

NEW YORK

Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant pays musical homage to his old Upper West Side neighborhood

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New York Daily News

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Jul 03, 2023 at 7:45 am

From gentrification came inspiration tinged with more than a touch of melancholy.

Musician Freddie Bryant returns to his old Manhattan neighborhood for “Upper West Side Love Story,” an ambitious two-CD song cycle mixing nostalgia with the cold hard truth about the local landscape’s changing fortunes through the decades.

These were the streets of the [58-year-old Bryant’s youth](#) and adulthood, until soaring rents and sweeping new development sent the guitarist/composer/lyricist to the Bronx four years ago.

“A bunch of the songs are love songs, and if you listen closely it’s about the neighborhood,” he said in one of the many local coffee shops that opened as the old Upper West Side morphed into something new.

“When I was here, it was my neighborhood,” said Bryant, sitting a short walk from his old playground. “But there’s always a neighborhood. It’s just [a different kind of neighborhood](#).”



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant poses in Central Park by the field where he played football during his 13th birthday party near his W. 87th St. childhood home. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

As one of Bryant's new lyrics puts it, "Mom and Pop have left the shop, replaced by another cafe."

The twin threads of music and memories intertwined in 2019 when the talented jazz musician received a 2019 grant from [Chamber Music America](#) to create what became the expansive 92-minute album getting released Friday.

Good news, but it was preceded by a three-year battle with an investor landlord over the W. 87th St. apartment building where his family resided for five decades.

When they were finally forced out after a series of increasingly expensive and fruitless court hearings, their apartment sold for a staggering \$2.3 million, Bryant said.

Luckily, the musician's distress provoked a bolt of inspirational lightning.

“There’s always some kind of message or meaning to me when I write,” he said. “And so it really made sense that this [neighborhood] was the biggest part of my life, really, besides babies and marriage, you know? It made sense.”



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant gestures to a point of interest along his home block on W. 87th St. on Friday, June 30, in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

The seeds for the 16-song work for a chamber-jazz ensemble, with music, lyrics and haikus by Bryant, were planted through his decades in the ever-evolving neighborhood between Central Park and the Hudson River.

But it was his family’s West Side farewell that resonated most with the musician. Bryant recalled the moment he realized the deck was stacked against them.

“My lawyer friend, she said, ‘Freddie, I’m sorry to tell you this, but if you’re in housing court, you already lost,’” he said. “Because it’s the nature of the beast, you know?”

Bryant, polite and thoughtful with salt and pepper hair, arrives at the coffee shop with his guitar to discuss the project that included more than just music and lyrics.

As he wrote, Bryant delved into the neighborhood’s history in the arts, a past that includes legendary Black residents like Billie Holiday and [Miles Davis](#). He recounts neighborhood jam sessions with Davis, [Dizzy Gillespie](#) and Thelonious Monk.



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant tunes his guitar before briefly playing on the block he lived on from 1967 until 2019 on W. 87th St. Friday, June 30, in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Bryant, in his fourth decade as an artist, conducted interviews with 20 friends and relatives to get different takes on their old stomping grounds.

“So it’s not like a scientific survey of everybody who lived here,” said Bryant. “And through the course of interviewing, I heard about various stories. ... But again, this piece is not research on the whole neighborhood.

“If I was doing that, it would be a 10-part series.”



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant, left, takes a photo with the super, Naser Pepic, right, and doorman, Miguel Colon, middle, from his childhood home on W. 87th St. in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

He also did some digging into government planner and power broker [Robert Moses and his “urban renewal” projects](#) that forced Black and Latino residents from their West Side homes in the name of progress.

The result: a song called “Moses the Pharaoh: Who Will Stay and Who Will Go?”

A graduate of the Yale School of Music, Bryant boasts a lengthy and impressive resume: He played with the Mingus Orchestra for two decades, led his own band Kaleidoscope, and is in high demand on the New York City jazz scene.

Bryant assembled a top-notch band of musicians for the “Upper West Side Love Story,” saying he wrote the songs in order from the first to the last — “I’m a Capricorn, they’re pretty much linear,” he said.

The CD opens with “Columbus, Quiet” and appropriately closes with “Last Song: It’s Time To Say Goodbye.”



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant poses for a portrait in the intersection of Columbus Ave. and W. 87th St., in front of the building that used to be the playground depicted on his t-shirt on Friday, June 30, in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

“The first half has a lot of childhood stuff going on,” he said. “The second half is for the adults, and we get into a lot of the heavier stuff about Robert Moses and [junkies on heroin and crack and homelessness](#).

“And [the Central Park 5](#) — It’s not central to my life, but it is central to what I remembered being a young person and the neighborhood. So that’s what I’m saying.”

The songs are often summed up neatly by their titles: “Love Can’t Live on Nostalgia,” “Kid’z Rhymes: Remember This?” and “Roses and Rubies: The Cost of What We Lost.”



Jazz guitarist Freddie Bryant poses for a portrait along Central Park West, near his lifelong home on W. 87th St. on Friday, June 30, in Manhattan. (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

Bryant now lives in a house in Riverdale, the Bronx, with a mortgage and property taxes and all the rest.

As an hour-long chat wound down, he reflected one last time on what was lost across the decades, about all the new faces on the once-familiar block.

“One hundred percent, I’ve made peace with the idea,” said Bryant. “I still feel a lot of memories and lost connections. But I really feel blessed to have had this opportunity to do this piece.”