

April 8, 2021

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**VILLAGEPRESERVATION.ORG**

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
NYC Landmarks Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Carroll,

**Re: Request for Evaluation re: 285 & 287 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street**

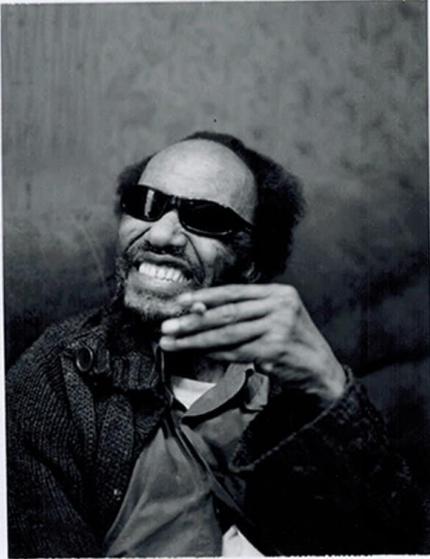
Dear Chair Carroll,

I am writing to ask that, in light of the Landmarks Preservation Commission's new "Equity Framework" for considering new landmark designations, you reconsider our proposed landmark designation of Nos. 285 & 287 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Manhattan, two highly intact Greek Revival "sister" row houses dating from 1837. No. 285 was the home for decades of Steve Cannon and his "Gathering of the Tribes" organization. Both Cannon and the Gathering of the Tribes were incredibly important to the African American cultural life of the East Village, which was a vital center of African American life and culture in the 20th century, with roots extending back centuries earlier. Very few of those vital African American sites of this great cultural flowering in this neighborhood of the last century, which included homes and gathering spaces of prominent artists, writers, musicians, activists, and actors, have been recognized by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. With Mr. Cannon's passing in 2019, we think it is time to revisit and reconsider this past rejection.

[As per our prior submission to the Landmarks Preservation Commission,](#) these twin structures were built on land originally owned by the prominent Fish family. The only houses ever to stand on their lots, both have miraculously survived nearly 200 years of neighborhood change, and stand today in excellent physical condition.█

*285 & 287 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street*

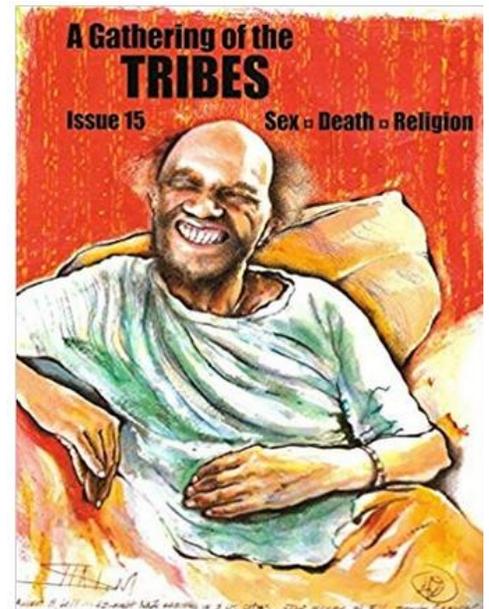




Steve Cannon

African Americans have lived in the East Village since the mid-17th century. Freed blacks in New Netherland were given farmland here and nearby, in what was the first free black settlement in North America. In the 19th century, the neighborhood was the site of historic speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass at Cooper Union, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church to which [Elizabeth Jennings Graham](#), the ‘Rosa Parks’ of her day, was traveling by streetcar when she was removed due to her race, and the Draft Riots on First Avenue. In the 20th century, the East Village was a hotbed of jazz and blues, home to Charlie Parker, Huddie William “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, and Randy Weston, and later of considerable activism, with the New York chapter of the Black Panthers founded, having offices, and holding fundraisers here. The neighborhood was also home to the Negro Ensemble Company; the world-renowned 5 Spot Jazz club; writer Amira Baraka (later known as LeRoi Jones) and the influential Yungen Press, called the “center of the black arts movement;” sculptor [Selma Hortense Burke](#); and the legendary jazz and Dixieland venue the Stuyvesant Casino. African-American artists as diverse as Ellen Stewart, Spike Lee, and Jean-Michel Basquiat began their careers here. And yet in all the East Village, only the Charlie Parker House at 151 Avenue B is landmarked specifically to honor the residence of an African American.

We believe that list should be expanded. Beginning in 1970, No. 285 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street was the home of Steve Cannon (1935-2019). Here he founded his literary magazine *The Gathering Of The Tribes* in 1991, and his home served as a vital and acclaimed gallery and salon for under-represented artists for decades. According to *The New York Times*, *The Gathering of the Tribes* was “a living monument to Lower Manhattan’s lineage of multicultural artists and thinkers — people who often get overlooked in favor of narratives of and by successive generations of self-destructing, gentrifying white bohemians — but it was also an all-hours open house, where all were welcome...and an essential site of Lower Manhattan...as the center of the avant-garde.” The formation of *Tribes* was motivated by the thriving artistic community in and around the Lower East Side: poetry at The Nuyorican Poets Café; performances and plays at the Living Theater; activist art at Bullet Space; as well as hundreds of artists trying to find and develop a voice in their medium and a place in which their work might be appreciated.” According to its website, *Tribes* was founded by Cannon because he “believed in the power of multiculturalism and interdisciplinary connections...He provided a space that empowered artists and writers of color, immigrants, women, LGBTQ people, and people from diverse class backgrounds, who regularly came together, bonded by a singular passion: love of the arts. He provided an open space for rigorous intellectual debate, and

