

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

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## Final Report Proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District 5021 Tireman Street

By a resolution dated July 16, 2019, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District in accordance with Chapter 21 of the 2019 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District consists of a single contributing building located on the south side of Tireman Street approximately ½ mile west of Grand Boulevard and addressed as 5021 Tireman Street. It is located approximately five miles northwest of downtown Detroit in the historic Old Westside neighborhood, a few blocks north of the nearby Nacirema Club and St.

Cyprian’s Church local historic districts. The surrounding area is residential with scattered commercial and institutional buildings along Tireman Street, a major east-west road that once separated Greenfield and Springwells Townships prior to annexation by Detroit and later served as the unofficial “Jim Crow Line” whereby African Americans were prevented from moving north of Tireman via racial covenants banning black home ownership. The Orsel and Minnie McGhee House, located one block north from the Blue Bird Inn, would play a crucial role in the 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruling deeming the practice of racial covenants unconstitutional. The building is presently vacant and owned by Detroit Sound Conservancy, a Detroit-based nonprofit dedicated to the preservation of the City’s musical heritage.

## **BOUNDARIES**

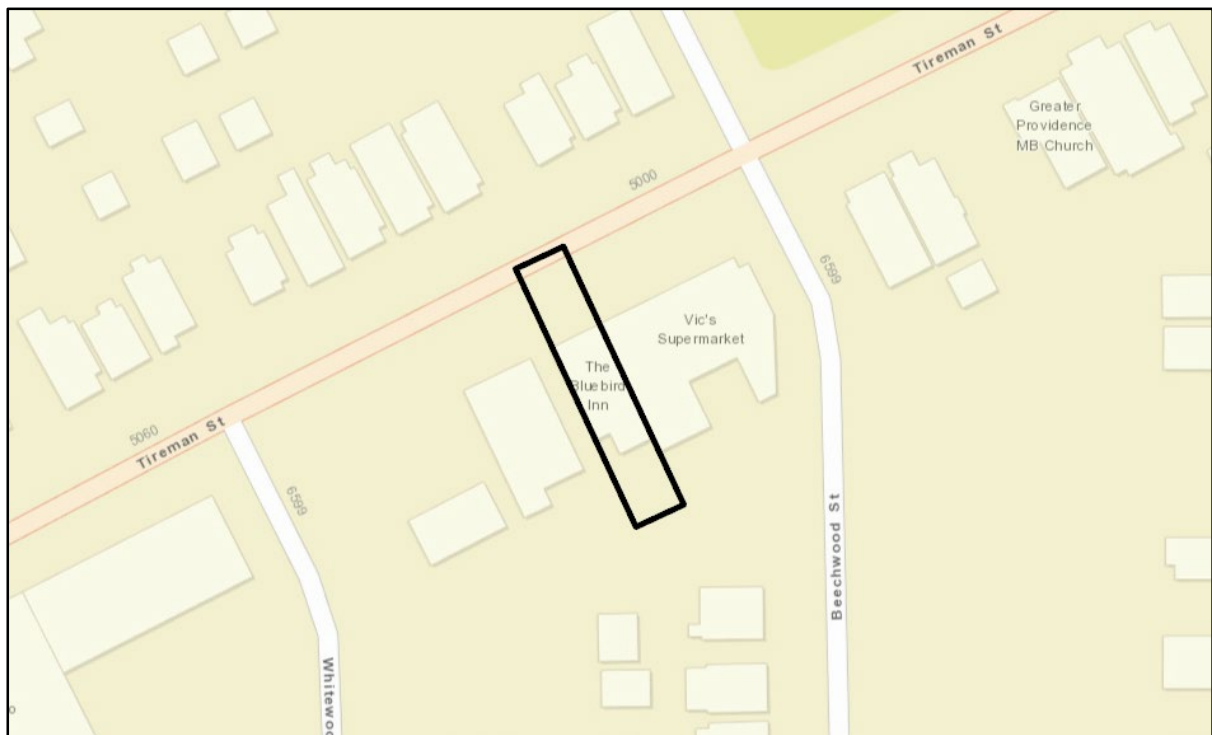
The boundaries of the proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District, outlined in heavy black on the attached map, are as follows:

*On the north*, the centerline of Tireman Street;

*On the east*, the east line, as extended north and south, of lot 32 of the Beech Hurst William L. Holmes Subdivision, Liber 17, Page 40, Wayne County Records;

*On the south*, the centerline of the east-west alley south of Tireman Street; and

*On the west*, the west line, as extended north and south, of lot 32 of the Beech Hurst William L. Holmes Subdivision, Liber 17, Page 40, Wayne County Records.



