



Contributors to *The Parsonage*, from left: Dan Tepfer, Regina Carter, Theo Bleckmann, Alicia Olatuja, Sarah Kirkland Snider and David Hajdu.

LYNDA WYATT

# David Hajdu Finds Love, Anarchy in a Single New York City Building

**DAVID HAJDU, THE EMINENT BIOGRAPHER,** cultural historian, music critic and journalism professor, has heeded T.S. Eliot's dictum that "old men should be explorers."

Toward his self-assigned imperative, Hajdu has generated a satirical novel (*Adrienne Geffel: A Fiction*, W. W. Norton & Co.) and a graphic nonfiction book addressing the parallel lives of three transgressive figures from vaudeville days.

He's also established a consequential oeuvre as a songwriter on three albums, most recently *The Parsonage* (Sunnyside), a poly-genre song cycle sung by Theo Bleckmann and Alicia Olatuja tracing the cultural currents that streamed through a single East Village townhouse over a 115-year timespan. He assigned each song to a different composer, asking them to configure a small chamber ensemble — pianist Dan Tepfer, cellist Erik Friedlander, bass clarinetist Carl Maraghi and bassist Sean Smith — in different combinations as they "refracted and reflected the past to their contemporary sensibilities."

"I've thought and cared about the craft of songwriting since my earliest memories of listening to the radio," Hajdu said. As he approached his 60s, he took up the challenge of applying what thought into action.

"A big benefit is that it helps my writing, my work as a critic and as an educator, because it's deepened my understanding of the creative process and what it takes for the people I'm writing about as a critic to do what they do."

Hajdu pinpointed seeing an old photograph of a hi-fi store in his neighborhood that's now occupied by a phone business as this project's gestational moment. "It was kind of a lightning bolt — that structure reflects the times," he said. "Everyone had hi-fi systems; now everyone has a phone."

As he researched buildings sufficiently palimpsestic to sustain a song cycle, Hajdu focused on 64 East 7th St., where, as an NYU undergraduate in the mid-1970s, he'd frequented a popular used bookstore called Books 'N Things whose proprietor related a moment when Lou Reed sang in the back of the store with poet Marianne Moore (referenced in Bleckmann's "Lou Reed Was Very Well Read").

"This structure was at the heart of so many moments in New York's cultural, social, political and aesthetic history," Hajdu said. "For some reason, it reflected what was going on at the time while also influencing the city around them, but in a different way each time — all these completely different phases emanating from the same physical space."

Hajdu embarked on the libretto in late 2018, trying "to conjure each era in the cadence and style." After completing it in six months, he presented the texts to the composers, "keeping my fingers crossed that they'd choose the one I secretly wanted them to choose."

As Hajdu had hoped, Regina Carter picked "Sailing To The Sunday School Picnic." Her poignant, ragtime-infused elegy and Tepfer's solo piano improvisation evoke the wreck of a steamboat that caught fire and sank on New York's East River in 1904, when the area was predominantly German. It took the lives of 1,021 people, among them the wife and daughter of the parsonage pastor who'd chartered the doomed steamboat.

Most of the Germans had moved uptown by 1920, when Russia-born Alexander Brailovsky, who ran a print shop and a Communist newspaper behind a stationery store in the back of the building's storefront, was arrested (soon exonerated) after witnesses to a Wall Street bombing that killed 300 people spotted him laugh-

ing nearby. Hajdu describes "Ballad Of The Man Who Laughed," scored by Rosnes, as "a vigorous Russian rallying cry."

Fast-forward to 1960, when polymath Black World War II veteran Bill Mackey (partnering with Max's Kansas City owner Mickey Ruskin) opened a coffeehouse called Les Deux Mégots. By 1962, the establishment was hosting poetry readings documented on mimeographed copies of the manuscripts and distributed to its audience. Hajdu's text for "Translation: Two Cigar Butts" collates lines from those 'zines, a process mirrored by composer Ted Hearne, whose sound collage includes sampled and electronically modified recitations by Allen Ginsberg.

By 1964, the premises housed the Paradox (evoked in "East In The Village" by Kirk Nurock), a popular macrobiotic restaurant run on communitarian principles, where Loudon Wainwright worked the cash register and Yoko Ono waited tables and tied herself in a burlap bag in an early performance art piece. By the early '70s, nihilist counterculture currents were ascendent in the form of the Living Light commune, trashed it, as represented in Tepfer's improvisation.

Darcy James Argue's spiky "Glamour And Standing" is a musical analogue to Hajdu's account of the commodification of the area during the 1980s. A few years ago, the building was gut-renovated and on the market for \$18.6 million, a figure that titles the final song.

"This is essentially a 21st century chamber jazz record," said Hajdu, who is currently working on a book about A.I.-generated art and music. "We wanted to have a strain of contemporary adventurism, open-endedness, experimentation. It's a bit of a wiggly project, and all the composers and musicians were up for that." —*Ted Panken*