

More room for the blues: Buddy Guy's Legends to move a block in South Loop

 Comments

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The flagship blues club in this home of the blues will have a new home of its own by next year.

Buddy Guy's Legends is moving up the block from its present South Loop location at 754 S. Wabash to 700 S. Wabash, a building that housed the jazz and world music club HotHouse until mid-2007. Renovation is under way on the two-story building, which more recently was used by Kinko's and an art supplies store.

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Facing eviction, the Buddy Guy's Legends blues club will move one block to a new South Loop home.

(John H. White/Sun-Times)

PHOTO GALLERY



• [Buddy Guy's Legends is moving](#)

News that the club is moving comes a decade after reports first surfaced that Legends would have to close or relocate when the 754 S. Wabash property was donated to Columbia College. The bad economy, which cooled plans for new construction projects at Columbia, allowed Legends management to bide its time in the club's 20-year home until a suitable replacement site could be found.

Owner Buddy Guy, 73, one of the few blues superstars who still tours regularly, has long expressed a desire to purchase a building for Legends. Guy has cited the need for a first-class downtown facility to represent Chicago's signature music. The new building should provide for larger capacity, better sound and sight lines, the flexibility of a second-floor stage and more space to exhibit the club's impressive collection of blues artifacts.

Guy sees irony in the fact that certain things have come full circle since Legends opened in 1989.



"You know when I first opened Legends, people were complaining that the club was too big for a blues club," Guy told the Sun-Times in a statement. "Now we've become too small and need more space. In the new place we'll have more room for people so when I play or my friends like the Stones or [Eric] Clapton come play, people won't have to stand outside 'cause they can't get in."

Brian Moravec, Legends' general manager, points out that Guy makes a comfortable living by playing and recording music, so he doesn't rely on Legends to yield a hefty profit.

"He has a blues club only to keep the blues alive," Moravec says, citing Guy's multimillion-dollar investment to acquire the building and land, gut the building and rebuild totally.

When it was announced that Guy was seeking a new site, landlords citywide contacted the club suggesting that their locations would be ideal.

"The more we thought about other areas, we realized that no place makes sense but here in the South Loop," says Isabelle Libmann, Legends' special events and public relations chief.

Guy is even more emphatic, stating, "I'm trying to keep some entertainment in the South Loop."

The new Legends should attract at least as many guests from nearby hotels while drawing increased walk-in traffic, Moravec says.

Unlike HotHouse, in which the mainstage was on the second floor, Legends will utilize the ground floor as its primary area. There'll be seating for nearly 400, up slightly from the 754 S. Wabash location, with a second stage upstairs for a total capacity of about 600. The city, Moravec explains, charges a greater amusement tax for clubs that seat more than 750.

"And if it's too big, you lose the intimacy," Moravec says. "Blues is better in a more intimate room."

The second floor will have a bar, pool tables, Guy's private office and band dressing rooms. It also may be used as a party area, allowing management the flexibility of renting out either area for private events while ensuring that public entertainment is available nightly -- a plus for international tourists who visit Chicago only briefly.

Gand Music and Sound will be working with the architects to design a state-of-the-art sound system. But Libmann is quick to point out that despite top-notch sound and video systems, the new Legends will retain the earthy atmosphere that people expect from a blues club.

"I hear people complain that they're afraid that it'll be too big and too clean," she says. "With all these technical upgrades, it's important to point out that everything else is staying pretty much the same."

A specific timetable for opening the new Legends would be premature, Moravec says. "The city's been very tough with clubs ever since E2 [the 2003 nightclub disaster]. The city's not going to make things easier on us [with code enforcement] just because Buddy Guy is the owner."

Guy's love of Chicago blues dates to 1957, when he got off a bus from Louisiana and heard great music coming from nearly every South Side storefront bar. Prior to owning Legends, he ran the famed Checkerboard Lounge, 423 E. 43rd St., in the 1970s and early '80s.

"There aren't many blues clubs left in Chicago, but there are still a lot of blues fans," Guy says. "I'm giving them a place to go."