Billy Holiday’s Legacy Walks the Halls of 55 Fifth Avenue

By Ingrid Mattson

Abstract:

I researched the brief window of time Columbia Records (then known as Columbia Phonograph) worked in my law school’s building and Billie Holiday recorded her first songs. Researching the history of a law school building is a simple task from a librarian’s perspective: navigating print and online access to collections, selecting the right time frames and keywords to search, and following different leads of who to contact at various departments are the basics of research. But navigating the moving target of people’s lives, corporate history, and social change can make the task more challenging.

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The site now known as 55 Fifth Avenue (home to Cardozo School of Law) was the birthplace of several truly remarkable cultural developments in New York City. As part of a conference highlighting Billy Holiday’s impact on music and issues of race in the United States, I dug into the history of the law school’s physical location and presented my research at the event *Billy Holiday’s Legacy Walks the Halls of 55 Fifth Avenue*, held online on February 22, 2021. The conference highlighted the fact that Billie Holiday’s first recorded performances were produced by John Hammond in our building. At the event, I addressed the site of the law school before the current building’s construction, Columbia Records’ time in the building, and the challenges researchers face when exploring these topics, even in an era when “everything is online.”

55 Fifth Pre-1911: The Lenox Mansion

Early in the twentieth century, New York City was rapidly changing. A July 2, 1911, *New York Times* article heralds what is now known as 55 Fifth Avenue as the bellwether sounding doom for lower Fifth Avenue homes. (Lower Fifth Avenue was described as Washington Square to Fourteenth Street.) The construction of the commercial building that now houses the law school, designed by the architectural partners Maynicke & Franke represented “the dreaded invasion of business” planted in the midst of a “district of old-fashioned homes…of such a select type as not to mar the atmosphere of quiet refinement characteristic of earlier days.”

Going back in time a bit, the present-day 55 Fifth Avenue was constructed on the site of the old Lenox mansion, which was home to James Lenox, a wealthy bachelor philanthropist who passed away in 1880. On his death, Mr. Lenox’s extraordinary book collection included the first Gutenberg Bible in existence in the United States and formed the nucleus of the New York Public Library holdings, while his mansion passed through several owners between 1880 and 1911. As another piece of music history, the mansion was the first site of the Institute of Musical Art from 1905–1910. You may know the Institute by its modern name: the Julliard School.

1911–1935: Commercial Enterprise at 55 Fifth

When the music school moved uptown, the building was sold to real estate developer Henry Corn, who demolished it and built the building that houses Cardozo School of Law today. Construction ran around $1.5 million dollars. The building was home to a number of companies in the 1920s including a few insurance companies, a furniture store, a restaurant on the ground floor, a number of publishing houses, and the Literary Guild, which celebrated a raging 300-person party with over five hours of dancing and a cake comprised of ten different varieties of pastry according to a *Standard Union* article from March 11, 1929. It was clearly a vibrant commercial space.

Advertisements in 1922 in the *New York Herald* and the *New York Tribune* show a listing to lease four floors in the building, each at approximately 18,000 square feet. But when this research project came to me, I wondered where, precisely, was Columbia (then known as Columbia Phonograph Company) located? It’s an 18-floor building, and the law school occupies the first-through-eleventh floors. I sincerely hoped to find Columbia occupied law school space, and I happily discovered this to be true.

New York has always been a city interested in real estate, and real estate notices were published with regularity even in the 1930s. According to a February 14, 1931, article from the *New York Tribune*, Columbia Phonograph Company leased two floors for $450,000 for 16 years. The *Tribune* notes the site was just blocks away from Thomas Edison’s former home. The *New York Times* reported the lease agreement as well, without the color commentary linking the past to the then-present, but specifying which floors were leased: the tenth and eleventh. At present, the tenth floor is home to the Dean’s Suite, faculty offices, and several administrative offices, while the eleventh floor is occupied by our Office of Career Services and our clinic suite.

Columbia’s time at 55 Fifth was very short-lived. By July 31, 1934, *Variety* was reporting that Columbia Phonograph Co., Inc., was acquired by Brunswick, and “as a first step in its Col acquisition,” Brunswick “endeavor[ed] to rid Col of its present lease at 55 Fifth avenue.”

Though brief, quite a lot happened in those three years. I was unable to find photographs of the recording space; the best I could find was a 1940 studio set-up with producer John Hammond standing by the piano. I’ve done a little consulting, mostly with my Senior Media Specialist and all-around A/V expert Chris Higgins who says the live room set-up in the photograph was likely similar to what was being used in the 1930s. Finding an engineering booth image from around that era was much trickier, in part because sound recording was still relatively new. Electrical sound recording using microphones began in 1925, and this process was likely used the entire time recording took place at 55 Fifth. (Magnetic tape recording (which predates digital recording) didn’t really take hold until around 1935.)

