

## **Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse**

Individual Landmark

206 West 118th Street

Designation Date: June 27, 2023



### **Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building**

**206 West 118<sup>th</sup> Street (aka 150-158 St. Nicholas Avenue**

**206-212 West 118<sup>th</sup> Street), Manhattan**

LPC Staff, June 2023

The Harlem nightclub Minton's Playhouse flourished in the Hotel Cecil for more than three decades in the middle of the 20th century. Famous for hosting important house bands, star headliners, and informal jam sessions, it was here that the pivotal jazz style known as "bebop" emerged in the 1940s, transforming American music. From this period forward, the hotel attracted many noteworthy guests, including leading jazz, blues, gospel, and soul performers.

Located at the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street, the Hotel Cecil was designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Julius F. Munckwicz and built in 1895-96. Operated as a residential hotel, this five-story, grayish buff brick structure offered furnished

apartment suites for long and short-term stays. From 1941 to 1961, it was listed in consecutive editions of the Negro Motorist Green Book, a guidebook that was popular with black travelers. Trumpeter Miles Davis remembered the Cecil as “first class ... the rates were reasonable, and the rooms were big and clean.”

Minton’s Playhouse opened in the hotel’s former dining room in 1938 or 1939. Named for the club’s owner, Henry Minton, it was managed until 1969 by Teddy Hill, who formed a house band in 1941 that included drummer Kenny Clarke and pianist Thelonious Monk. The house band played popular songs and accompanied guest singers and soloists, including such notable swing era musicians as Charlie Christian, Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Ben Webster. On Monday nights, when most Manhattan entertainment venues were closed, Minton’s held open jam sessions where such bebop innovators as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie could drop in and experiment. Gillespie remembered these performances as “wonderfully exciting” and as “seedbeds for our new, modern style of music.”

After World War II, bebop peaked in popularity and Minton’s was frequently credited for playing a significant role. Though leading critics like Ralph Ellison and Le Roi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) questioned the club’s singular importance, they did acknowledge Minton’s had been a “rendezvous for jazz musicians,” and that modern jazz had “probably” started here.” Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the club continued to present jazz, including groups led by, among others, Eddie Lockjaw Davis, Erroll Garner, Carmen McCrae, and George Benson.

Hotel Cecil was damaged by fire in 1974 and Minton’s Playhouse closed. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, the building was converted to supportive housing for homeless men and women in 1988. It is currently owned by the Harlem Community Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Empire State Development. The building contains approximately 89 residential units operated by the Cecil Housing Development Fund Corporation, as well as office and commercial space. The first floor of this sensitively refurbished late 19th century building is recently occupied by a jazz club/restaurant.

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