DESIGNATION REPORT

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Designation Report
Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building
June 27, 2023

Designation List 534
LP-2671

DESIGNATION REPORT

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building

LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan
206 West 118th Street
(aka 150-158 St. Nicholas Avenue,
206-212 West 118th Street)

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

The Renaissance Revival-style Hotel Cecil was home to Minton's Playhouse, the legendary nightclub where the pivotal style "bebop" emerged and flourished in the 1940s, redefining jazz and American music.

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building
NYC Municipal Archives, c. 1940

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Hotel Cecil &
Minton's Playhouse Building

206 West 118th Street, Manhattan

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Built: 1895-96
Architect: Julius F. Munckwitz

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1923, Lot 38
Building Identification Number (BIN): 1058396

Calendared: April 4, 2023
Public Hearing: June 6, 2023

On June 6, 2023, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Two people testified in support of designation, including representatives of the owner and the Historic Districts Council. The Commission also received letters of support for designation from Save Harlem Now! and the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Summary

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building

The Harlem nightclub Minton's Playhouse flourished in the Hotel Cecil for more than three decades in the middle of the 20th century. Famous for hosting important house bands, star headliners, and informal jam sessions, it was here that the pivotal jazz style known as "bebop" emerged in the 1940s, transforming American music. From this period forward, the hotel attracted many noteworthy guests, including leading jazz, blues, gospel, and soul performers.

Located at the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street, the Hotel Cecil was designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Julius F. Munckwicz and built in 1895-96. Operated as a residential hotel, this five-story, grayish buff brick structure offered furnished apartment suites for long and short-term stays. From 1941 to 1961, it was listed in consecutive editions of the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a guidebook that was popular with Black travelers. Trumpeter Miles Davis remembered the Cecil as "first class … the rates were reasonable, and the rooms were big and clean."

Minton's Playhouse opened in the hotel's former dining room in 1938 or 1939. Named for the club's owner, Henry Minton, it was managed until 1969 by Teddy Hill, who formed a house band in 1941 that included drummer Kenny Clarke and pianist Thelonious Monk. The house band played popular songs and accompanied guest singers and soloists, including such notable swing era musicians as Charlie Christian, Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Ben Webster. On Monday nights, when most Manhattan entertainment venues were closed, Minton's held open jam sessions where such bebop innovators as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie could drop in and experiment. Gillespie remembered these performances as "wonderfully exciting" and as "seedbeds for our new, modern style of music." After World War II, bebop peaked in popularity and Minton's was frequently credited for playing a significant role. Though leading critics like Ralph Ellison and Le Roi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) questioned the club's singular importance, they did acknowledge Minton's had been a "rendezvous for jazz musicians" and that modern jazz had "probably" started here. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the club continued to present jazz, including groups led by, among others, Eddie Lockjaw Davis, Erroll Gardner, Carmen McCrae, and George Benson.

Hotel Cecil was damaged by fire in 1974 and Minton's Playhouse closed. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985,[1] the building was converted to supportive housing for homeless men and women in 1988. It is currently owned by the Harlem Community Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Empire State Development. The building contains approximately 89 residential units operated by the Cecil Housing Development Fund Corporation, as well as office and commercial space. The first floor of this sensitively refurbished late 19th century building was recently occupied by a jazz club/restaurant.

Building Description

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building

Description

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building is a free-standing, five-story structure at the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street in Manhattan. The street facades are clad with buff brick, limestone, and terra cotta.

The West 118th Street (north) facade has two entrances. The main entrance has an Ionic portico, with two limestone columns set on pedestals and a masonry balustrade. The arched doorway is trimmed with foliate details. Flanked by rusticated blocks, it has an elaborate cartouche at the top. The entrance to the commercial space where Minton's Playhouse was located is near the east end of the West 118th Street facade. To the right of the door, a small metal plaque indicates that the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The first- and second-story window openings have splayed terra-cotta lintels and keyed surrounds that rest on a slim continuous molding extending the full length of the facade. Between the second and third stories, centered above the main entrance, is a six-bay-wide balustraded balcony with prominent paired brackets. The third-, fourth-, and fifth-story windows rest on continuous moldings. These openings are crowned by splayed lintels. The molding that extends between the third and fourth stories is divided into three sections with a central dentil molding. Near the west end of the facade, above the ground story, is a single bay of blind windows, as well as narrower paired window openings in the westernmost bay, linked by keyed surrounds at the second story.

Where St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street meet, the facade is rounded. The first story contains a doorway, flanked by pillars, with a single bay of window openings above.

The St. Nicholas Avenue (west) facade contains storefronts divided by cast-iron pillars with decorative capitals. Above the storefronts is a continuous masonry cornice. The second through fifth stories are divided into 15 bays that are similar in decorative treatment to the West 118th Street facade. At the north and south ends of the St. Nicholas Avenue facade are paired narrower windows, linked by keyed surrounds at the second story.

The building's secondary east and south facades are faced with brick. The east façade is partially visible and the south façade, which has two window bays, is fully visible. From Seventh Avenue, a single bay at the south end of the east facade is visible in a gap between two adjacent buildings.

Alterations

Overall, the facades are largely intact. Minor changes include the replacement of the historic bracketed cornice visible in the c. 1940 New York City tax photograph, and the replacement of historic one-over-one double hung windows with units of a similar configuration. The hotel entrance on West 118th Street incorporates a low concrete ramp and iron railing, as well a non-historic glass and metal door. To either side of the entrance portico are cameras with metal conduit and metal signs. The first-floor windows are covered with non-historic metal grilles. Between the first and second stories are lighting fixtures with metal conduit. The current entrance to the commercial space has a concrete ramp, a replacement wood paneled door, and a vinyl marquee, flanked by single-pane windows.

