

# *Jazz Landscapes*



*in the city of New Haven*

*Laura Clapp*

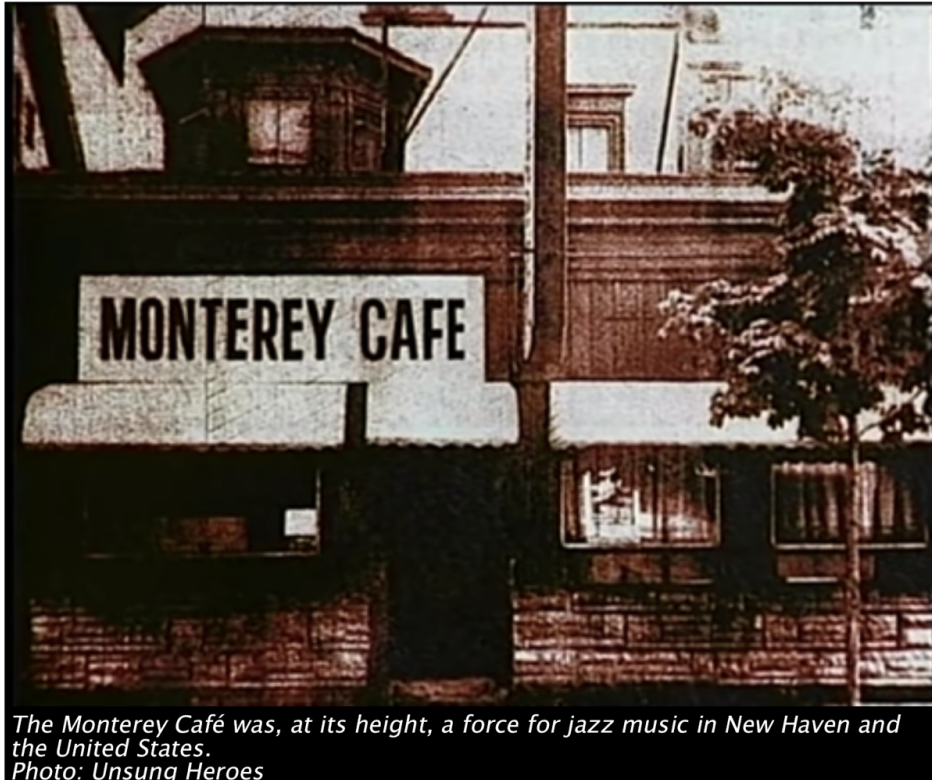
# 1. The Monterey

The building that once housed the Monterey Café is still standing today. Originally a residential structure, with the pitched roof and bay window characteristic of New Haven residential architecture along this stretch of Dixwell, the building had a commercial bump-out tacked onto its façade. This commercial bump-out was initially decked



The former Monterey Club now stands vacant on Dixwell Avenue.  
Photo: Google Maps

out in signage (both a horizontal storefront sign and a vertical sign perpendicular to the façade) and awnings. Today, however, it has fallen into disrepair. The neglected façade of the former Monterey is a painful reminder of what this stretch of Dixwell once meant to New Haven and the country's cultural identity as a whole.



The Monterey Café was, at its height, a force for jazz music in New Haven and the United States.  
Photo: *Unsung Heroes*

The Monterey was a true New Haven fixture. Rufus Greenlee, the founder and longtime owner of the club, was a celebrated Vaudeville performer in his own right who was deeply committed to the operation of the Monterey and to the city of New Haven. His club combined big names on the national jazz stage and local New Haven talent for unique nightly shows that attracted both performers and audiences from all over the country. Johnny Hammond Smith also recorded his album *Black Coffee* live at the Monterey.



Several artists, including Johnny Hammond Smith, recorded live albums at the Monterey.  
Photo: *cdandlp.com*

*"The Monterey was just one of a number of clubs on Dixwell Avenue that featured jazz. And while the Monterey might have had the most famous performers, all the clubs became showcases for local musicians." - *Unsung Heroes**

The geography of a strip of jazz clubs helped give rise to the particular nature of the New Haven jazz scene. Rather than jazz clubs serving as isolated establishments competing for clientele, these clubs formed a cohesive unit on Dixwell Avenue. The Monterey, with its star-studded setlists featuring the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, and Billie Holiday, may have been the anchor of this neighborhood, but the clubs around it, including Dixon's, The Playback, The Recorder, The Golden Gate, and the Democratic Club, were equally significant to the New Haven jazz scene. Local talent blossomed along this strip, where jazz could be heard seven days a week, from the morning until late into the night. Jazz on Dixwell Avenue was also a uniquely collaborative environment. As one New Haven musician recalled, "if you had a gig in New Haven, it wasn't really your gig because anybody would come in, and it was just common courtesy to let them play."

