



100 BEST NYC SONGS

For as long as there's been a New York City, Gotham has inspired odes to its majesty and danger, its punk vitality and all-embracing spirit. Love it or hate it, if you're a musician living here, sooner or later you're going to write about it. We've sorted through all the tracks we could find that dealt with what it means to live in or visit New York (and omitted those that weren't explicitly about NYC) to create this list of the 100 best songs about the city we call home. Edited by **Steve Smith** and **Sharon Steel**

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- 95 The Moldy Peaches, "NYC's Like a Graveyard" (2001)
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- 71 ▶ Fear, "New York's All Right If You Like Saxophones" (1982)
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- 67 ▶▶ The Ramones, "53rd & 3rd" (1976)
- 66 Barry Manilow, "New York City Rhythm" (1975)
- 65 Glenn Miller and His Orchestra, "Pennsylvania 6-5000" (1940)
- 64 Village People, "Fire Island" (1977)
- 63 Suzanne Vega, "Anniversary" (2007)
- 62 Lord Tariq and Peter Gunz, "Deja Vu (Uptown Baby)" (1998)
- 61 Gil Scott-Heron, "New York Is Killing Me" (2010)

60 Run-D.M.C., "Christmas in Hollis" (1987) This track epitomizes that elusive rarity: an NYC hip-hop classic that also functions as a mood-setter. Over a horn-heavy strut that Rick Rubin lifted from Clarence Carter's suggestive "Back Door Santa," the affable old-school heroes spin a Queens-set holiday yarn featuring a rich Santa Claus, an "ill reindeer" and a soul-fool banquet. Local color is scarcer than you'd think, but Run-D.M.C.'s shout-out to the titular 'hood adds the perfect shot of giddy specificity. —*Hank Shteamer*

59 Steely Dan, "Daddy Don't Live in That New York City No More" (1975) Few songs illustrate the quicksand-like pull of the New York demimonde better than this wailing, super-polished blues-rock cut. It's one of the few Becker-Fagen numbers to actually namecheck the city, despite their shared area upbringing. Our narrator is an incorrigible slimeball, swearing that his hustling days are behind him and betraying himself with each denial. A stripper-pole grooves throbs in the background—a reminder that for the shadily inclined, NYC's tendency to never sleep is more curse than blessing. —*HS*

58 ▶ Kool G Rap and DJ Polo, "Streets of New York" (1990) The godfather of

mafioso rap, New York's Kool G Rap can spin crime yarns with the vividness of a Scorsese film. The Corona, Queens, native details a crack-era NYC that's so gritty ("Dope fiends are leaning for morphine / The TV screens follow the homicide scenes"), it's unrecognizable to anyone whose introduction to the city came after Giuliani. —*Jesse Serwer*

57 Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, "New York City Serenade" (1973) Few of the songs the New Jersey workingman's bard penned about New York City are this diffuse—directness would come much, much later. But Springsteen's cinematically epic thunder, which would flower two years later on *Born to Run*, is evident in this wordy, string-enriched ballad from his early Waits-ish troubadour period. "Serenade" is part of an album filled with NYC nods, improbably issued on September 11. —*Steve Smith*

56 Laura Nyro, "New York Tendaberry" (1969) On the stark title track of Nyro's third album, the singer-songwriter offers a dark hymn of urban self-renewal. Accompanying herself on piano, she begins in a bleak space ("the past is a blue note inside me"), but builds to an impassioned swell: "Sidewalk and pigeon / You look like a city / But you feel like religion to me." —*Adam Feldman*

55 Nina Hagen, "New York / N.Y." (1983) With her glistening sheen of new-wave war paint and her fluorescent Tesla-coil mane—not to mention that voice, which could veer from a guttural growl to a faux-Wagnerian shriek in a heartbeat—the East Germany-born Nina Hagen's '80s output was probably a bit more pop-goth than pop-Gotham. But in 1983, this postdisco ode to NYC's downtown nightlife (sample lyric: "Shaking our hair to the disco rap / AM/PM, Pyramid, Roxy, Mudd Club, Danceteria") was close to inescapable on the city's underground dance floors. —*Bruce Tantum*

54 Boogie Down Productions, "South Bronx" (1986) MC Shan's "The Bridge" (see below) irked KRS-One so much that he made two classic responses to it on Boogie Down Productions' debut album, *Criminal Minded*: "The Bridge Is Over" and "South Bronx." The latter, with its unforgettable call-and-response hook ("The South Bronx, the South-South Bronx!"), still stands as one of the borough's signature anthems more than a quarter of a century later. —*JS*

