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 was 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 26, 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 to San Juan Hill, Lincoln Square, and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.
Monk lived in San Juan Hill in the Phipps Houses surrounded by tenement buildings very much like these, from 1922 to 1964. Monk biographer Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “It took a village to raise Monk: a village populated by formal music teachers, local musicians from the San Juan Hill neighborhood of New York…an itinerant preacher, a range of friends and collaborators who helped facilitate his own musical studies and exploration; and a very large, extended family willing to pitch in and sacrifice a great deal so that Thelonious could pursue a life of uncompromising creativity. He drew inspiration, ideas, and lessons from family members, daily experiences, joys and hardships, and the city itself—its sounds, its colors, its drama.”

**Top left**
Thelonious Monk performs at the Paris Jazz Festival, June 1954
Photo by Marcel Fleiss
Courtesy of Marcel Fleiss

**Bottom left**
Street scene from Lincoln Square, 1956
NYC Parks Photo Archive

By the early 1970s, a flurry of events featuring forms of Black music and modern jazz were organized and sponsored by Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Soul at the Center, a soul music series, ran from 1972 to 1973 and featured Simone and dozens of others in performances across Philharmonic Hall and Alice Tully Hall. The Newport Jazz Festival in New York City included Lincoln Center as a stage from 1972 to 1978, and Monk opened the festival in 1972 in Philharmonic Hall. He played once again in the hall, now renamed Avery Fisher Hall, in 1975, in one of his last ever performances. By 1974, the nascent Out-Of-Doors Festival added music, eventually becoming the primary showcase for jazz at Lincoln Center and in the neighborhood, running for more than 40 years. With these events now regularly occurring, Lincoln Center was starting to find approaches to interacting with the surrounding neighborhood.

**Top right**
Exterior of Alice Tully Hall during Soul at the Center, July 24, 1972

**Bottom right**
Nina Simone performs at Soul at the Center, July 23, 1972

Photos by Susanne Faulkner Stevens
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives
The neighborhood called San Juan Hill

The earliest references to a mostly Black neighborhood called San Juan or San Juan Hill appeared in print around 1898. Most Black residents of New York City became concentrated in this area around the turn of the 20th century, as Manhattan’s Black communities faced a gradual shift further uptown and to other boroughs, out of the Lower East Side, Hell’s Kitchen, and other pockets of lower and mid-Manhattan once considered Black neighborhoods.

While many Black artists had left the declining San Juan Hill by the 1930s, Monk stayed, remaining in the apartment his mother rented in the Phipps Houses at 243 West 63rd Street, a complex built in the early 20th century, untouched by construction or change for decades, still standing today.

Subway construction around San Juan Hill, at West 66th and Broadway, 1902
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

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
Monk's trip to Paris in 1954 to play the third annual Paris Jazz Festival ("Salon du Jazz") was his first experience with international travel. The trip was far from idyllic, but there was no Jim Crow segregation to navigate (unlike his tours in some parts of the United States), and he was well-known enough among French audiences to truly be treated well. His long-term patron Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter first heard Monk perform during this trip. Monk created his first solo recordings in Paris, though they would not be released until 1957.

Jazz pianist and Monk biographer Laurent de Wilde writes, "So Thelonious cut his first solo tracks in Paris. He was already thirty-six years old and would have to wait another three years before his producer decided to accord the merited importance to the piano solo form. This first 'official' solo recording (Thelonious Himself, Riverside, 1957) was followed by a number of others. Without exception, right down to the last one he recorded in London in 1971, they all produced the same miracle: Monk held all music within his own two hands" (Monk, Da Capo, 1997).

Top
Thelonious Monk sits with a group in a Paris hotel room, June 1954

Bottom
Thelonious Monk playing alongside photographer Marcel Fleiss, June 1954

Photos by Marcel Fleiss
Courtesy of Marcel Fleiss

In the first half of Monk's career, he could scarcely afford to record. This put Monk at a serious disadvantage in taking claim to his unique sound because recordings were essentially seen as copyright. Many Monk compositions were at one time credited to someone else who recorded first. Some of these conflicts were never resolved.
In early 1945, the music promoter Monte Kay organized free Lincoln Square Sunday jazz sessions in an area park, and Monk, frequently unable to book paying gigs, often played. When Monk's career finally picked up, he returned to play in Lincoln Square triumphantly. In late 1963, with an advance from Columbia Records, he booked Philharmonic Hall and paid all expenses and fees to have the performance recorded. This was the first jazz album recorded live in Philharmonic Hall.
Monk’s first performance in Philharmonic Hall took place Monday evening, December 30, 1963. Originally scheduled for November 29th, the performance was postponed after the November 22 assassination of John F. Kennedy Jr. and the ensuing national grief and turmoil. A *Time* Magazine cover and feature profile of Monk set to come out on the date of the concert was also rescheduled, and when it ran the following February, it proclaimed “The concert was the most successful jazz event of the season, and Monk greeted his triumph with grace and style. . . . For Monk the pleasure of playing in Philharmonic Hall was mainly geographical. The hall was built three blocks from the home he has occupied for nearly 40 years” (February 28, 1964). Another reviewer for the *Herald-Tribune* declared, “Everybody, including the musicians, had a good time. . . . Jazz evenings like that are a joy indeed.”

