Thelonious Monk's San Juan Hill, Nina Simone's Lincoln Square

If there isn't a body of text about a place to serve as a guide to its cultural history, how might we locate the story?

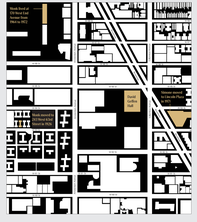
This exhibit considers an intimate source, the biographies of performing artists, as a way to understand San Juan Hill and the Lincoln Square neighborhood. Accounts of Thelonious Monk's life are rich in details about San Juan Hill. He lived in San Juan Hill, and then Lincoln Square, from about 1922 to 1975. Biographies of Nina Simone reveal she lived in Lincoln Square. She overlapped with Monk in the early 1970s at a significant moment in her career. Around this time, Simone was making performance history at Lincoln Center, appearing on at least six occasions from 1966 to 1973, more than any other Black performer of the time period, making her a significant figure as Lincoln Center programming began to embrace musical forms beyond classical.

Monk came of age in San Juan Hill in the 1920s and 30s, learning piano in the classical style, and in the ragtime and stride style then being pioneered at that time in the area. He would go on to mold the distinctive bebop style of jazz. Monk biographer Robin D.G. Kelley writes, "Monk wasn't born with some kind of natural musical knowledge and ability, nor was he entirely self-taught….He received a formidable music education and worked very hard to achieve his distinctive sound." In late 1963, around the height of Monk's fame and with an enviable record deal with Columbia Records, he booked a new venue in his neighborhood, Philharmonic Hall. On December 30th,1963, he performed an acclaimed show, and made history recording the first jazz album in the space, *Big Band and Quartet in Concert* (1964, Columbia Records).

Nina Simone made history in Philharmonic Hall too. She was a virtuoso pianist, regularly compared to Monk. She occasionally employed well-known Monk collaborators in her ensemble, and the two appeared on several of the same programs over the years. Al Schackman, a guitarist and Nina Simone's longtime accompanist, told Simone biographer Alan Light, "The closest person that had a sound that was not Nina but similar was Thelonious Monk. The way he used chord clusters…it sounded like dissonance or like somebody slamming an elbow, but it was a real musical experience, like Jackson Pollock throwing a can of paint on a canvas. I put her in a place with Ravi Shankar or Glenn Gould." On October 26th, 1969, one of the multiple appearances she made at Lincoln Center, she performed "Young, Gifted and Black," a song composed in memory of her friend Lorraine Hansberry. This recording is a track on *Black Gold* (1970, RCA), the first album Simone recorded live in Philharmonic Hall.

Monk and Simone influenced later generations of artists and opened doors at Lincoln Center. Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis, for example, includes over 40 compositions by Monk in its repertoire, with plans to eventually incorporate all 72 of his known works. The 2022 Lincoln Center Poet-In-Residence Mahogany L. Browne names Simone as one of her top influences, invoking her name in many poems. The singer and bass player Meshell Ndegeocello honored Simone in her 2015 American Songbook performance at Lincoln Center, primarily performing songs from her Nina Simone tribute album, *Pour Une Âme Souveraine—A Dedication to Nina Simone* (NAIVE, 2012).

Taken together, Monk and Simone and their legacies shed light on one hundred years of Black creative contributions in San Juan Hill, Lincoln Square, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.



The neighborhood called San Juan Hill

The earliest references to a mostly Black neighborhood called the "Tenderloin District" appeared in the mid-1890s. Black people had been residents of New York City dwellings concentrated in this area around Columbus Avenue and 62nd Street since the Reconstruction era. Lower-class Irish, Italian, German, and other immigrants shared the tenements with Black people, who were mostly tenants.

Within every Black ethnic enclave that left its stamp on the City, there is a story. Some of it is well known, some of it is forgotten. Some of it is being rediscovered. In this area, around Columbus Ave. and 62nd Street, a community developed in the decade of the 1890s and the early 1900s, which was characterized by a strong sense of community, a community which was to change for decades, and which was to be destroyed.

Anthony Campanella Lincoln Square, 1986
Excerpt from Lincoln Square
Credit Line: Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York

Before Thelonious Monk's bebop, and even before the prominence of Harlem and Brooklyn, San Juan Hill was both the residential and musical home of Black musicians in New York City. The big bands of swing and ragtime, especially, loomed large in the height of San Juan Hill's cultural influence at the turn of the 20th century.

"San Juan Hill had its share of Black professionals, but this was a community of porters, domestic servants, laundresses, longshoremen, cooks, chauffeurs, delivery men, truck drivers, a surprising number of musicians, and too many 'general laborers' to count."

Thelonious Monk: *The Life and Times of an American Original*, by Robin D.G. Kelley

Thelonious Monk records

Hoping to cut a "hit," Monk recorded his first album for Columbia Records, *Thelonious Monk* (1957), which included his composition "Crepuscule with Nellie." Producer Teo Macero, who was working with Miles Davis at the time, recalled, "Monk was a very, very, very,