

“Archie’s Barbershop”

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In a dark barbershop on Bunker Hill Road, streaks of summer sun slant across a circle of guitar pickers. It's Saturday afternoon in Archie Edwards's old store in Northeast Washington, and an environmental lawyer, a Methodist minister, a maintenance man, a robotics researcher and a 10-year-old kid who's never before played the blues are traveling down the river together, a thousand miles away from the hot city.

The Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation's weekly jam session is underway. Door's open, there's a stack of plastic chairs in the back and you're welcome to widen the circle. Might want to hurry in, though, because the owner of the building is fixing to sell it. All summer long, the situation has generated enough anxiety that somebody might have to write a blues number about it.

Store's closed all the time except Saturday afternoons. That's when Michael Baytop and a couple of the other gents who used to hang out at Edwards's Alpha Tonsorial Barbershop unlock the door and take a seat. Over the next few hours, guitars will wander in, maybe a flute, surely a couple of folks without instruments, newcomers who might just pick up a washboard and join in.

Back when Edwards was alive, Baytop would stop in around noon, when the proprietor was busy with the razor. "At about 2 o'clock he'd say, 'Okay, done cutting hair for today,' " Baytop recalls. "Somebody would say, 'I've been waiting two hours,' and Archie would say, 'You can come back Monday.' "

Now there's only one barber's chair left in the place, a shiny green swivel chair that hasn't generated a dollar in haircut

revenue since 1998, when Mr. Edwards passed. Baytop had spent a dozen years of Saturdays learning the acoustic Piedmont blues and listening to the old guys' stories, and he wasn't about to let that go. He and some of the other players decided to keep the barbershop going.

"Everybody told us we were crazy: 'You don't know nothing about running a barbershop,' " Baytop remembers. "I said, 'That's okay. We're not going to cut any hair.' "

Somehow, the place just kept going. The old musicians -- some of the top names in D.C. blues history -- welcomed any and all. Saturdays became a time for playing, teaching and just wading in the music. Star players from across the continent showed up. So did film crews from Finland, Japan, Israel.

When the rent on Edwards's shop came due, the players took donations. Eventually, they made some CDs and organized some concerts to meet the rent bill, which was \$100 a month when Edwards died. These days, it's \$300, which just about covers the property tax and certainly nothing more. Which is why the trustees for the owner, an aged woman named Helen Loftus, have decided it's time to sell.

"Her trustee decided to liquidate her assets," says Ray Ruppert, the real estate man who manages the property, which is on a quiet little retail strip consisting of a security agency, a law office, a balloon shop, an African culture center, a dentist and a dance school.

"When I asked Mr. Ruppert if he'd thought about donating the place to us, he laughed and said, 'That's what I thought we already did,' " says Patrick

Casey, a lawyer from Chevy Chase who spends his Saturdays playing slide guitar at the shop.

One of Baytop's relatives, Jeff Sibert, an ex-barber himself, has proposed to buy the property, which includes the store next door, and save the barbershop for the blues.

Sibert and Ruppert have just struck a tentative deal, under which Sibert will try to rent out the adjacent storefront at market rate and use that revenue to keep the music going in the barbershop, which he would renovate.

In a city where rents seem rocket-propelled and retailers hungrily snap up almost any space, the barbershop has managed to sit unchanged. Two bottles of electric green Jeris Hair Tonic sit on the shelf, just where Edwards last used them. There's a black-and-white TV under the mirror and a 1950s radio console up front.

On the wall in the back, some old jottings of Edwards's are framed, lyrics to a song about John F. Kennedy, and some other lines, too: "If you don't like my peaches, why don't you stop shaking my tree; if you don't stop shaking my tree, just come out of my orchard and leave my peaches to me."

A coffee can labeled "Donations" sits on the shelf. There's maybe \$6 in it.

"It's not like the symphony with its patrons," Baytop says. "People who love the blues got the blues."

As word spread about the real estate situation this summer, local musicians called and wrote with support. There have been crises before, and every time

the shop is threatened, "no matter what we've needed, it's almost like the Bible said, 'Speak and ye shall be given,' " Baytop says. When the society needed to set itself up as a nonprofit group, "I swear, guy walks through the door, harmonica on his hip, and he's a lawyer working with nonprofits and he asks if we need any help with that. His firm gave us \$7,000 of legal work."

Miles Spicer, a guitar player and treasurer of the foundation who works for CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, keeps a mental catalogue of the foreign visitors who drop by and then head home to spread the gospel of the barbershop. "They come back every year or two, or they send their friends," he says. "And some of them come to play with us. Most anyone can learn this; if you fall in with the right people and turn off the television, it doesn't take long."

My son, who is 10, plays a bit of piano but hadn't attempted the blues. The barbershop adopted him, and inside of 20 minutes he was leading a dozen musicians in an extended jam.

Jim Lande, the clarinet man, who carves the wooden bones that anyone who pops in can pick up to join the rhythm section, leans over to tell my son "a little secret: If you get the rhythm right, people don't worry so much about the notes."

Maybe Sibert is the latest in a series of miracles that have kept the home of the blues open. Maybe not. But on Saturday afternoons on Bunker Hill Road, there's no anxiety in the air. The rhythm is right, and ain't nobody worrying so much about the notes.