

ENTERTAINMENT

David Amram's encounters with Dizzy Gillespie, Patti Smith, and others

By [Barbara Hoffman](#)

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David Amram

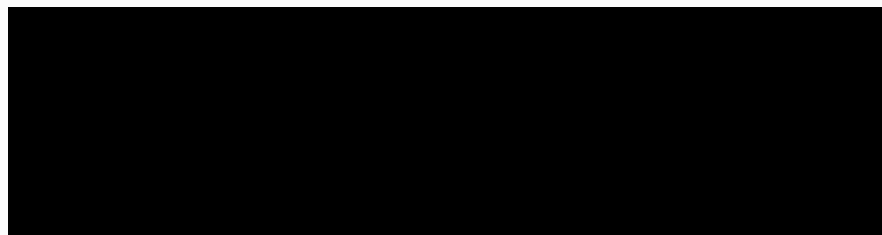
Photo: Christian Johnston

David Amram:

He jammed with Dizzy Gillespie and Patti Smith, wrote music for Joe Papp — and, in 1966, Lenny Bernstein made him the New York Philharmonic's first composer-in-residence. All told, David Amram's had quite a run — and it isn't over yet: At 83, he's still composing, conducting and playing jazz on his French horn. Naturally, the Pennsylvania native says he always knew he was destined for New York, "that great mystical, magical place." He's just given his papers to Lincoln Center's Library of Performing Arts, which is celebrating with a bunch of events, including a free concert Tuesday at 6 p.m. of Amram's chamber music.

This is his musical New York, past and present.

1. Art Foods delicatessen, formerly at Sixth Avenue and 10th Street



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“It was at Igor and Sonia Sudarsky’s classic neighborhood delicatessen that I worked with Arthur Miller composing the music for his play ‘After the Fall.’ Miller loved Greenwich Village, and the Art was where anybody and everyone would go — there were no A tables, and Igor would make you a gigantic sandwich. He used to let me make my own behind the counter. Dustin Hoffman lived right around the corner, and after he did ‘Midnight Cowboy,’ he still went to the deli because Igor was so nice to him. Whenever he had an interview, he’d take them there, so Igor would have more customers.”

2. Connolly’s Pub, 14 E. 47th St., between Madison and Fifth avenues



Connolly's Pub on East 47th Street.
Photo: Tamara Beckwith

“I performed there with the great Irish band Black 47 when Malachy McCourt was running for governor in 2006. We knew Malachy wouldn’t win, but he was so much fun to be with. Everyone was drinking up a storm, but because of my advancing years and because I work 16 hours a day, I was drinking diet ginger ale . . . I shock and disappoint people by not fulfilling my role as the stoned-out, aging boy wonder — I don’t drink, smoke or do drugs. When I go to schools, I tell the kids I’m living proof you can be just as much a crashing bore stone-cold sober as stoned out of your head.”

3. The Village Gate, formerly at Thompson and Bleecker streets



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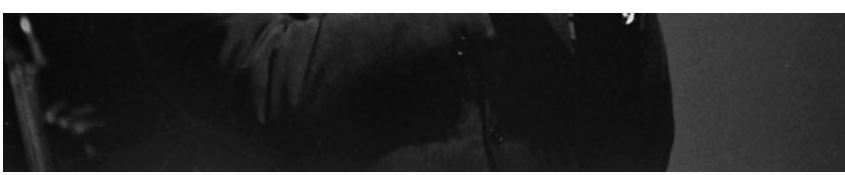
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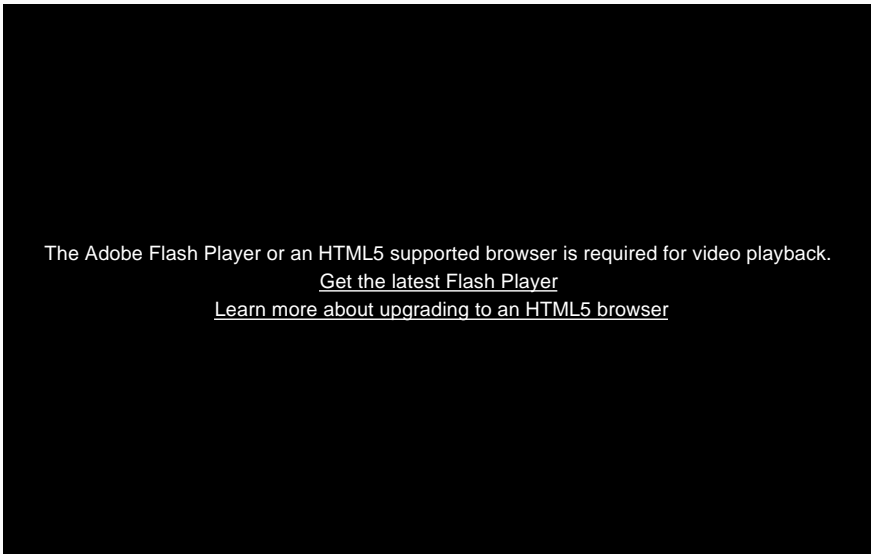


