

Memphis visitors welcome electronic changes to civil rights museum

By Michael Lollar

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Construction workers in hard hats were part of the scenery at the National Civil Rights Museum last week while circular saws buzzed in the background and a recording of Mahalia Jackson's "Precious Lord" played for visitors climbing the stairs to the balcony of the old Lorraine Motel.

The main building of the museum is closed for renovation, but it did not deter visitors to the rest of the museum, including one new feature that seemed to have universal appeal Friday. "It's awesome," said Diane Bryant of Kinston, N.C., when she pushed the button of a new electronic "listening post" in the museum courtyard and watched a short video about civil rights history.

It is one of five listening posts that foretell a new museum experience coming early in 2014 when the museum is scheduled to reopen with \$27 million in improvements, many of which are electronic enhancements to exhibits that opened to the public in 1991.

Bryant said the listening post is like a "quick, inviting preview" of what people will learn about the museum and civil rights history.

Each post tells a different story, including one in which gospel singer Mavis Staples and late soul artist Isaac Hayes talk about the history of the motel. The motel now is the facade of the National Civil Rights Museum. Its balcony, where King was killed, is one of the museum's top attractions. The Lorraine was one of the few Memphis motels and hotels that catered to black visitors with a guest roster that included Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Ethel Waters, Otis Redding and Lionel Hampton. "It was the hotel for blacks in Memphis.," says Staples in the listening post video. "Everyone stayed at the Lorraine ... If you wanted to meet up with your friends, anytime you went to the Lorraine somebody was there."

Hayes said, "We'd go down to the Lorraine Motel and we'd lay by the pool. Mr. Bailey (the owner) would bring us fried chicken, and we'd eat ice cream and all this kind of stuff. And we just frolicked until the sun goes down."

At another post, Lukasz Yoder, 12, of Los Angeles, touched the screen and watched a video of Martin Luther King's last day in Memphis and his shooting. "It's very sad. And it's very moving to see it where it actually happened," he said of the listening post video situated beneath the motel balcony.

Museum architect Juan Self said one of the biggest architectural challenges of the

new museum has been the new entry lobby, where his firm designed a circular stairway winding around the lobby to the second floor. Another change will be the theater near the entry where visitors will be directed for a brief orientation film. Designer Mario Walker said that as the film ends a double wall opens, serving as a dramatic gateway to museum exhibits.

Self said another new feature of the museum will be an expanded “Rose Room” upstairs. It once held about 200 people, but is being expanded to slightly larger than a pro basketball court that will accommodate up to 500 people. Its 10-foot ceiling is being raised to 13 feet at its lowest point and 15 feet at the highest point. The room will be used for museum functions and can be rented for receptions.

Among museum visitors Friday was Luther Brown, director of the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss. He was leading a tour of 40 educators sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Brown said he welcomes the electronic changes coming to the museum. He said it has been a “valuable resource” since 1991, but, “If I had a criticism it was that it was too text heavy.”



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