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Cass Avenue's exotic Chin Tiki is no more

BY JOHN MONAGHAN • FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER • MARCH 10, 2009

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It wasn't exactly a surprise. For months, a fence has surrounded the Chin Tiki restaurant and bar on Cass Avenue, behind the Fox Theatre. Still, news of its demolition last week came as a minor shock to everyone from preservationists and fans of kitschy tiki culture to moviegoers who enjoyed the funky old building's cameo in the 2002 movie "8 Mile."



DAVID P. GILKEY/Detroit Free Press

The once upscale Chin Tiki on Cass Avenue was a setting for the 2002 movie "8 Mile." The 42-year-old restaurant and bar was demolished last week.

"It was a Tiki tomb, a time capsule," laments Detroit Dave Toorongian, one of the first to sift through the building's rubble after it was leveled Thursday and Friday. As unlikely as it sounds, he says, "There was always that lingering hope that somehow someone would reopen it."

Chin Tiki opened in 1967, near the end of America's postwar obsession with Polynesian culture that began with the Broadway musical (1949) and film version (1958) of "South Pacific," based on James Michener's 1948 novel "Tales of the South Pacific."

Built by former Ford engineer Marvin Chin, the upscale dining establishment sported an ornately decorated downstairs lounge-restaurant, complete with towering tiki statues, waterfalls and a bamboo bridge. An upstairs banquet facility was home to Hawaiian-themed floor shows.

"It marked the end of an era where a married couple could leave the kids at home with a sitter, get drunk, watch scantily clad women in a floor show and try exotic food," says David Chow, a Berkeley illustrator and Tiki enthusiast, who visited the Chin Tiki site over the weekend.

Chow's Web site (www.davechowillustrations.blogspot.com) shows images before and after the demolition. In one, a lonely lei sits atop a mound of bricks.

Chin Tiki, which closed in 1980, had its swan song earlier this decade when it was used as a location in the movie "8 Mile." Star Eminem can be seen in both the upstairs party room and beneath the still-exotic Chin Tiki sign. Writer Sven Kirsten used several pages of photographs from the place in his 2007 book "Tiki Modern" (Taschen

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Renewed interest in Chin Tiki encouraged Marvin Chin to fix the place up with vague plans to reopen it. But after he died in 2006, his family quickly sold the building to Olympia Development LLC, owned by Detroit businessman Mike Ilitch and his family. Since then, there has been speculation that the Ilitches planned to tear down Chin Tiki and surrounding buildings to make way for a new hockey arena. Ilitch spokeswoman Karen Cullen said Tuesday that for the "immediate future," the site will be used to provide parking for various venues and events in the area. She said it was determined that Chin Tiki wasn't suitable for development.



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Much of the well-preserved Polynesian decor was removed during the 2007 sale of Chin Tiki. Tiki statues and exotic wall hangings were taken to the Chin family's Chin's Restaurant in Livonia. Weekend excavators found only remnants of bamboo furniture and kitchen fixtures among the debris.

Marvin Chin's son, Marlin, who manages the Livonia Chin's, says he visited the spot several times over the last week after he discovered it was being leveled. The restaurant enjoyed its heyday while he was growing up, and he recalls visits from celebrity guests like Barbra Streisand, Muhammad Ali and Joe DiMaggio.

For Ferndale writer Michael Zadoorian, whose new book of short stories is titled "The Lost Tiki Palaces of Detroit" (Wayne State University Press, \$18.95), the loss of Chin Tiki is an example of bad city planning. He thinks that with the right people behind it, Chin Tiki could have been a downtown success story, like the once-mothballed Cliff Bell's, the deco-style jazz club nearby that reopened recently.

"Obviously, I'm saddened by the loss of the Chin Tiki, especially since it will probably be for yet another parking lot for yet another stadium," he says. "I'm sure that Chin Tiki was an eyesore to a lot of folks, but to me, it's just another one of those great old Detroit places that no longer exists."

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