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Once a Musician's Haven, the Bronx Is Pricing Out Its Sidemen

Side Street

By DAVID GONZALEZ MARCH 19, 2017



Valerie Capers, a jazz pianist and educator who lives in the South Bronx, is alarmed by the challenge musicians have in finding affordable housing in her rapidly gentrifying borough. “I’m O.K. now,” she said, “but that can all change.” Credit David Gonzalez/The New York Times

There was once a time when the streets of the South Bronx nurtured genres of music that went on to influence American — if not global — culture. From the jazz clubs along Prospect Avenue to the doo-wop groups that formed at Morris High School in the 1950s to the salsa bands that headlined shows at the Hunts Point Palace in the 1960s, the borough had a vibrant musical scene that provided both entertainment and much-needed jobs for hundreds of sidemen. They could play several gigs a night, making enough to get by while hoping to land a recording deal.

Those venues are long gone, obliterated by the fires that swept through the borough. Gone, too, are the chances to earn a living, which, combined with seismic shifts in the music business and rising rents in neighborhoods now threatened by gentrification, have left older musicians in a precarious situation. Even well-known artists like [Dave Valentin](#), a [Grammy Award](#)-winning Latin jazz flutist who died recently, can find themselves [scrambling for affordable housing](#) when poor health prevents them from performing.

It may not be a well-known problem, but it is a fixable one, said Nancy Biberman, who runs [Whedco](#), a nonprofit housing and economic development group in the Bronx.

The group broke ground in January on [Bronx Commons](#), a development in the Melrose neighborhood where Ms. Biberman had hoped to set aside 15 percent of its 305 units for older musicians. The goal was to also involve them in the activities of the Bronx Music Hall, a performance and workshop space that is part of the complex, giving them a chance to continue making and teaching music to a new generation.

“There is no affordable housing for aging musicians,” said Ms. Biberman, who helped Mr. Valentin secure an apartment in one of her buildings. “There is senior housing, but that’s depressing, honestly. The elder artists I met did not want to be living in a building with people who are just old. They wanted to be who they were — musicians — and not isolated in an old-age home.”

She thought the proposed set-aside would be approved, especially since Mayor Bill de Blasio set a goal of providing 1,500 units of affordable housing for artists citywide as part of his broader plan to create and preserve housing for low-income residents. She saw it as akin to live-work spaces for artists like at [PS 109 in East Harlem](#).

Instead, she said, city officials told her that a set-aside might violate fair housing laws that prohibit preferences based on age or race.

Juliet Pierre-Antoine, a spokeswoman for the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development, said Whedco’s set-aside for aging musicians was different from housing for live-work spaces for artists. But she added that “there would be many opportunities for this population in future developments,” and that they could also apply to be included in affordable housing lotteries, though those often attract tens of thousands of hopeful renters.

“I have not heard any good reason,” Ms. Biberman said. “They just said I can’t do it. I figured we’ll just get this project in the ground and fight this battle another day.”

Richie Bonilla, who managed Mr. Valentin and many top salsa acts, said this predicament was not new. In the past, sidemen either had day jobs with benefits, or had a working spouse who paid the rent and put food on the table.

These days, he said, musicians have been reduced to taking low-paying gigs at restaurants, where a quartet might earn \$400. And even the bigger overseas festivals, he said, use local musicians to accompany marquee-name bandleaders.

“These guys live from gig to gig,” Mr. Bonilla said. “I’m telling you, if there was a place they could afford to live, there’d be a line around the block.”

But good luck qualifying, as Ms. Biberman found out with Mr. Valentin. Despite his fame, his income had been so reduced that he was able to get an apartment only after a relative co-signed his lease. Many musicians — often paid in cash and off the books — cannot produce the necessary paperwork or proof of past employment.

“What do they have left?” she asked. “Album covers and programs, platinum or gold records.”

Some have the support of friends and family who stage benefit concerts or crowdfunding campaigns to tide them over from emergency to emergency.

“It’s monumental what they are facing,” said [Valerie Capers](#), 81, a jazz pianist and educator who lives in the Bronx. “You get older and you have problems, like Dave had. You may have friends who pull together in a positive spirit to raise funds, but that is no solution for putting a roof over your head.”

The pressures are hardly easing, even for Ms. Capers, whose decision to teach at high schools and colleges allowed her to have medical coverage and put away money for retirement. In a borough where, [a recent report](#), said [71 percent of its inhabitants were at risk of displacement](#), the mounting wave of gentrification in the South Bronx has alarmed her.

“I’m O.K. now,” said Ms. Capers, who is on the advisory board to the Music Hall project. “But that can all change. With the challenge of finding affordable housing, we also find ourselves in a borough that is changing. It means not having access to the stores to get what you need to eat or medical care. It’s a really tough situation.”

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