

FROM BROADWAY TO THE BRONX



NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORY THROUGH SONG

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Introduction

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*Searchin' for a sound we hadn't heard before, and it said
Welcome to New York
It's been waitin for you
Welcome to New York.*

(Taylor Swift, 'Welcome to New York', 2014)

New York City. The Big Apple. The city that never sleeps. If you can make it here, you'll make it anywhere – or so they say. Clichés abound about the place, legends even, myths; forever cemented on stage and on screen, in literature and music. Frank Sinatra serenaded it. Billy Joel and Jay-Z & Alicia Keys ascribed a whole state of mind to it. Don Henley measured time in New York minutes. John Cage even turned the sounds of the city themselves into music, in his 1977 performance piece '49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs'.

New York's musical history however, goes much deeper than this – the city has birthed so many artists and genres that their histories cannot be disentangled from the stories they tell: for some, New York City is a place of 'bruised romanticism' (Lasser 2019: 3). For others a place to express themselves, to showcase their cultural and biographical background – even what it means to be American, a New Yorker. At the same time New York can also be the city that holds them hostage, isolates them, kills them. It is always a place oscillating between belonging, longing and alienation; ever shifting, ever fleeting. Therefore, all the songs discussed in this collection always contain multitudes; marrying personal experience and systemic issues, hopelessness in the face of inequality and the wish for a better future. But in the end, they all show us the nuanced and often troubled history of New York City, and yet still add to its legendary status.

*New York City's Music from Colonial Times to the Turn of the
Twentieth Century*

The chapters in this book span songs and artists from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first. And yet, music, both in religious as well as vernacular

contexts, were already part of daily life in colonial New York – as were concerts and musical theatre, especially since the first half of the eighteenth century. One of the first major musical figures of this period was William Tuckey, who arrived from Bristol in 1752. His life reflects many of the different musical ventures and occurrences in these years, as he was a choirmaster in church, established a singing school, started a series of concerts with both instrumental and choir music, and staged North America's first performance of Handel's *Messiah* (HWV 56, premiered 1742) in 1770 (Ogasapian 2004: 77–79).

Around the same time, one of the first centres of New York's concert and theatre life became the so-called 'pleasure gardens', which hosted, among many other things, seasonal concerts and stage plays. Though similar venues also opened in other colonial cities, the ones in New York especially thrived thanks to a generally more diverse religious community and authorities allowing such leisure places to be established in the first place (Scribner 2017: 277–78). Other privately owned commercial venues for music, theatre and vaudeville followed in the next century, with Park Theatre (1798), Bowery Theatre (1826) and Bowery Amphitheatre (1833) as some of the most well-known examples. While some of them targeted the city's elites, many offered their shows for low entrance fees, making (musical) theatre one of the most important leisure venues for the working class. Thanks to these large audiences and, at least for the 'bigger names', generous salaries, some of New York's theatres became favoured performing spaces for international actors, actresses and musicians (Jackson 2010: 1295) and thus played a vital role in the transatlantic cultural transfer.

Immigrants coming to New York were also a major part of this transfer. Their songs, plays and hymns became part of the city, and venues who primarily targeted specific immigrant groups gave them a place of identification and belonging. At the same time, immigrant performers and producers opened the theatrical and musical traditions of their home countries to people outside of their communities: Yiddish musical theatre, for example, was first developed in Eastern Europe by touring troupes who combined Jewish and Yiddish musical practices with European traditions of operetta and other 'light' stage genres. In 1883, Yiddish theatre was banned in Russia, following the rise of antisemitism after Tsar Alexander II's assassination, and many performers immigrated to North America, thus bringing the Yiddish theatre to the United States and New York (Heskes 1984: 75–76). Here the plays of artists like Abraham Goldfaden 'popularized works of art, [...] [have] been a teacher of social problems, raised the self-respect of the Jews and the standing of the Jew in the literary' (Annual of Central Conference of American Rabbis cited in Heskes 1984: 76).

