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In Home of Hip-Hop, a Concert Hall to Honor Its Musical History

By ELI ROSENBERG | JAN. 16, 2017



Ground was broken on Friday on the Bronx Music Hall, a 300-seat space that will be part of an affordable housing complex in the Melrose neighborhood. Credit Elias Williams for The New York Times

The South Bronx may be known as [the birthplace of hip-hop](#), but it was a springboard for musical talent long before that occurred.

Salsa music was played by some [Bronx](#) residents, like [Willie Colón](#) and others members of [the Fania All-Stars](#), among other groups. In the 1950s, jazz giants like [Donald Byrd](#) and [Herbie Hancock](#) called an apartment in the Morrisania neighborhood home. [The Chantels](#), one of the first girl groups in doo-wop, met one another as first graders at St. Anthony of Padua School nearby.

Planners are hoping to tap into this rich history with a new music venue, the Bronx Music Hall, to be built in the Melrose neighborhood. Ground was broken on Friday on a 300-seat space that will be part of an affordable housing complex.

It is the latest move to honor the Bronx's heritage, part of a continuing effort to burnish the image of an area that was once synonymous with urban decay and neglect.

Bobby Sanabria, a drummer and percussionist from the area, will serve as the music hall's co-artistic director. He cited the diversity of the borough, and quoted a remark made by Mark Naison, a Fordham professor who has been involved with the project, that no other place in America had nurtured more forms of music than the South Bronx. "The problem is nobody knows that, not even Bronxites," Mr. Sanabria said. "A lot of that history was wiped away."

The project's housing component will consist of 305 below-market-rate apartments to be offered to residents making from 30 to 110 percent of the area's median income. About 5 percent of the housing will be set aside for people moving out of homeless shelters, said Nancy Biberman, founder and president of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, or Whedco, the nonprofit behind the project.

Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a statement, "As we build more and more needed affordable housing, there is no finer tribute to New York's deep artistic history than including a music hall in this Bronx development."

The housing development and the concert hall, which were proposed by Whedco in 2008, will be the final development on vacant city land set aside more than 20 years ago for a renewal project.

Mr. Sanabria recalled that when he was growing up in the Bronx in the 1960s, there was a vibrant cultural scene and a landscape dotted with music clubs. "We had about 75 nightclubs in the South Bronx and in the surrounding areas, numerous catering halls and dance halls," he said. "It was an incredible scene that nurtured all these forms of music."

But when President Jimmy Carter's toured the area in 1977, his motorcade passed "block after block of burned-out and abandoned buildings, rubble-strewn lots and open fire hydrants, and people shouting 'Give us money!' and 'We want jobs!'" according to an [article in The New York Times about the visit](#).

Mr. Sanabria, who has been nominated for seven [Grammys](#) and toured overseas, says some people still recoil when he tells them he is from the South Bronx.

Progress has been made over the years, he said, but "we're not there yet." He is now the artistic director at the Bronx Heritage Center, which is run out of another Whedco housing development.

Though hip-hop has grown into a worldwide phenomenon respected by music scholars, Mr. Sanabria also wants the music hall to honor less heralded aspects of the borough's music scene. He aims to feature sounds from diverse immigrant communities as well as those of better-known artists.

The housing component will be designed by Danois Architects, while the firm WXY Architecture & Urban Design will serve as the architect for the Bronx Music Hall. The firm Local Projects, which worked on the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in Manhattan, will be the hall's designer.

The music hall will have a digital archive serving as a repository of the cultural riches produced by the area, Mr. Sanabria said. In an adjacent plaza that will be constructed as part of the project, he hopes to bring back the drum circles he remembers in parks and on street corners when he was younger.

The development will serve as a testament to the determination of the longtime residents of the area, he added.

“The soul of the people of the Bronx is one of resiliency, resistance and pride,” Mr. Sanabria said. “It really is a majestic history.”

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