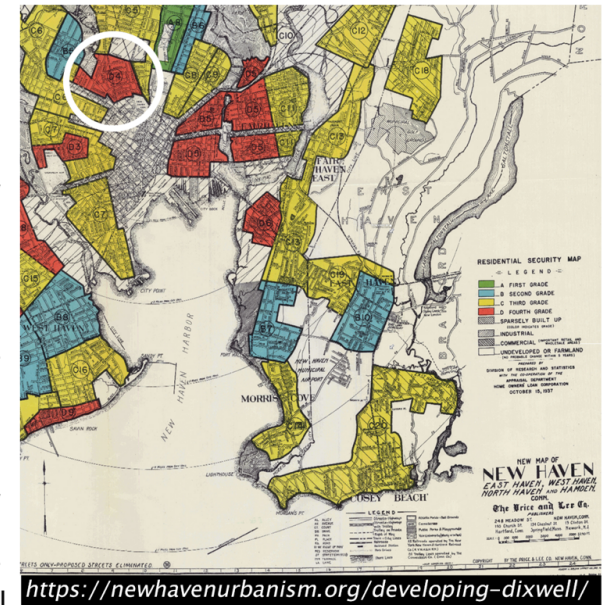


A jam session in the living room of Eddie and Bobby Buster. Talented musicians in their own right, the Buster Brothers were also natural mentors. Photo: *Unsung Heroes*

Perhaps no better example of this collaborative spirit existed than the Buster brothers. Residents of the Dixwell neighborhood, Eddie and Bobby Buster were both talented musicians and natural mentors. If they had a gig, they would welcome all musicians, regardless of level, experience, instrument, age, or talent, onto the stage with them. They also operated informal music lessons out of their own home for all people in the neighborhood who were interested. As evidenced in the photograph above, these Buster Brothers jam sessions cut across all sorts of barriers. Musicians of any race or background were welcome. Interestingly, musicians of any instrument were welcome as well. Above right is a man playing bassoon – not an instrument commonly associated with jazz. The Busters' children recall waking up to the sound of different instruments and different musicians every morning. The Buster brothers made Dixwell's jazz scene what it was by fostering local talent and building a neighborhood through their music and mentorship.

The Dixwell jazz scene was a thriving, collaborative, supportive, and innovative landscape at its height. However, the neighborhood of Dixwell faced many challenges in the latter half of the 20th century.

This 1937 Home Owners' Lone Corporation (HOLC) map shows how the Dixwell neighborhood was a victim of redlining. Although posing as purely analytical documents, these maps spelled the doom of neighborhoods that needed investors' capital the most in order to survive. The decision of which neighborhoods to starve of capital was often motivated by prejudice against certain ethnic communities or racial groups. The Dixwell



<https://newhavenurbanism.org/developing-dixwell/>

neighborhood, show here as the D4 wedge, has historically been predominantly African-American. Jazz clubs, along with many other Black-owned businesses, managed to thrive in this neighborhood despite the redlining and other discriminatory lending practices it suffered from. However, redlining and the ensuing lack of capital, lack of opportunity, botched redevelopment efforts, and social issues that took hold eventually ended the thriving Dixwell jazz scene. The Monterey itself became caught between two rival gangs in the 1980s and was finally forced to shut its doors in 1991.

Despite being reduced to little more than an abandoned storefront, the Monterey still lives large in the memories of many of New Haven's jazz greats. Willie Ruff, bassist and Yale School of Music faculty member, recalls:

*"My very first year at Yale there was a little club on Dixwell Avenue called the Monterey... This one night, who walked into the club to perform but the singer Betty Roche. Everybody had turned out, because they knew Betty's performance of 'Take the A-Train' with Duke Ellington. I thought, here I am, at only 19, just five blocks from the Yale campus, playing bass on the bandstand with the great Betty Roche in New Haven, Connecticut. I said to myself, I believe in miracles."*

## 2. Foundry Café

From the Dixwell neighborhood, head south along the Farmington Canal Greenway until you reach the intersection of Audubon and Whitney. On the south side of the street, locate the coffee shop “Koffee?”

Beginning in 1850, this stretch of Audubon between Whitney and Orange was a major manufacturing district in the city of New Haven. The New Haven Manufacturing Company, the McLagon Foundry, the Butricks Steam Engine Manufacturers, the



The 1886 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the density of the Audubon manufacturing district.