At the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street is a non-historic awning and

vertical sign that is shorter than the one present c. 1940. The large display window at the west end of the West 118th Street facade, and the door and transom in the corner opening, are not historic. The storefront openings along St. Nicholas Avenue contain replacement infill and non-historic awnings. The historic third-floor balustrade, similar to that of the West 118th Street facade, has been removed and replaced with a fire escape. Installed on the second through fifth floors, it extends across two window bays in which the south (right) window has been replaced with a door. At the north end of the east facade, close to the West 118th Street sidewalk, a metal ventilation pipe extends slightly above the roof. Both the south and east facades are painted white.

History of Central Harlem

Hotel Cecil occupies a trapezoidal lot at the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street in central Harlem. Indigenous peoples have lived in this area for thousands of years. Manhattan and the west part of the Bronx was home to the Wiechquaeskecks, a Munsee-speaking people.[2]

Nieuw Haarlem was established by Dutch settlers in 1658. It was originally a small village and farming outpost. Under British rule, a fixed boundary between what became known as New York and Harlem was drawn, extending diagonally from the East River at 74th Street to the Hudson River at 129th Street. Harlem would remain sparsely settled until the mid-19th century.

St. Nicholas Avenue follows the route of a Wiechquaeskecks trail, later called Harlem Lane and Kingsbridge Road. It runs diagonally north from West 111th Street, near Sixth Avenue, to West 124th Street, and then turns north, ending at West 193rd Street. In the 18th century, Hendrik Van Bramer erected a house on the south part of the block, close to where the Hotel Cecil stands. In 1882, the Bramer building was described by historian A. B. Caldwell as occupied by a "roadhouse."[3]

New York State passed legislation to create St. Nicholas Avenue in April 1866. The Commissioners of Central Park were given the duty to "lay out and establish the grade of an avenue not exceeding one hundred feet in width, to be called the avenue St. Nicholas."[4] Not only was St. Nicholas associated with Christmas holidays, but in the early 19th century he was considered an anti-British symbol and patron saint of New York and the New York Historical Society.[5]

Transit improvements spurred Harlem's development throughout the 19th century. The New York and Harlem Railway began passenger service in 1837, with stations along Fourth (now Park) Avenue, at East 109th, 115th, and 125th Streets. Elevated railways began to serve 116th Street in 1878-80, with stations on Second, Third, and Eighth Avenues (now Frederick Douglass Boulevard), followed by an IRT subway station at Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard) and 116th Street, which opened in 1904. Related improvements included the paving of West 118th Street in 1892[6] and the establishment of two small public parks: Hancock Square (1893, now Hancock Park), bordered by St. Nicholas and Eighth Avenues, between 123rd and 124th Streets, and Kilpatrick Square (1908, now A. Philip Randolph Square), a block south of Hotel Cecil, bordered by St. Nicholas and Seventh Avenues, between 116th and 117th Streets.

Starting in the 1880s, speculative row houses in popular architectural styles began to line the east-west streets, while institutional structures and apartment buildings were built on the avenues. Early residents were mainly Eastern European immigrants. After World War I, Harlem began to attract large numbers of Black residents, many who were leading intellectuals and cultural figures during the Harlem Renaissance (see "Jazz in Harlem" section).

Hotel Cecil

Hotel Cecil was designed by Harlem architect Julius F. Munckwicz (1830-1902) who also built hotels in Greenwich Village and on the Upper West Side. Constructed in 1895-96, the builder was Thomas R. White.[7] The estimated cost was $125,000.[8] The name was probably inspired by the prestigious Hotel Cecil in London, which opened the same year.

Designed in the Renaissance Revival style,

the understated exterior is clad with light gray or buff brick, limestone, and terracotta. It featured modest classical details, including an Ionic entrance portico on West 118th Street, balconies on both facades, and windows highlighted with keyed surrounds and splayed lintels.

The hotel was constructed in the vicinity of many recently erected residential buildings, such as the Washington Apartments (1883-84, a New York City Landmark) at Seventh Avenue and 122nd Street, as well as various groups of row houses in the Mount Morris Park Historic District and Extension, which extends from Marcus Garvey Park to Seventh Avenue. Nearby New York City landmarks, built soon after the hotel's opening, include: Graham Court Apartments (1899-1901), Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02), Regent Theatre (now First Corinthian Baptist Church, 1912-13), and Hotel Theresa (1912-13).

Five stories tall, Hotel Cecil was completed by December 1896. A residential hotel, it was advertised in 1898 as the "only fireproof modern family hotel in Harlem containing every requisite for comfort and convenience: suites from two to five large, light, lofty rooms."[9] Furnished and unfurnished rooms were available to lease, as well as "superbly furnished bachelor apartments of bedroom, sitting room, and bath."[10] Personal references were required, suggesting management hoped to attract an elite clientele.[11]

Within a year of completion, the hotel was acquired by Mrs. [Sarah] Abram S. Hewitt, wife of the former New York City mayor,[12] who was described in *The New York Times* as a "large investor in apartment house properties along the west side and north of Central Park."[13] William B. Franke Realty Company became owner in 1899, through a trade for the Monticello apartment house, a seven-story building at the northeast corner of West End Avenue and 79th Street.

