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The Jazz Loft Signs Contract to Purchase Historic Vail-Leavitt Theater

Riverhead, N.Y. — A new chapter is about to begin for one of Long Island’s most storied cultural landmarks. On Tuesday, December 16, The Jazz Loft’s president and founder, Thomas Manuel, traveled to Riverhead for the official contract signing with the Town of Riverhead to purchase the historic Vail-Leavitt Music Hall. The Vail-Leavitt Theater, is located at 18 Peconic Avenue, Riverhead.

Following more than two years of negotiations, the Riverhead Town Board approved the sale of the Vail-Leavitt to The Jazz Loft for \$150,000. In return, The Jazz Loft will now undertake a full restoration of the 144-year-old venue, preserving its historic character while breathing new life into one of the region’s oldest performing arts spaces.

Manuel’s vision for the Vail-Leavitt is both ambitious and community-focused. Plans call for reviving the theater as a dynamic hub for education, artistic collaboration, business partnerships, and year-round cultural programming.

“We envision *The Jazz Loft @ The Vail* becoming a vibrant center of activity that truly serves the entire community,” said Manuel. “It will embody the town’s ‘Work, Live, Eat, Stay, Play’ vision and help Riverhead shine as a cultural destination.”

Renovations are expected to begin in January 2026, with a goal of celebrating a grand reopening in the summer of 2026.

Built in 1881, the Vail-Leavitt Theater is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is widely considered the oldest theater on Long Island and the oldest performance venue in downstate New York. Its main theater and balcony replicate, to scale, J.W. Flack’s design of the original Ford’s Theatre opera house. Though owned by the Town of Riverhead, the theater has

sat largely unused for more than four decades, with several unsuccessful attempts to restore or revitalize it—until now.

The Jazz Loft, a nonprofit music venue and museum in Stony Brook, has a proven track record of transforming cultural spaces into thriving economic and artistic engines. Hosting more than 200 events annually, The Jazz Loft has boosted local businesses, supported hotels and restaurants, and created festivals and partnerships that draw thousands to the community each year.

For more information about The Jazz Loft, visit thejazzloft.org.

Photo: Contract sign



The Jazz Loft's founder Tom Manuel signs the contract to purchase the Vail-Leavitt Theater.

Photo by Sofia Copola

Photo: band



The Jazz Loft brought a taste of the music that will now fill the air at the Vail-Leavitt Theater. From left are Darrell Smith; Tom Manuel; Dean Johnson; Steve Salerno and Ray Anderson.

Photo by Sofia Coppola