

# HARLEM

## A MIX OF OLD AND NEW

While the community is changing,  
its rich cultural identity remains

BY KATHRYN STORRING  
PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

The boos were tentative at first. In fact, the three women seated behind us giggled between jeers.

But, within moments, the pockets of negative energy flaring up here and there were contagious and a good portion of the audience started booing enthusiastically.

It was a strange experience for polite visitors from Kitchener. The boos had a good-natured undercurrent, but one could only imagine how they felt on stage, where the singer seemed determined to wring another ounce of emotion from a Spanish song.

Suddenly, “The Executioner” tap-danced across the stage. That’s right, The Executioner. And, yes, he was tap-dancing. I am

sorry to admit that we joined the laughter as he whisked the singer away.

Now, it’s not as ominous as it sounds — unless you are the hapless Spanish singer, of course. The Executioner, a.k.a. C.P. Lacey, had already wowed us with his dancing and impressionist skills. Performers like Sammy Davis Jr., James Brown and Michael Jackson are easy marks for Lacey’s costumes and fancy footwork. So, if there had to be an execution, at least the audience was primed to enjoy it.

But it still sounds nasty, right? It does as I write it down. My only excuse is that when you are immersed in Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, it is all part of the game. Any performer stepping onto this New York stage knows the house rule: Be good or be gone.

Amateur Night at the legendary Apollo Theater draws a boisterous crowd. Elsewhere in Harlem, professional dog walkers are a common sight and street vendors offer a wide range of foods.





They also know survival can launch a career. Since Amateur Night was introduced in 1934, the winners' circle has included the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, Gladys Knight, D'Angelo and Lauryn Hill. These days, the "super top dog" will win \$20,000 at the annual finals; winners of the 17-and-under contest get \$5,000.

But performers also risk going out in a blaze of boos. As host/comedian Capone joked: It is best not to give performers false hope about a career in show biz.

On this Wednesday night, the winner — chosen through audience cheers — was a petite singer visiting from Japan who strutted around the stage like she had already found fame. An earnest R&B singer placed second and a high-energy dancer came third. A 12-year-old singer topped the 17-and-under crowd. (Fortunately, booing is not allowed at this level — that would be hard to bear.)

For the spectators, the atmosphere was part American Idol, part cabaret and part

dance party. (At intermission, the audience was encouraged to swarm the stage and cut loose with the DJ.) After the final curtain, we spilled out onto Harlem's main drag — 125th Street — pumped by our role in a musical tradition. Soul-food mainstays like Red Rooster, Sylvia's and Amy Ruth's are within a 10-minute walk, luring locals and tourists alike with cornbread and crispy fried chicken with waffles.

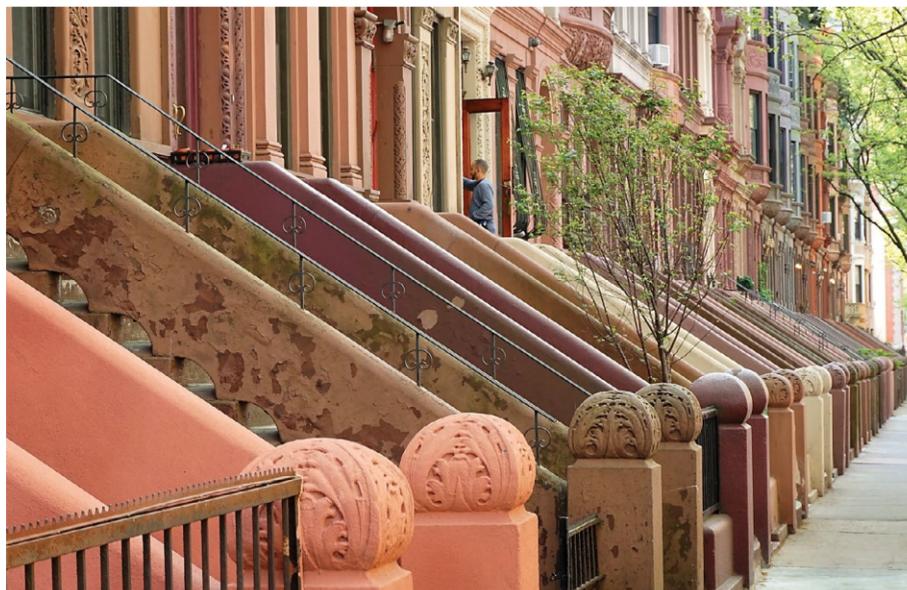
But there's one other thing about these Harlem landmarks. Signs of gentrification are everywhere. Signs for Banana Republic and Red Lobster crowd the Apollo from the building next door. At the time of our visit, Whole Foods was in hiring mode for its first Harlem store a couple of blocks away.

**M**anhattan's Harlem neighbourhood sprawls between the Hudson and Harlem rivers above the city's

**ABOVE:** The scene inside Red Rooster, one of the well-known soul food restaurants.

**LEFT:** Harlem brownstones command high prices these days.

**RIGHT:** Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, midway between Central Park and Columbia University, welcomes a variety of faiths, communities and school groups.





