

Lofts Ain't What They Used to Be

Revisiting the Jazz Loft, where anti-establishment ideas thrived

BY HOWARD MANDEL

Time was a Manhattan jazz loft, was a downbeat, drafty, dingy, semi-dangerous place where you might hear anything, meet anyone and afterward end up anywhere. That's why you dropped by. Today the Manhattan jazz loft—any Manhattan loft—is different: renovated, formalized, upscale.

But drift back to the Jazz Loft, a bohemian hangout in the flower district from the mid-1950s to the mid-'60s. It could be the setting of a great, as-yet-unwritten jazz novel of America at a turning point, when post-WWII/pre-Vietnam culture bloomed in full glory; when eccentric geniuses, slumming celebrities, the contentiously brilliant and attractive hangers-on rubbed shoulders, crossed genres and created sparks; when urban living was almost affordable and spontaneously exciting; when creativity was fiercely expressionistic and non-conformity the lay of the land.

This Jazz Loft is the topic of a traveling exhibition at the NYC Public Library for the Performing Arts through May 22, curated by researcher Sam Stephenson under the auspices of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Stephenson, who directs the multi-dimensional *The Jazz Loft Project*, was drawn to its story through the photography of W. Eugene Smith, the Loft's initially discontented, eventually speed-fueled host. He has edited an award-nominated book combining Smith's gritty black-and-white images with transcriptions from his voluminous archive of audiotapes capturing jams and rap sessions. The exhibit has spun off a fascinating panel discussion, the premiere screening of a film tangentially connected to the Loft and a 10-part radio series by producer Sara Fishko.

All this media does a fine job of depicting the Loft's decade-long underground party. The illegal live-work space—off any beaten path and completely non-commercial—

drew artists, actors, choreographers, writers and philanthropists such as Diane Arbus, Stan Brakhage, Willem de Kooning, Doris Duke, Lincoln Kirstein, Franz Kline and Anais Nin to mingle, argue, lay back, flirt, drink and get high. Musicians were its mainstay: jazzniks such as Thelonious Monk, Zoot Sims, Charles Mingus and Bill Evans, as well as figures of contemporary classicism like David Amram, Dennis Russell Davies, Ben Johnston, Joel Krosnick and Alvin Singleton.

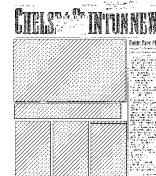
One of the reasons they all showed up was that besides Smith—a *Life* magazine star who quit in a huff over a photo-essay layout, left his wife and four children in Croton-on-Hudson and moved to the city—also residing in the five-story walkup were painter David X. Young, musician Dick

see **JAZZ** on page 11

Cary and composer-arranger Hall Overton. Today, Overton is remembered mostly for his smart, spare arrangements of pianist Monk's eternally individualistic songs for a 10-piece ensemble that he led in a single 1959 concert at Town Hall. But Steve Reich, Carman Moore and Joel Sachs, who spoke April 14, described Overton as their indefatigable, independent "hands-on, realistic" composition instructor.

As they put it, Overton didn't pledge allegiance to the 12-tone serial style demanded by the day's elite conservatories. Instead, he believed in composing "intuitively, what one heard in one's head," and furthered the era's budding cross-pollenization of genres.

"We were all jazz listeners then," Reich explained. "It was a form of rebellion." The obverse was true, too, according to Moore: "Jazz musicians were fascinated by the new classical music." Overton positioned himself in both realms, composing an opera based on *Huckleberry Finn* and gigging on piano at



Bradley's, the Village musicians' nightclub, weeks prior to his death in 1972.

At the end of the '50s there were several efforts to mix jazz energies and contemporary compositional thought. Gunther Schuller's "Third Stream," advanced at the Lenox School of Jazz in the Berkshires, is most famous; George Russell and Gil Evans were active in the initiative, too. Aficionados today take the results for granted. But the loving repertory treatment pianist Jason Moran gave Monk's Overton-arranged 1959 concert by revisiting it on its 50th anniversary—beautifully captured in the film *In My Mind*, shown at the Library on April 19—couldn't have happened otherwise. The Jazz Loft was the anti-establishment venue where such ideas could germinate and blossom.

The Jazz Gallery, best of 2010's Manhattan jazz lofts, springs strong new works on the cognoscenti, though its ambiance is nowhere as casually unconventional as the flower district Jazz Loft's was. Manhattan has become too gentrified to afford much of such low rent, rough and tumble mashing up, though some survives, for instance at the Rise Up Creative Music & Arts presentations at Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center and The Local 269 bar. Most artist-operated music lofts now are in Brooklyn. But that's a topic for another time. 📷

The Jazz Loft Project, *through May 22. NYPL for the Performing Arts, at Amsterdam Ave. & West 55th St., 212-870-1630.*



Courtesy of New York Public Library

scene from *In My Mind*.