At the time Columbia Phonograph was at 55 Fifth, it also started manufacturing radios. From May 1932, I discovered consumers could consider a radio on “a sensible basis of tone---appearance---dependability---price.” H.E. Ward, then president of Columbia, was quoted stating “Our company enters the radio field in an enviable position. We have not a dollar in debts; we have cash on hand for effective operation, no plant and equipment to maintain, and no thought of mass production.” It’s not clear where those radios were produced, but conceivably since they were not mass produced, manufacture may have also been at 55 Fifth.

Getting back to recording, among those who recorded here, I found Gene Autry and Jimmy Long in October 1931 (on Perfect Records), Fletcher Henderson and his band in December 1932, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra in February 1933, Benny Goodman and his Orchestra with Billie Holiday in November and December 1933. Billie Holiday recorded two songs with Benny Goodman and his Orchestra in our law school: *Your Mother's Son-In-Law* and *Riffin’ the Scotch*, and *The New York Age* reported in its Talk of the Town section September 29, 1934, this brief note: “Billie Holiday is making records for Columbia.” The *New York Age*, founded in 1887, was the most prominent Black newspapers of its time.

I did a lot of searching to see if I could dig up old blueprints or permits for renovations around this time, and the best I was able to track down after lots of emailing back and forth with Amy Stecher at NYC Municipal Records, was architectural plans for the eleventh floor in the late 1940s. At the top left of the plans, the most notable information is that the reception area for businesses appeared to be located at the bank of elevators closest to our clinic suite at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Thirteenth street. These are not the bank of elevators most commonly used by our students today, so this configuration is particularly interesting. The elevators most typically used by Cardozo visitors today are described as freight elevators. You can see a number of spaces in the architectural plans, and we can only speculate about what the space looked like when Columbia was onsite.

To the right in the plans, on the east side of the building, you can see what is labeled as “Court,” which appears to be exterior space if you look at a Google satellite image of the building today. I tried valiantly to locate John Hammond discussing cigarette breaks in the courtyard hoping there was some trace of an outdoor space I could track down, but alas, we are limited to descriptions of sound at 55 Fifth and a visual record has eluded me.

A story John Hammond has told in a number of places goes like this:

“The recording industry was absolutely broke in the early 1930s. Columbia was in bankruptcy; it was owned by a company called Grigsby-Grunow . . . so poor old Columbia and OKeh were a bankrupt part of a bankrupt company, so there was no money for jazz at all. . . . I persuaded [Columbia] that they had to record Fletcher Henderson. . . . So at ten o’clock in the morning there were three people in the studio and by 12.35 John Kirby dragged his bass in and we had exactly 50 minutes to cut four sides and balance the band. This was the days of big waxes, so there was no way of editing it. ’New King Porter Stomp’ was just a run-through; there was no time to do a take. The band is very loose, and the whole thing was recorded on one microphone at a lousy studio at 55 Fifth Avenue.” This quote is drawn from *The Song of the Hawk: The Life and Recordings of Coleman Hawkins*. Mr. Hammond tells a similar story in *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music*.

By all accounts, this session, which John Hammond identifies as his first producing endeavor, “gives an impressive sound picture of the Henderson band at its relaxed best.” Even with a “lousy studio” exceptional talent and skill shine.

2020–2021: Reflections on Research

When I was a lawyer considering library school, Bob Menanteaux, one of my law librarians at Seattle University School of Law asked me whether we need librarians since everything is online. I don’t disagree that a lot of information exists online. But I’m not sure if you’ve noticed: it’s not terribly well organized. I’m grateful Bob posed the question as its come up a number of times during my career.

Most of my research was conducted with bits and pieces I found scattered across a strange collection of blog posts, websites, and licensed databases from the New York Public Library. This kind of information isn’t really indexed in newspapers. Keyword searches were the primary way I was able to track information down, but the databases where finicky. Sorting between 55 fifth Avenue, 55 5th Avenue, or describing the location as the northeast corner of 5th avenue and 12th street, all yielded different sets of search results (not to mention the challenges of deciding between Avenue and Ave. on platforms that don’t have root expanders). Similarly, searching “Billie Holiday” spelled with an “ie” versus a “y” produced different search results—and just try searching for her pre-1935 before she found commercial success. Columbia was variously referred to as Columbia Records, Columbia Phonograph, and Col. I did combination searches with architectural firm names, developers, and neighborhoods. And, despite extended off-site access to databases as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, there were still some databases I couldn’t access due to licensing restrictions and got to have a video conversation with a masked librarian sitting at the New York Public Library.

All the books written and all the ephemera on the internet require someone to have preserved, archived, or researched it, and that’s the role of librarians in a modern era. Other people spoke at the Billie Holiday event with me: filmmakers, a historian, archivists, and scholars, and I was struck by the importance of librarians for preserving history to facilitate future works of art, scholarship, and social change, and the ongoing need to promote what librarians do.