

Tin Pan Alley

47-55 West 28th Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 830 Lots 7-11

Built: c.1854-57

Architect: Not determined

Style: Italianate

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendaring as Individual
Landmarks, March 12, 2019



47-55 West 28th Street, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2019

Between 1893 and c.1910, West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue became home to a significant concentration of sheet music publishers in New York City, known ever since as “Tin Pan Alley”. These firms revolutionized the music publishing industry’s practices for the creation, promotion, and consumption of popular music. As music publishers began to congregate in the area, the name “Tin Pan Alley” was coined in 1903 to describe the racket of piano music audible on the block. The later grew to refer to the entire music production industry in America, and was the inspiration for the music studios of London’s Tin Pan Alley on Denmark Street from 1911-1992.

Music publishers sought offices close to theaters, hotels, music halls, and other venues to facilitate their collaboration with songwriters and song “pluggers,” musicians whose role was to promote and demonstrate new sheet music. Their move to Tin Pan Alley in the 1890s reflected the northwestern movement of the City’s entertainment district and the proliferation of entertainment venues near Madison Square Park, and for the first time music publishers were concentrated in a close cluster—highlighted by this iconic row—rather than in scattered offices.

The first music publisher to move to West 28th Street was M. Witmark & Sons, at 51 West 28th Street from 1893-97 and 49 West 28th Street from 1896-1897. M. Witmark & Sons originated the practice of giving free “professional copies” of music to well-known singers in an effort to market its songs, a practice so successful that almost all other music publishers in the area followed suit. Within months, other firms leased offices on the block, with a high of 38 publishes in 1907. In addition to hiring pluggers to demonstrate their songs in department stores, theaters, vaudeville halls, and other entertainment venues, firms like the Witmarks’ employed a technique known as “booming” to inflate the audience’s notion of a song’s popularity and to market a tune on its catchiness.

In the heart of the Tenderloin, Tin Pan Alley gave unprecedented opportunities to songwriters of color and of Eastern European Jewish descent. The first African-American owned and operated music publishing businesses in the United States had offices on this block; some of their songwriters deliberately tried to rework stereotypes which were popular in music of the time because of the influence of minstrel shows and American vaudeville.

The Tin Pan Alley era arose at a unique moment in the development of sound recording and playback technologies and a shift in in-home music culture. The sheet music produced on Tin Pan Alley was meant to be taken home for domestic piano performance and entertainment. Between 1901 and 1920, most American households began to own record players for the first time, and the new recordings were seen as a convenience over the time and expense of piano training. Sheet music sales peaked at two billion copies in 1910; by then, most of the music publishers in this area had followed the entertainment district to Madison and Times Squares, where larger, newer, and custom offices were able to accommodate their new in-house orchestras and recording spaces.

Nos. 47-55 West 28th Street were built in the 1850s as Italianate row houses, intact elements of which include bracketed cornices, fenestration patterns, and projecting stone lintels and sills. All of these structures underwent ground floor conversions to accommodate retail storefronts prior to or in the midst of the Tin Pan Alley era. Above these storefronts, these row houses retain much of their historic detail. Over a century since the music publishers moved away, they represent Tin Pan Alley’s significant contributions to musical history and American culture.