Andrew B. Hendryx Company, A.A. Ball & Co., and the New Haven Rattan Co. all called this stretch of Audubon home for several decades. The density of this manufacturing district is evident in the 1886 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, above. By 1973, however, the sparseness of the area is shocking (below). In the mid-1960s, the area was targeted for urban redevelopment. In 1965, the Arts Council obtained the permission of the City of New Haven to develop Audubon Street as a new arts district for the city. The Neighborhood Music School was the first to open a new building on Audubon in 1968. Over the next half-decade, this new district continued to grow with the addition of the Creative Arts Workshop



By 1973, the city of New Haven was in the process of creating a new arts district on Audubon Street.

and the ACES Educational Center for the Arts. In 1975, the City of New Haven tapped local musician Marcia Stevens to open a sheet music store in the second story of the only remaining structure from the McLagon Foundry.



The Foundry Café used to occupy this historic building on Audubon Street. Photo: Laura Clapp

The first floor of this old foundry building, now “Koffee?,” was home to the Foundry Café, an epicenter of the New Haven jazz scene from the 1970s through the 1990s. In the early 1990s, an FBI raid exposed the Foundry Café as a crack cocaine distribution hub. In New Haven, the demise of jazz clubs has often been connected to the presence of drugs in the city. Why did this connection exist, and what does it tell us about the nature of jazz landscapes within the city?

The Foundry Café was an intriguing member of the cast of characters that made up the newly-minted Audubon Arts District in the 1970s. The effort to create this district was spearheaded by the City of New Haven itself, but what place did more informal establishments such as the Foundry Café hold in the masterplan for the Audubon district? Can a district for the arts be manufactured in the way that the City board was planning? How necessary are more organic, ground-up processes and establishments for creativity in a landscape?

Little documentation exists of the nature of the Foundry Café itself. It seems that the dramatic story of its demise has overshadowed the rest of its lifecycle.

