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Marcus Books: Living History in the Fillmore District

A keystone in San Francisco's African American community, Marcus Books has illuminated the Fillmore District since 1960. Nonetheless, the historic business was served an eviction notice last spring, galvanizing a public weary of the displacement of beloved cultural institutions. [STORY ON PAGE 6](#)

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SAN FRANCISCO SMALL BUSINESS WEEK



JOHNNIE BURRELL

Above: The owners of Marcus Books have lived and worked out of 1712-1716 Fillmore since 1980. Today, Greg and Karen (Richardson) Johnson (pictured) manage the San Francisco shop. Below: Community members gathered for a rally and press conference at City Hall on July 30, 2013 to advocate for a resolution introduced by Supervisor London Breed in support of the historic building and bookstore.

Layers of History: Marcus Books

Local Community Rallies to Preserve Historic Bookstore

The historic home of Jimbo's Bop City and Marcus Books, located at 1712-1716 Fillmore Street, is on its way to becoming San Francisco's next local Landmark. Built in the Stick Eastlake style, this 1883 Victorian is significant for its association with pioneering jazz club Jimbo's Bop City, community leaders Raye and Julian Richardson, and Marcus Books, the country's oldest Black-owned and Black-themed bookstore. Having been relocated by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency in 1978, the building also embodies the history of government intervention in the Western Addition neighborhood and its impact on the local Japanese American and African American communities.

This recognition of 1712-1716 Fillmore Street as an important cultural resource comes at a difficult time in its history. Earlier this year, the property was sold in foreclosure to investors, prompting efforts to evict Marcus Books and its owners who live on the upper floors of the building. While neighborhood nonprofit Westside Community Services offered to purchase the building to enable Marcus Books to remain

open, new owners Nishan and Suhaila Sweis have rejected the offer, indicating they would not sell the property for less than \$3.2 million.

A coalition of city officials, the NAACP, community activists, and nonprofit organizations have rallied to save the cultural institution. Supervisor London Breed introduced a resolution to support the preservation of the Jimbo's Bop City/Marcus Books building and to encourage the new owners to sell the property to someone who will "uphold the building's community-serving purposes." The full Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted the resolution on July 30, 2013, but the bookstore's future remains uncertain.

Early History: Jimbo's Bop City

Jimbo's Waffle Shop at 1686-1690 Post Street opened in 1950, offering chicken and waffles during the day and jazz performances at night. The restaurant became an informal spot for musicians to relax and perform after-hours, typically after performing at more formal venues for white audiences. The owner, James "Jimbo" Edwards, changed the name of the business to Jimbo's Bop City, and it quickly became a promoter of both traditional jazz and the new "bop" sound. It also earned a reputation for fostering racial tolerance and social integration, progressive for its time. At Jimbo's Bop City, amateurs played alongside well-known professional performers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane. The club closed in 1965, having contributed to the legacy of the Fillmore as the "Harlem of the West."

Redevelopment in the Western Addition

During the 1960s and 1970s, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA) embarked on an ambitious and ultimately destructive plan to revitalize the Western Addition, Japantown, and Fillmore neighborhoods. The former Jimbo's Bop City, then located on Post Street, was initially identified for demolition, but was spared after a coalition of activists organized to relocate the building. This coalition consisted of members of the African American and Japanese American communities who lived in the area, as well as members of San Francisco's early preservation movement that originated during the redevelopment era of the 1960s and 1970s. Several neighborhood groups formed to counter the destructive actions of the SFRA as well, including the Fillmore Community Development Association, Fillmore Residents, Inc., and the Western Addition Community Organization (WACO). Essie Collins, a member of WACO, was responsible for petitioning the SFRA to move the former Jimbo's Bop City building from Post Street to its current location at 1712-1716 Fillmore Street.

A Cultural Institution Emerges

The building's most recent significance is its association with Marcus Books and its founders, Drs. Julian (d. 2000) and Raye (1920-)



BUNKY'S PICKLE (FLICKR)

Renowned pianist Art Tatum performs at Jimbo's Bop City, the legendary jazz club that occupied the building now located at 1712-1716 Fillmore Street from 1950 to 1965.

Richardson. Moving to the city from Alabama in 1941, the Richardsons quickly became pillars of the African American intellectual and activist communities. They offered small-scale publishing and book-selling to the Black community beginning in 1947, served as professors at San Francisco State University, and mentored people of all ages. As the oldest continuously operating Black bookstore in the country, Marcus Books has contributed profoundly to Black intellectualism, culture, and political life in San Francisco since its origins in the historically Black Fillmore neighborhood in 1960, three blocks from its current location on Fillmore Street. Its present site represents the only extant building in the Western Addition that maintains an association to the bookstore, as buildings that housed earlier iterations of the business have since been demolished by the SFRA. Marcus Books has also been a bedrock of Black community empowerment and action, functioning as a community center in social and political struggles ranging from organizing against SFRA activity to the 1968 student strike at San Francisco State College (now University). The Richardson family has lived and worked out of 1712-1716 Fillmore Street for 30 years, from 1980 to 2013.

Next Steps for Landmark Designation

The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) added Jimbo's Bop City/Marcus Books to the Planning Department's Landmark Designation Work Program in June 2011 and recommended approval of the Landmark Designation Case Report to the Board of Supervisors on November 6, 2013. As this issue of *Heritage News* goes to print, the Board has yet to vote on the nomination, but supporters remain confident that 1712-1716 Fillmore will become San Francisco's next official Landmark. ■