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Final Bow for a Musical Mecca

Crowds Pay Their Respects as Archie's Barbershop Is Shuttered

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Saturday afternoons in the 2000 block of Bunker Hill Road NE won't sound the same: The acoustic blues jams at the Alpha Tonsorial Parlor, better known as Archie's Barbershop, have ended after almost 50 years, and a decade after the passing of its proprietor, [Piedmont](#) bluesman Archie Edwards.

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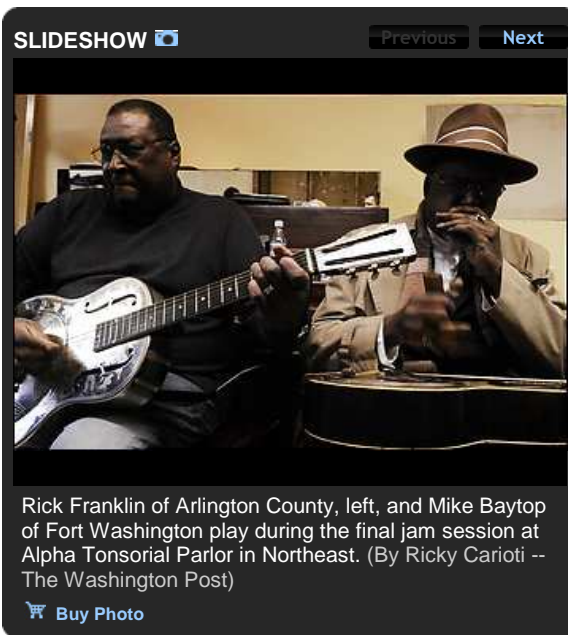
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Until last week, musicians and blues aficionados continued to crowd into the barbershop, even as most of its cabinets and artifacts were put into storage, including the "Friends, passed to ancestors . . . we miss you" message board honoring the departed, which could now add "Alpha Tonsorial Parlor, 1959-2008."

Traditionally, the lone remaining barber's chair sat empty to honor the memory and legacy of Edwards, who often whiled away the hours in it playing his Gretsch resonator guitar. But on these final Saturdays, space has been at a premium as visitors -- mostly local, some from far distances, and wide-ranging in ethnicity, age and gender -- came to pay their respects.

Saturday's final farewell got so crowded that the barbershop was standing room plus, like rush hour at the crossroads, provoking a second, smaller but equally spirited jam out on the street. "What are they gonna do, evict us?" someone asked as the late afternoon chill inspired some up-tempo, heat-generating play. Inside, the music and good spirits didn't fade away until, appropriately, the midnight hour.

A recent gathering featured nine guitars, three



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mandolins, a washtub bass, assorted harmonicas, wooden rhythm bones and an upright piano, all playing a tune around the room. Someone would kick things off, then pass along the melody to be picked, plucked, blown or tapped -- even whistled -- until it came back full circle to the starting line. No audience here, just participants, even if it was just tapping a foot in rhythm.

"If you can't have fun, why do it?" asked Warner Williams, one of several veteran bluesmen who have been longtime citizens of the blues circle.

That Archie's Barbershop was closing caught no one by surprise. The last snips of hair fell to the floor in 1998, and the barbershop opened only for the Saturday jams (it also served as headquarters for the nonprofit Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation). It got by on donations, benefit concerts and, in recent years, CDs featuring Archie's regulars. A third anthology, "Don't You Weep and Moan," was recently released, with a picture of the now-shuttered barbershop on its cover.

None of it added up to enough, and efforts to buy the property were unsuccessful. The space will be gutted and converted into a dentist's office.

Blues artist Eleanor Ellis, who played with Edwards in the 1980s and co-founded the Blues Heritage Foundation in 1998, finds that ironic, given that the foundation was started "because only a few musicians would come to the barbershop after Archie died, and we just didn't want to see it gone, or turned into a dentist's office. We wanted to keep it open just because of Archie's presence."

Until recently, that meant a jumble of still-sharp scissors, shaving mugs and hair tonic bottles, an ancient cash register, a rack of old singles and newspaper clips, concert posters and framed lyrics, a small barber pole in the window that lighted up but no longer spun. Also vintage photos of Edwards, the shop's musical and tonsorial patrons, and legendary bluesmen such as Mississippi John Hurt, who lived in Washington for three years after being rediscovered in the early 1960s.

Hurt, Edwards's biggest influence, often stopped by for a shave and haircut, good conversation and blues jams late into the night. He's the one who insisted Edwards keep the Piedmont traditions alive, although he was unable to do so full time until retiring from the government in 1981 at age 63. (The barbershop was his side job.) Edwards recorded two albums, the first when he was 63. He toured here and abroad, but most of his playing was done regionally, with the barbershop the most likely place to hear him, particularly after he retired. Then it might be Edwards playing alone, or with a friend or two, or the visiting blues devotee. It was loose, as informal as any barbershop conversation: tunes exchanged, little lessons learned, nothing like the cacophonous community jams of recent years.

"There's a ton of history in that place," said Miles Spicer, guitarist and assistant treasurer of the Blues Heritage Foundation, noting that "for 50 years people knew exactly where to go." Spicer encountered Edwards 10 years ago, when Spicer was a [University of Maryland](#) student. "I had a guitar and didn't know what the heck to do with it," he recalled, until professor and blues scholar Barry Lee Pearson brought Edwards and other local country blues masters into his classroom. Bunker Hill Road soon became a weekly stop.

Now, the location of the jams will be shifting. After a Saturday stopover at [Takoma Park](#) Middle School, the jams will resume Feb. 9 at HR-57 Center for the Preservation of Jazz and Blues on 14th Street NW.

According to Spicer, although the location is changing, the mission is unchanged: to preserve, teach and share the Piedmont blues tradition. Named for the Virginia-Carolinas-Georgia region where it originated in the 1920s (Edwards was born in rural [Franklin County](#), Va.), it's more lighthearted than its harsher-sounding Delta cousin, powered by a lilting fingerpicked guitar sound in which the thumb creates a bouncy alternating bass as the melody is picked out on the treble strings. It's an engaging style that can sound as much like ragtime, early country and Tin Pan Alley as country blues.

Mike Baytop first heard it in the mid-1980s at the Folklife Festival on the [Mall](#).

"I thought there were *two* people playing guitar," he marveled. "With East Coast blues, you

cover all the bases with your playing -- the bass line, the melody line, and you're playing your own rhythm. When I realized that [Edwards] was doing it all, I said, man, I need to learn to do that."

After the bluesman's passing in 1998, Baytop co-founded the Blues Heritage Foundation, at which time the Saturday jams became codified, as well as more crowded and expansive in their outreach.

"When Archie was alive, it was much more of a man's club," Spicer said. "But . . . the idea of a jam is to learn new stuff and to share the stuff that we all have in common. Come on in and hang out with us, we'll find a place for you."

At the new location, of course.

Saturday at the Folklore Society of Greater Washington's Midwinter Festival, the Archie's Barbershop jam session will be from 1 to 3 p.m. in Takoma Park Middle School's Auxiliary Gym.

On Feb. 9, the blues jam move to its new home at HR-57 Center for the Preservation of Jazz and Blues, 1610 14th St. NW, 202-667-3700, 1 to 5 p.m.

To find out more about the jams and the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, go to <http://www.acousticblues.com>.

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