

New York Songlines

Jim Kearney Naureckas

Virtual Walking Tours of Manhattan Streets

Why Songlines?

The Aboriginal Australians were able to navigate across their harsh and unforgiving land by memorizing and following the Songlines - an intricate series of song cycles that identified the landmarks that one needed to pass to get where one needed to go. These songs described how the features of the land were created and named during the Dreamtime, the timeless era when the giants, heroes and monsters that serve as totems for the Aboriginal tribes walked the earth. By singing the songs in the proper order, the Aborigines could walk across their nation's vast deserts and always know where they were.

Far from aboriginal, most New Yorkers weren't even born here, and this overpopulated isle may seem like the opposite of Australia's trackless deserts. After a slight period of disorientation, we generally find our way around all right, whether we rely on street signs, subway maps or the taxi driver's orienteering skills. North of 14th Street and west of 6th Avenue, at least, the streets mainly run in straight lines and meet at right angles, and you can usually get where you're going just by following your feet.

But by relying on maps, signs and Manhattan's perpendicular geography, New Yorkers have given up something important: **a sense of place**. If you can get from your starting place to your destination without knowing anything about the points in between, chances are you won't pay much attention to them. And we do hurry about town without looking up, many of us, walking by the same buildings hundreds of times without noticing what they are or even what they look like.

Which is a shame, because New York has its own giants, heroes and monsters who left their marks and their names on the land around us. If we learn their stories which are written on our streets and avenues, we'll have a much better chance of knowing where we've been, and where we're going.

To this end I offer these as the **New York Songlines**. An oral culture uses song as the most efficient way to remember and transmit large amounts of information; the Web is our technological society's closest equivalent. Each Songline will follow a single pathway, whether it goes by one name or several; the streets go from river to river, while the avenues stop at 59th Street, which is my upper limit for the time being. I've long since gone beyond the parts of Manhattan with which I have any real personal knowledge, making tips from readers increasingly important.

Don't feel you need to travel in a straight line, however; at most intersections you can click on one of the arrows to turn the corner and explore a new Songline. Many of the addresses noted are simply the ordinary shops, restaurants and apartment buildings that you would pass if you were walking along a Manhattan street; you need not pay attention to them while looking for the exciting bits--unless you're the sort of person who has to look in every window that you pass.

New York City is constantly changing; don't be surprised if something mentioned here has become another ghost of Manhattan's past. But please let me know about any anachronisms you spot, as well as any New York lore you can add to the New York Songlines.

"I believe that anybody living anywhere upon the face of the globe, if they were to simply take the time and do the research, would find an incredible nest of wonders buried right where they were standing, right in their own backyard. I think that all too often, in the 21st Century, and throughout the 20th Century, we tend to spend our everyday existence walking along streets or driving along streets that we have no real understanding of, even if we see them everyday, and they just become fairly meaningless and bleak blocks of concrete, whereas, if you happen to know that such-and-such a poet was incarcerated inside an asylum upon this street or that such-and-such a murder happened here or that such-and-such a fabulous, legendary queen is buried in this vicinity: all of these little stories, it makes the places that we live much richer if we have a knowledge of these things. All of a sudden, you're not walking down mundane, dull, everyday streets anymore, you're walking down fabulous avenues full of wonderful ideas and incredible stories."

-Alan Moore, "Five Questions for Alan Moore"

"No matter how long you have been here, you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey's, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge.... You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now."

-Colson Whitehead, *The Colossus of New York*

Places to Start:

Times Square : Broadway and 42nd Street

New York Public Library : 5th Avenue and 42nd Street

Grand Central Terminal : Park Avenue and 42nd Street

Empire State Building : 5th Avenue and 34th Street

Macy's : Broadway and 34th Street

Madison Square Garden : 7th Avenue and 33rd Street

Madison Square Park : Madison and 26th Street

The Chelsea Hotel : 23rd Street

Ladies' Mile : 6th Avenue

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