53 MC Shan and Marley Marl, "The Bridge" (1986) When MC Shan told the story of "how it all got started way back when," the Queensbridge rapper fired the opening salvo in what's known



PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/CORBIS

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in hip-hop lore as the “Bridge Wars.” After Boogie Down Productions leader KRS-One misinterpreted the song’s sentiment as an affront to the Bronx’s hip-hop sovereignty, a years-long volley of battle raps between BDP and Shan’s Juice Crew followed. But no dis track could subdue the raw power of Shan’s distorted delivery and Marley Marl’s monstrous beat.—JS

52 ▶ The Magnetic Fields, “The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side” (1999) This swinging love song by Stephin Merritt is about an ugly dude who has some fugly wheels—but hey, at least he’s got wheels. The tone is pure Magnetic Fields: sweet tempo, self-deprecation and a dash of nervy wit that is unique to Merritt. He may have left us for Los Angeles, but the attitude on this track is all Gotham.—Sharon Steel

51 ▶ Andrew W.K., “I Love NYC” (2001) Look past the fist-pumping refrain and E Street Band–goes-techno overture and what you’ve got is a pop puzzler that could have sprung only from the mind of Andrew Wilkes Krier. One listen to that guitar-synth blast, and it’s clear that W.K.’s love for his adopted hometown borders on religious zeal.—HS

50 Bill Withers, “Harlem” (1971) Withers was an unlikely troubadour who sang about daily life, and “Harlem”—though overshadowed by hits like “Lean on Me”—is a mellow, groovy, heartfelt R&B gem. Complete with acoustic guitar riffs, insistent percussion and a wizened voice imparting urban poetry, it’s an ideally heavy soundtrack to summer in NYC.—Marley Lynch

49 Odyssey, “Native New Yorker” (1977) Sure, punk and No Wave might have the mythos; but really, the sound of New York’s clubland in the late ’70s was disco. And there are few songs more disco than the lush “Native New Yorker,” a cut that pairs Odyssey’s singing Lopez sisters with a swarm of swing-band horns and what just might be the biggest string section in the genre’s history. Lyrically, the song is almost trite—it’s about acting on your dreams before you lose them—but when that chorus kicks in to remind you that you’re from the



greatest city in the world, it’s goose-bump time.—BT

48 Jay-Z with the Notorious B.I.G., “Brooklyn’s Finest” (1996) “Jay-Z and Biggie Smalls, nigga shit your drawers.” The chemistry was always thick whenever former George Westinghouse High School students Jay-Z and Biggie teamed up. With its roll call of Brooklyn neighborhoods (if yours made the cut, it had street cred back in ’96), this track from Jigga’s *Reasonable Doubt* stands as their definitive collaboration.—JS

47 ▶ Jeffrey and Jack Lewis, “Williamsburg Will Oldham Horror” (2005) In this track, local antifolk hero Jeffrey Lewis uses a Bonnie “Prince” Billy sighting on the L train as an excuse to obsessively dissect the petty insecurity that plagues aspirants in the Grand Prix of Brooklyn cool. If you can’t relate even a wee bit to a characterization like “Hapless in our hipness / Crowded five to an apartment,” consider yourself very, very lucky.—HS

46 Tom Browne, “Funkin’ for Jamaica (N.Y.)” (1980) Though rarely celebrated, Jamaica, Queens, has been one of the city’s black-music hotbeds since jazz greats like

Fats Waller and Count Basie bought houses in the area in the ’30s and ’40s. Trumpeter Tom Browne finally gave the ’hood its theme song with this 1980 tribute, which boasts contributions from fellow “Jamaica Kats” such as bass legend Marcus Miller and keyboardist Bernard Wright.—JS

45 Ace Frehley, “New York Groove” (1978) The sole breakout hit from the matched set of Kiss solo albums unleashed in 1978, this Ace Frehley single didn’t sound like the tunes the Spaceman had previously penned for the band. And for good reason: He didn’t write it. U.K. keyboardist Russ Ballard wrote “New York Groove” in 1975, when it provided a minor hit for English glam band Hello. Frehley’s take was allegedly inspired by Times Square hookers, which sheds light on drummer Anton Fig’s crunching-footsteps beat.—Steve Smith