In subsequent years, Hotel Cecil struggled financially and was sold at public auction in January 1915 to "satisfy claims against it."[14] Laramie Realty Corporation acquired the building in February 1921. At this time, *The New York Times* described the hotel as a "Harlem Landmark." [15]

During the Harlem Renaissance, the owners were slow to welcome Black guests. In 1933, they were accused by the Scottsboro Boys' Defense Club of refusing to "accommodate a negro ... because of his race."[16] By 1940, however, the hotel's policy had changed. Augustus Granville Dill, for instance, former manager of *The Crisis* magazine and *Brownies' Book*, was identified by the *New York Amsterdam News* as a tenant, and the hotel was listed in consecutive editions of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a popular guide that identified businesses that were friendly to Black travelers, from 1941 to 1961.[17] During this period, many Black jazz musicians who performed at Minton's Playhouse, which opened on the first floor in 1938 or 1939, also stayed at the hotel (see "Hotel Cecil since the 1940s" section).

Architect Julius F. Munckwicz[18]

Born in Leipzig, Germany, Munckwicz immigrated to the United States in 1849. He began his five-decade career in New York City as an architect at the Parks Commission in 1857, where he worked with Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould on such projects as the Central Park Boathouse (1872-76, demolished) and the buttressed stone retaining wall in Morningside Park (1883-92, a New York City Scenic Landmark). He formed his own architectural practice in 1862. Towards the end of his career, he maintained an office in Harlem and designed several Manhattan hotels. In addition to Hotel Cecil, he designed the Marie Antoinette Hotel (1895, later enlarged, demolished) on West 66th Street, and the Keller Hotel (1897-98, a New York City Landmark)

at 150 Barrow Street in Greenwich Village. His son, also named Julius Munckwitz (1857-?), was an architect for the Parks Department.

Jazz in Harlem

Jazz originated in New Orleans, but since the mid-1920s this exuberant musical genre has been synonymous with New York City and particularly Harlem. It blended African and Western traditions, including the work songs of enslaved people, spirituals, and blues. As the center of the American music industry, many trailblazing Black performers traveled to, or passed through Manhattan, where some of the earliest commercial jazz recordings were made, including performances by the Original Dixieland Jass Band in 1917, and blues singer Mamie Smith in 1920. Smith's recording of "Crazy Blues" for Okeh Records was a commercial milestone, selling a reported 75,000 copies in the first two months of release.[19]

The first phase of the Great Migration, between 1910 and 1940, saw many southern Blacks move to New York City to escape "Jim Crow" laws and racial discrimination. In 1910, just 10% of central Harlem's population was Black, while the majority of residents were Eastern European Jews. There were many synagogues close to Hotel Cecil, including two structures that are part of the Mount Morris Park Historic District: Temple Israel (now Mt. Olivet Baptist Church) and Congregation Chebra Ukadisha B'nai Israel (formerly Lenox Avenue Unitarian Church). After 1920, Harlem's Black population increased steadily, reaching a 70% majority in 1930 and 98% in 1950.[20]

A great many entertainment venues opened in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. Ragtime, a term that refers to an early syncopated jazz genre, as well as stride piano, was heard in many Harlem cabarets by 1910.[21] Most nightspots were concentrated in the West 130s, including Barron D. Wilkins' Café Astoria, John W. Connor's Royal Café, and Leroy's Café.[22] During Prohibition, the number of venues multiplied, as well as dozens of illicit bars, often called speakeasies. Writer-poet Claude McKay claimed in 1937 that Harlem was a "paradise of bootleggers" and "an all-white picnic ground . . . with no apparent gain to the blacks."[23] Patrons came to do what they could not do elsewhere: drink alcohol, dance, and listen to jazz, a new and inventive style of music that some detractors saw as "devil's music."[24]

One of Harlem's most famous late-night venues was the Cotton Club (1923-36), at Lenox Avenue and West 142nd Street. With a capacity of 700, this whites-only nightclub presented lavish revues performed by mainly Black entertainers, such as jazz pianist-composer Duke Ellington, who led the house band for four years (1927-31) and Cab Calloway. These big band performances were frequently broadcast on national radio, allowing jazz to be heard throughout the country. In 1933, the commercial artist E. Simms Campbell published "A Night-Club Map of Harlem," marking the locations of the Cotton Club, Connie's Inn (1923-34), Savoy Ballroom (1926-58) and Small's Paradise (1925-80s), one of the first racially integrated clubs in Manhattan.

Prohibition ended in December 1933, allowing alcohol to be served legally throughout the United States. While some nightclubs closed, others, like the Cotton Club, left Harlem and relocated to midtown Manhattan, where a large group quickly clustered on West 52nd Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

Jazz became part of the American cultural mainstream during the 1930s. Popular dance bands appeared in Hollywood films, clarinetist Benny Goodman brought his racially integrated orchestra and trio to Carnegie Hall, and a well-attended "Carnival of Swing" was held at Randall's Island

Stadium, headlined by many leading performers. An estimated 200 big bands toured the country during this era, employing 3,000 musicians, many who were Black and based in New York City.[25]

Musicians also gained notoriety by performing in small groups. Intimate settings offered greater opportunities for individual players to solo and experiment, setting the stage for subsequent musical innovations in the early 1940s.

Minton's Playhouse

Minton's Playhouse opened on the first floor of Hotel Cecil in 1938 or 1939. This Harlem nightclub is recognized in many jazz histories as the "birthplace" or "cradle" of bebop, a style that changed the course of American music in the 1940s. Compared with the more structured and layered sounds of earlier big band music and swing, it had a less commercial character, with faster tempos, abrupt changes, and frequent breaks for virtuosic solos and improvisation.

