

Gibson to open store at former Tower Records site in West Hollywood



The Tower Records building in West Hollywood was for decades a center of activity in the Sunset Strip's vibrant music scene. The good times ended after Tower filed for bankruptcy in 2006, but Gibson plans to start a new scene that pays tribute to the old one. (Richard Hartog / Los Angeles Times)

By **ROGER VINCENT**

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The former Tower Records building, a legendary West Hollywood site that was under threat of being demolished, will have a second life in the music business as a special outpost for guitar giant Gibson Brands.

Plans for the property, at 8801 Sunset Blvd., are in early stages, but the Nashville company intends to showcase its musical instruments and consumer electronics in a venue that will also feature live performances, Chief Executive Henry Juskiewicz announced Monday.

"We want to reinvent this site to be the international phenomenon that its legacy deserves," he said.

Constructed in 1971, the Tower Records building was for decades a center of activity in the Sunset

Strip's vibrant music scene. The store's walls were plastered with giant reproductions of album covers. Record labels routinely kicked off new releases by sending bands there to perform.

The good times ended after Tower Records filed for bankruptcy in 2006, but Gibson plans to start a new scene that pays tribute to the old one.

"We are going to honor history and take it to a whole new level," Juskiewicz said. "We want to retain that crazy vibe of Tower Records."

Gibson has signed a 15-year lease for the rectangular one-story building that would be unremarkable were it not for the mother lode of memories it conjures for generations of music fans who remember the joys of browsing among record racks and pondering eclectic art on album covers.

Juskiewicz said Gibson would spend at least \$1 million to renovate the 8,700-square-foot building for a reopening by the end of the year.

"It will be very evocative of Tower," he said, "not a 20-story palace or anything."

One of the owners of the property, Chicago developer Sol Barket, announced plans in 2010 to demolish the former record store and build a three-story structure that would house an upscale gym and offices for rent. Preservationists protested the plan and the city withheld approval of the project, which also called for prominent advertising signs. The owners then decided to look for a tenant to rent the existing property.

"We had a lot of interest in the Tower site" from potential renters, including a well-known art gallery, said real estate broker Jay Luchs of Newmark Grubb Knight Frank, who represents the landlords.

"At the end of the day, Gibson was the right fit," Luchs said.

A longtime neighbor of the property, Jerome Cleary, opposed the proposed gym in the hope that remnants of the Sunset Strip's musical legacy that dates to the 1960s would be preserved.

"Rock 'n' roll is what made people want to come here," said Cleary, a writer and stand-up comedian. "Sunset shouldn't be just a generic place."

Founded in 1894, Gibson Brands is a music industry powerhouse that owns many brands in addition to its signature guitar line. Other instrument lines include Epiphone, Kramer, Tobias, Slingerland, Baldwin and Wurlitzer.

It has a professional audio recording line and consumer electronic brands such as Onkyo, Integra,

Teac and Esoteric. It recently acquired Hong Kong-based Philips Home Entertainment, the company that invented the cassette tape and the CD, DVD, MP3 and MP4 formats.

"This will be the first spot where our entire music chain will be presented," Juskiewicz said.

Equally important to Gibson, he said, will be the yet-unnamed Sunset Strip location's function as a place for new talent to break out.

"Live music is a tough business, and it's getting hammered," Juskiewicz said. "What artists need to develop their craft is to get exposed to an audience and not have to fill 10,000 seats. Hopefully we will contribute to bringing out up-and-coming artists of all genres."

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