### Boundary Justification

The boundaries described above delineate the parcel presently and historically occupied by the Blue Bird Inn and contains the entire footprint of the building.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Blue Bird Inn is significant under National Register Criteria A at the national level for its contributions to modern jazz through the development of the bebop musical art form. As a black-owned working-class jazz club, the Blue Bird Inn uniquely exemplifies the rapid racial demographic shifts of Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s as well as the development of Detroit's early African American neighborhoods through extensive economic and social networks, and is thus also significant under Criteria A at the local level.

For its direct association with jazz musicians of national renown such as Detroit-area artists Terry Pollard, Thad Jones, Elvin Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Barry Harris, Billy Mitchell, Sonny Stitt, Joe Henderson, Yusef Lateef, Kenny Hagood, Dorothy Ashby, and Donald Byrd as well as touring artists such as Sarah Vaughan, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis, the Blue Bird Inn is significant under National Register Criteria B at the national level.

Finally, based on the archaeological investigations undertaken by faculty and students of Wayne State University in 2015, the Blue Bird Inn is significant under National Register Criteria D at the local level for its ability to yield important archaeological information exclusive to African American history in Detroit.

### Period of Significance

The period of significance is defined as 1948, when the first house band was formed with a primary focus on bebop, to 1960, when the Blue Bird Inn no longer featured a permanent house band and bebop began to transition to hard bop, post-bop, and free jazz styles.

## HISTORY

### Early History of the Site

The land where 5021 Tireman sits is part of the traditional territory of the *Confederacy of Three Fires*, comprised of the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi) Nations and referred to as *Waawiyatanong*, or “where the water goes around,” in the Anishinaabemowin language of the Anishinaabe indigenous community. The region's original inhabitants, including Anishinaabe as well as Wyandot, Iroquois, Fox, Miami, and Sauk tribes, are known to have traveled throughout the area surrounding 5021 Tireman by using multiple trail systems including the Shiawasse Trail that now roughly corresponds to today's Grand River Avenue.

After Springwells Township was created by an act of Michigan Territorial Governor Lewis Cass in 1818, Greenfield Township was created from its northern portion in 1832 and included the land where 5021 Tireman sits. The earliest record of European settlers in Greenfield Township is listed as 1826, describing the territory as a “vast wilderness, each settler being obliged to cut his way through the forest to his own land.”<sup>1</sup> Later known for its agricultural lands, including the immense seed farm of D. M. Ferry & Company that encompassed nearly three hundred acres, Greenfield Township received its name in reference to “its green fields [that] are both beautiful and productive.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Belden (1876)

<sup>2</sup> Farmer (1890)

By 1892, the area was platted as the “Beech Hurst” William L. Holmes Subdivision. A well-regarded Detroit businessman, William L. Holmes served as the president of the Detroit Telephone Company (1896) and the Detroit Tool Company (1905). In 1906, Beech Hurst subdivision was annexed by the City of Detroit as part of its 6.9 square mile expansion westward, bringing the City’s total size to 35.65 square miles.<sup>3</sup> According to Baist’s real estate atlases, in 1911 the surrounding area was largely undeveloped but by 1923 commercial development was concentrated along Grand River and Warren avenues with residential development throughout the area and encompassing both sides of Tireman Street.