Located the east side of the hotel's first floor, the club occupied the former dining room.[26] It was named for the owner, Monroe Henry Minton (c. 1884-1970), who previously managed the Rhythm Club, at Seventh Avenue and West 132nd Street, where many important jazz musicians performed. Minton, who played saxophone, was the first Black delegate to New York's American Federation of Musicians Local 802. He was well-known in the community, having served as the union's sergeant-at-arms for Harlem (1926-32) and as president of the New Amsterdam Musical Association.[27]

Best remembered as a jazz venue, Minton's was also a popular restaurant and bar. Frequented by mainly Black patrons, some 1940s articles describe it as a tap room and bar and grill, where people "sipped and supped" and as "one of our better dine and drink places."[28] Pianist Mary Lou Williams[29] remembered, it:

> … was not a large place, but … nice and intimate. The bar was at the front, and the cabaret was in the back. The bandstand was situated at the rear of the back room . . . During the daytime, people played the jukebox and danced … It seemed everybody was talking at the same time; the noise was terrific.[30]

Teddy Hill (1909-78) became the club's long-time host and managing director in late 1940 or 1941.[31] A successful big band leader since 1934, Teddy Hill & His Orchestra toured England and France in 1937, was a "fixture" at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, and "held down one of the featured spots" at the 1939 World's Fair in Queens."[32]

A small, salaried house band was assembled by Hill in January 1941. It was led by the innovative jazz drummer Kenny Clarke, who claimed:

> . . . when Teddy took over, Minton's changed its music policy. Teddy wanted to do something for the guys who worked with him. He turned out to be a sort of benefactor since work was very scarce at that time. Teddy never tried to tell us how to play. We played just as we felt.[33]

Members of the band included trumpeter Joe Guy, bassist Nick Fenton, and pianist Thelonious Monk.[34] Robin D. G. Kelley, a Monk biographer, wrote: "The band was good, but it wasn't great. It was still a far cry from what would become known as bebop."[35] Though Monk left before the end of 1941,[36] jazz journalist Bill Gottlieb would later describe him as the "George Washington of Bebop," and Hill said he was the "guy who deserves the most credit for starting bebop. Though he won't admit it."[37]

The house band performed popular songs

with a changing roster of swing era singers and soloists, including guitarist Charlie Christian, trumpeter Roy Eldridge, and saxophonists Lester Young, Ben Webster, and Coleman Hawkins.

On Monday nights, when other music venues were closed, open jam sessions, sometimes referred to as "Celebrity Nights," were encouraged.[38] Monk later told jazz writer Nat Hentoff:

> It got a little glamorous maybe on Monday nights when Teddy Hill, the manager, would invite guys who were at the Apollo that week. As a result, all the different bands that played at the Apollo got to the hear the original music, and it got around, and talk started going about the fellows at Minton's.[39]

When trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie was in New York City, he frequently joined these jam sessions. An alum of Hill's big band in the1930s, Hill claimed he gave Dizzy his memorable nickname.[40] Gillespie had especially fond memories of performing at Minton's. In his 1979 autobiography, he wrote:

> Jam sessions, such as those wonderfully exciting ones held at Minton's Playhouse were seedbeds for our new, modern style of music … What we were doing at Minton's was playing, seriously, creating a new dialogue among ourselves, blending our ideas into a new style of music.[41]

These spontaneous performances held great prestige. Pianist Herbert H. Nichols wrote in *The New York Age* in July 1941 that jam sessions were a "musical art" created by "colored hands." He claimed musicians would "rather miss their sleep than pass up a chance to hear Roy (Little Jazz) Eldridge or the Hawk at a jam session" – a possible reference to Minton's Playhouse. Nichols found these performances inspiring and instructive, claiming they were "more in the nature of attending school."[42]

Jerry Newman, a junior at Columbia University, frequently recorded performances at Minton's, as well as at Clark Monroe's Uptown House, a nightclub on West 134th Street, using a cumbersome portable disc recorder.[43] Made during spring 1941, these low-fi recordings capture the beginnings of bebop, when jazz was transitioning away from dance music and swing.[44]

Minton's Playhouse & Bebop

The term bebop probably originated in the early 1940s. Though Kenny Clarke did not remember giving the music played at Minton's a name, he believed it was Hill who "put the word out to journalists."[45] Trumpeter Hot Lips Page alleged it came from pianist Fats Waller, who, while playing at Minton's, complained: "Stop that crazy boppin' and a-stoppin' and play that jive like the rest of us guys!"[46] In 1948, journalist Richard O. Boyer recounted in *The New Yorker*:

> It was at Minton's that the word "bebop" came into being. Dizzy [Gillespie] was trying to show a bass player how the last two notes of a phrase should sound. The base player tried it again and again, but he couldn't get the two notes. Bebop! Be-bop! Be-bop! Dizzy finally sang.[47]

Bebop gradually captured the popular imagination in the mid-1940s. Though Minton's stayed open throughout World War II, presenting such headliners as Lester Young and Ben Webster,[48] the public had relatively few chances to hear this inventive music

due to a two-year strike by the American Federation of Musicians, when hardly any new records were released by major labels.

When the strike ended in November 1944, bebop began to emerge: Dizzy Gillespie formed his own ensemble, and the first commercial bebop recordings were made. The new style of jazz attracted considerable media attention and Minton's was frequently given credit for launching it. *Associated Press* reporter Jean Meegan wrote in 1947:

> Whether "be-pop" has reached its peak is a debatable point. From Minton's playhouse in Harlem, it has spread over the country through records, radio and performances by orchestras . . . who have copied it. It has infected a public that may not understand it at all.[49]

Later that year, *Down Beat* magazine published Bill Gottlieb's interview with Monk that verified "the oft told tale, it all began up at Minton's in early 1941."[50] The article included a well-known photograph of Monk, with bassist Howard McGhee, Roy Eldridge, and Teddy Hill, as well as a glimpse of the club's entrance, flanked by what appears to be enamel wall panels and casement windows.

