

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

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## Final Report Proposed Baker's Keyboard Lounge Historic District 20510 Livernois Avenue

By a resolution dated January 20, 2015, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Baker's Keyboard Lounge Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Baker's Keyboard Lounge Historic District consists of a single contributing building located on the east side of Livernois Avenue south of Eight Mile Road. The building is presently owned by SB Media LLC and continues to be operated as Baker's Keyboard Lounge.

## **BOUNDARIES**

The boundaries of the proposed Baker's Keyboard Lounge Historic District, shown in bold lines on the attached map, are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of the east-west alley running between Eight Mile Road and Norfolk Avenue;

On the east, the centerline of the north-south alley running between Livernois Avenue and Warrington Drive;

On the south, the southern boundary line, as extended east-west, of Lot 14 of Woodlawn Subdivision, Liber 29, Page 54, Wayne County Records;

On the west, the centerline of Livernois Avenue.

## **BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The west, north, and east boundaries are defined by public streets or alleys. The south boundary is defined by an adjacent building that is not historically associated with Baker's Keyboard Lounge.

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Known as the "world's oldest jazz club," Baker's Keyboard Lounge has operated continuously as a jazz venue since 1934. It uniquely exemplifies a period in jazz history, from the mid-1930s into the 1960s, when the evolution of the genre was defined by performances in small, intimate "listening rooms," and is the only remaining jazz club from that era in Detroit. Its Art Deco-influenced Moderne-style architecture by Phillip Funke, interior design and alterations by Blaine Ford, and decorative painting by Harry Julian Carew are largely responsible for creating one of the premier listening rooms in the United States—an environment which drew top talent from around the world, including Pat Flowers and Art Tatum, and was a contributing factor in the continued success of the venue. The architectural character of Baker's Keyboard Lounge has remained largely unchanged since the 1950s, and its cultural significance as a center of the city's jazz scene persists to the present day.

## **PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Period of Significance begins in 1934 (when jazz performances begin) and concludes in 1963 (when Clarence Baker concludes the initial phase of his tenure as manager).

## **HISTORY**

The jazz scene in Detroit evolved out of a surge in the popularity in ballroom dancing which swept the United States during and after World War I. Well into the 1930s, this scene in Detroit was centered in venues mainly located along Woodward and Jefferson avenues. The more popular ballrooms typically booked both white and African American acts, but guests were customarily segregated.<sup>1</sup>

This climate began to change, however, in the 1930s, as the entertainment industry began to adapt to the changing economic conditions of the Great Depression. While the great ballrooms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert, "Before Motown, Detroit Had Jazz," Time: The Detroit Blog, September 2, 2010. <http://detroit.blogs.time.com/2010/09/02/before-motown-detroit-had-jazz/>

1920s were struggling, and often closing, a “revival” was taking place as smaller, more intimate venues were appearing throughout the city, and especially in nightclubs located in Paradise Valley.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment now known as Baker’s Keyboard Lounge opened for business—though not, at first, as a music venue—in 1934. Frances Baker purchased the 1929 building and, with her husband, Chris, opened a lunchtime sandwich shop with indoor seating for eighteen guests. With an adjacent gas station, the Bakers served travelers at the corner of Livernois Avenue and Base Line Road (now Eight Mile Road) at a time when the surroundings were still largely a “rural neighborhood ... where cornfields were more common than houses.”<sup>3</sup> Although the location would, in the coming decades, become the northern anchor of the city’s Livernois “Avenue of Fashion,” at that time it was a remote locale at the end of a bus line, far removed from the major jazz venues along Woodward Avenue and on Detroit’s east side.