44 Bob & Earl, “Harlem Shuffle” (1963) One of the most brilliant soul 45s of all time, this dance-floor mainstay hit the airwaves in 1963. The song animated the still-segregated black clubs and the radios of white America alike, pulling in listeners intrigued by this so-called race

music. Though it was covered by a little band called the Rolling Stones in ’86 and sampled in House of Pain’s party-starting anthem “Jump Around,” the cut remains rooted in the hip- and shoulder-shaking that emerged in Harlem Renaissance ballrooms.—ML

43 Original studio cast (On the Town), “New York, New York” (1960) Written for the 1944 musical *On the Town*, this zippy bolt of tourist elation was sung by a trio of sailors on shore leave in a “helluva town” (lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green had to change that to “wonderful town” in the 1949 film). Fresh off the boat and goosed by the fanfares of Leonard Bernstein’s brass, they’re literally leaping at the chance to explore it.—AF

42 Interpol, “NYC” (2002) In 2002, Interpol offered the soundtrack to the mopey side of New York. A dark counterbalance to the buoyant energy of the Strokes, Interpol wore smart suits and disaffected expressions. The band played melancholy hooks as singer Paul Banks sighed lines like, “The subway is a porno.” We’ve all had days like that, Paul.—Sophie Harris

41 Nat King Cole, “Harlem Blues” (1958) Leave it to this urbane crooner to make a lovelorn lament sound like a sepia-tinted tour through old Harlem. There’s a breezy postcard quality to Cole’s nostalgic urban sketch—“Since my sweetie left me, Harlem ain’t the same old place / Though a thousand flappers smile right in my face”—more emblematic of hoary clichés about ’20s uptown life than of how anyone actually lived. But that’s part of the point: Nelson Riddle’s swaggering arrangement is a reminder that over the years, romantic notions of NYC have come to feel as vivid as the place itself.—HS

40 Alice Cooper, “Big Apple Dreamin’ (Hippo)” (1973) The band known as Alice Cooper had three smash records to its name by ’73, so this song’s titular reverie feels more like a Broadway-style fantasy of hitting it big than a real-life dream. What does ring true is the track’s pervasive sleaze: Vincent Furnier embodies one of a pair of (male?) prostitutes transfixed by the promise of sin dens that “never close.” Few paeans better capture the city’s salacious promise than the double entendre in this refrain: “New York is waiting / For you and me, baby / Waiting to swallow us down.”—HS

39 The Rolling Stones, “Shattered” (1978) The iconic English rockers had a notorious love-hate relationship with the States, especially NYC. That ambivalence is conveyed nowhere better than in this song, which Mick Jagger reportedly wrote in the back of a yellow cab. It’s a sleazy punk track about the grime that was rife in ’70s New York: the trash, the greed, the sex, the despair. Shadooobie!—ML

38 The Avett Brothers, “I and Love and You” (2009) There is nothing quite as sweet as returning to New York—not least if you’ve had a rough old time of it while you were away. This song starts out plain ol’ sad: “Load the car and write the note,” but finds its release at its chorus: “Ah Brooklyn, Brooklyn, take me in! Are you aware the shape I’m in?” Probably the best thing about New York’s lived-in shabbiness is the fact that it accepts everyone, frayed edges and all.—SH

37 Bruce Springsteen, “The Rising” (2002) That the Boss would dig deep to frame his response to the 9/11 attacks was no surprise. This song—the title track from his chart-topping 2002 LP—was the anthem that New York and the nation seemed to need. Starting from the perspective of a fireman climbing the stairs inside one of the burning towers, Springsteen waxes bardic and biblical to evoke a sense of everyman resolve and redemption. From an artist once known for bombast, the austerity of this track speaks volumes.—Steve Smith

36 The Strokes, “New York City Cops” (2001, UK only) Julian Casablancas’s chronicle of a strange booze- and rock & roll-fueled evening spent on “the streets of American nights” involves a girl named Nina, the desire to get the hell out of New York and a bunch of dumb police officers. It may not have been the most memorable flip-off from the winners of the Sonic Hipster Pageant circa 2001, but it’s still one of our favorites.—Sharon Steel

35 The Bee Gees, “Stayin’ Alive” (1977) Just try to imagine John Travolta’s iconic strut down the streets of Brooklyn at the start of *Saturday Night Fever* without hearing this disco classic thumping behind him. As Barry Gibb’s falsetto vocals alternate between cockiness (“Got the wings of heaven on my shoes”) and desperation (“Life going nowhere, somebody help me”), the song taps into both the pride and the anxiety of urban survival.—AF