## 3. Owl Shop

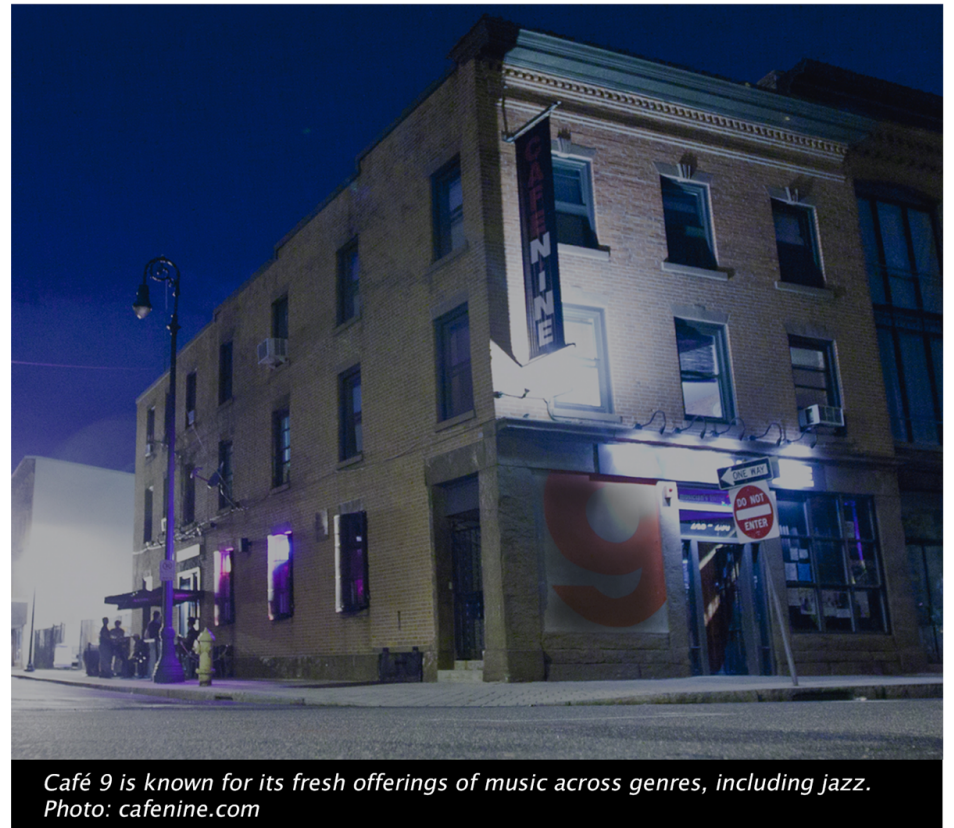


*Photo: Christopher Capozziello for the New York Times.*

At the southwest corner of the New Haven Green, jazz finds a somewhat unlikely home. The Owl Shop, at 268 College Street, is a smoke shop dating back to the 1930s. At its height, the Owl Shop operated out of five New Haven locations and shipped its signature tobacco blends by mail order to all 50 states. However, as smoking declined in popularity over the last few decades of the 20th century, the Owl Shop faced an identity crisis. Following a change of ownership in 1998, the shop acquired its liquor license and began operating as a bar. New tobacco laws in the early 21st century prevented smoking and drinking in the same establishment, but the Owl Shop was grandfathered in to the old tobacco laws. The Owl Shop was suddenly one of the only legal smoking bars in the state of Connecticut. In order to determine a future for itself, the Owl Shop turned towards the past – by introducing a weekly live performance by the Hawkins Jazz Collective. The music seems to complete a larger picture of a “throwback” to a different era. The faithful renditions of straight-ahead jazz standards that can be heard at the Owl Shop are in sharp contrast to the innovative improvisations of Dixwell Avenue’s heyday. Perhaps the introduction of live jazz was an attempt to draw a connection to New Haven’s past as a thriving center for jazz. Or maybe jazz music just seemed a natural companion to the smoke shop haze and old-timey bar atmosphere. In either case, it seems fitting that jazz find a new home in a New Haven fixture with deep roots.

## 4. Café Nine

From the Owl Shop, head south on College Street and then east along Crown for four blocks. On the corner of State and Crown streets, an elegant but nondescript three-story brick building stands out from its neighbors with the large red number “9” painted on its façade. Opened in the 1970s as Blue Bartz, this dive bar was since rechristened “Café 9,” reflecting growing efforts to rebrand and revitalize the Ninth Square district of New Haven. Mike Reichbart, the original owner, always saw Café 9 as a space where different genres of live music could coexist. The booking philosophy of Café 9’s current owner, Paul Mayer, has only moved further in that direction: “We book what we like.” Nicknamed the Musician’s Living Room, this 130-capacity bar now hosts acts of all stripes, including rock, indie, punk, and, yes, jazz music. In the spirit of the old Dixwell jazz clubs, Cafe 9 also hosts a weekly Sunday Night Jam series.



*Café 9 is known for its fresh offerings of music across genres, including jazz.  
Photo: cafenine.com*

## 5. Firehouse 12



Jazz music finds a new home in an old firehouse adapted as a mixed-use space.  
Photo: Winchester Lofts

Café 9 is not the only jazz establishment in the Ninth Square: walk a mere half-block west on Crown and you'll come to Firehouse 12. In the early 2000s, the city of New Haven was seeking proposals for how to repurpose this abandoned elegant brick firehouse on Crown Street. Nick Lloyd, then a graduate student at the Yale School of Music, proposed the concert venue/recording studio/bar hybrid that is now Firehouse 12, and was granted the bid. After extensive renovation, the Firehouse 12 jazz series began in 2005, along with the opening of its bar and the launching of its record label. The upstairs of the old firehouse was converted into an apartment, where Lloyd and his partner, Megan Craig, a visual artist, reside. The jazz series at Firehouse 12 "mixes hard experimentation and mainstream progressivism in a way that might be unusual for a jazz club in New York City," writes Nate Chinen of the New York Times.



Similar to the Monterey, Firehouse 12 has its own in-house record label.  
Photo: Christopher Capozziello for the New York Times.

Firehouse 12's in-house record label harkens back to the days when jazz artists would record albums at the Monterey in Dixwell. Taylor Ho Bynum, Lloyd's partner in the operation of Firehouse 12, says of the record label: "In a funny way, since it has a physical home, there was less need to represent a specific scene." The physicality of the space informs the nature of its performances and its record label.

Adaptive reuse and jazz have come together in meaningful ways throughout the modern history of the New Haven jazz scene. Firehouse 12, with its combination of jazz performances, recording studio, airbnb, apartment, & award-winning bar, might just be a sustainable business model for a space for jazz to continue to live in the city of New Haven.



A performance in Firehouse 12's hybrid recording studio-performance space  
Photo: Daniel Fine for the New York Times

## 6. NXTHVN

An exciting new development is underway just blocks from the former Monterey club. NXTHVN, a space for the arts in a repurposed manufacturing plant on Henry Street, is currently under construction, with the mission to “cultivate a sustainable creative community that attracts and supports talent within and beyond New Haven.” This space will include professional studios for visual artists, an art gallery, a café, on-site lodging for artists, and a black box theater. There are many similarities to Firehouse 12 in this establishment – diversifying the business model might be the most sustainable route forward for arts landscapes in the city of New Haven. It’s significant, of course, that this ambitious new arts complex is opening in the heart of Dixwell. There are worries of gentrification with so much capital flowing into an establishment of this sort, but there are also many reasons to be optimistic. The space is rooted in the existing neighborhood, both in terms of respect and diligence in its engagement with the surrounding community, and in terms of its connection to the history of Dixwell as an innovative jazz landscape. And who knows -- perhaps the black box theater will launch its own jazz series, making the Dixwell neighborhood once again hum with the innovative timbres of jazz.



Deborah Berke Partners' rendering of the NXTHVN complex

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