Chris and Fannie Baker’s son Clarence, however, was a jazz enthusiast. Within a year he convinced his parents to purchase an upright piano<sup>4</sup> and began to invite local jazz pianists to play during his shifts at the restaurant. “I was a rabid jazz fan,” Clarence Baker later recalled, “I figured if I had to be there, I was going to put in something I wanted to listen to.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1939, after his father suffered a stroke, Clarence Baker took over management of the facility, which at some time prior to 1941 was renamed Baker’s Bar.<sup>6</sup> Clarence had already begun to recruit jazz pianists from out of town, and he would spend the 1940s working to shift the establishment’s emphasis away from sandwiches and to establish a reputation as one of the city’s premier jazz venues. Clarence’s tenure as manager of Baker’s was interrupted only during the years 1943–1945 when he enlisted in the armed forces during World War II. During this time, “Ma Baker,” as Frances was called, managed the business.<sup>7</sup>

### **Solo Pianists: Pat Flowers and Art Tatum**

The club’s most notable musician for some time was Detroit-based Ivellee “Pat” Flowers, a student and collaborator of stride-style pianist Fats Waller. Flowers had begun his career at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a venue in Detroit, and lived in Philadelphia and New York before returning to Detroit. Flowers played regularly at the club from 1940 until “about 1954.”<sup>8</sup> It was Flowers who suggested,<sup>9</sup> in 1947 or 1948,<sup>10</sup> that the name be changed to Baker’s Keyboard Lounge.

Another Baker’s mainstay was Art Tatum, a musician of outstanding ability who frequently performed in Detroit in the mid-1950s. From Toledo, Ohio, Tatum was visually-impaired from childhood but gifted with perfect pitch and an outstanding memory; he learned to play piano by ear. During his career he resided in Cleveland and New York, and went on several tours in the United States and England before he spent the final years of his life in Detroit.

Also playing in the Harlem stride style, Tatum had, by the time he came to Detroit, already established a reputation as one of the most technically-skilled pianists in the world. Despite his abilities, his adherence to the solo piano format meant that his mainstream popularity never approached that of more well-known jazz musicians of the era, his fame being eclipsed by the rise

2 Jim Gallert and Lars Bjorn, “Baker’s Keyboard Lounge: A Detroit Classic,” accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.detroitmusichistory.com/baker-s-keyboard-lounge.html>.

3 Eric Whitaker and Hugh W. Smith to Saunteel Jenkins, City Council Petition #957, April 4, 2011.

4 Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

5 Baker’s Keyboard Lounge, *World’s Oldest Jazz Club: 80 Years 1934–2014*, brochure.

6 According to city directories. Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

7 Ibid.

8 Bjorn, 117.

9 Whitaker and Smith.

10 According to city directories. Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

in popularity of jazz bands and bebop music. Nonetheless, he retained the admiration of, and was an inspiration to, a generation of jazz pianists: Fats Waller once addressed him as “God,” while Charlie Parker once announced “I wish I could play like Tatum's right hand.” Count Basie called him the “eighth wonder of the world,” Dave Brubeck likened him to “another Mozart,” and Teddy Wilson suggested that if “all the finest jazz pianists were gathered” in the presence of Tatum, “everyone there will sound like an amateur.”<sup>11</sup>

Tatum began in October 1949 to play at Club Alamo, a short-lived club, next-door to Baker's, that hosted acts from a variety of genres in addition to jazz. He promptly walked out, however, when he witnessed a prospective African American customer being refused service. Tatum's actions led to a public apology, published in the *Michigan Chronicle* two months later, from the club's owner. Tatum then returned, where he played regularly until 1953.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, Baker's Keyboard Lounge had expanded and the club was now dedicated entirely to jazz music. Tatum moved to Baker's, selecting a Steinway grand piano from New York which remains at the venue to this day.<sup>13</sup> Tatum played regularly, even as he grew ill as a result of kidney failure. He performed there up until his death, in 1956, at the age of 47—his final performance in April of that year.

### **Expansion and Remodeling**

Beginning around 1940, and concluding by 1958, Clarence Baker oversaw a series of renovations as he worked to transform the space, completely reconfiguring the small sandwich shop to function impeccably as a premier music venue. Exact dates of alterations are unclear and suggest a pattern of frequent and incremental evolution throughout this period.

Baker recalls renovations beginning in “1938 or 39”,<sup>14</sup> while city building permits<sup>15</sup> show a “cement block addition” approved January 24, 1940, and a “brick and block addition” permitted on August 21, 1942. Possibly in reference to either of these alterations, the *Detroit Free Press*, in October 1940, announced that an expansion of the building would be completed sometime in 1941.

