Newark Symphony Hall, sang a spiritual. Everyone grabbed gold-painted shovels and pressed them into the tightly packed earth.

Theresa Hooper Marshall, chairwoman of the board of the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, said her group had been working a long-time for that moment. "We've weathered the storm," she said.

So has the neighborhood.