Dizzy Gillespie performs at the Newport Jazz Festival Rhode Island June, 1967.

Photo: AP

“In August of 1977, I sat in with Dizzy Gillespie’s great band. After we were done playing, we went back in the dressing room with the famous overhead leaking pipe and reminisced about our wonderful concert in Cuba that May. We were the first Americans to go there since the revolution with the permission of the State Department, as musical goodwill ambassadors. Dizzy said, ‘Why don’t you take that piece you wrote in memory of Chano Pozo at the concert we did in Havana, and write it out for a symphony orchestra to play? The classical cats need to find out about this music. It’s so sophisticated and soulful.’ ‘Thank you, Dizzy,’ I said. ‘I never would have thought of doing that.’ ‘You didn’t have to,’ said Diz. ‘I did.’ ”

4. Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St., between Sixth Avenue and Broadway



“I played my first New York concert there in the spring of 1956, playing French horn in Oscar Pettiford’s big band. Thelonious Monk’s quintet was co-billed. People thought Monk had disappeared, because for years he hadn’t recorded. People said he was ahead of his time. Monk was right on time, but people didn’t realize. He came and played that night at Town Hall, and it was incredible.”

5. New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street



The New York Public Library

“I did a duet with Patti Smith there in 2008, when the scroll that Jack Kerouac wrote ‘On the Road’ on was there. I knew Kerouac for 12 years and was his first musical accompanist. When his father was dying, Jack promised him he’d take care of his mother. He had a very hard time in the ‘60s — he was a devout Catholic and was patriotic, so a lot of people accused him of the worst crime: falling out of fashion. Fortunately, he remained the same person he always was, and people now appreciate him as a great artist. The same with Woody Guthrie. People used to ask, ‘What side are they on?’ I’d say, ‘They’re on the side of humanity — they want to see the world get together.’”

6. Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, 737 E. Sixth St. between Avenues C and D



Emmanuel Presbyterian Church

Photo: Christian Johnston

“In 1956 I went to meet Joe Papp, a young theatrical director who wanted to have free Shakespeare in NYC and was looking for a composer. He was having meetings in this funky church, working on the lowest budget possible, and yet he was dressed up like he was auditioning for a Broadway spectacular, in a black overcoat with shiny lapels. He’d been doing Shakespeare with recorded music from ‘Quo Vadis,’ and people were saying, ‘You got that big Hollywood music blasting. Why don’t you get some original music?’ I showed up in an old sweater with holes in it. Joe told me later, ‘You looked so unorthodox, I figured you must be talented.’”

7. Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St., between Bleecker and West 4th streets



“This cafe is one block from my first job in NYC, when I performed with Charles Mingus at the old Café Bohemia in 1955. The Cornelia cafe has been a gem for over 40 years, and for the last nine, I’ve performed there the first Monday of every month, if I’m free. I perform music I’ve composed with artists in the theater, film, poetry, dance and jazz worlds, and always invite a few mystery guests . . . playing here now reminds me how lucky I am to still be alive.”

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