34 Tom Waits, “Downtown Train” (1985) Rod Stewart’s cover version was a hit in 1989, but the throaty grit of Tom Waits’s original cut adds layers to his portrait of romantic obsession in a world of grimy anonymity. Is the contemptuous narrator a soulful dreamer? A muttering stalker? Both? You never quite know who might be hanging his or her hopes on the subway strap next to yours.—AF

33 Bob Dylan, “Talkin’ New York” (1962) If the bumpkinism the former Robert Zimmerman affects on this early-career classic was a pose, it was a thoroughly convincing one; few songs have better conveyed the

The kings of New York

New York City’s music royalty comprises a select group of songwriters—who have penned not just one but several audio love letters to the city we call home. The Hotel Chelsea of Leonard Cohen and the Greenwich Village of Bob Dylan are immortal reference points, but it started much earlier: It’s impossible to imagine the booming 1920s without

shock of NYC modernity. After chronicling a “rockin, reelin’, rollin’” subway ride, the wide-eyed hayseed from Hibbing, Minnesota, arrives at the clincher: a phonetic name check of the ’hood that would make him famous, “Greenwich Village.”—HS

32 ▶ Ella Fitzgerald, “Manhattan” (1957) The Great American Songbook team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart had its first hit with this adorably clever 1925 ode to urban staycations, which finds gentle romance amid the bustle of city life: the “balmy breezes” of the subway, the “sweet pushcarts gently gliding by” on Mott Street. In her 1956 account, Ella wears the song’s wit on her sleeve like a charm bracelet.—AF

31 James Cagney, “Give My Regards to Broadway” (1942) A master of infectious pop Americana (his other hits include “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “The Yankee Doodle Boy”), George M. Cohan wrote this cheerful ditty for the 1904 musical *Little Johnny Jones*. It has been stuck deep in the country’s head ever since, boosted by James Cagney’s memorable celluloid turn as Cohan himself in biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. Broadway’s regard for Cohan remains clear: A statue of the seminal songwriter and entertainer has pride of place in Times Square today.—AF

30 Bobby Womack, “Across 110th Street” (1972) The genius of this funk-soul marvel lies in the way it captures the Greek-tragedy-caliber pathos of

Rhapsody in Blue, 26-year-old George Gershwin’s portrait of rising skyscrapers and bright horizons, when New York became the most populous urban area in the world. In the ’30s and ’40s, jazz musicians including Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington carried the city—and country—through the struggles of the Great Depression and WWII. The freewheeling 1960s would be hardly as romantic if not for the politically conscious songs that came out of the Village folk scene. Tunesmiths like Simon &

ghetto life, portraying both the pimps and junkies and the up-and-comers desperately seeking a way out. Penned for a blaxploitation film of the same name, the song portrays Harlem as the ultimate crucible: “You don’t know what you’ll do until you’re put under pressure,” croons Womack, who grew up in Cleveland and clearly knows a thing or two about urban poverty. “Across 110th Street is a hell of a tester.”—SH

29 Jennifer Lopez, “Jenny from the Block” (2002) In this 2002 chart-topper, J. Lo insists that even though she’s now a superstar, she hasn’t forgotten her Bronx roots. This was close to the beginning of her stardom; since then she’s racked up sales of more than 55 million albums, plus awards for acting ventures. “Used to have a little, now I have a lot,” she insists. Whether she’s still Jenny from the block is questionable; the track’s catchiness is not.—ML

28 ▶ Suzanne Vega, “Tom’s Diner” (1987) The original version of Suzanne Vega’s stark, unaccompanied melody sounded like antifolk before there was antifolk; by contrast, the big-hitting version that blared out of

Garfunkel explored the quieter, interior world of that decade. Simultaneously, the Velvet Underground dug into the late-’60s seamy underground. In the mid-’70s, with the city near bankrupt and in decline, the ascent of punk rock and hip-hop added fresh rebellious voices to the landscape. The Ramones and the New York Dolls reveled in the grime of downtown Manhattan, while outer-borough artists like Grandmaster Flash created dance music that resonated beyond a rarefied disco club. Throughout the ’80s and ’90s,

cars and Walkman earphones for most of 1990 was remixed by DNA, refurbished with a Soul II Soul beat. Yet the essence of its story held fast—a girl sits in a diner, reads the paper, watches customers and drifts occasionally (“I am... thinking of your voice”). Just as the song is specific but endlessly remixable (as 1991’s *Tom’s Album* attested), so too Tom’s Restaurant, a real eatery in Morningside Heights, could be anywhere.—SH