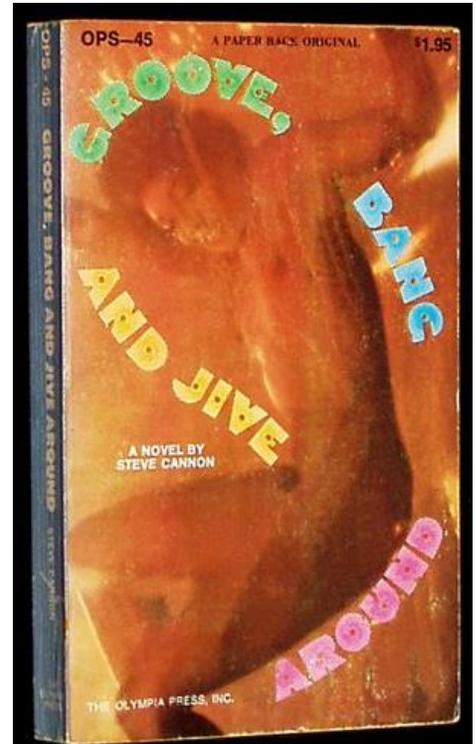


at the same time, rigorous experimentation, the combination of which is the lifeblood of the arts.”

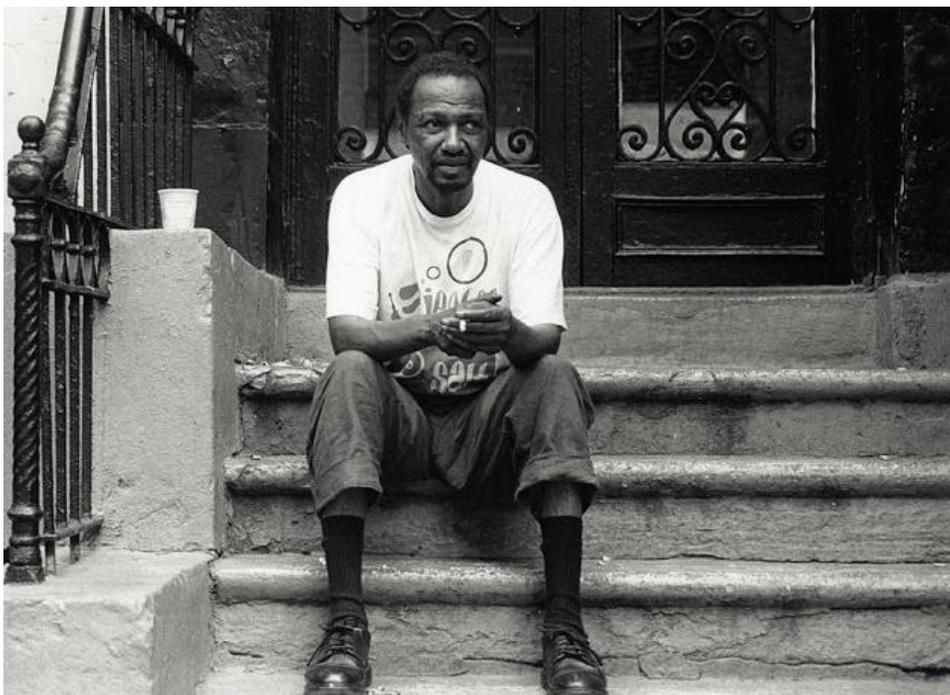
Known as “the keeper of the multicultural flame and flavor of downtown Bohemia” since the early 1960’s, Cannon originally hailed from New Orleans. Influenced by his family’s penchant for storytelling, recitation, and music, he pursued writing and cultural endeavors. When he arrived in New York City in the early 1960’s, his only interest was becoming part of the downtown scene, where writers, artists, musicians, dancers, photographers and many others expressing their artistic visions could gather and exchange ideas.

Cannon was the author of “Groove, Bang and Jive Around,” published in 1969. Friend Ishmael Reed described it as a “pre-rap novel” that presaged the spoken-word style that flourished at the Nuyorican Poets Café beginning in the late 1980s. Having gone blind in the 1980s due to glaucoma, he was the only blind gallery owner in New York City and was referred to by Reed as “the emperor of the Lower East Side.” Over the years, he collaborated, worked, and mixed with such legendary figures as Norman Mailer, Miles Davis, Cecil Taylor, Leonard Bernstein, Charlie Parker, LeRoi Jones, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, David Henderson, Henry Threadgill, and E.L. Doctorow. He was also a mentor to many prominent downtown writers, including Eileen Myles, Norman Ohler, and Paul Beatty.

