Black history group hopes to reopen famed Baton Rouge theater

By Emily Kern Hebert
The Advocate

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Otis Redding, The Four Tops and Louis Armstrong performed at the Lincoln Theater. Families flocked there after church to see the latest motion pictures. Civil rights leaders met in its upstairs offices.

Now the Lincoln Theater sits unused and in need of repairs. But the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame hopes to restore it to its former glory and document its place in history.

“We look at it as a jewel that can showcase Louisiana’s successes,” said Brenda Perry, museum founder. “For the African-American community, that was a haven; that was a monument of thriving.”

Goals include reopening the theater to live performances and making it the museum’s official home.

The Lincoln opened during segregation in 1951 and became a central location for African-American business and social life in Baton Rouge.

“African Americans created their own institutions so they would not have that second-class citizenry of segregation,” said consultant Donna Fricker, who is helping to prepare its nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

The building more than a theater. City directories from the 1950s show that it was the home of The Baton Rouge Post newspaper office, The Lincoln Pharmacy, dentist Sam Chapman, The Lincoln Barber Shop, attorneys Bruce Bell and Johnnie Jones, The Good Citizen Life Insurance Co. and The Keystone Life Insurance Co., said Fricker.

Jones represented the United Defense League, which organized the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott and also had offices in the Lincoln. In 1953, the Rev. T.J. Jemison led Baton Rouge’s African Americans on an eight-day boycott of the Baton Rouge bus system. That protest served as the blueprint for similar efforts throughout the nation, including the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Jones had been admitted to the bar only weeks before Jemison asked him to represent the United Defense League. He said he was probably chosen because he was Southern University’s only law graduate that year.

Several news articles over the years have said that King met with Baton Rouge organizers at the Lincoln. Jones, now 90, says he doesn’t recall that, though he does remember spending a day in Baton Rouge with Jemison and King.

“Maybe it was a quiet visit,” Fricker said. “Martin Luther King was not the huge figure then that he became.

“The important thing to me is Martin Luther King in his own autobiography said he called Jemison for his advice,” she said. A collection of rewards and photographs showcasing Jemison’s contributions to the civil rights movement are being stored in the Lincoln.

Fricker is interviewing Black residents who went to the theater to help document the building’s significance.

“So much of history at this grassroots level is not written down,” Fricker said.

City Constable Regina Brown recalls walking to the theater with friends.

“When I was growing up, television screens were a rarity in the household,” Brown said. “The picture was the call of the day.”

Live shows were for adults. But Gwen Hamilton, now with the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, recalls Sunday afternoons at the theater, sometimes watching the same movie multiple times.

“You paid one price and you could stay until your ride came,” she said. “I remember seeing ‘Santa Claus Conquers the Martians’ five times,” Hamilton said her mother never worried — the Lincoln was safe.

“I imagine 45 years ago, just like today, there were not a lot of options and places for teenagers to go,” Hamilton said. “Today, it’s the movies and 45 years ago it was the movies.”

The theater closed in the mid-1980s, beset by population shifts, inability to get first-run movies and competition from new theaters.

Brothers Noel and Joel Jackson, devoted movie-goers there as children, tried unsuccessfully to revive it in 1986.

Joel Jackson worked at the Lincoln in 1974 after high school, and Noel Jackson at another theater owned by Fred Williams, who owned the Lincoln in those years.

“There was nothing better I could do when I got out of high school than run that film and put my hands on a film projector,” Joel Jackson said.

They leased the building and opened in February 1986 with a showing of “Godzilla.” To spark interest, they offered a double feature for $1.50. Children’s matinees on Saturdays were a success. But after a shooting on the property, business never recovered.

The brothers said the building was still in pretty good shape then.

Ted Jemison Jr. bought and renovated it with red leather seats like those from the 1950s, and reopened it in May 2001 with a show featuring comedians, activists and actor Dick Gregory.

He planned to showcase national comedic and vocal acts, and said he rented the building to any organization with a worthy cause.

In 2003, then-democratic presidential candidate Al Sharpton spoke there.

The theater closed again in 2006 after the death of Jemison’s mother. The Black History Hall of Fame bought the Lincoln, then listed on the Foundation for Historical Louisiana’s “Treasures in Trouble” list, for $345,000 last year. Much of the money came from the state.

Perry said it will cost about $50,000 to fix the roof and water damage, replace broken windows, install metal doors and an alarm system, and remove a tree.

The group does not yet have an estimate for restoration but has raised $100,000 toward buying land for the museum expansion.

Perry said security will be a priority when the museum reopens, with lighted parking and shuttles planned to bring people to and from their cars.

However, Jones, who has agreed to donate the desk from his law office at the Lincoln to the museum, said it has a wonderful goal but he doubts it can get together enough money.

“We just can’t jump up and say we’re going to do it. You’ve got to have appropriate plans.”

Others see the group’s plans fitting perfectly with the vision of the newly formed South Baton Rouge Civic Association.

At the first communitywide meeting to discuss revitalizing the area, the theater was at the center of the plan, said Metro Councilwoman Tara Wicker, whose district includes the theater.

“I can really see the Lincoln Theater serving as that beacon of light that allows for the illumination or rebirth of that whole Eddie Robinson corridor,” Wicker said.

“I know it’s the answer to a lot of prayers,” she said, referring to older residents who have remained in the area and have waited for something positive to happen.

Perry agreed. “South Baton Rouge, we’ve got to take it back.”

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