Minton's Playhouse developed a powerful aura – one that attracted both prominent performers and patrons. The Beat Generation poet Jack Kerouac often attended performances during his years as a student at Columbia University in the early 1940s. In his nostalgic evocation of Minton's Playhouse, published in 1959, he recalled:

> On the piano that night Thelonious introduced a wooden off key note to everybody's warm up notes. Minton's Playhouse, evening starts, jam hours later, 10pm, colored bar and hotel next door. One or two white visitors: some from Columbia, some from nowhere, some from ships, some from army, navy, air force, marines, some from Europe. A strange note makes the trumpeter of the band lift an eyebrow. Dizzy is surprised for the first time that day. He puts the trumpet to lips and blows a wet blur.[51]

Trumpeter Miles Davis, who moved to Manhattan to study at the Julliard School in 1944, would later write:

> I wanted to come to New York in the first place, to get into the jazz music scene that was happening around Minton's Playhouse . . . the Black jazz capital of the world . . . you came uptown to Minton's if you wanted to make a reputation among musicians . . . it also taught a whole lot of musicians, made them what they eventually became . . . I could learn more in one session at Minton's than it would take me two years to learn at Julliard.[52]

Pianist Billy Taylor arrived the same year. In the mid-1980s, he told an interviewer:

> Everybody knew about Minton's, all young musicians, because that was a legendary place already … All over the country it was known that this was one of the places where you could go and, whether you were lucky enough to sit in there or not, at least you could hear the legendary musicians jamming.[53]

Minton's Playhouse: 1945-74

With the end of World War II, "Celebrity Night" jam sessions resumed, and Minton's was remodeled.[54] At this time, Monk formed a short-lived rehearsal band that practiced in the hotel's basement.[55]

Newspaper advertisements promoted Minton's as the "Playhouse," and the house band was led by such bebop saxophonists as Kermit "Scotty" Scott and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. Headliners included Monk and Webster, as well as pianist Erroll Gardner and singer-pianist Carmen McCrae.[56] Guitarist George Benson performed at Minton's in the mid-1960s. His shows were attended by such leading record producers as Clive Davis and John Hammond.[57]

Some performances were recorded and released as albums, including *Music After Midnight* (1953) by the Tony Scott Quartet, as well as *Up At Minton's* by Stanley Turrentine (1961), and a series of four albums released by Eddie Lockjaw Davis and Johnny Griffin (1961-65).

Around the time of Minton's 15th anniversary, people began to look back and consider the club's legacy. Monk humbly told Nat Hentoff in 1956:

> It was just a job. I had no particular feeling that anything new was being built. Its true modern jazz probably began to get popular there . . . Some of those histories and articles put what happened in ten years in one year. They put people all together at one time in this place.[58]

When novelist-critic Ralph Ellison described the club's "mysterious spell" for *Esquire* magazine in 1959, he admitted he wasn't entirely convinced that all of the stories he heard were actually true. His thoughtful essay, which opened with "our memory and our identity are ever at odds," nonetheless acknowledged that Minton's had been "a rendezvous for musicians," one of many places where "jazzmen have worked out the secrets of their craft."[59]

Critic LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) shared a similar perspective. In 1962 (published 1967), he wrote:

> By now it is almost impossible to find out just what did go on in Minton's during the early 40s.There were so many conflicting stories, many by people who have no way of knowing.[60]

He also remarked, Minton's was "still full of sounds" but that what was heard in the early 1960s was "mainstream" and that the performers were "stand-up replicas of what had been experimental twenty-five years ago."[61]

Teddy Hill remained associated with the club until about 1969,[62] though business had begun to decline. Following the Harlem riots of 1964 and 1965, *The New York Times* reported "fewer whites" were visiting the area and the club was often filled with "empty tables that were neatly dressed in white and red tablecloths and shiny black ashtrays."[63] In December 1968, Minton's hosted a poignant reunion, attended by musicians who gathered to celebrate the 54th birthday of the Baroness Pannonica (Nica) de Koenigswarter, a long-time patron of both Charlie Parker and Monk.[64]

Jazz performances possibly continued throughout the late 1960s and into early 1970s, though a columnist for the *New York Amsterdam News* reported in August 1973 that Minton's had been converted to a "discotheque."[65]

Hotel Cecil since the 1940s

Many significant Black jazz musicians were guests of the Hotel Cecil in the 1940s through the early

1970s. In his autobiography, Miles Davis wrote enthusiastically about its character:

> Next to Minton's was the Cecil Hotel, where a lot of musicians stayed. It was a hip scene . . . Minton's and the Cecil Hotel were both first-class places with a lot of style. The people that went there were the cream of the crop of Harlem's black society... the rates were reasonable, and the rooms were big and clean.[66]

The hotel attracted a remarkable and varied group of long- and short-term guests. Residents included such notable jazz musicians as saxophonist Paul Gonsalves, singer Jon Hendriks, bassist Milt Hinton,[67] trumpeter Ray Nance, and saxophonist Ben Webster, who reminisced:

> Most of the guys around then knew where I lived. If someone came in Minton's and started to play—well, they'd give me a ring, or come up and call me down. Either I'd take my horn down, or I'd go down and listen. Those were good days. Had a lot of fun then."[68]

Musicians' memoirs make frequent reference to the Hotel Cecil, which was within walking distance of the Apollo Theater and less expensive than Hotel Theresa (both are New York City landmarks). During a national tour, the Prairie View Co-Eds, an all-girl Black swing band, stayed for ten days in 1945.[69] The trombonist Fred Wesley called it "another favorite hotel of road bands, centrally located in beautiful downtown Harlem."[70] Etta James, the famed blues singer, wrote:

> I started hanging out with Sam [Cooke] and the Soul Stirrers when we were all living at the Hotel Cecil in New York. All the gospel stars stayed at the Cecil – Shirley Caesar, the Caravans, the Blind Boys, the Pilgrim Travelers, Johnny Taylor was around, and so was Lou Rawls.[71]

It was also popular with such doo-wop vocal groups as The Cadillacs and The Flamingos, who were known to rehearse in their rooms.

