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From the Baltimore Sun

Baltimore nightclub is to close Saturday

Hammerjacks, heavy metal, rock icon, has been sold to developers

By Lorraine Mirabella, Rob Hiaasen and Sam Sessa
Sun reporters

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[Hammerjacks](#), once a Baltimore icon of heavy metal and rock, will close Saturday after the sale of its building to developers.

The club never regained its legendary status after its reincarnation in 2000 in a two-story brick building on Guilford Avenue, where disc jockeys spinning dance club numbers and hip-hop were more common than live music.

But in the days before the cavernous club under an Interstate 395 overpass was razed and paved over for Ravens stadium parking, bands such as Guns 'N' Roses and the Ramones could practically make the expressway vibrate.

The nightclub's Web site is running a countdown to last call, down to the millisecond. It says the club has been sold.

A message on its voice mail says: "The rumors are true. May 27 Hammerjacks will be closing their doors forever."

Club owner Michael W. Hunter Jr. did not return calls yesterday. Neither did developers Bresler & Reiner Inc. of Rockville and Richard W. Naing of RWN Development Group, who have presented the city with redevelopment plans for Guilford Avenue north of City Hall.

But it's likely Hammerjacks and other buildings between Saratoga and Pleasant streets, such as a parking garage and self-storage facility, will be torn down to make way for a tower with housing and ground-level shops, the city planning director said. That would continue a redevelopment frenzy that has taken hold downtown and has begun along the Guilford Avenue corridor with new apartments in the Saratoga Court building at Guilford and Saratoga.

For some in Baltimore's club scene circles, especially those who remember the old Hammerjacks as a cultural phenomenon, news of the sale, first reported by The Daily Record, hardly registered.

Don Wehner of Up Front Promotions, a regional promotion company, booked acts for a decade at the old Hammerjacks, which featured entertainers such as Tupac Shakur, Queen Latifah, Marilyn Manson and local bands like Jimmie's Chicken Shack. For Wehner, the club he knew and loved is gone.

"Hammerjacks closed in the fall of 1997," Wehner said. At its current location, the club "didn't even make a dent in the

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live music world - maybe not even in the DJ world."

The newer Hammerjacks did find a niche as an outlet for Baltimore's unique urban club music called the "B-More" sound - ultra-fast, drum-driven dance music. Along with Club Choices and the Paradox, Hammerjacks also has featured some of the best-known local producers and supporters of the B-More sound, including DJ Rod Lee and DJ "Club Queen" K-Swift.

"I know them both, and with all due respect to them, the Hammerjacks that exists is not the Hammerjacks that made the music scene in Baltimore," Wehner said.

Seth Hurwitz, a regional concert promoter and co-owner of the 9:30 Club in Washington, also fondly remembers the old Hammerjacks in the 1980s during the era of the big-hair bands.

That was a time when the club, in a converted brewery building in an industrial patch of South Howard Street, had an image "as a haven for big-haired, scantily dressed, hard-rock gals and their longhaired boyfriends in tight jeans," The Sun's former pop music critic, J.D. Considine, wrote in 1997. Despite that image, he wrote, "the appeal was far broader."

Hammerjacks remained vital to Baltimore's music scene in the 1980s and 1990s. It featured two clubs - a two-story bar with DJs and a concert hall that had opened in 1985 - where 3,000 fans could rock the night away.

"It was a big part of the landscape," said Ron Furman, owner of the Max's on Broadway bar in [Fells Point](#), who occasionally helped promote shows at Hammerjacks. "It personified that style of music, dress, what was being played on mainstream radio at the time. It had some of that MTV feel to it, but it was definitely that blue-collar working man's bar at the same time. Everybody felt comfortable in there, and it had the allure of having a dark side."

"It was rock 'n' roll," Furman said. "They played all those 'hair' bands, and it had that illusion of being rough. It was a drinking man's bar, but at the same time vast and big. It was a place where you could see acts in a bar atmosphere. You could see the Guns 'N' Roses of the world."

In 1997, the Maryland Stadium Authority purchased Hammerjacks in a deal to acquire three tracts on South Howard Street for \$3.1 million. The former owner, Louie Principio, told The Sun at the time that he believed the property was worth at least \$4.4 million, but he was tired of the fight. "I feel like someone punched me in the stomach," he said then. Principio could not be reached yesterday.

Principio went on three years later to open the new Hammerjacks on Guilford Avenue. He planned to bring bands in a more limited way and reserve weekends for DJs playing mainstream rock 'n' roll and dance music.

Drummer John Allen played at the newer Hammerjacks, most recently with rock group SR-71 in 2002, and also played at the previous location.

Though the newer Hammerjacks threw few rock shows, Allen said his band's gig there seemed like past concerts at the South Howard Street club.

"The night that we played it, it had a great, great feel to it," Allen said. "It felt like the old one. It was packed and people were rocking out. I think in some respects the Hammerjacks prior to the one on Guilford was a point in time, and sometimes it's really hard to capture that."

The city's musical landscape changed significantly after the new Hammerjacks opened. Rams Head Live, a concert hall in [Power Plant Live](#) that cost more than \$10 million and holds 1,600 opened in late 2004. Nationally touring club acts found new homes there and at Sonar, a refurbished warehouse near Hammerjacks on Saratoga Street with a 1,200-person capacity that opened shortly before Rams Head Live. In 2003, the 8x10 Club on Cross Street also received a \$2.5 million makeover.

Hammerjacks wasn't a major player anymore, some in the club business said yesterday.

"It was not an important live music venue - not in my world, the rock concert world," said Hurwitz, of the 9:30 Club. "The old Hammerjacks is really the story. This is not even the same story, but it is a good reason to reminisce."

Hammerjacks on Guilford will likely be replaced with a tower at least 40 stories tall of condominiums or apartments and ground-level retail, Otis Rolley III, the city's planning director, said yesterday.

Rolley said the city supports the concept of the plan. Developers have presented conceptual plans but have not filed specific plans with the city, he said.

"The preference of the city is to activate all of downtown on both sides of the JFX," Rolley said. "You want height here in downtown. You want people living right near their workplaces with access to conventional retail."

The Guilford Avenue corridor is underused, prime downtown space near City Hall dotted with self-storage and garages, he said.

"We could get more for the city and the neighborhood other than the existing uses," Rolley said.

As for Hammerjacks closing, he said: "You would have to assume it wouldn't be closing if it were highly successful."

The closing reflects nothing more than supply and demand, Hurwitz said. In this case, "it's a real estate deal - and if that is more important than what was happening in the club, that kind of says it all right there," he said.

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