27 Simon & Garfunkel, “The Only Living Boy in New York” (1970) After Art Garfunkel ditched a planned songwriting session for a trip to Mexico, Paul Simon penned this veiled sonic fuck-you to his partner. In it, he sings of a special kind of loneliness known to New Yorkers, who often wonder why it doesn’t seem like there’s anything to do in the city where the options are limitless. But the key lyric is the song title itself, which speaks to the idea of being the only one who’s truly alive in a city of 8 million anonymous souls.—Sharon Steel

rappers—namely Wu-Tang Clan, the Notorious B.I.G. and LL Cool J—made tracks about NYC street life nationwide anthems. After 9/11, songs by Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen and Ryan Adams rallied the city, reminding us why we’re proud to live and work here. The current king of New York, Jay-Z, has the rare ability to embody our moment: successful and polished, with the desire to reach back to those scrappier salad days, nostalgic while looking forward.—Andrew Friscano

26 Elton John, “Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters” (1972) “Now I know that rose trees never grow in New York City,” sings John in the first verse of this disillusioned song from his *Honky Château* album. (Bernie Taupin’s lyric riffs on a line from Ben E. King’s “Spanish Harlem.”) But despite his anger at the Big Apple’s benighted upper classes—inscrutable and crazy as the figures in the title—he the soldiers on with the faith that if he goes his own way, “[his] own seeds shall be sown.”—AF

25 Stevie Wonder, “Living for the City” (1973) Yes, Stevie Wonder hailed from Detroit; yes, the protagonist of this urgent *Innervisions* track is from small-town Mississippi. But listen past the first fade to the dramatic interlude at the track’s heart, and you’ll hear the tale of a wide-eyed new arrival in NYC stung immediately as a drug mule and tossed in the can for a decade. The anger in Wonder’s voice is genuine, fueled by social injustice and by his collaborators, who forced take after take of the song just to piss him off for effect.—Steve Smith



Andrew W.K., “I Love NYC”

24 Ryan Adams, "My Blue Manhattan" (2004)

There's another Ryan Adams song further up our list (don't peek!), but we had to find a place for the prolific songwriter's two-and-a-half-minute confection "My Blue Manhattan" in the upper climes of our tally. Written long before Mandy Moore sweetened his perennially salty view on life, this piano-driven song about first snowfalls and boning the wrong people is clipped, classic Adams—and totally New York, which is exactly why we love it so much.—Sharon Steel

23 Lou Reed, "Halloween Parade" (1989)

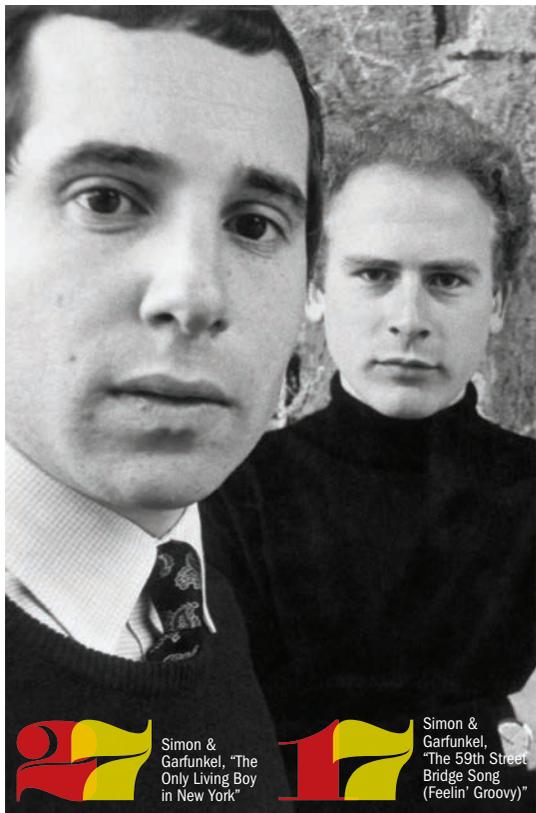
Ever on the lookout for another aspect of the NYC fringe to immortalize, Lou Reed hit pay dirt when he zoomed in on the West Village's annual queer-friendly costume bonanza. In his inimitable offhand style, he delivers both vivid reportage and a lament for a generation ravaged by AIDS. Reed never names the disease; instead, he catalogs the characters he misses ("There ain't no hairy and no Virgin Mary / You won't hear those voices again") and gives himself a pep talk, exhibiting the resilience cultivated by every self-respecting New Yorker.—HS

