

# Baker's Keyboard Lounge: A Detroit Classic

By Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert

Baker's Keyboard Lounge on the corner of Eight Mile and Livernois in Detroit advertises itself as "The World's Oldest Jazz Club" and it is recognized as such by the International Association of Jazz Educators. Baker's featured pianists beginning in late 1934 but didn't become a major jazz club until the 1950s.

Detroit's jazz scene in 1934 was found in the ballrooms along Woodward and Jefferson and in nightclubs in Paradise Valley, thus Baker's at the time was a distant spot at the city border. The city was slowly coming out of the Great Depression but the recovery was shaky with many ups and downs throughout the 1930s. The depression had given vaudeville theatre entertainment a serious blow and when the revival in the musical entertainment business came it was often at smaller clubs like those in Paradise Valley, the city's African American business and entertainment center. The Club Plantation, the Band Box and Buffalo's were three of the hot spots on Adams, between Beaubien and St. Antoine. There was no growth in the ballroom business during the thirties, but the Graystone still hosted name big bands on Monday nights.

Clarence Baker took over Baker's Bar from his father Chris in 1939, the year when out-of-town pianists were brought in for the first time, as he told Lars in an interview. A renovation in 1952 expanded the club and gave it its elegant moderne



*Baker's Keyboard Lounge interior, postcard photograph. The club hasn't changed much since this 1960s picture. The lower image is reversed (the bandstand is actually on the opposite wall). The view is from the rear of the club. Courtesy Fay Baker*

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*Baker's matchbook cover and back,  
Gallert Collection*

look, which is still in existence today. The renovation moved the door and the bar from the Livernois side to the north side of the building. Baker's features comfortable booths, tilted mirrors, a bar with a painted keyboard, and wall paintings by Harry Julian Carew. The subdued lighting helps to create an intimate atmosphere. Baker's feels like a jazz club. The memories of a million notes played by a thousand musicians hang in the air. The bandstand contains a grand piano (selected by Art Tatum) and can fit six or seven musicians.

The compact size of the club is dictated by its surroundings. The south end of Baker's parking lot bordered Club Alamo from 1948 through the 1950s. Club Alamo featured jazz and comedy acts; Art Tatum played there frequently from 1948–1953. After Club Alamo folded Baker bought the real estate and expanded his parking lot. But Baker's big chance for expansion was to acquire the property, known as “the woodshed”, adjoining the south end of his club. It was owned by “an older Polish couple,” according to Baker's widow, Kay. “They sold it to a Doctor, I think, and he sold pop and snacks and kindling wood from it.” The property became available at some point but according to current Baker's co-owner John Colbert, Baker underbid his competition by \$500 and lost out. He thus forfeited any chance of expansion and created a predicament Baker regretted for the rest of his life.

The main attraction from 1940 until about 1954 was Detroit pianist Pat Flowers, a protege of Fats Waller who captured much of Waller's spirit and energy. Flowers got some national attention through his solo piano recordings for Hit/Guild in 1944 and, using Waller's sidemen, for RCA-Victor in 1946–47. From 1954-56 Flowers was an added attraction at Baker's. In November 1955 he had the challenging



*Pat Flowers, undated publicity photo  
It was during Flowers' tenure that  
Baker's Bar became Baker's  
Keyboard Lounge.*

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*Early 1950s shot of Clarence showing the south end of his club. The building bordering the club, known as the "Woodshed", was offered for sale but Baker underbid and lost his chance for expansion*

jazz acts that Baker started to bring in around 1955. Others included mainstream piano trios, small groups, and vocalists. Modern jazz was less common at Baker's during the 1950s. The major acts were Dave Brubeck in 1957 and Gerry Mulligan in 1958. In the 1960s Baker's turned more towards the hard bop varieties of modern jazz, while still focusing on mainstream acts. Frequent visitors were Groove Holmes, Les McCann, Jimmy Smith, Oscar Peterson, George Shearing, Yusef Lateef, Barry Harris, and Kenny Burrell. This is also when the audience at Baker's went from predominantly white to a more racially balanced mix.