On April 13, 1926, Jacob Molin was deeded the land where 5021 Tireman sits under the will of Illinois Webster, the widow of Orange Webster who purchased the land directly from William Holmes in 1889. On September 3, 1926, Molin pulled a building permit to erect a one-story brick store measuring 30’ wide x 60’ long x 12’ tall for \$6,000. Molin was active in the Jewish community and the owner of Realty Cornice & Roofing Company, addressed as 585 Kennilworth Avenue in the North End neighborhood of Detroit, although the business was bankrupt by 1927. On March 18, 1927, Molin sold the property to Jacob Stiglitz, who operated a hat and clothing store in the North End.

At that time, the building housed two separate storefronts and was addressed as both 5019 and 5021 Tireman Street. Paul Gorman’s tire repair shop was the first recorded business operating out of the 5021 Tireman storefront from 1927-1932, with Detroit Chrome, a plating works company, operating out of the 5019 Tireman storefront from 1929-1931. The property sat vacant from 1932-1934 and was sold at public auction to First National Bank on September 30, 1935. Detroit Refrigeration Service operated out of the 5019 Tireman storefront from 1935-1937.

### The Blue Bird Inn

The separate 5019 and 5021 addresses were combined in 1937 when William DuBois opened the Blue Bird Inn as a neighborhood bar and restaurant at 5021 Tireman. DuBois, who migrated with his family from Alabama to Detroit in the mid-1920s and purchased a home at 6534 Whitewood, around the corner from 5021 Tireman, worked various jobs as a laborer, grocer, and machine operator at Ford Motor Company.<sup>4</sup> From 1934-1937, he operated a beer garden with his wife, Pinkie, a block away at 5113 Tireman.

On August 12, 1937, DuBois pulled a building permit to alter the building by making the doors swing out and enlarging the men’s bathroom. Three months later, he was shot and killed by his son, Robert “Buddy” DuBois, who pled self-defense and was sentenced to a life-term in Jackson Prison.<sup>5</sup> The Blue Bird Inn remained open under several different managers and its first advertisement appeared on April 30, 1938, featuring jam sessions on Thursday and swing music by the Sonny Boy Williams quartet.<sup>6</sup> The bar also featured the Jimmy Caldwell orchestra and Ella “Black Beauty” Lee, a blues singer who also performed at various Paradise Valley clubs.

On September 20, 1943, Pinkie DuBois purchased the property from First Liquidated Corp and, reflecting the bar’s growing popularity, a building permit was pulled on January 6, 1944 to construct a 21’ by 12’ one-story cement block rear addition to expand the kitchen and bathrooms. By 1946, Buddy DuBois returned from prison and resumed management of the bar

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<sup>3</sup> Perry (1917)

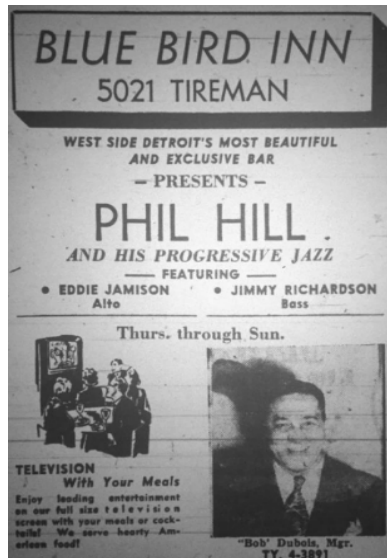
<sup>4</sup> Brace (2016)

<sup>5</sup> Detroit Free Press (1938)

<sup>6</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

along with his sisters, Gertrude Bukley and LaJean DuBois, who were actively involved with its operations and finances.

Seeking to expand the current clientele and attract a younger crowd to the bar, Buddy DuBois embarked on a plan to modernize the Blue Bird Inn. To achieve this, he installed a television set in the bar (a relatively new technology in the late 1940s) and pulled a building permit on April 27, 1948 to alter the front façade of the building, described as a “distinctive exterior- a pure blue façade accented with a New York City-style awning that ran across the sidewalk and right up to the curb.”<sup>7</sup>



Early Blue Bird Inn advertisement.  
Source: *Michigan Chronicle*, 11/20/1948

DuBois also implemented a new live music policy by hiring pianist Phil Hill with the instructions to assemble an exclusive house band “specializing in the new thing from New York City - bebop.”<sup>8</sup> According to a payroll ledger,<sup>9</sup> this change occurred on September 9, 1948, and for the next two years, Phil Hill’s five-piece band would present “progressive jazz” every Thursday through Sunday. The Blue Bird Inn quickly became a favorite hangout for jazz musicians throughout the city, receiving rave reviews from the *Michigan Chronicle* in every weekly issue for the rest of the year.