When James Brown and the Famous Flames played the Apollo in April 1959, some or all of the group were guests, including singer Bobby Byrd, who recalled: "we were staying at the Cecil Hotel. They had a basement down there where we rehearsed, got the voices together and worked out the routines."[72] Rock guitarist Jimmy Hendrix also briefly stayed during 1965.[73] At this time, the assistant manager was Claude Jeter, a well-regarded gospel singer and minister who had a distinctive falsetto voice.[74]

Hotel Cecil also attracted a noteworthy amount of criminal activity. Big Joe Richards, a major crime figure in Harlem, was arrested at the hotel in 1942. In subsequent years, central Harlem became New York's "busiest police precinct"[75] and the hotel was the scene of multiple murders and deaths, as well as frequent police raids. For instance, Rudy Lewis, one of the lead singers of The Drifters vocal group from 1960 to 1964, was found dead in his room in 1964.[76]

The building was badly damaged by fire in 1974 and Minton's Playhouse closed. Three years later, in April 1977, New York City became owner of the building. Minton's Playhouse (and the Cecil Hotel) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 18, 1985. The nomination stated that it was "recognized by musicians and historians as one of the foremost jam session

nightclubs in the United States."[77] It also claimed, "the events that occurred at Minton's Playhouse … and the music created there … clearly played an important role in transforming the course of jazz."[78] At the time, the structure was mostly vacant – windows were "sealed with concrete blocks," and the club interior was "deteriorated though restorable."[79]

Hotel Cecil was acquired by the Harlem Urban Development Corporation (now Harlem Community Development Corporation), a subsidiary of the New York State Urban Development Corporation (now Empire State Development), in 1987. This agreement required the new owner to renovate the building and select a community sponsor to operate an apartment hotel. Restored with public and private funds, including a loan from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, it reopened as supportive housing for homeless men and women in 1988.[80] The renovation architect was Roberta Washington.[81] At present, the building is leased to the Cecil Hotel Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Housing and Services, Inc. It contains approximately 89 residential units, as well as office and commercial space.

A plan to revive Minton's Playhouse was conceived in the 1990s.The Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, an independent not-for-profit corporation, approved a major loan to a group of investors to renovate the space in 1996, though by 1999 support for the project had waned. Under manager Earl Spain, Minton's Playhouse was revived in 2006 under the name Uptown Lounge at Minton's Playhouse. It lasted four years, until 2010. Business executive Richard Parsons took over the space in 2013, adding The Cecil, a dinner club in the St. Nicholas Avenue storefronts. The multicolored 23-foot-long neon and metal sign for Minton's Playhouse, originally installed between the first and second floors at the east end of West 118th Street, was removed in 2013 and donated to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., where it is currently part of the "Musical Crossroads" exhibition.[82]

Conclusion

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building played an important role in the history of Harlem and American music. Minton's Playhouse, which occupied the former dining room, opened in 1938 or 1939. It was here that the influential jazz style known as bebop was nurtured and where many important Black jazz musicians performed, polishing their craft and reputations. The hotel also hosted an extraordinary group of entertainers and recording artists as guests, including individuals who were associated with various types of jazz, gospel, blues, and soul music. The hotel is now supportive housing, with commercial spaces on the first floor that preserve and reflect the building's history and cultural significance.

Endnotes

[1] Raoul Birnbaum and Roberta Washington, "Minton's Playhouse," National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form (Washington, D.C., United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1985)
[2] According to the U. S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs "descendants of the original Munsee now live among the Delaware Nation, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, and the Shinnecock Nation, all of which are recognized by the U.S. federal government as Tribal Nations descended from those that once lived in what is now New York City." See Nan A. Rothschild, Amanda Sutphin, H. Arthur Bankoff, and Jessica Striebel Maclean, *Buried Beneath The City: An Archeological History of New York* (2022), 48.
[3] A.B. Caldwell, "The History of Harlem; An Historical Narrative," (1882), 27, viewed at google.books.com
[4] "Teddy Hill Drawing 'em At Minton's," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 15, 1940, 20; "Teddy Hill, Former Band Leader, Now in Business," *The New York Age*, February 1, 1941, 4.
[5] See "Santa's New York Roots" at https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/12/09/santas-new-york-roots
[6] *Street Pavements of All Kinds: Borough of Manhattan* (City of New York, 1948), 188.
[7] Three years later, the Cecil Apartments (Neville & Bagge, 1898) were built at 929 West End Avenue.
[8] LPC files, clipping, 1895, most likely from *Real Estate Record & Guide*.
[9] Advertisement, *The Sun*, September 11, 1898, 9.
[10] Advertisement, *The Sun*, November 11, 1898, 10.
[11] Advertisement, *New-York Tribune*, January 30, 1897, B14.
[12] "The Real Estate Market," *The World*, June 11, 1897, 5.
[13] "In The Real Estate Field," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1899.
[14] "Old Man Suicide Over Loss," *The New York Times*, February 9, 1915.
[15] "Realty Notes," *The New York Times*, February 3, 1921.
[16] "Club Begins Novel Fight," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 9, 1933, 1.
[17] For a list of *Negro Motorist Green Book* editions, see: http://community.village.virginia.edu/greenbooks/content/cecil/
[18] This section is based on "Keller Hotel Designation Report" (Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2007), written by Cynthia Danza.
[19] "Jazz," *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (Yale University Press, 2010, second edition), 672.
[20] "No Longer Majority Black, Harlem Is in Transition," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2010.
[21] For a brief history of ragtime, see: https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035811
[22] "Ragtime," *Encyclopedia of New York City*, 1074.
[23] Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (1937), 106.
[24] See *The Devil's Music: 1920s Jazz* at https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/beyond/jazz.html
[25] "Jazz," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 672.
[26] Around this time, an entrance to the club was probably added on West 118th Street, allowing patrons to enter without passing through the hotel lobby. In subsequent years, to increase visibility from Seventh and St. Nicholas Avenues, sections of the facade adjacent to the entrance were modified, adding an awning, signage, enameled paneling, and new windows.
[27] Minton served as NAMA president during the first years that the club was open, from 1938 to 1945. See "Central Harlem Historic District Designation Report" at http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/2607.pdf, (Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2018), 249.
[28] "All Ears," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 9, 1940; also see https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/CrazyBlues.pdf
[29] Mary Lou Williams lived around the corner at the Dewey Square Hotel in the early 1940s, as did Charlie Parker later in the decade. See Dizzy Gillespie, with Al Fraser, *To Be, or Not ... to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie*, (Doubleday, 1979/2009), 148.
[30] Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz* (Pantheon Books, 1996), 530.
[31] Hill replaced Dewey Vanderburg. See "Harlem Round Up" *New York Amsterdam News*, October 26, 1940, 13; "Teddy Hill, Former Band Leader, Now in Business," *The New York Age*, February 1, 1941.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Kenny Clarke, quoted in *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: The Story of Jazz* (1955, various editions), 339.
[34] The documentary *Thelonious Monk: American Composer* (Taurus Films, 1991/2002) includes interviews with pianists Billy Taylor and Randy Weston that were filmed inside the space where Minton's Playhouse was located. Accessed in 2023 at https://youtu.be/ehvPDFfalFs
[35] Robin D. G. Kelley, *The Life and Times of an American*

