



NEW YORK VS. NEW YORK

New York City is a three hundred–square mile archipelago of islands and a bit of mainland on the Atlantic Ocean. Once a lush paradise where the Algonquian people lived, now a part of the northeastern United States, this megalopolis has been stiffened by over six thousand miles of street, twelve thousand miles of sidewalk, and one million buildings. Beneath all that concrete are thirty-six occasionally maddening subway lines, and between the buildings are over two hundred bus routes, and meanwhile six ferries travel along the rivers, all of which constitutes the country's largest public transit system, running every minute of every day, conveying the city's eight million residents and an inconstant flock of tourists among its five boroughs.

There is also a second New York, one even more capacious than those three hundred square miles. The second New York is the collective fantasy of New York, an imaginary place that remains mostly impervious to the changes occurring in the actual city. This is the New

York that serves as a backdrop to countless films and novels, and it's the place where people envision themselves living before they actually move there, and it's one of the reasons people stay when they have legitimate reasons to move elsewhere, and it's the New York a tourist hopes to find and take a selfie with, and it's the dream that the tourism industry intends to sell to them.

Within a single day in the city, the physical realities and costs of the actual New York will be pitted over and over against the unfettered possibilities of the imagined New York, a battle that may be won by either side at any given moment, though neither can ever subsume the other for good. The fantasy of New York gets better press, of course, though the reality of New York is the side cashing our ever-inflating rent checks. Other big cities have a similar duality, but I've yet to find the place where this dichotomy is quite as dramatic and dramatized and romanticized as it is here. Perhaps it has something to do with how many books, films, television shows, songs, photographs, and other works of art have been made about this dizzyingly complex place. To fully appreciate New York City, you must find the liminal spaces that exist between the fantastical and material visions of it.

NEW YORK AS MUSE

Of all the world's great and complex cities, New York is the most accustomed to being a muse. Her Central Park has become the most filmed location on the planet, and her skyline is one of the most immediately

recognizable, and she's served as a siren of seemingly infinite songs, and new ones are being written all the time. However, if you listen to enough songs about New York, you'll notice that many of them feature this tension between its imagined and actual versions. Songs about New York are usually a particular kind of love song—ballads laden with both heartbreak and thrall. Even diehard, lifelong New Yorkers who would never dream of living anywhere else sustain their devotion through bouts of exhaustion, loneliness, exasperation, and woe.

Plenty of books have also been written about New York and its various histories; there are thousands of approaches you might take to begin to understand the city. This book is meant to be part introduction for an outsider, part travel guide, part portraiture. Like many other writers from North America, I began my professional life in New York City by moving restlessly between neighborhoods for a decade, frustrated by the city's economic burdens but also mesmerized and inspired by its inhabitants. What sometimes felt like a failure to find a more permanent way of life ended up exposing me to dozens of ways of life, and introduced me to the close friends who keep me coming back quite often now that I live elsewhere.

I was told that the first two years in New York City are the hardest to endure, but for me they were simply the years most densely packed with learning the city's flows and fluctuations. Lucky and unlikely things

seemed to occur just as often as mundane, unlucky things. I made incredible friends and met atrocious people who tried to make my life hell. I made money and lost money. I hailed taxis to escape sudden rains-torms and missed the last train back to Brooklyn in the middle of the night. I did all the things that ordinary foolish people do when they move to Manhattan with scant savings and no trust fund and no job.

And, as with millions of others, New York City left a deep mark on my life, and as with all those other deeply marked people New York City is completely indifferent to our awe. You could say this is true of all cities, that

☞ **New York City is completely indifferent to our awe** ☞

all cities are impersonal because they are public spaces, designed to hold all who arrive, incapable of feeling anything in particu-

lar for whoever is there. I feel sure, however, that New York's insouciance is specific, even somehow intentional. Every inch of New York City is beloved, yet she is unconcerned with our love. And like all beloved things, New York City deserves a preponderance of portraits. Maybe that's why people can't stop writing ballads about the city; her nonchalance compels them. Perhaps what you're holding in your hands, then, is less a book than a song.