22 New York Dolls, "Subway Train" (1973)

Country bluesmen couldn't get their minds off the railroad; in this Stony glam classic, David Johansen transposes that sentiment to seedy early-'70s NYC. He's lovesick, you see—smitten with a hooker who has to "get on back to Daddy"—and he finds solace in riding the subway incessantly and aimlessly, to the point that the conductor "thinks [he's] gone insane." Johnny Thunders's lead guitar blares like a train whistle, completing this quintessential ode to being bummed out in the Big Apple.—HS

21 Nas, "N.Y. State of Mind" (1994)

This sinister, piano-driven track introduced the world to the studied, Dickensian style of street reportage that would become Nas's trademark, all but transporting listeners to the street corners of his native Queensbridge, while offering one of the rap legend's most famed lines: "I never sleep 'cause sleep is the cousin of death."—JS



27 Simon & Garfunkel, "The Only Living Boy in New York"

27 Simon & Garfunkel, "The Only Living Boy in New York"

17 Simon & Garfunkel, "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)"

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20 The Ramones, "Rockaway Beach" (1977)

Penned by Dee Dee Ramone (reportedly the only beachgoing member of this pasty Queens punk band), "Rockaway Beach" not only celebrates the South Shore strand known as the "Irish Riviera," but makes the destination sound more appealing than it actually is. The highest-charting single of the Ramones' career, this bubblegum masterpiece peaked at No. 66 on *Billboard's* Hot 100. For locals during a hot summer, it's No. 1 with a bullet.—Steve Smith

19 Billy Joel, "New York State of Mind" (1976)

"Some folks like to get

away, take a holiday from the neighborhood"—but not Billy Joel, whose soulful neostandard extols the comforts of being home in New York, even in a somewhat melancholic mood. "It comes down to reality, and it's fine with me 'cause I've let it slide," he sings; the song's jazzy piano and saxophone lines are not carefree so much as stubbornly injured to care.—AF

18 Vampire Weekend, "M79" (2008)

This gem from VW's breakout debut portrays a crosstown bus ride as an opportunity for bittersweet reverie, complete with string and harpsichord accompaniment that makes you feel like the star of your

very own Wes Anderson flick. The song conjures the world of a bookish, self-absorbed Columbia-ite in just a few choice phrases: "I'll ride across the park / Backseat on the 79 / Wasted days / You've come to pass." In keeping with its higher-educated, neopreppy provenance, the song cul-de-sacs in a series of cryptic references.—HS

17 Simon & Garfunkel, "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)" (1966)

Most of the time, New Yorkers operate under the assumption that feelin' groovy is best achieved by rushing through everything and subdividing their lives into a series of iPhone reminders. Here, Simon & Garfunkel tap us on the shoulder and tell us to take in the view, look for some fun and just chill. "Life, I love you," Simon croons. We're pretty sure he also means NYC.—Sharon Steel

16 Joni Mitchell, "Chelsea Morning" (1969)

Mitchell's tune was eclipsed in commercial success by Judy Collins's version, but the singer's own recording, in which she happily recounts the joys of waking up in her picturesque room in the Chelsea Hotel, grips us hardest. A gray Manhattan morning is dappled in exuberant hippie-commune sunlight after Joni's through with it. Homegirl didn't need a triple shot of espresso, five cigarettes and a scroll through Facebook status updates—just some oranges in a bowl, rainbows on the wall and a sun show peeking through her yellow curtains.—Sharon Steel

15 LL Cool J, "Doin' It" (1996)

As far as filth goes, "Doin' It" sounds every bit as naughty as Khia's "My Neck, My Back (Lick It)"—

just without the explicit lyrics. That's thanks in no small part to lady rapper LeShaun, who murmurs its restless hook ("Doin' it an' doin' it an' doin' it well"). That LL Cool J responds with a firm, manly rejoinder ("I represent Queens, she was raised out in Brooklyn") only adds fuel to the fire. Fittingly, LeShaun does not appear in the video, because she was pregnant at the time.—SH

14 George Benson, "On Broadway" (1978)

It's hard to imagine that "On Broadway" wouldn't be a smash hit, given that the song was the work of not just one, but two legendary songwriting teams: Mann-Weil and Leiber-Stoller. The Drifters, for whom the final version of the track was written, had a Top 10 hit with it in 1963; myriad covers followed, and both David Bowie and Genesis quoted a lick. But it's hard to imagine a version that better captures the song's aspirational moxie—or its six-string braggadocio—than George Benson's smooth-sailing, chart-topping live take.—Steve Smith

