

53 West 28th Street Building, Tin Pan Alley

53 West 28th Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 830 Lot 8

Built: c.1859

Architect: Linus Scudder

Style: Italianate

Action: Proposed for Commission's Calendar, March 12, 2019;

Public Hearing, April 30, 2019; Proposed for Designation, December 10, 2019



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

Between 1893 and about 1910, West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue became home to the most significant concentration of sheet music publishers then known in New York City. As publishers began to congregate in the area, the name “Tin Pan Alley” was coined c.1903 to evoke the racket of piano music audible on the block. Here, composers, arrangers, lyricists, promoters, performers, and printers came together as collaborative firms of sheet music publishers and made an indelible impact on practices for the creation, production and promotion of American popular music. As the office of numerous musicians and sheet music publishers in the 1890s-1900s, 53 West 28th Street represents Tin Pan Alley’s concentration of New York City’s influential popular music business in one location and its importance to American culture.

Tin Pan Alley arose at a unique technological moment before phonographs and records were affordable for most American families and when sheet music was the principal form of music distribution, the basis of much public performance, and the backbone of middle class in-home entertainment. Because most sheet music was meant to be taken home for performance on piano, the aim of publishers was to expose their music to masses of prospective purchasers to increase the likelihood of sheet music sales. A number of creative, lucrative, and sometimes devious business strategies arose on Tin Pan Alley; the shrewd business sense and insistent promotion tactics of Tin Pan Alley firms were essential to the era’s boom in sheet music sales and were a precursor to promotion and sales tactics that remain a feature of the popular music business.

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 in department stores, theaters, vaudeville halls, and other entertainment venues. 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. On Tin Pan Alley, music publishers were concentrated in a close cluster—highlighted in the iconic row at 47-55 West 28th Street—rather than more isolated offices for the first time in New York City. The intimate scale of Tin Pan Alley’s row houses made it possible for publishers to advertise their work to theater crowds and passersby on low-slung signage, made sheet music publishers’ offices accessible to creative hopefuls eager to capitalize on their talent, and made the sonic experience from which Tin Pan Alley took its name possible, with piano music audible on the street from the multiple offices in each modest structure.

Tin Pan Alley represents a number of milestones for the participation of African-American and Jewish artists in mainstream music production. It arose about a decade after immigration of Jewish refugees from persecution in Eastern Europe to New York City began in the early 1880s, and a notable proportion of Tin Pan Alley’s music publishers, songwriters, and pluggers were of German or Eastern European Jewish descent or were immigrants themselves. At the same time, significant numbers of African Americans began to migrate to New York City in search of work and opportunities unavailable in the Jim Crow-era South, and the prominence and valuation of African American creators’ contributions to the music business underwent significant growth on Tin Pan Alley.

A number of Tin Pan Alley’s ragtime publications were well-known hits that brought ragtime into countless homes through the dissemination of sheet music and were pivotal to its popularization as a genre. However, as relatives of musical forms which were popular in minstrel shows, some of Tin Pan Alley’s compositions were built on objectionable caricatures of African Americans in the tradition of

blackface performance. Their employment of slurs and caricatures reflects systemic racism in the post-Reconstruction era and a particular lineage of racist stereotypes in American entertainment. Some African American songwriters on West 28th Street deliberately tried to rework stereotypes that were popular in music of the time.

By 1910, with phonograph and record sales on the rise, almost all of Tin Pan Alley's music publishers had followed the entertainment district to Times Square, where larger, newer, and custom offices were able to accommodate their new in-house orchestras and recording spaces. The term "Tin Pan Alley" later grew to refer to the entire music production industry in America, and inspired the music studios of London's Tin Pan Alley on Denmark Street from 1911-1992.

53 West 28th Street was built c.1859 as an Italianate row house, intact elements of which include its bracketed cornice, fenestration pattern, and projecting stone lintels and sills. Like other structures on the block, it underwent a conversion to accommodate a retail storefront prior to the Tin Pan Alley era. Above its storefront, it retains much of its historic detail and its form and character reflect its appearance when numerous Tin Pan Alley sheet music publishers made their offices there in the 1890s-1900s. Along with the adjacent row at 47, 49, 51, and 55 West 28th Street, 53 West 28th Street represents Tin Pan Alley's significant contributions to American culture and popular music.



53 West 28th Street, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2019

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