The casual, unpretentious atmosphere of the Blue Bird Inn distinguished it from other more formal jazz clubs in the city. Pepper Adams, baritone saxophonist at the club in the 1950s, described the Blue Bird Inn as “the kind of neighborhood club patronized largely by working people, with terrific jazz on a regular basis”<sup>10</sup> and “how a jazz club should be at its peak.

Great place. Great atmosphere. Nothing phony about it in any way.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, the Blue Bird Inn is regarded as the club that came closest to the prototype of the modern jazz club with an emphasis on small, intimate listening rooms instead of dancing or large-scale performances.<sup>12</sup> Billy Mitchell, Blue Bird Inn house band leader from 1951-1954, further recalls his experience as a jazz musician in the 1940s:

“I was working with groups that were playing in clubs that were more show-oriented than actually jazz-oriented...there was some jamming going on, but the time of the extended solo...for example, in those days it was almost an unwritten law that you played two choruses and then sat down. Whereas today, two choruses, ain’t nobody took a deep breath yet...that era came for us in Detroit, when the Blue Bird era started.”<sup>13</sup>

On October 1, 1949, as further testimony to the Blue Bird Inn’s growing reputation for skilled improvisation and musical collaboration, Charlie “Yardbird” Parker, nationally renowned jazz saxophonist and early originator of bebop, joined the Phil Hill band from the audience in an

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Brace (2016)

<sup>10</sup> Babson (1984)

<sup>11</sup> Danson (1983)

<sup>12</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

unpublicized and impromptu jam session.<sup>14</sup> For the next decade, the Blue Bird Inn would play a crucial role in the development of local and visiting musicians, helping to create a talent pipeline for modern jazz ensembles throughout the nation often referred to as a “finishing school” incubator for new talent and a “neighborhood lounge turned into a jazz academy.”<sup>15</sup>

In late 1951, DuBois fired Phil Hill for breaking the Blue Bird Inn’s exclusivity contract and performing, under the pseudonym Baron Emanuel, at the Crystal jazz club on Grand River Avenue.<sup>16</sup> Tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell took over the house band at age twenty-five and formed a quartet with Terry Pollard on piano, James “Beans” Richardson on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums. The musical “renaissance” taking place at the Blue Bird Inn was described as:

“The musicians who take chorus after chorus on the Blue Bird Inn bandstand are just about the most uninhibited, relaxed, and frenetic bunch of men (sic) in the city...there’s always the chance that ‘anybody’ may drop in for a series of choruses. Anybody, of course, refers to somebody who is somebody, musically. Mitchell’s group is a progressive one that emphasizes solo lines more than harmonic construction.”<sup>17</sup>

Terry Pollard, at age twenty-three, was the youngest member of the band. Pollard had started playing professionally at age seventeen and was extremely well respected for her piano and vibraphone technique and perfect pitch. Jazz clubs were a predominantly masculine space, and while there were several female jazz vocalists performing in the 1940s and 1950s, there were very few female bebop instrumentalists. In 1953, Terry Gibbs heard her perform at the Blue Bird Inn and recruited her to join his band in New York City where she remained until returning to Detroit in 1957, later becoming an influential member of the Yusef Lateef Quintet.