Original (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 64.
[36] Kelley, 75.
[37] Bill Gottlieb, "Thelonious Monk – Genuis of Bop," *Down Beat*, September 24, 1947, 2.
[38] Gillespie wrote there were "big fines for playing jam sessions," but that Minton's was "immune" due to the owner's former position as a union delegate. Gillespie, 139-40.
[39] Nat Hentoff, "Just Call Him Thelonious," *Down Beat*, July 25, 1956, 15-16, reprinted in *The Thelonious Monk Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 74.
[40] Hill made this claim to guitarist George Benson in the mid-1960s. See "Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master," *Smithsonian National Museum of American History* (2011), 55, viewed at https://www.si.edu/media/NMAH/NMAH-AC0808_Benson_George_Transcript.pdf
[41] Gillespie, 134.
[42] Herbert H. Nichols, "The Jazz Life," *The New York Age*, July 5, 1941, 10.
[43] Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (University of California Press, 1999), 228.
[44] Jerry Newman made about 23 recordings. Some were broadcast by the Columbia University Radio Club in summer 1941 and were later released as 78 rpm records in 1947. Kelley, 73; *Reading Jazz*, 532.
[45] Interview in Masaya Yamaguchi, *Miles Davis: New Research on Miles Davis & His Circle* (2019), 153, viewed at google.com/books.
[46] John S. Wilson, *The Collector's Jazz: Modern* (J. P. Lippincott Company, 1959), 12.
[47] "Bop," *The New Yorker*, July 3, 1948, was reprinted in the exhibition catalogue *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969),186.
[48] "Majoring 'Round Town," *The People's Voice*, January 23, 1943, 31.
[49] "Swing Historians Hail Turning Point in Jazz," *Knoxville Journal*, May 11, 1947, 44.
[50] Bill Gottlieb, 2.
[51] Jack Kerouac, "The Beginning of Bop," see https://crippledmindy.wordpress.com/2014/05/31/the-history-of-bop-by-jack-kerouac/
[52] Miles Davis played occasional gigs at Minton's in the fall of 1945, with Coleman Hawkins and pianist "Sir" Charles Thompson. See Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 52, 53, 54.
[53] Interview, cited in National Register Nomination, 8.
[54] At this time, Teddy Hill was serving in World War II. During the war, M. C. Gattis and Henry Lee were the club managers. See advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News*, August 11, 1945, B7.
[55] Kelley, 117.
[56] "Tavern Topics," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 8, 1952, 21.
[57] George Benson, 55.
[58] Nat Hentoff, 15-16.
[59] "Ralph Ellison Remembers The Golden Age of Jazz," *Esquire* (January 1959), republished online in 2021 at https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a36452417/ralph-ellison-mintons-jazz-remembrance/
[60] "Minton's" was written in 1962, though it was first published in 1967. LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (Da Capo Press, 1967), 21.
[61] Ibid., 23.
[62] "Grad Student Rediscovers Roots Through Thesis Project," *The Daily Campus* (2012), viewed online at http://www.smudailycampus.com/ae/grad-student-rediscovers-roots-through-thesis-project
[63] "Fewer Whites Are Taking 'A' Train to Harlem Nightspots," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1967.
[64] *Brilliant Corners: A Bio-Discography of Thelonious Monk*, 192, viewed at googlebooks.com
[65] Les Mathews, "Mr. 1-2-5 Street," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1973, B7.
[66] *Miles: The Autobiography*, 648.
[67] Gillespie, 143.
[68] Quoted in Frank Buchmann-Moller, *Someone to Watch Over Me: The Life and Music of Ben Webster* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), 94.
[69] Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke University Press Books, 2000), 125.
[70] Fred Wesley, *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Duke University Press Books, 2002), 50.
[71] David Ritz and Etta James, *Rage to Survive: The Etta James Story* (Hachette Books, 2003), 88.
[72] Geoff Brown, *The Life of James Brown* (Omnibus Press, 2009), viewed at google.com/books.
[73] David Henderson, *'Scuse Me While I Kiss The Sky -- Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 67.
[74] Anthony Heilbut, *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Knopf, 2012), 37.
[75] "The Two-Eight – The City's Busiest Police Precinct," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 26, 1975.
[76] "'Drifters' Lead Singer Lewis Found Dead in Hotel," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 3, 1964.
[77] "Statement of Significance," National Register of Historic Places Nomination.
[78] National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 12.
[79] "Description," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1-2.
[80] "Homelessness should not mean hopelessness, says housing advocates," *New York Amsterdam News*,

September 5, 1992, 3.