According to Baker, the building exterior was remodeled in 1952,<sup>16</sup> although building permits do not indicate any additional renovation work occurred until a “cement block” addition in 1956. Regardless of the exact date, these alterations likely brought to the exterior to its present configuration and established the sleek, Moderne-style appearance which drew attention to the building facade. The architect for these improvements was Phillip J. Funke, A 1929 graduate of the University of Michigan who had designed a number of homes in Detroit's nearby Sherwood Forest neighborhood between 1940 and 1950.<sup>17</sup> This work moved the entrance away from Livernois Avenue to its present location at the north side of the building,<sup>18</sup> it also relocated the bar; these changes allowed additional space for a bandstand surrounded by lounge-style seating. Also in 1952, according to Baker, a series of murals by Harry Julian Carew, a decorative painter who was concurrently working on renovations at the Fisher Building, were added.<sup>19</sup> On canvas and affixed

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11 John Burnett, “Art Tatum, A Talent Never to be Duplicated,” National Public Radio: NPR Music, November 5, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6434701>

12 Bjorn, 117.

13 Whitaker and Smith.

14 Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

15 Located at the Detroit Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department.

16 Lars Bjorn, interview with Clarence Baker, November 18, 1994, quoted in Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

17 According to Phillip Funke's son, Michael Funke. Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

18 Each year from 1950 through 1953 an annual permit application was filed to allow a steel and tile entrance canopy to extend over the public sidewalk; this was rendered unnecessary as the main entrance was moved.

19 Lars Bjorn, interview with Clarence Baker, November 18, 1994, quoted in Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author,

permanently to the walls of the listening room, they depict street scenes from a variety of European cities.

In conjunction with a “cement block cabaret” addition permitted on December 12, 1956 and March 7, 1957, designer Blaine Ford completely remodeled the building interior.<sup>20</sup> Ford’s design included the installation of the club’s trademark piano-shaped bar, finished with chrome and black and white porcelain, constructed by the Gerald Ward Cabinet Shop of Highland Park, Michigan.

Porcelain-enamel white walls with vertical black stripes, and black and white carpet in the listening room were also added. Ford’s design also included a major upgrade to the acoustic properties of the space; mirrors, angled to allow patrons to view the pianists hands, were installed as well.<sup>21</sup> A coat check room was also added at this time.

Significantly, anecdotal accounts from a number of musicians credit Ford’s interior design—its aesthetic as well as its acoustic qualities—as contributing factors to the success and longevity of Baker’s Keyboard Lounge.

“The room’s acoustics alone were a big lure,” states Ed Wolfrum, an audio engineer who worked at Motown Records and produced recordings at Baker’s, in an interview with the *Detroit Free Press*. “The Italian-tiled ceiling, carpeted floors and flannel-covered walls were painstakingly designed for the best sound ... it was a small room with that intimate environment ... it had a character to it,” Wolfrum recalls.<sup>22</sup> According to music journalist Chuck Thurston, in an August 23, 1966 article in the *Detroit Free Press*, Baker’s Keyboard Lounge was “touted around the country as the top listening room ... the padded walls and muted light combine to keep the audience quiet, so quiet that even the bartender occasionally gets shushed.” According to Alexander Zonjic, “It’s one thing for an act to draw, but it’s another for the room to draw. And Baker’s did that.”<sup>23</sup>

At Baker’s Keyboard Lounge, “a musician is freer to do more of what he wishes,” says Kenny Burrell. “Some clubs create an atmosphere that promotes listening, with proper staging, lighting, and other aspects, such as good microphones and good pianos. Baker’s Lounge in Detroit is one club where the owner does many things to promote listening.”<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, the management style of Clarence Baker—a jazz enthusiast who worked the house personally each night—is credited with creating a favorable environment that attracted the most talented musicians. Unlike managers at many other venues, Baker was flexible with musicians and strict with his customers, and would expect patrons to remain silent and pay the utmost respect to musicians during performances. Baker would not hesitate to eject patrons who detracted from the environment that he sought to create.<sup>25</sup>

Whether due to the work of Funke, Ford, and Carew, or the management of Baker, business grew at Baker’s Keyboard Lounge during the 1950s. When the nearby Club Alamo went out of business, Baker purchased the facility and used the location to expand his parking lot. Located immediately to the south and sharing a common wall with Baker’s Keyboard Lounge, a small business known as “the woodshed” sold firewood to nearby residents. Baker made an offer to purchase it but was not successful; as a result, Baker was prevented from further increasing the size of his venue.

