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Baker's sold, to remain a jazz club

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Baker's Keyboard Lounge, one of the most historic jazz clubs in the country, sold today in a bankruptcy auction in downtown Detroit, for \$395,000.

The new owners, Hugh W. Smith III and Eric W. Whitaker of SB Media, plan to keep Baker's as a jazz club, but give it a much-needed cleaning and freshening.

"She's 77 years old, she needs a new dress, we need to spruce up the old girl," Smith said of the famed venue located on Livernois just south of Eight Mile, where greats like Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis and Nat King Cole played.

As the manager of Baker's for the last two years, Smith says he knows exactly what needs to be done. "God had given me the privilege of not only working at Baker's, learning the business from John (Colbert, the present owner), but to learn the fans and know their expectations. Now we can try to meet those expectations."

They intend to keep dinner service — "Baker's is known for their food, and we wouldn't change anything the patrons like," Smith said — but he will also address issues such as the lack of backstage facilities for musicians.

Smith and Whitaker have 20 days to close on the sale, following the order of bankruptcy court, and then the process will be started for a transfer of the liquor license. The new owners hope to keep the bar open throughout, after a thorough cleaning and freshening.

Smith, 43, says his favorite form of jazz is bebop ("Miles Davis, Coltrane, Oscar Peterson!") and is well aware of Baker's history, down to its piano bought by Art Tatum.

"Teddy Harris was a mentor of mine," Smith says, of the renowned Detroit jazz musician, conductor and Motown arranger, whose orchestra played a weekly "big band night" at Baker's for years.

"I'm just thanking God that I'm in a position to maintain jazz like Teddy wanted," Smith says. As for Baker's size, he doesn't see it as a problem. "I love the intimacy of it. If you're a businessman, you look at the numbers, but if you are a jazz enthusiast, in my opinion, you know that the ambience of that room is what makes the show electric."

Smith and Whitaker are only the third owners of Baker's, which Chris and Fannie Baker opened as a lunch restaurant in 1933, then their son Clarence started booking jazz in 1934. Clarence Baker sold the club to John Colbert in 1996.

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