FRANK SINATRA'S NEW YORK

Frank Sinatra's recording of the classic jazz standard "New York, New York" has become so synonymous

with New York City that many fail to notice that it's actually about not the place itself but the fantasy of moving there. "Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today," he croons, singing as someone planning a relocation. "I'll make a brand-new start of it... in old New York!"

There's a manic swagger in the way Sinatra repeats "New York, New York," and "A-number one," and "top of the heap!" as though trying to psych himself up for something dangerous, something only the totally insane would attempt. And though these lyrics gave us the adage "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere," the *if* is perhaps the most weighted word in the cliché.

Since New York is a city of hustlers, and since the success of a select few New Yorkers is built on the back of so much failure and subjugation, Sinatra's "New York, New York" is actually, despite its bravado, a tragic story, the all-too-common arc of precarious ambition glistening with delusion before it meets the city's harsh facts. But the way reality and fantasy play off of one another in New York is crucial to understanding anything about its culture or history or inhabitants. This tension between fiction and truth is as present in a long life in New York as it is in a few days' vacation there.

LIZA MINELLI'S NEW YORK

The Sinatra recording of "New York, New York" has become so well known that it's easy to forget that

the song was originally written for Liza Minelli to perform as the theme to the Martin Scorsese film of the same name. The lyricist, Frank Ebb, indeed knew what it meant to work a variety of odd jobs before hitting it big as a songwriter, though he was a native New Yorker and never had any “little-town blues” to shake off. Minelli, though born in Los Angeles, could perhaps summon the outsider’s feeling of being seduced by Manhattan’s grandeur, but she was born into show business as the daughter of Judy Garland; she’d already hit it huge by 1977, when she made the recording.

Minelli’s version of the song is a bit sillier and softer than Sinatra’s. Her aspiring New Yorker sounds like she’ll have a good time regardless of whether she succeeds, while Sinatra’s voice is darkened with mafioso heaviness—he’ll make his dreams come true even if it means breaking someone’s legs. Perhaps it’s Sinatra’s type of swagger that makes and controls all the money in New York, but it’s Minelli’s kind of character that gives the city its striving buzz, its glitter, its value.

LIL’ KIM’S NEW YORK

Far from an idealizing jazz ode is “Lighters Up,” an instant classic by Brooklyn native Lil’ Kim. The song mourns friends who were shot dead in her neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, explains which blocks are unsafe at night, and describes police brutality with sobering frankness, but it’s still saturated with New-

York-or-nowhere attitude. Kim’s adolescence and young adulthood in the 1980s and ’90s coincided with a particularly violent era in the city’s history, though it’s currently one of the safest in the United States. However, no tragedy or hardship or cost of living could break Kim’s fidelity to her city and borough, “home of the greatest rappers”—a list on which she places herself second only to the Notorious B.I.G.

Entire books have been written about the deeply intertwined relationship between New York City and hip-hop, which is widely understood to have its origins in the early 1970s in The Bronx; nearly every rapper with a New York connection has released a song about their particular block or neighborhood, and nearly all those songs detail the intense dangers and daily costs of living there while also declaring an undying love for the place and its people. There it is again: this persistent sense of contradiction within a ferocious, compulsive love.

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THE MOST INESCAPABLE SONG ABOUT NEW YORK

The day the opportunity to write this book appeared, I was walking around the Doctores neighborhood of Mexico City when I heard Jay-Z’s and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind” twice, by chance—first as I

passed by a mechanic's garage, and fifteen minutes later from the window of a taxi. Over the last decade and a half, "Empire" has become the city's primary musical representative, the sonic equivalent of the skyline itself. The original version was composed by a team of two Brooklyn-born women who were missing the city while in London on a business trip; legend has it that Jay-Z's team originally passed on the song, but that a music executive brought it back to their attention several months later. A success story with a near miss—what could be more New York than that?

Fifteen years after its release, when I had a yearlong fellowship at the Bryant Park branch of the New York Public Library, I noticed that "Empire" was the go-to soundtrack for young men selling 360-degree selfies in Times Square, and the song most likely to be blasted by pedicab drivers ferrying tourists up and down Fifth Avenue. Jay-Z's and Alicia Keys's recording is a radio-friendly midpoint between a fantastical jazz standard like "New York, New York" and all the hip-hop tracks grounded in gritty reality, such as "Lighters Up." Keys's soaring vocals feel like a hymn for a romanticized (and sanitized) vision of New York, while Jay-Z's verses sell his rags-to-riches poster-boy story for the hundredth time. "Half of y'all won't make it," he reminds the listener, a gross overestimation of how many of us actually will.