By the mid nineteenth century, several new stage forms had also arrived in New York, among them the variety show, a more sexually explicit form of vaudeville,

and the minstrel show. So-called minstrel halls who specialized in performances of that genre – one of the most overt manifestations of systemic racism in musical culture – were centred around Broadway and thus started the long tradition of its musical theatres (Jackson 2010: 1296).

Broadway's rival entertainment district of that time was the Bowery, a street in lower Manhattan. The area first became a neighbourhood for middle- to upper-class people, reflected in its opulent theatres like the already-mentioned Bowery Theatre and Bowery Amphitheatre. This changed after the Civil War, when the district first became known for cheaper entertainment, catering mostly to immigrants and working-class audiences. After the building of the Third Avenue elevated line in 1876, the Bowery got basically cut off from the rest of the city, and instead became a place for brothels and late-night saloons (Jackson 2010: 148), thus showcasing a different side of urban entertainment and music than Broadway at that time.

This brief overview of New York's musical and musical theatre life up until the turn of the century would not be complete without a mention of the thriving 'classical' concert life: The New York Philharmonic was already founded in 1842, followed by the New York Symphony Orchestra in 1878; the Metropolitan Opera opened in 1882, Carnegie Hall in 1891. Music education also became more institutionalized in the second half of the century, with colleges and universities offering special diplomas or degrees and conservatories like New York College of Music (1878) and Jeannette Meyers Thurber's National Conservatory of Music (1885) trained a new generation of American composers and musicians (Keller et al. 2010: 267–68).

New York's Popular Songs in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

New York's music industry in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by two genres that also shaped the nationwide popular culture in these decades: Broadway's musical theatre and the 'parlour songs' of Tin Pan Alley. These songs not only came from New York, they also often made the city, its citizens and places as their subject. And onstage, especially the 'backstage musical', revolving around the (fictionalized) life of Broadway's artists, became quite popular starting in the 1930s. These first five decades and their New York songs are extensively covered in Michael Lasser's *City Songs and American Life, 1910–1950*, describing both historical contexts as well as artists and songs of the Big Apple until the start of the Cold War, so we won't go into more detail here.

In general, popular songs cannot be separated from the history of music and theatre in New York: they were an integral part of and popularized by musical

theatre, minstrel shows, vaudeville and variety shows. In addition, church songs, as well as folk songs – both of North American origin as well as from the home countries of immigrants – shaped the musical life of New York: from Mainland China, for example, came *muayu*, a folk song tradition from the South, especially the province of Taishan, where many immigrants to the United States came from. Su Zheng found traces of these narrative songs in both San Francisco's as well as New York's Chinatowns, telling stories not only of immigrants in the United States but also of wives left home (2010: 135–39), as *muayu* was a way for especially women 'to learn to read and to acquire knowledge [...], as well as to have some amusement' (Zheng 2010: 137).

For the US mainstream, another form of song became very popular in the nineteenth century, the so-called 'parlour songs'. These musical pieces were written specifically for amateurs to be sung and played at home. Their publishers and composers could be found all over the United States, though around the turn of the twentieth century New York City, and even more specifically Tin Pan Alley, became the epicentre of this kind of sheet music production. As described in Veronika Keller's chapter on the songs of Tin Pan Alley, this music became a kind of subgenre by itself, and was heavily influenced by immigrants, but also used ethnic and racist stereotypes to entertain its mostly (white) middle-class consumers.