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January 22, 2015.

20 According to Blaine Ford’s daughter, Gay Ford Kempner. Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015. A Michigan Historical Commission state historic site application for Baker’s Keyboard Lounge suggests 1958 as the year of Ford’s renovations, but does not provide a citation.

21 Whitaker and Smith.

22 Robin Givhan, “Keyboard’s Locked at Bakers,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 18, 1988.

23 Givhan.

24 Kenny Burrell, interview with Dan Morgenstern, *Down Beat*, 1966. Quoted in Larry Pryce, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2015.

25 Lars Bjorn, personal communication with author, January 29, 2015.

In retrospect, however, the relatively small size of Baker's Keyboard Lounge venue seems to have been one of the key factors in contributing to the success of the venue. As present co-owner Hugh W. Smith observes of the space, "I love the intimacy of it. If you're a businessman, you look at the numbers, but if you are a jazz enthusiast, you know that the ambiance of the room is what makes the show electric."<sup>26</sup>

## A "Golden Era"

The 1950s began, according to current co-owner Eric Whitaker, a "Golden Era" of jazz at Baker's Keyboard Lounge and in Detroit in general. Notable musicians who played at Baker's during this time included Tommy Flanagan, Errol Garner, Meade Lux, George Shearing, and Fats Waller. The period, extending into the early 1970s, was marked by the popularity of jazz trios and quartets. Other acts booked at Baker's Keyboard Lounge during the era included musicians such as Dave Brubeck, Cab Calloway, John Coltrane, Gene Krupa, and Gerry Mulligan.<sup>27</sup>

Into the 1950s, the visitors at Baker's were largely white, even while Pat Flowers, Art Tatum, and many of the club's most popular musicians were African American.<sup>28</sup> This began to change, however, by the end of the decade. By the early 1960s musical tastes began to shift towards sub-genres of jazz such as hard bop, and acts such as Kenny Burrell, Barry Harris, Groove Holmes, Yusef Lateef, Les McCann, Oscar Peterson, and Jimmy Smith drew in both African American and white patrons in large numbers.<sup>29</sup>

Baker leased the club in 1963 to Solly Hartstein in order to devote his time to other business ventures. For some time, he managed the London Chop House and Caucus Club in downtown Detroit, but in 1973 he resumed management of Baker's Keyboard Lounge.<sup>30</sup> By the mid-1970s, the compensation rates for nationally-known musicians began to increase significantly, and social changes, such as an increase in the availability of musical entertainment on television, meant that patrons tended to go out to live music venues less frequently. These factors made it harder for a small venue such as Baker's to attract top talent.<sup>31</sup> Many jazz clubs around the United States folded during this era, but Baker's Keyboard Lounge persisted, adjusting its format as necessary to keep up with changing tastes.

## After Clarence Baker

In 1996, Baker retired permanently from the business, selling Baker's Keyboard Lounge to Juanita Jackson and John Colbert. The present owners, Hugh W. Smith and Eric J. Whitaker, purchased the club in 2011. Smith had worked as a manager under the previous owners, and, when he learned that the club was in danger of going out of business, partnered with Whitaker. The site retains its immense cultural significance as a center of Detroit's jazz scene, known for both scheduled performances and impromptu jam sessions.

Operating continuously from 1934 into the present day, Baker's Keyboard Lounge is thus by many accounts the "oldest jazz club in the world,"<sup>32</sup> a distinction recognized by the International

26 "New Owners Vow to Keep Baker's Alive," *Detroit Free Press*, February 1, 2011.

27 Whitaker and Smith.

28 Bjorn, 117.

29 Gallert.

30 Ibid.

31 Lars Bjorn, personal communication with author, January 29 2015.

32 This honor is sometimes attributed to another club: the Village Vanguard, located in New York City. Bjorn places the opening of that venue "three months before Baker's" [*Before Motown*, 117], while Martin Williams suggests that the Vanguard did not open until one year later (*Jazz Heritage* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 137). Both sources, however, agree that the Vanguard did not begin to feature musical performances until 1935, and even

Association of Jazz Educators<sup>33</sup>, and one which the venue has proudly advertised in recent decades. Certainly, it is noteworthy for remaining in continuous operation for over 80 years, an honor that few, if any, jazz venues can claim. For this honor, Baker's Keyboard Lounge was recognized as a Michigan state historic site on December 5, 1986.