For anyone who wasn't there to witness it, it's hard to overstate how wildly popular and ubiquitous this song

was from the very start. And why shouldn't it have been? It's a perfect storm of everything New York loves about itself, an ode to its perfections and imperfections, another peddling of the contradictory myth that anyone can hit it big here while almost no one will make it at all.

"Empire" first took over the radio in the autumn of 2009, as my two-year anniversary in the city came and went; naturally, I was thinking about leaving but didn't have anywhere else to go. In the chorus, Keys sings, "These streets will make you feel brand new / Big lights will inspire you"; subconsciously, I rewrote the lines as "These streets will make you feel brand new / Before they destroy you."

In fact, I didn't feel totally destroyed, but the relentless pace and high cost of living had roughed me up, and I knew they could do worse. I'd moved to Manhattan in 2007, thinking I'd get my master's degree and then go back to New Orleans, where I could probably beg my way back into my kitchen job and find an affordable apartment. But I'd quickly succumbed to the idea that living in New York ruins you for anywhere else.

☞ Living in
New York ruins you
for anywhere else ☞

Living in New York hadn't been a dream of mine as I grew up in Mississippi. When I moved there for graduate school, I was sure I'd remain indifferent to its charms, which was just as well since I couldn't

afford to stay long anyway. Two years later I'd lived in four different apartments, trying to find a balance between sensible rent and the hazards of the places I could afford—arduous commutes, dubious legality, plenteous roommates, even more plenteous mice, and so on. In those same two years I'd held a variety of jobs and gigs to earn money to pay for the privilege of putting up with these indignities, and though steady work and a livable living situation were nowhere in sight, and though I hated the long winters and almost never had time or money to take advantage of the city's nightlife or museums or theatre, I still wanted to stay, still felt more seduced by the city's fantasies and possibilities and people than discouraged by the actual experience of it. In my internal debate between the romanticized ideal of the city and its harsh reality, neither side could ever totally win.

PIZZA RAT AND OTHER MEMES

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the least appealing aspects of the city.

In 2015, a young man posted a video of a rat dragging a whole slice of pizza down some stairs to a subway platform,

launching a meme that would get covered in every major New York publication and inspire a popular

Halloween costume, magically transforming the city's rodent and litter problem into an advertisement for how wonderfully strange a life there can be.

In the years since *Pizza Rat*, several extremely popular Instagram accounts have sprung up to aggregate user-submitted videos and photos of similar only-in-New-York! moments. Most of them are of wild things happening in public as “real” New Yorkers blithely pass by: ignoring smoke and flames shooting up from a hole in the street, or rushing past someone in a crazy costume, or looking the other way while a man is walked down the street on a leash by a leather-clad woman (it happens more often than you'd think).

But just as often, these social media accounts depict truly disgusting or alarming things happening on a subway car or platform. A mysterious substance oozes from a wall, someone clips their toenails on their commute, a pigeon is trapped on a crowded train. In one video, which I first suspected to be AI-generated, a rather large snake slithers loose across the subway floor. (It's real.) Perhaps the most famous post of this variety is of a rat crawling on a rider who's fallen asleep. He wakes up, stands, and brushes the rodent off his chest with disquieting nonchalance.

Of course, there are the more charming videos, too. There's the huge dinner table full of casseroles overtaking a subway car on Thanksgiving Day, a meal apparently available to anyone who stumbles upon

it. There's the B train conductor with an incredible singing voice, giving a micro-concert from his window while the train idles. There are dozens of videos of people transporting large appliances or pieces of furniture by subway or bike or moped. There's plenty of documentation of puppies being carried in purses, and for some reason

☞ **For some reason I've seen more than one live duck in a clear backpack** ☞

I've seen more than one live duck in a clear backpack, and of course there are

all the charming cats on leashes or in carriers or running free in our corner bodegas, ostensibly to keep the rats and mice away.