In the 1920s and 1930s, another part of New York became synonymous for a new artistic movement, when in Harlem, African American authors, painters and musicians became 'part of a group linked by ethnic pride, political activism, and a shared cultural lineage' (Gaither and Rampersad 2010: 577). This 'Harlem Renaissance' came to life after not only the 'Great Migration' brought many rural African Americans from the Reconstruction South to urban centres in the North, but also Black soldiers coming back from the First World War and questioning their discriminated status in a society they had just fought for (Lasser 2019: 49, 56). Though primarily a literature movement, music, and especially jazz, played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance and shaped the development of popular songs in America for decades to come.¹

The Harlem Renaissance also introduced African American literature, art and especially music to the white population of New York City. For them, 1920s Harlem became a place of exotic escape, with its (artistic) residents showcasing a mixture of 'primitive' artistry, as displayed by the popular 'jungle décor' of many clubs. Especially the Plantation Club and the Cotton Club, with bandleader Duke Ellington, gave white audiences access to these experiences through music, dance and song, without them actually interacting with Black Americans (Lasser 2019: 70–75).

At the same time, the Harlem Renaissance also improved the reputation of African American musicians, especially as bandleaders, but also on Broadway.

Best known even today are lyricist Noble Sissle and composer Eubie Blake who wrote the first big all-Black Broadway hit *Shuffle Along* in 1921, a string of songs, connected by dialogue and jokes (see Schenbeck and Schenbeck 2018: xv–li). In that regard, it was typical for Broadway shows in the 1920s, as they were still more vaudeville and variety shows than theatre with a developed plot and characters. They focused primarily on the performance of songs (some newly written, many pre-composed), dances, comedy sketches and many more flamboyant and exotic elements, with Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.'s 'Ziegfeld Follies' yearly revues defining the genre between 1907 and 1931 (Donhauser 2019: 1431).

The 1930s saw a sharp decline of musical performances in New York City for mostly two reasons: The Great Depression made financing of the popular and lavish productions like the 'Ziegfeld Follies' nearly impossible, and they had to compete with sound films in general and their musical productions in particular. Many of Hollywood's musicals still revolved around Broadway, used songs from former productions or even created new hits, like Harry Warren's 'Lullaby of Broadway' in *Gold Diggers of 1935*. This song and its story, removed from the rest of the plot, about the last night of a glamorous 'Broadway Baby' is discussed in Chris Flinterman's chapter, both in its first incarnation in the original movie and its revival in the 1980s' *42nd Street*.

Songs were still the heart of musical productions, either onstage or on-screen, and were oftentimes recorded separately. They were distributed on the radio – though in these early days most radio shows still contained live performances – and through the now rapidly developing phonograph industry, as after the First World War selling numbers of phonograph recordings for the first time overtook those of sheet music (Lasser 2019: 95–98). Many of the early record labels were centred in New York City: around the turn of the century, even before the heydays of Tin Pan Alley really started, it was already home to labels like The Universal Phonograph Company, founded in 1897, or Victor Talking Machine Company, founded in 1901. Together with later additions – some of which still exist today like the Radio Corporation of America (today's RCA Records) in 1919 (Burgess 2014: 18–19, 27) – they drew hundreds of musical artists to New York and laid the ground of its varied recording industry in the second half of the twentieth century.

The music industry of the 1930s not only brought artists to New York, they also broadcast New York's music and musicians live to the whole nation: The National Broadcasting Company (NBC), partly owned by RCA, for example, started to air 'Your Hit Parade' nationwide, first in 1928, and then from 1935 to 1959. It presented the week's top ten record sales, performed by local bands and musicians, and sometimes the recording stars themselves (Lasser 2019: 106). Though the top ten were based on the record and sheet music sales all over the country, especially in the early days, the bands came solely from New York

(Dunning 1998: 738), de facto making this radio show an early platform not only of American popular songs, but also of New York City's music industry.