13 The Velvet Underground, "I'm Waiting for the Man" (1967)

Like many of the Velvets' songs that focus on New York City's dark underbelly, "I'm Waiting for the Man" is supposedly based on fact. Legendary downtowner Lou Reed wrote this gritty track about scoring heroin for \$26 at a Harlem brownstone—which he claims is a true story, aside from the price he paid. The song addresses the daily issues of addiction—traveling to a sketchy neighborhood, impatiently waiting for the dealer and coping with an angry girlfriend. Even the frantic drumbeat reflects a junkie's anxiety.—ML

Area songs

New Yorkers are fiercely devoted to their city, as anyone who's debated the merits of Brooklyn over Manhattan will tell you. And hometown pride has inspired some of the most memorable tunes penned about NYC. The best of these are transporting: The Ramones' "Rockaway Beach," an ode to the sandy strip in the band's native

Queens, calls to mind the thrill of escaping the sweltering streets during the summer, both lyrically and through its punk take on surf rock. The Dictators' "Avenue A," meanwhile, laments the changes that took place in the punk group's home turf of the East Village from the late '70s to today; "It's not who you know / It's who you pay / Down on Avenue A" offers a takedown of the corporatization of the once-bohemian stomping ground.

Musicians also namecheck their neighborhoods in order to establish their New Yorker bona fides, or to prove that—despite fame, fortune and, in all likelihood, having left those communities behind—they still remember their roots. In "Brooklyn's Finest," two Kings County titans—Jay-Z and the Notorious B.I.G.—call out a slew of borough spots, including Crown Heights, Brownsville and Red Hook. Ten years earlier, Boogie Down Productions'

"South Bronx" established that borough's hip-hop dominance, referencing "a kid named Flash" (that would be Grandmaster) and Scott La Rock. KRS's Boogie Down Productions partner in crime, as progenitors of the genre. And even that was a response to MC Shan's "The Bridge," which claimed that hip-hop "all got started" in Queensbridge. It just goes to show: For New Yorkers, the neighborhood you come from means everything.—Amy Platt

12 Duke Ellington Orchestra, "Take the 'A' Train" (1941)

In 1939, Duke Ellington tapped Billy Strayhorn as his new right-hand man and sent for the pianist-composer, then living in Pittsburgh. Ellington's instructions said to hop on the A, bound for Harlem, and Strayhorn was off—both creatively and careerwise. The lyrics, added later, spelled out the sentiment—"Hurry, get on now / It's coming / Listen to those rails a-thrumming"—but Strayhorn's brass-festooned original achieves the same effect: a musical depiction of a rising star getting his shot at the glitzy big time.—*HS*

11 Wu-Tang Clan, "C.R.E.A.M." (1993)

More than a hot cut from a landmark debut album, this track—the title of which stands for "cash rules everything around me," chanted by Method Man in each chorus—helped to forge the Shaolin mythos at the heart of the Wu-Tang empire. Verses spat in turn by Raekwon and Inspectah Deck paint a gritty portrait of urban survival over an eerie piano-and-organ backdrop that circles endlessly and aimlessly.—*Steve Smith*

10 Leonard Cohen, "Chelsea Hotel No. 2" (1974)

Cohen's disarmingly tender reference to a blow job from Janis Joplin still shocks, but that's not what makes this song such an enduring portrait of NYC bohemia. When he sings, "Those were the reasons / And that was New York / We were ravin' for the money and the flesh," he doesn't come off as a perv so much as a sad, old poet, memorializing his own bygone wild days and the ones who didn't make it through theirs. If the Chelsea Hotel still retains any of its heady cachet (which was later unpacked with wry brilliance by Jeffrey Lewis in "The Chelsea Hotel Oral Sex Song"), we have this magical ballad to thank.—*HS*

9 Ryan Adams, "New York, New York" (2001)

Modern-day balladeer Ryan Adams shot the devastatingly gorgeous video for this New York City hymn of praise against a backdrop that would change forever just four days later, when the Twin Towers were destroyed. The



48 Jay-Z with the Notorious B.I.G., "Brooklyn's Finest"

1 Jay-Z with Alicia Keys, "Empire State of Mind"

Grammy-nominated single from his excellent *Gold* album remains a fierce declaration of love, as well as a courageous rallying cry from a city recovering from loss and pain.—*ML*