A skateboarder whips down the street near the Apollo Theater in Central Harlem.

### IF YOU GO

- Curious about how New York built a park on the roof of its water treatment plant? Check the details here: [nyc.gov/home](http://nyc.gov/home). Using the search field, upper right, type North River Wastewater Treatment Plant and follow the links.

- For more on Riverbank State Park: [parks.ny.gov/parks/93/details.aspx](http://parks.ny.gov/parks/93/details.aspx)

- For a brochure and map for the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway, feed the name into the search field on the parks website: [nycgovparks.org](http://nycgovparks.org)

- Various tour companies offer Harlem options. We chose Free Tours By Foot. As the name implies, you do not pay upfront, so the leader works hard to earn a pay-what-you-want fee at tour's end. The website also offers maps for self-guided exploring. From [freetourbyfoot.com](http://freetourbyfoot.com), use the Choose a City tab to connect to New York City and Harlem.

- For more on the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine: [www.stjohndivine.org](http://www.stjohndivine.org)

- Some of New York City's best-known museums are on what is known as Museum Mile. Those above 96th Street are part of Harlem, including the impressive Museum of the City of New York, where history gets a multimedia spin: [ny.com/museums/mile.html](http://ny.com/museums/mile.html)

- The Apollo Theater offers music lovers Amateur Night and more. [apollotheater.org](http://apollotheater.org). By the way, there was a time when even young performers could be booed off the stage — or not. Lauryn Hill performed at age 13 and kept going despite a nasty audience. Feed her name and the word Apollo into YouTube to see star power take root.

- And with all of that music, touring and sightseeing comes a hunger for soul food. Three popular choices await in Central Harlem near 125th Street:

- Red Rooster, 310 Lenox Ave.: [redroosterharlem.com](http://redroosterharlem.com)

- Sylvia's, 328 Malcolm X Blvd., [sylviasrestaurant.com](http://sylviasrestaurant.com)

- Amy Ruth's, 113 W 116th St.: [amyruths.com](http://amyruths.com)

gorgeous Central Park. It ends at 155th Street in the north, just across the Harlem River from Yankee Stadium. East Harlem's southern border dips down along Central Park to 96th Street, including the upper tip of what is known as the Museum Mile. The area many refer to as West Harlem is harder to define; it depends on the map and the source. Some say it comprises three neighbourhoods — Morningside Heights, Manhattanville and Hamilton Heights. Others exclude one or more. The esteemed Columbia University, for one, prefers to say its Morningside Heights campus is on the Upper West Side, and some maps agree.

And names do count. When we talk about staying in a friend's West Harlem apartment, the first question is about safety. Negative images linger from the 1980s when drugs and crime devastated Harlem. But that all changed in the mid-1990s, setting the scene for today's people-focused street vibe that reminds us of parts of Toronto.

The west and central sections of Harlem that we explored were an invigorating mixture of the old and the new. Restored brownstones can sell in the millions, while just a couple of blocks away homes are unpolished, with real life beating back any phony veneers. You'll see people hurrying to catch the subway south into the heart of Manhattan, while sidewalk vendors peddle fruit, CDs and jewelry.

In business areas away from the well-groomed 125th Street, neighbours greet each other in small grocery stores, pharmacies, barbershops and delis. Some shops are spiffed up and modern; others are decidedly time-worn, but decently stocked with everyday goods.

Here are snapshots from a warm spring evening on Broadway near West 149th Street:

- The young customer in the wine store looks fashionably fabulous. Her black platform shoes are criss-crossed by white laces. A small red backpack is slung casually over the shoulder of her smart peach dress; a beige hat tops her long hair. As her boyfriend pays for their wine, she beams as the woman behind the counter

chats to her in Spanish.

- Down the street, chatter rises from the patio of a sushi restaurant. Across the street, a pub is packed with young beer lovers.

- A middle-aged woman pauses outside a Baskin-Robbins, intent on an ice-cream cone, while teen boys sit on a stoop, one twirling a basketball as they talk.

- Two young women wearing long, colourful dresses and hijabs chat as they head along a residential street carrying a box of pizza.

One afternoon, we joined about 25 other tourists for a two-hour exploration of Central Harlem. Our guide, whose grandmother is a longtime Harlem resident, highlighted landmarks such as the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, which is part of the New York Public Library system; and the upscale architecture of Strivers' Row, where, if you look carefully, you might spot a gatepost sign from the past — Private Road: Walk Your Horses.

Our guide delved into Harlem's complex history, which started in 1658 when it was a Dutch village, and she celebrated its rich cultural identity, mainly carved out between the First World War and the Depression by musicians, writers and intellectuals.

But she also marked the neighbourhood's various roller-coasters. It's difficult to fathom the Cotton Club, for example — a whites-only speakeasy featuring African-American musicians. (What kind of heartless manager would rule that chorus girls could not be darker than a "paper-bag brown"?) Our guide led us to several dazzling wall murals that speak of history and activism, and she pointed out the YMCA on 135th Street where Malcolm X stayed in the 1950s.