At the same time, Broadway still had its hits, but its shows began to change from the former revue-style to the 'book-musical'. It had a more cohesive plot, character development and, musically important, songs which either developed the plot or told the audience more about the characters. One of the earliest hits of this genre was *Show Boat* in 1927 (Winslow and Lalonde 2010: 873), and 'book musicals' rose in popularity especially in the 1940s. Many of them were smashing successes, with over a thousand performances on Broadway, an unheard number before. Especially *Oklahoma* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II became a massive hit with 2212 performances. This started the 'Golden Era' of Broadway and the musical, with hits like *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951) and *The Sound of Music* (1959), all three also by Rodgers and Hammerstein; *Annie Get Your Gun* by Irving Berlin and Dorothy and Herbert Fields (1946) or *My Fair Lady* by Frederick Lowe and Alan Jay Lerner (1956) and, considered as the last great piece of the era, *Fiddler on the Roof* by Jerry Bock and Joseph Stein (1964) (Naden 2011: 2–3, 15). These were all set outside of New York, in most cases even in foreign countries like Siam, England or Austria. By contrast, the 1966 Neil Simon-written *Sweet Charity* is set in New York, but deals in musical cosmopolitanisms, as Nick Braae discusses in his chapter.

New York Songs since the 1960s

In the 1960s, New York became the East Coast home of folk music, with artists like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan gravitating towards Greenwich Village's Café Wha? and other counterculture hangouts (see Petrus and Cohen 2015). Especially lower Manhattan became a rich breeding ground for artists of all couleurs, one thinks only of Pittsburgh-born Andy Warhol and his Factory, which also included New Wave rockers The Velvet Underground & Nico. Their singer, Lou Reed, a Jewish New Yorker whose 'real God was rock 'n' roll' (Reed 1998) became one of the well-known *enfants terribles* in these circles. Stephen Petrus's chapter deals with one of his later works, 1989's 'Dirty Blvd.', a critical commentary on wealth inequality in the city. The Velvet Underground also paved the way for a larger wave of other leftist, and often queer, political artists that would eventually birth the punk genre in 1970s New York. The Ramones left their indelible mark, as did female artists like Patti Smith and Blondie. Smith emerged out of 'Ridiculous Theatre' circles in the East Village and beyond, and her frequent collaborations with her lover, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, painted a picture of her wide net of artistic output. Her 1975 album *Horses* is perhaps her true *pièce*

de resistance, and is discussed by Ryan Donovan Purcell in this volume. Blondie and their front singer Debbie Harry were one of the bands who put the now-defunct CBGB's punk club on the map, before they made it big towards the end of the decade. Despite her widespread success, Harry never lost her political bite, as Lene Annette Karpp shows in their chapter on Blondie's 2017 output, 'Doom or Destiny', that had her team up with none other than Joan Jett in criticism of Donald Trump and his administration.

The 1970s, perhaps like no other decade, showcased the entanglements of lived realities and artistic production. It also birthed hip hop as a protest movement against the vast systemic injustices by the federal and municipal governments, as well as urban planners. Most infamously, perhaps, in the form of Robert Moses and the Cross-Bronx Expressway, cutting off mainly Black and Latinx communities in The Bronx from the rest of New York, thus fast-tracking its transformation into a ghetto (Chang 2005: 10–11) – similar to what happened to the Bowery a century before. But it also came out of a larger, national debate of systemic racism, the aftermath of a Civil Rights movement that had achieved successes but had ended in the assassination of its two central figureheads, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Pioneering artists like Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets paved the way for many Black artists and the birth of hip hop. Scott-Heron chronicled his own alienation in and from the city in two songs, the subject of Justin Patch's chapter in this book. The Last Poets, who officially formed on Malcom X's birthday in 1968 at (what is now) Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem, are discussed here by Martin Butler and Marek Jeziński in this context and how they used their music to speak to their experience as Black men in an increasingly hostile urban space. Grandmaster Flash's famous lyric, 'It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder, how I keep from going under', echoes a similar sentiment, showcasing the thematic through line to what is often credited as one of the first hip hop tracks in existence. The accompanying video, also released at a time when music video became a new art form, bore further testament to the experience of being Black in a New York ruled by gangs and the NYPD.