*Miles Davis at the Blue Bird Inn.*  
Source: *Michigan Chronicle*, 9/11/1954

Replacing Pollard on piano for the Mitchell house band was Tommy Flanagan. Together with trumpeter Thad Jones, the new Billy Mitchell quintet hosted national acts such as Sonny Stitt, famed saxophonist often compared to Charlie Parker in terms of style and skill who also had family in the Old Westside neighborhood. The Billy Mitchell quintet would later become associated with Miles Davis’ five-month stay in Detroit from 1953-1954. Davis came to Detroit to kick his heroin habit. Davis, one of the most influential jazz trumpeters in the development of the “cool” or “west coast” jazz style, spent significant time at the Blue Bird Inn performing with the house bands led by Mitchell and then Beans Richardson, featuring Pepper Adams on baritone saxophone, Barry Harris on piano, and Elvin Jones on drums. Illustrating the impact of musical collaboration between the Blue Bird Inn and Miles Davis, Richardson recalls:

“I remember playing ‘Bitty Ditty,’ one of Thad’s numbers, where the band had played the melody with the chords, but then when soloing we got

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Cox (1995)

<sup>16</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

into a blues thing. Miles suggested changing it around, to play the chords during the solo as well, and this became the standard way of playing it.”<sup>18</sup>

Davis, who would record “Bitty Ditty” himself in 1955, later returned to the Blue Bird Inn with a quintet featuring John Coltrane. Coltrane, a renowned jazz saxophonist who heavily influenced the development of the “free” or “modal” jazz style, would later hire multiple Detroit jazz musicians in his own quintet and recording group, most of whom were also affiliated with the Blue Bird Inn. From 1955-1956, Davis and Coltrane performed with the Blue Bird Inn house band led by bassist Alvin Jackson with Yusef Lateef on tenor sax and flute, Donald Byrd on trumpet, Barry Harris on piano, Art Mardigan on drums, and Bernard McKinney on trombone. *Down Beat*, a leading national magazine specializing in jazz, described the club in glowing terms as:

“Symptomatic of the Detroit approach to jazz is the atmosphere, the look and the feel and the sound, of the Blue Bird...they’re a pert, perky group of musicians who deserve every sort of support, at home in Detroit, and abroad in the rest of the country, for the simple, swinging modernity of their music.”<sup>19</sup>



The Blue Bird Inn elevated stage, ca. 1959  
Source: Detroit Sound Conservancy archives

On January 21, 1957, Clarence Eddins pulled a permit for interior renovations at the Blue Bird Inn for \$2,000. A co-owner of the club since August 26, 1952, Eddins had taken over management in 1956 following the unsolved murder of Buddy DuBois. Eddins had migrated with his mother from Alabama to Detroit in the early 1920s, worked for a time at Chrysler auto factory, and later became a 32<sup>nd</sup> Degree mason. Well respected in Detroit jazz circles, under his leadership and vision the Blue Bird Inn thrived as the “hottest jazz joint in the nation west of New York City.”<sup>20</sup>

The extensive 1957 remodeling dramatically changed the interior of the Blue Bird Inn, adding booth seating along the western wall and expanding the main floor by removing the rear kitchen space. With a new total capacity of 125 people, the Blue Bird Inn’s primary focus shifted from a low-key neighborhood bar and restaurant to a premier jazz club.<sup>21</sup> As

a part of this shift, the stage, previously located on a small platform to the right of the front entrance, was moved to the rear of the bar and “prominently placed as the centerpiece of the room,” completely redesigned as an elevated, semicircular wooden platform with a decorative backdrop and railing encircling its outer edge.<sup>22</sup> The new, modern interior was described as:

“A cozy, shoe-boxed shaped room blessed with warm acoustics and friendly sightlines. A long bar runs down the left side and a row of booths down the right. A geometric pattern adorns the back wall, painted salmon, lime green, and white, covered with stucco sparkles.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> *Down Beat* (1956)

<sup>20</sup> Cox (1995)

<sup>21</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>22</sup> Brace (2016)

<sup>23</sup> *Detroit Free Press* (1996)

In addition to updating the club's interior, Eddins instituted a new music policy that focused on bringing in national acts for five to six day engagements. Former Blue Bird Inn house band members, who had left Detroit and built further distinguished jazz careers in New York City, would also regularly return and play at the club. These returning musicians included:

- Trumpeters **Thad Jones**, who recorded with Thelonious Monk, received a 1978 Grammy Award for his own Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, and later took over leadership for the Count Basie Orchestra, and **Donald Byrd**, who performed with Art Blakely, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Thelonious Monk and later served as a heavy musical influence for Herbie Hancock;
- Drummer **Elvin Jones**, who was a member of the John Coltrane quartet and also played with Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Sonny Rollins;
- Pianists **Tommy Flanagan**, who recorded with Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, and John Coltrane and later served as Ella Fitzgerald's full-time accompanist, and **Barry Harris**, who performed with Coleman Hawkins and would later assume leadership of the Jazz Cultural Workshop in New York City; and
- Multi-instrumentalist and composer **Yusef Lateef**, an innovator in blending jazz with world music who would receive a 1987 Grammy Award.