In June 1964, *Big Band and Quartet in Concert*, the live recording of the show and the first jazz album ever recorded in Philharmonic Hall, was released.

Card for contract number 168, Philharmonic Hall rental, Thelonious Monk & His Orchestra
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

“He’s so creative, so individual, that he’s a genius.”


“It will be different music...different personnel and a different place. A lot of people notice this free sound and don’t know that they notice it. That’s why I like the small group—it flows with so much freedom. You get the bigger band to flow the same way by the way you write the music and the way you play it.”

Nina Simone’s voice

Nina Simone’s growth into a more political artist can be gleaned from the evolution of her look, performance style, and voice. Simone did not even start singing until 1964, and when she first incorporated her own vocals, at the request of an Atlantic City club owner, she mostly sang well-known standards, hymns, and carols, interspersing classical music with improvised blues and jazz compositions. Her first lyric hit in 1958, a rendition of George and Ira Gershwin’s “I Loves You, Porgy” in the style of Billie Holliday, was by no means a political song. When the 26-year-old Simone moved to New York around the release of her debut album *Little Girl Blue* (Bethlehem Records, 1959), she began establishing herself culturally in the city, making friends with other young musicians, artists, and writers from the Village to Harlem. By 1961, she was wearing her hair in an Afro, and adding songs like “Black is the Color” to her repertoire—though, at times, she still imagined turning back fully to her classical training.

Her musical career took its significant turn in 1963. Amid news of Martin Luther King’s imprisonment in Birmingham, Alabama, the playwright and activist Lorraine Hansberry questioned Simone about what her music was doing for the civil rights movement. Songwriting was new for Simone, but she chose to plunge into it deeply, writing of her experience as a Black woman and of the experiences of Black people, and embodying those stories through her performances.

Portrait of American singer Nina Simone who will appear on [Dutch] television at Christmas, December 14, 1965
Photo by Ron Kroon
Dutch National Archives / Anefo

“Nina Simone used music, lyrics, and performance strategies on- and offstage to develop black power perspectives that were free of misogyny and claimed black women’s experiences as relevant. That she did so at all is significant, that she did so as early as 1963—well before the apparent ascendance of black power or second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and 70s—is even more so.”

*How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, by Ruth Feldstein
Nina Simone’s performances at Philharmonic Hall

Ron Delsener, a booking agent who worked a great deal with Lincoln Center in its early days, first brought Simone for a show in Philharmonic Hall on November 22, 1966. Delsener booked many folk, R&B, and jazz performances in Lincoln Center in the 1960s and 70s including Aretha Franklin, Richie Havens, Miriam Makeba, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Cat Stevens, and Ray Charles. Another major booker, Harold Leventhal, brought Simone to Lincoln Center again on February 18, 1967.

Simone’s most consequent show at Lincoln Center was her October 26, 1969 concert, booked through RCA, the evening of the Black Gold album recording. Released in 1970, a single from this album, “Young, Gifted and Black,” was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Female R&B Vocal Performance in 1971. The recognition was bittersweet, because the song honored her friend Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry had died at the age of 34 in 1965, leaving behind an unfinished autobiographical play by the same name. In her introduction to the song at Philharmonic Hall in 1969, Simone told the Lincoln Center audience that “I think that very soon now, maybe four or five weeks, I won’t be able to sing it anymore for each time I do it, she comes a little closer, and I miss her a little bit more.”

Delsener brought Simone back again on October 10, 1971. RCA booked her again in a July 28, 1973 show. Selections from both of those shows were released as another album in 1973 called It Is Finished.

In addition to performing on Lincoln Center stages, Simone joined its audiences. And on at least one occasion, during a 1972 Rosetta Tharpe show, Simone was so moved she provided a surprise performance of her own after Tharpe’s show.

Nina Simone performs at Soul at the Center, July 23, 1972
Photo by Suzanne Faulkner Stevens
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

Within about a decade of its opening, Simone would perform at Lincoln Center a remarkable six times starting in 1966, booking more frequent shows in Philharmonic Hall than any other solo Black performer of the time, and bringing a range of influences and styles from jazz standards and folk songs, to world and soul music, with chart climbing anthems about racial justice.
A new neighborhood at Lincoln Square

A house program for Nina Simone’s 1971 performance, her fourth, at Lincoln Center. By October 1971, Simone also lived in Lincoln Square. What drew Simone to live and perform so often in the area?