Cannon’s accomplishments were not limited to the arts. In the 1960s he was a leading figure in the Umbra collective of African American writers, one of the first and most



prominent post-Civil Rights African American literary groups, which also produced Umbra Magazine. He taught humanities at Medgar Evers College which helped to integrate the New York City public school system. Cannon, along with Joe Johnson and Reed, began an independent publishing house that focused on multicultural literature in the 1970s called



*Cannon on his stoop at 285 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street*

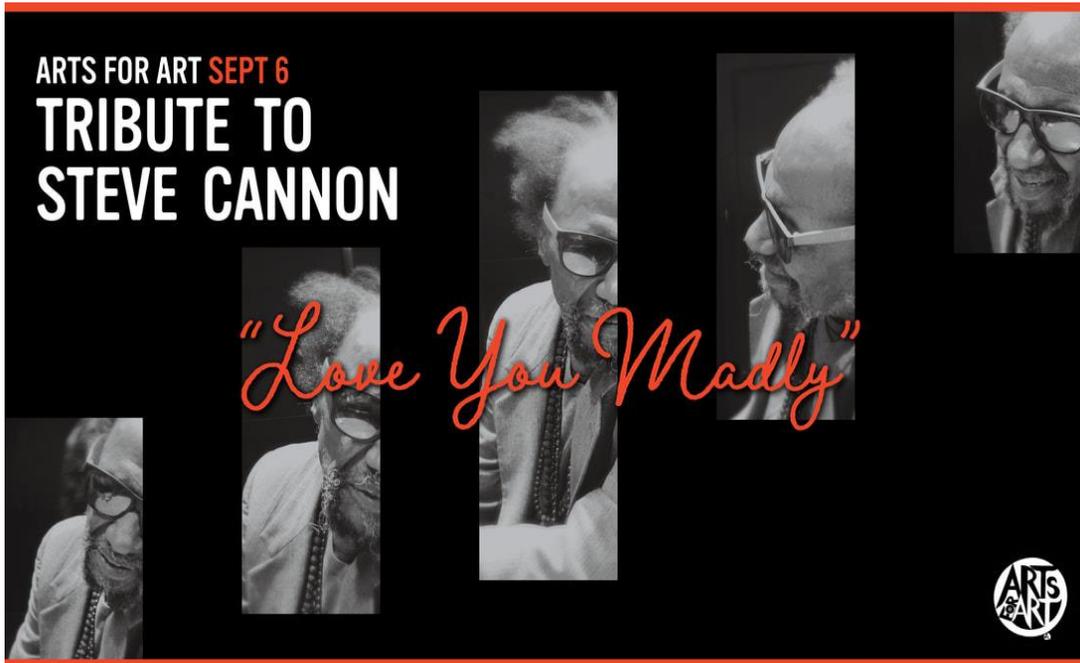
Reed, Cannon and Johnson. In 1973 he also collaborated with Reed to interview the first Black science fiction writer, George S. Schuyler, for Reed's publication, *Yardbird II*.

Cannon maintained an "open door policy" at his home at No. 285 East Street, which became a nexus for artists and poets to discuss, share, and display their works.

According to Bob Holman, founder of the Bowery Poetry Club, Cannon also started a workshop on the stoop of his home in the early 1990s that was literally called "The Stoop." Poets could use this venue to recite works in progress. He was instrumental in the founding of many of the Lower East Side and East Village's renowned cultural institutions, such as the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival, the Lower East Side Arts Festival, the Howl Festival (of which he was the Poet Laureate), and the Nuyorican Poets Café.



After Cannon's death, several events were held in his honor by poets, artists and



organizations, including the Bowery Poetry Club, the Sun Ra Arkestra, Bob Holman, Chavisa Woods, Katherine Arnoldi, Janine Cirincione, Patricia Spears Jones, Valery Oisteanu, Penny Arcade, Ron Kolm, Nina Kuo, William Parker, Daniel

Carter, Tracie Morris, Anne Waldman and Edwin Torres. One of these event was held by the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, which was preceded by a Jazz Funeral Parade led by New Orleans's Rebirth of Jazz, beginning at Cannon's home at 285 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

No. 287, No. 285's sister building, retains the same vivid Greek Revival detail on the façade and in its ironwork, and has its own interesting history as well. As per our prior submission, the parlor level entrance to the building shows a Star of David tile mosaic, and at the basement level the letters "M S." In all likelihood, this refers to the owner identified in



*Performance and exhibition space at 285 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Gathering of the Tribes*

alteration permits at the beginning of the 20th century of the building, Max Schechter. This part of the Lower East Side was home to the largest Jewish community in the world in the early 20th century. Given that Jews were at the time not welcome to live everywhere, it was not uncommon for builders of tenements to place Stars of David in their buildings (sometimes on the façade, if it was a newly constructed building) to send the message that Jews were welcome there, especially since many did not speak English.

These histories very much align with the Commission's Equity Framework. I strongly urge the LPC to re-consider the designation of these two buildings, for both their architectural and cultural significance to the East Village and New York City.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: Borough President Gale Brewer  
City Council Member Carlina Rivera  
Senator Brad Hoylman  
Assembly Member Deborah Glick  
Community Board 3, Manhattan  
Historic Districts Council  
New York Landmarks Conservancy