



Harlem of the West - The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era

By Elizabeth Pepin, Lewis Watts

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Billie Holiday singing at the New Orleans Swing Club. Dexter Gordon hanging out at Bop City. Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane all swinging through town for gigs. Sound like a nostalgic snapshot from the New York jazz scene, or perhaps New Orleans? Nope. This particular sentimental journey describes San Francisco's Fillmore District in its heyday. The Fillmore in the 1940s and 1950s was an eclectic, integrated, and hopping neighborhood dotted with restaurants, pool halls, theaters, and shops many minority-owned and boasting two dozen active nightclubs and music joints within its one square mile. Although it has been commemorated in songs, poems, and in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, few people today know of the rich history of the Fillmore and its musical legacy because it vanished abruptly and so thoroughly due to redevelopment in the 1960s. Through dozens of archival photographs and oral accounts from the neighborhood residents and musicians who experienced it at its height, *Harlem of the West* celebrates this unique and rediscovered chapter in jazz history and the African-American experience on the West Coast.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Mellow memories emerge in this consummate, tightly edited look back at an exuberant way of life in San Francisco's Fillmore District during the 1940s and '50s, when dozens of blues, R&B and jazz joints flourished amid businesses run by African-Americans, Japanese-Americans and Filipino-Americans. "The entire neighborhood was a giant multicultural party throbbing with excitement and music," remembers former Fillmore Auditorium manager Pepin. Art professor Watts and TV producer Pepin faced a difficult task when they set out to document the Fillmore's musical heyday. Few photos were known, and 1960s redevelopment left vacant lots. During a 15-year period, they explored city files and tracked former residents, and the resulting oral accounts by musicians and clubgoers make these pages an evocative echo of the past. Interviews led to photographic treasure troves, and although some pictures had "aged badly," Watts repaired damaged images with digital restorations. Researching newspapers, books and magazines, the authors stockpiled a mountain of memorabilia—including a map of neighborhood landmarks, 200 b&w archival photographs, ads, clippings, handbills and posters—presented here in a 9 1/4 x 7 3/4" format. The enthusiasm of the era bubbles forth, and fold-out endpapers of long-ago logos and signs provide a nostalgic closing coda. (*Feb.*)

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About the Author

Elizabeth Pepin is a photographer, public television producer, and former manager at the historic Fillmore Auditorium. She lives in San Francisco.

Lewis Watts is a photographer and professor of art at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with a long-standing interest in African-American history in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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