She was forthright about the dark days when drugs and crime took a toll, and she pointed to the various signs of recovery — and change. Harlem was predominately black in the mid-20th century; these days, many sections have become multi-ethnic.

As we walked, I thought about the absurdities of "progress." Our fellow walkers were from around the globe — Australia,

England, Ukraine and Argentina, among others. Presumably they had signed up — as did we — out of curiosity and respect for Harlem's heritage and struggles. Presumably they did not come for the McCommunity the developers and chain stores have in mind for Harlem's gentrified future.

At the same time, I thought about the articles I read in pre-trip research warning that many Harlem churches are tired of the "gospel tours" offered to tourists. Perhaps our tour's respectful curiosity also disrupted the lives tourists are coming to admire.

After the tour, my husband and I did spend time exploring a church, but it's one that clearly welcomes outsiders with open arms. In fact, it's been that way since the cornerstone was laid in 1892.

The founders of the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine were determined that their "Cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of New York" would reach out to the city's growing immigrant population. The seven chapels surrounding the High Altar are dedicated to those from Scandinavia, Germany, the British Isles, France, Italy, Spain and Eastern Europe/Asia.

As its charter put it, the cathedral would be "a house of prayer for all people and a unifying centre of intellectual light and leadership." Fourteen themed bays border the central part of the cathedral, honouring professions and endeavours such as medicine, law, education and communications.

Located on Amsterdam Avenue at 112th Street, not far from Central Park, the cathedral is magnificent and immense, one of the largest Christian churches in the world. But true to its founders' vision, it is more than a building.

Various faiths and communities gather here for services more than 30 times a week. Some are traditional, some not so much, including the Blessing of the Bicycles, which welcomed cyclists and their bikes for the 19th annual service in May. The service apparently ends with a joyous ringing of the bike bells to celebrate the cycling season ahead.

Other parts of its mission are more serious

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A walking tour includes a stop at this Know Your Rights mural on 138th Street in Central Harlem.

— a soup kitchen, social service outreach, educational programming and a cultural commitment brimming with everything from art exhibitions and lectures to performances by visiting school choirs. In a building on its grounds, it runs an independent elementary school for all faiths that emphasizes arts, athletics and leadership development.

Indeed, a couple of school groups clustered within the cathedral during our walkabout. The teen class was discussing architectural structures while a younger group was learning about math and shapes.

Fortunately, a visitor doesn't need math to be impressed by the cathedral's treasures. There is the gleaming Altar of Peace, for example, created by master woodworker George Nakashima from the trunk of a 300-year-old black walnut tree. The cathedral houses the Barberini Tapestries, woven in the 17th century, as well as a textile conservation lab that serves clients from around the world.

Stained-glass windows capture religious and secular images, including a 1925 prototype television in the Communication Bay. The Great Rose window, 12 metres in

diameter, includes a mind-boggling 10,000 pieces of glass.

The next morning, we indulged in what has become a vacation tradition — a two-hour timeout for reading and coffee. We chose one of the two trendy cafes a short walk from our accommodations and nestled in, surrounded by laptops and young people (who probably thought we were quaint as we read actual books). Our guess is that they were post-secondary students who lived in the neighbourhood. The ever-expanding Columbia University is just one of several educational institutions just a few subway stops away.

Pumped on caffeine, we set out to explore Mother Nature's urban cousin, just a few moments away from Broadway's street life. First, we connected to Riverside Drive, along the west edge of the neighbourhood. A broad sidewalk, dressed up by a stone wall, runs high above the busy Henry Hudson Parkway, allowing peaceful views of the Jersey shoreline across the river.

At 145th Street, a bridge lifts pedestrians over the parkway to Riverbank State Park — and many surprises.

Our quiet spring walk barely touched its amenities. There are three swimming pools, a covered rink for either ice or roller skating, an amphitheatre, an athletic centre and tennis courts. For children, there are two playgrounds and a splash pool;

for those who just want to relax, there is a restaurant and picnic tables.

But get this — the park, 11 hectares (28 acres) in all, actually stretches across the roof of one of the city's massive wastewater treatment plants, a clever bit of city planning if ever there was one.

The only people not welcome in the park are cyclists, but not to worry. The Hudson River stretch of the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway trail sweeps along the edge of the state park. The trail is on its way north to Dyckman Street (just above the Cloister Center of Medieval Art) or south to Battery Park. Ambitious types can round the tip of Manhattan and head up to East Harlem. The Greenway is about 50 kilometres in all, much of it through parks or hugging the riverfronts. But before you pack your bike, take note: there are also a few gaps where cyclists must brave city streets.

If the section of Greenway we tested is any indication, the trail is wide and well maintained; there was ample room for walkers to join the cyclists, joggers, stroller pushers and professional dog walkers for a long or short bit of exercise. (At 148th, walkers can head back into Harlem via a tunnel under the expressway and stairs that climb back to Riverside Drive.)

Yes, it was a mellow morning in Harlem, and in no time we were recharged. Time to dive back into Manhattan's touristy pleasures — the museums, galleries, theatres, jazz and people-watching opportunities — all just a subway ride away. 

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