Although the Blue Bird Inn would continue to feature live music throughout the 1960s, it was no longer the epicenter of bebop as other Detroit clubs such as Minor Key and Baker's Keyboard Lounge began to bring in modern jazz acts. In fact, its last house band from 1958-1959, the International Jazz Quartet led by Ernie Farrow, was not exclusive to the Blue Bird Inn and would regularly play at the Bohemian Club. By 1970, the Blue Bird Inn would no longer present live music (although live music briefly resumed in 1993, following Eddins' death and at the request of his widow, Mary, and continued with special guest performances for the next four years including Rodney Whitaker, Marion Hayden, and Jimmy Smith).<sup>24</sup>

After being listed on the Wayne County Real Estate Auction in 2007, the vacant building had multiple owners and suffered from deterioration and neglect. While the historic interior has been completely scrapped, leaving few vestiges of the historic nightclub, a 2015 archaeological survey undertaken by Wayne State University uncovered numerous artifacts.<sup>25</sup> In recognition of the site's ability to yield important information specific to African American history in the early twentieth century, the Blue Bird Inn was listed on the Michigan Inventory of Archaeological Resources in 2017.<sup>26</sup> The building was purchased in 2019 by the Detroit Sound Conservancy with plans to reinstall the elevated stage and restore the club.

### Bebop and Modern Jazz in Detroit

Detroit's early jazz scene first emerged in the early twentieth century as a culmination of previous blues and society band (ragtime) styles that flourished in the Paradise Valley and Black Bottom neighborhoods, the center of Detroit's African American commercial and social life.<sup>27</sup> During the height of the "Swing Era" and the growing popularity of ballroom dancing and big band jazz in the 1920s, early jazz venues such as Arcadia Ballroom and Graystone Ballroom became regular stops for popular national bands (Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman, etc.) While the large venues booked both white and black acts,

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<sup>24</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>25</sup> Brace (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Site number 20WN1201

<sup>27</sup> Ibid



smaller venues did not offer opportunities for black bands until the 1930s and audiences were typically segregated with the notable exception of “black and tan” clubs in Paradise Valley, such as Club Plantation, that attracted a mixed-race audience.

Bebop grew out of the Swing Era but marked a radical departure in musical form and style. Known as “musician’s music,” bebop was not as danceable and demanded close listening with an emphasis on fast tempo, complex chord progressions and harmony, and improvisation.<sup>28</sup> Bebop groups also featured a small combo (four to six players) supporting the soloist performers, as compared with the big band ensembles that featured up to fourteen players. Mirroring the rapid shifts in American society in the early 1940s and “early stirrings of black consciousness,” Detroit was one of the first cities outside New York City that bebop took root in a “complex network of musical practice sites and performance spaces...the new music fit Detroit’s established character as a locus of black advancement.”<sup>29</sup>

An important reason that bebop flourished in Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s was the stellar music education offered by the Detroit Public School System. Recognized among the country’s best programs by the mid-1920s, students would take music classes three to four times a week in elementary school and often play an instrument by middle school.<sup>30</sup> High schools offered further specialized musical study with rigorous curriculum and school concert bands, and the most celebrated music programs took place at Miller, Northwestern, Northern, and Cass Technical high schools. According to Billy Mitchell: “I would say it would compare with some of the college programs of today.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to preparing young musicians with the technical skills necessary to master the speed, precision, and harmonic theory required by bebop, the Detroit Public School System created a knowledgeable and appreciative audience for modern jazz. Combined with the postwar economic boom, this constant demand for jazz resulted in a steady growth of jobs for musicians in nightclubs, dance halls, and bars, allowing performers to further experiment with and expand the bebop style. According to Porter Crutcher:

