

Singing The Bye-Bye Blues: End Of A D.C. Legend

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The legendary Archie Edwards Blues Barbershop, home of a weekly jam session in Northeast Washington that draws amateurs and pros from all over the planet, is about to die. The shop has been sold and will be gutted and converted into a dentist's office.

"It now looks like we'll have to be out sometime in January," says Donna Fletcher, a longtime player in the pickup group that gathers on Saturday afternoons in the shop on Bunker Hill Road that once housed Edwards' Alpha Tonsorial Barbershop.

The good news, such as it is, is that the jam sessions will be relocated, to another of Washington's great musical treasures, HR-57, the Center for the Preservation of Jazz and Blues, on 14th Street NW, in February. HR-57's owner, Tony Puesan, "is welcoming us with open arms," Fletcher says. "HR 57's mission is compatible with ours and in addition to holding the Saturday afternoon jams in their space on 14th Street, we may be able to partner on a variety of educational projects."

But not even HR-57's cool setting can match the funk and the dark comfort of the old shop on Bunker Hill. As my column from last year reports (on the jump), this was a place where you didn't even need to know an instrument to pop in, take a seat, and join in on the music. It has been that way in the barbershop for half a century. Regulars and one-time visitors plunked some money in the coffee can and somehow the rent got paid.

But then last year, the trustees for the building's owner decided to sell, "to liquidate her assets," the real estate man said. Now, Fletcher says, it's time, and the only hope for preserving the barbershop is an effort "to dismantle the barbershop wall to preserve and store as much of it as possible and to save all of the papers and photos and ephemera. Some things will likely be displayed at HR 57, and we will try to find somewhere appropriate for the rest -- perhaps in a mobile display and/or a museum."

Archie Edwards, the barber who started giving over Saturday afternoons at his shop to acoustic blues in 1959, died in 1998. There haven't been any haircuts at the shop since then, just a group of stalwarts who come by Saturday mornings, unlock the door, and wait to see who shows up to play. The blues barbershop was a rare jewel in this or any other city. I hope to get over there one more time before it goes away, and I'll try to follow it over to HR-57, but the passing of the real place is a sad moment, one that calls for a few hours of the blues.