One other Detroit jazz club—the Blue Bird Inn, deserves mention as having rivaled Baker's Keyboard Lounge for several decades. Also founded in the mid-1930s, the Blue Bird Inn, located at 5021 Tireman Avenue, was significant as an African American owned institution, and also for attracting national acts of the same level as those drawn to perform at Baker's. The Blue Bird Inn, however, stopped offering live music by the 1970s, and its building, though still standing, is presently vacant. This leaves Baker's Keyboard Lounge as the most outstanding extant example of Detroit's jazz heritage of the 1930s through the 1950s.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Baker's Keyboard Lounge is located on Livernois Avenue, Detroit's "Avenue of Fashion," just one block south of Eight Mile Road and the city's northern border. Extensive exterior and interior remodeling make it difficult to determine a date of construction for the building; a Michigan Historical Commission state historic site application suggests that the building was built in 1910; however, the earliest city building permit for the location was issued for a "lunch stand" of "cement block" in 1929.



The Moderne-style, single-story, flat-roofed, rectangular building faces its most prominent facade to the west, fronting on Livernois Avenue; its main entrance, however, faces north, consisting of a pair of black-painted steel doors recessed into a rounded, cutaway corner beneath a wide overhang supported by a cylindrical, aluminum-clad column. The windowless structure is faced with light gray, elongated, common-bond brick, curved bricks defining the rounded northeast corner of the building. The building footprint occupies the entire site except for a small loading area at the northeast corner.

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then, the club focused primarily on beat poetry accompanied by folk music. The Vanguard became a jazz-only venue in the 1950s.

33 Gallert.

The southern half of the Livernois Avenue facade is clad with black enameled steel panels. A prominent sign, with cursive-style, internally illuminated channel letters, reads “Baker’s,” below which an illuminated sign with changeable Wagner letters typically announces upcoming scheduled events. The sign is surrounded by a festoon of bare incandescent bulbs.

The northern half of the Livernois facade, and the north facade, feature aluminum panels on a projecting parapet wall, colored black and white to resemble piano keys.

The depth of the building is greater than its street frontage, resulting in an interior space that is somewhat larger than a visitor might expect. Entering the building, a succession of spaces unfolds from smaller to larger, beginning with an entry foyer with paired interior glazed doors. Passing through the entry reveals a coat check room to the right; corners are rounded, in keeping with the Moderne-style interior. A piano-shaped bar, finished with black and white porcelain, dominates the spaces, nestled against a curved wall of black bricks. The stage is not visible from the bar.

Continuing inward, the space expands around a corner into the large, 99-seat listening room; differing ceiling heights and finish materials suggest at least two distinct stages of construction. The floor is concrete. On the western end of the space, walls are white porcelain with black stripes; the eastern end is finished with synthetic paneling resembling wood. Recessed behind angled frames are murals on canvas, by Harry Julian Carew, depicting European street scenes, although some of these murals have been covered by curtains and angled mirrors.

Interior fixtures include rows of booths around the perimeter of the listening space, with open space in the center (typically filled with tables and chairs). A bandstand along the north wall contains a grand piano and space for about six musicians. A mirror, which formerly existed behind the stage, has been removed. Behind the bandstand, a swinging door leads to a backstage and kitchen area.

## **LIST OF CONTRIBUTING AND NONCONTRIBUTING RESOURCES**

The proposed Baker’s Keyboard Lounge Historic District consists of a single contributing resource.

## **CRITERIA**

The proposed Baker’s Keyboard Lounge historic district appears to meet National Register criteria A, B, and C as well as the first and third criteria adopted by the Historic Designation Advisory Board: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (2) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history; and (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends designation of the proposed Baker’s Keyboard Lounge Historic District.

## **COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, who are residents of Detroit, and three ex-officio members. The appointed members are Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye,



Zené Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson, Victoria Bird-Olivier, and Kari Smith. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Hugh W. Smith and Gerald Underwood.

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Proposed Baker's Keyboard Lounge Historic District  
20510 Livernois Avenue

— Proposed district boundary