Yet another genre shaped by Black artists that dominated the 1970s was disco, forever immortalized by the more-grim-than-remembered *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the infamous Studio 54 nightclub. Artists like Diana Ross became household names, and Ross would go on to cement her New York legacy with the recording of *The Wiz*'s 'Home', the subject of Jaap Koojiman's chapter in this volume.

Queer artists like Andy Warhol also called Studio 54 home, showcasing the entanglements of art forms and genres in the city space, but also the stark contrast between Midtown Manhattan and the Bronx, and the ever-growing divide along class and race lines. The hedonism of places like Studio 54 however came to a grinding halt as soon as the HIV/AIDS crisis hit in the 1980s and furthered these social divides, as both the queer community and communities of colour were

devastated by a pandemic left to run rampant by indifferent federal and local governments. New York City was the place hit hardest in all of the United States, a consequence also of the severe economic decline the city had gone through in the previous decade. It became the hub for queer activism once again after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, when groups like ACT UP formed around Larry Kramer and others (cf. Schulman 2021).

The consequence of a lost generation of queer people is still felt on Broadway today, and had directly contributed to a dire output of musical theatre well into the 1990s. Jonathan Larson emerged as one of the sole creative voices amidst cookie-cutter tourist fare produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber and the Walt Disney Company, who also significantly contributed to the gentrification and ‘cleaning up’ of the Times Square area, turning the theatre district into a tourist-friendly hub (Shearer 2021: 104–05). Larson’s legacy piece *RENT* turned into a cult text for many, and keeps resonating with audiences until today. In an interview with Sabrina Mittermeier, actor and original *RENT* cast member Anthony Rapp recalls his work on the original workshop, Broadway production and eventual film adaptation, as well as his friendship with Larson and his own life as a struggling queer artist in the East Village of the early 1990s.

As reductive as it is to assign specific genres to single decades or places, the modern music industry of the last 20–30 years is perhaps more eclectic or (yet) harder to grasp and nail down than previous ones. Hip hop undoubtedly remains one of the defining genres shaping the city and the musical industry at large. Bands like Public Enemy, the subject of Ben Quail’s chapter, also showcased its cross-over potential. Meanwhile, The Wu-Tang Clan’s somewhat unusual roots in the often-forgotten borough of Staten Island are further testament to how the genre has broadened. Brianna Quade’s chapter in this volume chronicles the influential band’s breakout success in the early 1990s, while Alex de Lacey tackles Harlem duo Cannibal Ox, who shaped the genre in the early 2000s. Emma Horrex’s chapter goes further by discussing one of the most important female rap artists of all time, Lil Kim, and her Brooklyn roots. Jamaican and other Caribbean immigrants to New York also shaped much of its musical landscape during the 1990s and beyond, as the chapters by James Barber on Shinehead, and Alison Mc Letchie on David Rudder, show. The broad spectrum of Latinx immigrants to New York and their *barrios* like Washington Heights became the focus of Broadway wunderkind Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2008 musical *In the Heights*, the subject of Elena Machado Sáez’s contribution to this volume. Miranda, who would go on to land another smash hit akin to *RENT* with *Hamilton* in 2016, also showcased that musical theatre and hip hop can go hand in hand – a quintessentially New York crossover.

No matter which one, songs about New York often truly feel timeless, and ‘New York State of Mind’ is perhaps the truest example of this. With his residency

in Madison Square Garden, Billy Joel, a son of the city, has cemented his legacy as a true New York artist. It is thus only fitting that Diane Hughes discusses the classic in its own chapter.

So, let's take a Greyhound on the Hudson River Line ... and take a trip into the musical history of New York.

NOTE

1. For more on this important chapter of New York City's cultural history, we recommend 'Black Music in the Harlem-Renaissance: A Collection of Essays', edited by Samuel Floyd (1990), an article by Wendy Martin about 'Jazz and the Harlem Renaissance' (2021) and the third chapter of Lasser's book, in which he covers not only the songs of the Harlem Renaissance but also songs (both by African American as well as white composers) about Harlem itself (2019: 49–92).

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