

Drummers fight with new Harlem citizens

NEW YORK (AP) - On Saturday nights in summer, hundreds of fingers pound out mesmerizing rhythms on African drums — a ritual repeated for decades in Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park.

This year, the drums have a counterpoint: the complaints of "new Harlemites."

"African drumming is wonderful for the first four hours, but after that, it's pure, unadulterated noise.

We couldn't see straight anymore," said Beth Ross, who lives in a luxury apartment building near the park.

"It was like a huge boom box in the living room, the bedroom, the kitchen. You had no way to escape except to leave the apartment."

Ross's complaint is just the latest sign of conflict in Harlem, where upscale apartments and hotels are rapidly changing the face of a neighborhood long considered the heart of Black culture in America.

Central Harlem around Marcus Garvey Park is especially attractive, with its opulent brownstones and churches from the Gilded Age of the 19th century.

The park was formerly known as Mount Morris Park, the name given to it by developers in the 1800s, when the area was mostly White; that name is now often used by real estate agencies. The park was renamed in 1973 for the Harlem-based Black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, who had advocated Black ownership of Harlem.

The influx of outsiders intensified after the arrival six years ago of Harlem's most famous commercial tenant, former President Clinton, whose 125th Street office is a short walk from Marcus Garvey Park. He said then that he hoped his presence would encourage others to move to the neighborhood.

Longtime Harlem residents say that while his intentions were good, the "new Harlemites" are making changes that are destroying some of what's dearest to the Black community.

A community garden was bulldozed to make way for elegant new apartments — right next to the future Museum for African Art on Fifth Avenue. After 50 years in business, the soul food restaurant Copeland's closed in

July, a victim of what the owner called the neighborhood's changing demographics and food tastes.

"They call this the new Harlem Renaissance — bringing in people who are able to pay for these properties, who push out people who can't, like schoolteachers and municipal workers," said James David Manning, the 60-year-old Baptist pastor of the Atlah World Missionary Church, a block from the park.

The original "Harlem Renaissance" was a flowering of literature, art, theater and music during the 1920s and 1930s, when Black writers, artists and musicians became famous — from Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston to Josephine Baker and Duke Ellington.

In recent years, Manning said, "the community has been taken over by big business and banks, and deep-pocketed entrepreneurs. If we lose Harlem, we lose the flagship of African-American people worldwide."

Apartments are priced at \$400,000 to \$4 million in a condo complex set to go up on the south side of the park. About a fifth of its 26-story residential space is reserved for affordable rental apartments.

The drumming dispute erupted earlier this summer with complaints from residents of a new 23-unit co-op overlooking the north end of the park. Days later, the drummers reluctantly moved farther inside the park after a few of their representatives met with building residents and officials of the city parks department, which gave the drummers a permit for the summer.

Now, complains Agnes Johnson, a community activist and dance choreographer, "You can't hear the drummers or see them from the street. Try and find them now!"

To the drummers and their supporters, the Saturday-evening ritual that began in 1969 is part of their history and culture. "Some of these drums are prayed over, blessed in Africa," said Benjamin Thompson, a retired security guard who plays trumpet with the group.

Carl Alexander, 71, a retired teacher originally from Trinidad, has been drumming here for 34 years.

"People come and drum for spiritual reasons — and to get away from the hustle and bustle," he said.

Ross, an executive career coach who moved into the area a year ago, says she feels "honored" to be living in Harlem alongside longtime residents. "It is their community, their history," she said. But when it comes to their drumming location, she thought it was time to change.

"It's a matter of quality of life," she said.



Drummers who have met for decades in Marcus Garvey Park in the Harlem neighborhood of New York enjoy their Saturday night ritual. The sounds have upset some new to Harlem.



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