



Rock the Bricks: Fillmore East/East Village Neighborhood - by Larry Ross

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In this month's column we look at legendary music venue the Fillmore East which was located at 105 Second Ave. and East 6th St., in Manhattan's East Village/Lower East Side Historic District. Known as the East coast version of San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium and Fillmore West, it opened in what was once a 1920's Yiddish vaudeville theater known as the Commodore. The area had been populated with independently owned and operated venues and was known as the Jewish theater district. It eventually became the Loews Commodore before converting to the "Village Theater," where from the early 1960's to 1967 there were burlesque shows and famous acts such as Cream and the Doors.

Fillmore East, past

Fillmore East, present

In 1968 music promoter Bill Graham took over the venue and turned it into the Fillmore East, often referred to as the “Church of Rock and Roll,” where multiple bands performed nightly to sold out crowds. Some notable acts that performed there include Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, the Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin, and many others. The hall was known for its excellent acoustics where many memorable live recordings were produced including the Allman Brothers Band Live at the Fillmore East.

The East Village, part of the Lower East Side, was originally occupied by the Lenape Native American Tribe and then the Dutch in the 17th century, who created large farms called “Boweries.” By the middle of 18th century there were wealthy estates located throughout the area. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries these estates gave way to a new street grid system, where Federal style rowhouses dotted the skyline. The neighborhood eventually became a gateway for immigrants from all over the world making it a true melting pot.

Tenement buildings are one of the most identifiable aspects of the area and made for some of the worst living conditions in New York in the late 19th century and early 1900s. The Garment Center also originated in this area where unsafe work conditions existed, leading to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire near Washington Square Park and the deaths of 146 workers. From the 1950s to the 1990s the East Village area began to take shape as beatniks, hippies, musicians, artists, and writers moved into the area. In order to disassociate from the image of poverty, the area sometimes referred to as Alphabet City, Little Ukraine and the Bowery, was given a new name by its residents called the East Village, which is now the heart of the underground culture in New York.

By 1971, after only three years, the Fillmore East closed its doors outliving its usefulness due to the large growth in the concert industry and the area having taken on a harder edge. Over the next several years various acts continued to perform there under the name Village East and the New Fillmore East. In the 1980s The Saint nightclub operated there, which eventually closed and became home to Apple Bank. As the area began to gentrify, the auditorium portion was demolished and replaced by an upscale apartment building now known as the Hudson East. The original frontage on Second Ave. remains intact.

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