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Michael Goforth: Restoration effort continues for historic Lincoln Theater

By Michael Goforth

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The white-painted, odd-shaped, boarded-up building doesn't look like much. Like many structures in the neighborhood, it's seen better days.

But, there's something special in the history of the building and something special about what its future might hold.

Reginald Floyd grew up a few blocks away and, if he finished his chores on time on Saturday mornings, he could go with his friends for an afternoon of movie-watching at what was then the Lincoln Theater.

"The Lincoln Theater and church were the places to go," he said of the Fort Pierce building that was a magnet for some residents of the Treasure Coast. "That theater was important to that community more than you would think a theater is today. It galvanized the community."

Margaret Benton lived closer to the Lincoln Theater and remembered how the movies would change about every two days. She remembered the cowboy movies, the serials, the news reels.

The theater was built in 1946 by her father, Dr. Clem C. Benton, the first black physician in the area, and Dr. Harry Center, a white pharmacist. One part of the building was the movie theater. The other part was a store selling sundries and concessions for the movie theater, which were passed through a window to movie customers.

Those were far different times for the Lincoln Park community and Avenue D.

The theater attracted black residents of Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties.

"They didn't have a theater," Floyd said. "We had a theater."

That theater was also the centerpiece for what was the "economic, commercial anchor for that area of Fort Pierce," he said.

"On Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights," he said, "Avenue D looked like on Times Square," with families walking about, shopping, socializing.

Today, the area is trying to overcome a recent history of poverty and violence.

And, many believe restoration of the Lincoln Theater can play a major role to revitalizing and bringing greater pride to the area.

The Lincoln Theater, which also hosted live entertainment and graduation ceremonies, served as a hurricane shelter and briefly served as a church following its closing in the late 1960s. But, in 2001, as a wrecking ball threatened to demolish the structure, the Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Committee acquired it with the hope that it might eventually be restored.

Benton chairs the Lincoln Theater Restoration subcommittee of that committee and Floyd is a subcommittee member.

“We are one of the last remaining historic black theaters in the country,” Benton said. “It’s really an historic prize.” Formerly a 500-seat venue, she said, “It’s a wonderful size for a regional theater. We have a good fit for providing those acts that don’t need a huge theater.”

“There’s a certain romanticism associated with the Lincoln Theater,” Floyd said. “A lot of people remember the Lincoln Theater and thought that theater could be brought back to life.”

About five years ago, thanks to the Community Redevelopment Agency of the city of Fort Pierce, the interior of the theater was gutted and the roof replaced. Benton said she hopes the next step in restoration will be marquee and facade improvements, which may cost some \$180,000 to \$200,000. Then, she said, funds will be solicited to redo the interior and turn it into a performing arts center.

As of late last week, \$200,000 for the theater was included in the state budget.

On May 10 at the McAlpin Fine Arts Center at Indian River State College, a fundraiser for the restoration project will feature jazz composer and pianist [Nat Adderley Jr.](#) The son of famed jazz cornet player Nat Adderley Sr. and nephew of Cannonball Adderley, one of the all-time great saxophone players, the younger Adderley has spent much of his career as [songwriter, music arranger and director](#) for the late Luther Vandross. Adderley first visited his aunt, Joelene Hayling, in Fort Pierce as a child.

State Rep. Larry Lee, D-Port St. Lucie, grew up on Avenue O in Fort Pierce and walked to the Lincoln Theater with friends Saturday afternoons. Admission was about 25 cents and he recalled seeing movies like “King Kong” and “The Ten Commandments.”

“It was really a great time for Fort Pierce,” he said. “It was really bustling.”

Noting that the theater is one of the few black movie houses still standing in Florida, Lee said, “We should do all we can to preserve that theater.”

FUND-RAISER FOR RENOVATION

OF HISTORIC LINCOLN THEATER

Who: Nat Adderley Jr. and quartet

Where: Indian River State College McAlpin Fine Arts Center in Fort Pierce

When: 7 p.m., Saturday, May 10

Ticket price: \$25

Purchase tickets: Jackson Hewitt/Al Johnson & Associates, Kmart Plaza, Fort Pierce; Granny's Kitchen, 901 Avenue D., Fort Pierce; Men's Rags, KMart Plaza, Fort Pierce; Drummers Only Drum Shop, 1532 S.E. Village Green Drive, Port St. Lucie; online at www.LincolnTheaterConcertSeries.com.



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