From Swing to Sushi

Former mecca for black entertainment returning to life as '90s-style club

By Lisa Ann Williamson
The Grand Rapids Press

On any Friday evening, Ted Rasberry could count on one thing — Barnett's Coral Lounge would be hopping. It must have been about 1939 when Rasberry first strolled into the club, which featured live jazz and good conversation. Rasberry was a young man, about 24 years old, a baseball player with the Negro Baseball League, who manned second base and rounded out batting averages near the .300s.

When he wanted to unwind or catch up with the folks in town, he headed to Barnett's, which had been THE spot since it opened as Barnett's Hotel, operated by Stanley L. Barnett. Barnett's was one of a few places in Grand Rapids, including the American Legion Clique, Post 20, and the Horseshoe Grill, where blacks could go for entertainment.

Magic of music

In the mid-1950s under the management of local attorneys, Alphonse Lewis Jr., the club hosted jazz guitarist Eddie McFadden, vibraphonist Johnny Lytle, organist Hank Marr, saxophonist Rusty Bryant and other groups that circulated around New York and Chicago.

Barnett's closed in 1988 amid struggles over taxes and ownership. Until recently, Alphonse Lewis Jr.'s law offices were in the building, but Barnett's hasn't seen the life and spirit of its former self in years.

Now the 12,000-square-foot red brick three-story building at 36-40 Ionia Ave. SW with the distinctive roofline and small oval oculus or window may soon see crowds again.

Owners of The Sienna Room, 23 Ionia Ave. SW, recently purchased the building in July and crews are working to renovate it. The building will reopen next summer as Opus 1894, an upscale club with an 80-seat restaurant serving sushi. It's part of the downtown resurgence that has brought in restaurants, bars and clubs in the last couple years to surround Van Andel Arena.

Ionia Avenue south of Fulton Street is alive with furniture stores, delicatessens, coffee houses, sports bars and restaurants.

In with the new

The rebirth continues southward, Rasberry said he's happy to see the building coming to life again, but he'll never forget Barnett's.

"It was the center attraction for so long. There wasn't any other place so well-known," said Rasberry, now 84. "Anybody who was anybody wanted to go there. People were well-dressed. You could seat yourself by the windows with the fellows. You met interesting people there. Barnett's had doctors and lawyers, many people.

Everybody wanted to buy Rasberry his favorite drink — whiskey. "Then if you bought someone a drink, they did you a favor. Mine was cheap," Rasberry laughed. "We was in the house."

From the cobblestone Ionia Avenue, people would enter the front door, take a left to get to the restaurant or a right to go into the bar with live entertainment.

"People would just pack in," Rasberry said.

Upstairs was the hotel. Rasberry said he stayed a few nights there over the years.

"Customary segregation was the norm," said Randall Jelks, local historian and professor of history at Calvin College. "Even though blacks could entertain at local hotel lounges and theaters, they would have to sleep at the homes of families or stay at black-owned hotels."

"Barnett's was located by the train station and gave people who were just coming into town the opportunity to stay there," Jelks said.

Built in 1894, the structure was called the Waldron. Its first recorded function was as a hotel, called the Central House. Central House joined several other small hotels along Ionia Avenue.

The building was in the city's hub, right across the street from Union Railroad Station, which housed shops and the train depot. People came to Grand Rapids on the Pere Marquette from Chicago and Detroit. About 1952, Stanley Louis Barnett also came to Grand Rapids. Although he started out as a waiter at the Palm Hotel and the Peninsula Club, he had a dream of owning a business that featured live music. By 1984, he was in front of the City Commission requesting a saloon license for a property at 60 Kent St.

"They want a place," read the headline in The Evening Press. "Application for saloon license by colored man." "There is no place for a Negro to go," Barnett told The Evening Press. First-class saloons don't want you and they're getting harder to find."

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