But then there are the posts depicting violent, angry, or plainly psychopathic behavior. Terrifying altercations between drivers and bikers are a staple of these accounts; recently there was a video of a man throwing multiple pieces of furniture from the twentieth floor of a building in Midtown. The New York newspapers and magazines that covered the story were quick to point out that the man was from Florida.

One of my favorite such posts is a video of a young man yelling at the driver of an SUV. The driver doesn't even bother to lower his window, and the young man throws his Citibike in front of the SUV; it quickly runs over the bike, only for the young man to pick it up and safely ride away. It's an incredible advertisement for the durability of the city's popular

bike share system. (Having never used a Citibike, I'm in the minority. Everyone insists it's the new best way to get around town.)

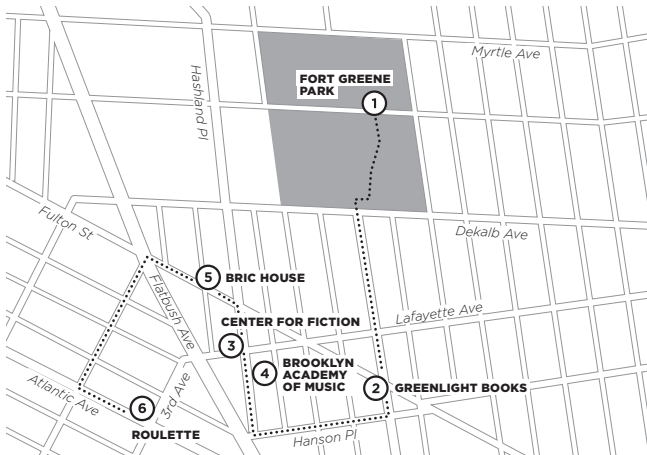
The photos and clips on these Instagram accounts might give the uninformed viewer the sense that New York City is a place of total madness and occasional danger. You'd think it would deter anyone considering a visit or relocation. But even the craziest posts are an homage, one of the many ways the dream of New York City subsumes the reality, again and again. The other effect of these accounts is that when something "New York" happens in public, it's often surrounded by people filming it, ready to DM their submission.



Five Itineraries

*Scan the QR code at the end of each route
to access the map on your phone.
(Google Maps required)*

1. Fall in Fort Greene



For the couple of years I lived a block away, I loved visiting **Fort Greene Park** after nine in the evening and before nine in the morning, when dog owners can let their pets off leash. I don't know whether or not there are more dog owners per capita in Fort Greene, but from the way the park sometimes looked during those hours it certainly seemed like the most dog-friendly neighborhood in the city. There are tons of places to get coffee around the park, so start your day there either in time to see a field full of frolicking dogs or just to take in the park itself, which was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who also designed Central Park and Prospect Park. Fall is the best time to see the changing leaves.

If you walk down South Portland Avenue away from the park, you'll eventually come to **Greenlight Books**, one of Brooklyn's busiest and most popular bookstores. It should be easy to lose track of an hour or so there, or at the still somewhat new location of **The Center for Fiction**, a literary nonprofit organization that has a bookstore, café, and plenty of literary events.

Fall is also high season for the performing arts, and Fort Greene is arguably Brooklyn's most cultural neighborhood, home to the **Brooklyn Academy of Music**, an epicenter for theatre, dance, music, and film. In operation since 1861, BAM has several stages clustered in three buildings on the western side of Fort Greene. Truly one of my favorite things to do in the

city is catch a film matinee at **BAM Rose Cinemas**, or just walk into whatever's playing on any of their stages. I always leave inspired.

If you can't get a ticket to something appealing at BAM, you could also try **BRIC House**, an art space that features rotating contemporary exhibits, performances, and even a nonprofit community TV channel. Or you could take a short walk into downtown Brooklyn to yet another incredible venue, **Roulette**. Founded in an attempt to bridge two sides of American avant-garde music (what co-founder Jim Staley has called "the two Johns: John Coltrane and John Cage"), Roulette has since expanded its programming to include a wider variety of musical and theatrical performance.

Between all the cultural events there are tons of options for lunch or dinner or cocktails, and if you find yourself out late enough you can always circle back to Fort Greene Park, where the dogs may be running loose again.