Simone perhaps felt an affinity for the Lincoln Center area because of her training in classical music, which she expressed disappointment about having to abandon. At one Carnegie Hall performance, she stated “This is where you wanted me to play. But I should have been playing Bach” (What Happened, Miss Simone?, 2015). One reviewer noted that “Simone could ‘take a predominantly white and initially indifferent audience and by sheer artistry, strength of character and magical judgement, drive them into a mood of ecstatic acclamation.’ Simone’s background as a classically trained musician who bridged cultural hierarchies enabled her to bridge other seemingly contradictory positions” (Ruth Feldstein, How It Feels to be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement, Oxford, 2013).

House program for Nina Simone and Her Ensemble, October 10, 1971
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

In Nina Simone’s contract for her 1972 performance at Lincoln Center, her home address is listed as One Lincoln Plaza. One Lincoln Plaza retains the vestiges of its pre-urban renewal past in its alternate address, 20 West 64th Street. Indeed, the building was built around 33 West 63rd Street, an 1890s-style tenement building still standing today.

Nina Simone contract for Soul at the Center, June 22, 1972
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

“There is a great deal of electricity in this album. There is a great deal of rapport between the audience and myself, which has been missing in so many of the previous albums.”

Nina Simone on Black Gold, recorded in Philharmonic Hall on October 26, 1969

“I think Nina really started to glean her ability to compose story lines and poetry and lyrics from Lorraine.”

Al Schackman, jazz guitarist and accompanist to Nina Simone, What Happened, Miss Simone
Thelonious Monk died on February 17, 1982. He was 63. Monk’s daughter, Barbara, wanted to see her father remembered in relationship to what mattered to him most in his life, and his neighborhood was high on the list. She coordinated a successful effort for New York City to rename an area in the heart of old San Juan Hill in his honor. The section of West 63rd Street that crosses in front of the still standing Phipps Houses, which she also sought to preserve, is now named Thelonious Sphere Monk Circle in his honor.

One of Monk’s earliest havens in the neighborhood, the Columbus Hill Neighborhood Center, still stands as well, though it has passed through many iterations over the years. It is now known as the Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center, and it still serves the artistic and creative needs of young people in the neighborhood.

Thelonious Monk at the Village Gate, New York City, October 1968

Photo by Bernard Gotfryd
Library of Congress

Meshell Ndegeocello honored Nina Simone during Lincoln Center’s 2014-2015 American Songbook series, performing songs from her tribute album to Simone, Pour Une Âme Souveraine—A Dedication to Nina Simone (NAIVE, 2012). Simone passed away at home in Carry-le-Rouet, a small town in the south of France, on April 21, 2003. She was 70.

In 2022, Mahogany L. Browne became the Poet-In-Residence at Lincoln Center. Browne is well-known for her 2016 poem “litany,” which honors Nina Simone. Browne calls Simone “a pillar when I am thinking about how I move in rooms, investigate ideas with art, & where to place my anger.”

Meshell Ndegeocello performing in A Dedication to Nina Simone, American Songbook, February 11, 2015

Photo by Kevin Yatarola


Musicians like the Piano Choir recorded Monk compositions to pay tribute to his unique innovations to the jazz genre, even while he was still living.

The Piano Choir performing at Soul ’73 at the Center, August 8, 1973

Photo by Suzanne Faulkner Stevens
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts archives

“So the last shall be first, and the first last, for many will be called, but few chosen.” This was Monk’s life condensed to a parable—a life of constant struggle for work, for recognition, for respect as a pianist and composer.”

_Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original_, by Robin D.G. Kelley

“It was important to pick songs that [Simone] had written, because the hope for me is to get more people interested in her, check out her catalog and sort of revive it, and also use her story and learn from her story.”

Meshell Ndegeocello, on her 2015 performance at David Geffen Hall, honoring Nina Simone as part of the Lincoln Center American Songbook series.
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- *What Happened, Miss Simone?,* by Alan Light
- *What Happened, Miss Simone?,* directed by Liz Garbus
- *Upper West Side Story: A History and Guide*, by Peter Salwen

With heartfelt gratitude to all our colleagues, but especially:

Dedicated to artists everywhere who toil to make their art, but especially to the under recognized.
Graphic—The neighborhood called San Juan Hill

Monk lived at 170 West End Avenue from 1964 to 1972

Monk moved to 243 West 63rd Street in 1926

David Geffen Hall

Simone moved to Lincoln Plaza in 1971
Graphic—Exhibit Bottom

Monk lived at 243 West 63rd Street off and on from 1928 to 1964.

Nina Simone lived at 1 Lincoln Plaza in the early 1970s.

David Geffen Hall