“If it wasn’t for Detroit, I think bop would have died. I lived in New York after the war and, believe me, they didn’t really enjoy jazz there as much as we did here. They just wanted people to think they were hip. There was nothing like Detroit, and the Bluebird was very much at the center of that scene.”<sup>32</sup>

The established culture of local mentorship between musicians was also an important factor in the spread and success of modern jazz in Detroit. In addition to the strong social networks and exposure to new music available for aspiring young musicians in school, church, and music halls, leading local jazz artists such as Thad Jones, Barry Harris, and Yusef Lateef would offer advanced training classes in music theory and improvisation in the bebop style.

While the lack of major record labels in Detroit would force many musicians to leave and seek opportunity in New York and California, the local jazz community remains strong and Detroit continues to make meaningful contributions to the legacy of modern jazz with creative

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<sup>28</sup> Lott (1988)

<sup>29</sup> Macias (2010)

<sup>30</sup> Stryker (2019)

<sup>31</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>32</sup> The Hour (1998)

programming and music education, as illustrated by the present-day Carr Center Arts Academy and the Detroit Jazz Festival, the world's largest free yearly jazz festival, founded in 1980.

### Role of Jazz Clubs in Detroit's Early African American Neighborhoods

During the "Great Migration" in the early twentieth century, large numbers of African Americans fleeing the south in search of economic opportunity settled in Detroit, attracted by well-paying manufacturing jobs and black entrepreneurship. Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were the first neighborhoods in Detroit with the largest concentration of black-owned businesses and housing, but overcrowding and deteriorating building conditions soon led many African Americans to move into other areas of the city such as the North End, Conant Gardens, Eight Mile-Wyoming, and Old Westside neighborhoods.

The Old Westside was the largest black enclave outside Paradise Valley, home to about a third of Detroit's African American population by the 1940s and centered on Tireman Street and West Grand Boulevard.<sup>33</sup> Proudly featuring the motto, "The West Side is the Best Side," the Old Westside neighborhood boasted an attractive building stock, large concentration of influential churches,<sup>34</sup> and over three hundred family-owned black businesses by the 1950s. Supporting a solid black working-class population, the largest employer of Westsiders was Ford Motor Company followed by the nearby Kelsey Hayes Wheel Company.<sup>35</sup>

The expansion of jazz clubs in Detroit from the 1920s to 1950s mirrored the shifting black population from Paradise Valley across the city, especially concentrating in the North End and Old Westside neighborhoods. As African Americans in Detroit experienced segregation on a daily basis through racially biased civil rights policies, jazz clubs offered a crucial social and economic network that connected and maintained ties between the geographically disparate early black neighborhoods. For example, although located almost five miles away from Paradise Valley, the Blue Bird Inn paid annual dues to the Paradise Valley Businessmen's Association and regularly contracted business from local black-owned stores, distributors, and repair shops (for example, beer was purchased from Paradise Valley Distributing Company, the first black-owned beer distributor in the country, and the jukebox was managed by Ray Music Company, based in Paradise Valley).<sup>36</sup>

The Blue Bird Inn would also provide check-cashing services for the neighborhood, providing an alternative to banks and other financial institutions known for predatory and discriminatory practices towards African Americans.<sup>37</sup> Both Eddins and DuBois were well-known "numbers men"<sup>38</sup> in the Old Westside neighborhood, active in the daily lottery game popular across African American neighborhoods in Detroit. A lucrative gambling enterprise that created a thriving underground economy, numbers men helped circulate capital within the black community and "in many ways filled the void left by a formal economy indifferent to black residents' needs: They bankrolled many small businesses, from bars to restaurants to corner groceries, and also saved many businesses from bankruptcy."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sugrue (1996)

<sup>34</sup> This area of Detroit is referred to as the "Circle of Churches"

<sup>35</sup> WestSiders (1997)

<sup>36</sup> Brace (2016)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

<sup>39</sup> New York Times (2019)