8 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message" (1982)

Hip-hop existed before this breakthrough single dropped; still, with unprecedented prominence given to Grandmaster Flash's harrowing narrative over the Furious Five's slow groove, "The Message" arguably marks the birth of rap as we know it. The clear-eyed and explicit lyrics still pack a punch; in the repeated line "Don't push me / Cause I'm close to the edge," you can sense the desperation of a neighborhood, a culture and a generation.—*Steve Smith*

7 Leonard Bernstein with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, Rhapsody in Blue (1959)

George Gershwin was just 25 years old when he wrote this genre-bending composition for piano and jazz orchestra in

1924. A sublime collage of melodies and rhythms, the piece conjures the throb and clang of Jazz Age urban life so evocatively that it has become an aural signifier for New York City itself. The piece was notably used in the opening montage of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and in the Hirschfeld-inspired sequence in Disney's *Fantasia 2000*.—*AF*

6 Lou Reed, "Walk on the Wild Side" (1972)

This deathless Lou Reed cut paints a wise, sympathetic portrait of the misfits, hustlers and junkies drawn like flies to New York City, where every outsider can find a sliver of acceptance, if not outright redemption. Even the track's signature sound—tubby acoustic bass tangled with slinky, fretless electric—was a hustle: In a 2005 interview, session player Herbie Flowers (who played both instruments) claimed he was just trying to make twice the cash.—*Steve Smith*

5 Billie Holiday, "Autumn in New York" (1952)

The bruised optimism of Vernon

Duke's much-covered 1934 jazz standard—which allows that a New York autumn is "often mingled with pain," but insists that "it's good to live it again"—found its perfect expression in Billie Holiday's yearning version with pianist Oscar Peterson. Duke's moody music and poetic lyrics ("Glittering crowds and shimmering clouds in canyons of steel") are an invitation to fall in love.—*AF*

4 LCD Soundsystem, "New York, I Love You but You're Bringing Me Down" (2007)

From an album that inspired a critical love-in came a video that starred Kermit the Frog, for a song that LCD Soundsystem chose to close its farewell show. Its charms are many; A downtempo, half-shrugged first verse turns into a punch-by-punch slugfest by the song's end—the perfect equivalent to any New Yorker's relationship with the city we love to hate and hate to love. Besides appealing to city dwellers' nostalgia, it addresses trivial concerns ("Take me off your mailing list"), along with some big ones ("Our records all show

you were filthy but fine"). And why is it all so infuriating? New York knows we'll never break up with her: "You're still the one pool where I'd happily drown."—*SH*

3 Beastie Boys, "No Sleep Till Brooklyn" (1986)

Like the Beasties themselves, this *Licensed to Ill* anthem runs on a mixture of local pride and adolescent obnoxiousness. Slayer guitarist Kerry King backs the three MCs as they take turns chronicling the lifestyles of the young, rich and tasteless on the road ("Got limos, arenas, TV shows / Autograph pictures and classy ho's"). They also drop in a reference to "cold kickin' it live" at MSG, just so you know they've risen to the top of the local heap as well.—*HS*

2 Frank Sinatra, "Theme from New York, New York" (1980)

The city's unofficial anthem sees New York through the wide eyes of an outsider: a small-town striver hoping that "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." The song breathes aspiration, and is itself a fairly recent arrival: Broadway's John Kander and Fred Ebb wrote it for Liza Minnelli to sing in 1977's *New York, New York* (a film set in the '40s), and Frank Sinatra made it famous three years later. Even though it's not quite "A-number-one, top of the list" in our rankings, it remains the quintessential paean to "old New York," city of dreams, where brand-new New Yorkers arrive every day.—*AF*

1 Jay-Z with Alicia Keys, "Empire State of Mind" (2009)

Of all the world's glitzy capitals, New York is the one that's truly the city of dreamers. Rough-and-tumble is putting it mildly, as the city's rich musical history attests. But from its many knocks, something amazing emerges. When Jay-Z's roll-with-the-punches verse gives way to Alicia Keys's chorus, it's the musical equivalent of the first time you touched down on the JFK tarmac or saw the Statue of Liberty. "Empire State of Mind" is hopeful and warm—and for that reason, it's the only song to provide a real update to Sinatra's "New York, New York." We'll take it.—*SH*

DON'T AGREE? We chose our top 100 songs about NYC, but we want to hear from you, too: Tell us what you would've selected as the No. 1 song! Vote for your favorites at newyork.timeout.com/nycsongs.