[81] Roberta Washington was a commissioner at the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission from 2007 to 2015. See "Hearing before Subcommittee on Housing, Urban Affairs," January 26, 1988 (serial no. 100-45), 44, viewed at google,com/books.

[82] The Minton's Playhouse sign (or possibly an earlier variant) appears in a 1953 photograph by the French photographer Daniel Filipacchi. For more information about the club's neon sign, see "Sign for Minton's Playhouse" at https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2015.1 and "https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Musique/Le-jazz-dans-le-viseur-528873

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, state, and the nation.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1923, Lot 38 as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building
206 West 118th Street (aka 150-158 St. Nicholas Avenue
206-212 West 118th Street), Manhattan
LPC Staff, June 2023

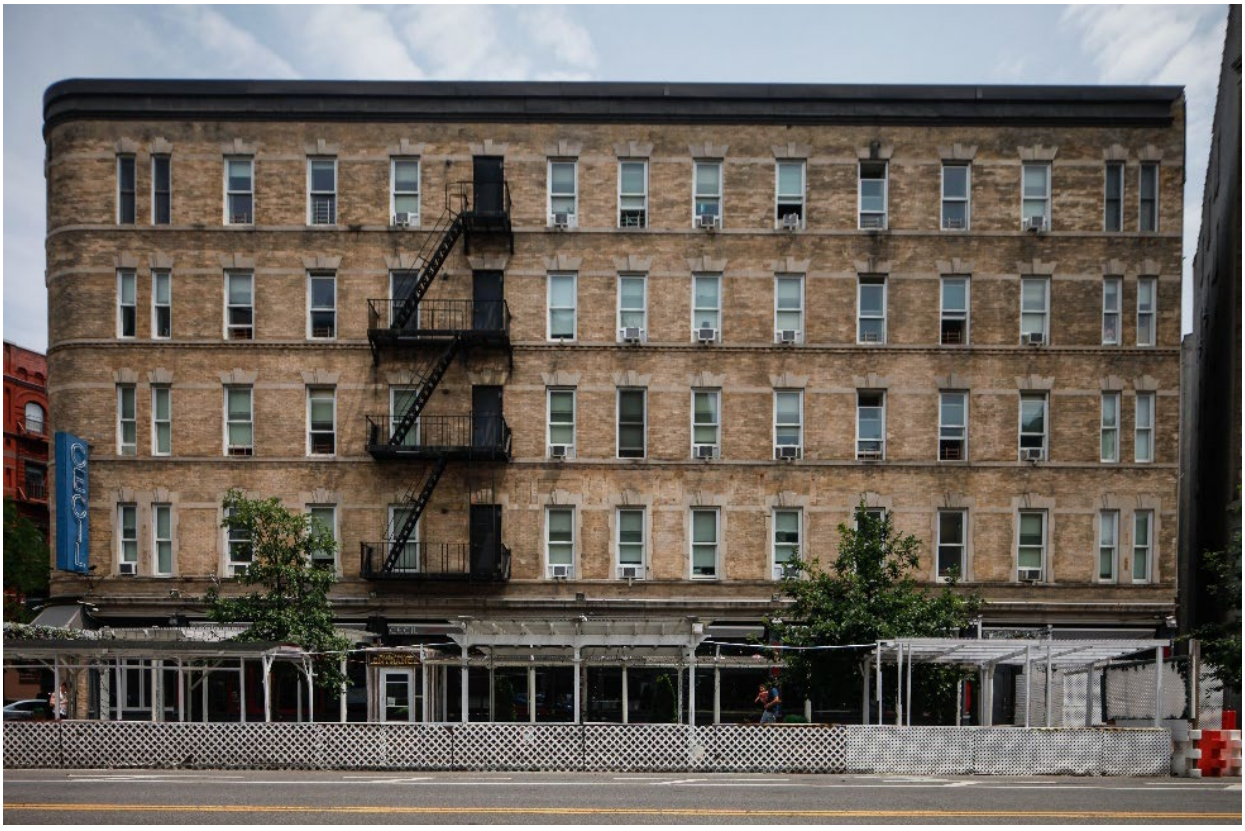
Thelonious Monk, Howard McGhee, Roy Eldridge, and Teddy Hill, Minton's Playhouse
William P. Gottlieb, 1947
Music Division, Library of Congress

Hotel entrance
West 118th Street
LPC Staff, June 2023

Minton's Playhouse entrance
West 118th Street
LPC Staff, June 2023

West 118th Street facade
LPC Staff, March 2023

West 118th Street façade
LPC Staff, June 2023



St. Nicholas Avenue facade
LPC Staff, June 2023

North corner
St. Nicholas Avenue facade
LPC Staff, June 2023

West 118th Street façade, east end (left)
View from Adam C. Powell Jr. Boulevard (right)
LPC Staff, June 2023

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building | LP-2671

NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 22.v2, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, DHW, Date: 6.27.2023