Finally, Detroit jazz clubs have a long history of challenging de facto segregation by providing informal meeting spaces for black and white musicians and audience members alike. Bebop, in particular, attempted to “change society, or to at least work out in a lived context the unfinished attempt to chart a meaningful urban existence in the face of continuing white racism.”<sup>40</sup> The Blue Bird Inn, functioning as a black-owned working-class bar with an open attendee policy from the 1930s to 1960s, thus uniquely captures the racial and social demographic shifts in Detroit during that time. With its centralized location on Tireman Street coinciding with African Americans challenging housing discriminatory policies in the 1940s and 1950s by moving north of Tireman, comprising ninety percent of its population by 1960,<sup>41</sup> the Blue Bird Inn reflects the important role of cultural institutions amidst rapidly changing social and economic norms throughout the city.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District is located on the south side of Tireman Street approximately mid-block between Beechwood and Whitewood streets. To its east are two contiguous commercial buildings and to its west is an auto repair shop separated by a shallow vacant lot. Built in 1926, the one-story commercial block building occupies a rectangular footprint and is constructed in the simple commercial vernacular style common in the 1920s. Clad in alternating beige and orange polychrome vertical-scored brick laid in a running-bond pattern, the building rests on a concrete slab foundation and is capped with a flat, asphalt roof. With a rectangular cement-block rear addition from 1944, the building footprint occupies nearly the entire parcel with a broad grassy lawn extending from its rear wall to the back alley.

The front façade (north elevation) is symmetrical and modestly embellished with a decorative brick parapet capped with concrete and defined by a central Roman arch inlaid with a concrete medallion featuring a rosette and egg-and-dart motifs and flanked by simple concrete volutes; vertical concrete bands featuring a shield motif on the outermost corners; alternating brickwork interlaced with three plain concrete blocks; and a concrete running belt-course spanning the entire length of the façade. Slight vestiges remain on the eastern-most horizontal band of block letter signage from the previous building tenant, “Detroit Chrome Co.”

The original entryway and storefront windows were modified by a significant 1948 exterior alteration and are now comprised of two recessed wooden doors barred by a black metal security gate and flanked by two vertical column single glass-block windows and two large rectangular openings, the western opening filled with glass-block and the eastern opening covered with plywood. Both storefront openings are covered with a smooth stucco veneer painted cobalt blue and featuring decorative images of birds, musicians with various instruments, musical notes, and cocktail glasses painted white, black, brown, and pink and arranged in a roughly symmetrical pattern. The painting is signed “A. O. Stewart, 1994.” Directly above the entryway is a slightly protruding horizontal electric marquee sign featuring “THE BLUE-BIRD INN” in pink capital letters.

A simple brick chimney is found in the westernmost corner of the building’s rear façade (south elevation) along with a one-story rectangular rear addition comprised of cement blocks and containing three regularly spaced windows covered with metal bars. The building’s eastern elevation abuts directly with its eastern neighboring commercial building, but the western

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<sup>40</sup> Macias (2010)

<sup>41</sup> Bjorn and Gallert (2001)

elevation features a common brick veneer, recently exposed after the demolition of its western neighboring commercial building.

While the interior suffers from a loss of integrity as the majority of interior architectural features have been removed (such as the bar, stage, and booth seating), the building as a whole maintains historic integrity as no substantive alterations to the exterior have taken place since the 1948 front façade alteration that occurred within the period of significance.

## **CRITERIA**

The proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District appears to meet the National Register of Historic Places Criteria A, B, and D:

- A) That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B) That are associated with the lives of significant persons in our past; and
- D) The property must show, or may be likely to yield, information important to history or prehistory.

### List of Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

The proposed Blue Bird Inn Historic District consists of a single contributing resource.

## **COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, who are residents of Detroit, and two ex-officio members. The appointed members are Melanie Bazil, Naomi Beasley-Porter, Carolyn Carter, Keith Dye, Louis Fisher, Zene Fogel-Gibson, Theresa Hagood, Calvin Jackson, and Joseph Rashid. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the City Planning Commission and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Carleton Gholz and Gerald Underwood.

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