

Influential music hall closes in Huntington

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9:53 PM EDT, June 16, 2009

After 26 years of music in the heart of Huntington village, a construction worker took the stage of the Inter-Media Art Center Tuesday - to disassemble it for good.

The center, better known as the IMAC theater, is closing its doors.

Michael Rothbard, executive director of the performing arts center that brought a breadth of music to suburbia - ranging from African percussionist Babatunde Olatunji to jazz greats Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock, to more contemporary artists such as Ani DiFranco and Suzanne Vega - said Tuesday it's time to move on.

"When we started we were pioneering," Rothbard said. "We were the only ones bringing this variety to Long Island, now seven or eight theaters have opened up who are doing exactly what we do."

Still, he acknowledged that some outside influences helped prompt the decision.

Rothbard said a decline in funding coupled with the rising cost of putting on live productions - where a single show can cost \$40,000 - is a factor. A recent fundraiser netted only about \$20,000. The annual rent of about \$150,000 on a century-old building desperately in need of a major renovation began to become an issue. Finally, Rothbard said, he had a "nightmarish" relationship with the landlord in addressing some of the building issues.

The landlord, Frank Viteritti, did not respond to requests for comment.

The 500-seat theater, once a vaudeville house and later a movie theater, was stripped of all its past and present glory Tuesday, barely recognizable as the stage that once played host to Phoebe Snow, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers and Donovan. There was no sign that just a few weeks ago jazz vocalist Bobby Caldwell had filled the house.

Town Supervisor Frank Petrone said in a statement that he has put together a committee to explore getting a new performing arts center in Huntington. For Huntington resident Richard Mallory the news that it was being shuttered was hard to hear.

"That's horrible," said Mallory, a plumber who said he often walked from his home to the theater with his family. "It was a place where parents and kids could both enjoy the music, often in the same show. This is the worst news to happen to the village in a long, long time."