In what proved to be the first of several attempts to sell the business, Baker leased the place to Solly Hartstein in 1963 and opened a supper club, Act IV, in Detroit's New Center area that featured light comedy and popular musical fare. Hartstein, a former saxophonist and bandleader under the name of Jay Hart, was "a frustrated musician" according to Baker. Hartstein continued Baker's jazz policy for a year then switched to a comedy format

job of opening for Art Tatum. In February 1956, Pat Flowers and Clarence Baker ended their fifteen-year relationship, one that had benefited both parties.

Tatum played Baker's during the last two years of his life. During his last performance in April of 1956, Baker remembered that "Tatum was very sick. He lived at the Cadillac (Hotel), but had a hard time making all three shows." Tatum was one of the major



*Solly Hartstein and his wife, Fay flanking an unidentified musician During Hartstein's tenure as owner, Baker's became more welcoming to black patrons.*

*Courtesy Fay Baker*

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*A 1980's exterior photograph.  
Courtesy Wayne State University*

for four months, which didn't work. Hartstein resumed booking jazz and hosted a steady stream of modern jazz groups. He seasoned the jazz offerings with comic Redd Foxx and satirist Professor Irwin Corey, then popular on the club circuit. Baker's supper club venture went under in 1969. He managed the London Chop House and then the Caucus Club, and when Hartstein retired to Florida in 1973 Baker reclaimed his club.

Baker's seats only around 100 but until the late 1980s musician's salaries were moderate and Clarence was able to turn a profit. Many former Detroiters, like Kenny Burrell, would couple a gig at Baker's with a visit home. But the jazz business began to change and the small size of his lounge, mixed with rising salaries, attrition of established jazz stars and changing musical tastes, forced Clarence to book only proven national acts or "all star" local bands that sometimes backed out-of-town performers. Baker occasionally brought in 'smooth jazz' groups. He couldn't compete with larger venues but survived because of a loyal local following. Baker leased management rights to the club several times from 1973–1996, but the ventures failed because the new owners either lacked a passion for the music or weren't savvy enough to survive the often rough-and-tumble world of running a nightclub.

After leasing the club in 1985, Baker and his close friend/business partner Earl Klugh opened "Baker's Uptown" in a redesigned building in Pontiac. They enjoyed some success but ill health and problems at the Detroit club forced them to close the Pontiac operation and Baker resumed his post at Baker's Keyboard Lounge.

By 1996 Baker's health was marginal and he wanted to sell the club lock, stock and barrel. He put an ad in a local paper and John Colbert, a retired Detroit Police Lieutenant, saw the ad and discussed it with his partner, Juanita Jackson. Jackson was hip to the ways of the club business in Detroit. She'd worked at various north end nitespots as



*A later picture of Clarence Baker.  
Courtesy Fay Baker*

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a barmaid, and managed Doc Harris' Jazz Workshop. Jackson was also a fine chef, and had owned & operated "Juanita's Kitchen" located near Baker's club. They contacted Baker and met with him. "Clarence could tell John and Juanita were smart enough to make the club work," says Baker's widow, Kay. "He and John are similar in many ways – they're both good businessmen and hard-headed." Colbert fooled around with the music format for a minute but quickly realized that Baker's is not just a jazz club, it is an important part of Detroit's music community. He works hard to strengthen its position by featuring Detroit jazz talent six nights each week. John has inaugurated a "jam session" to Baker's each Wednesday and always keeps an ear toward the bandstand to catch emerging talents.

Clarence came in the club many times before his death on September 28, 2003, at the age of 93. He was happy with the new owners and felt his life's work was in good hands. Indeed, Colbert and Jackson have started a new tradition at Baker's, one that builds upon the club's history and provides a platform for new, and established, musicians to spread the gospel of jazz to an appreciative audience. Long may they prosper! ■



*Juanita Jackson and John Colbert*