



PAUL FUSCO/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

LOOK

BY MEGHAN HOGAN *preserved*

Harlem at Mid-Century Photographed by Look Magazine *Images Preserved Thanks to Save America's Treasures*

“COMMUTERS GIVE THE CITY ITS TIDAL RESTLESSNESS, NATIVES GIVE IT SOLIDITY AND CONTINUITY, BUT THE settlers give it passion,” E.B. White famously claimed in his 1949 paean *Here is New York*. Harlem at mid-century had all of these qualities, and more, a vital enclave in a place emerging as the world’s cultural capital in the wake of World War II. Harlem was home to three classes, said a 1964 *Time* article—“middle, working, and deprived”—all packed in a desolate no man’s land of crumbling tenements slowly being ravaged by drugs, poverty, and crime. “This is the jungle,” a woman said in the article, “the very heart of it.” At the same time, it was an outpost of hope amid the squalor, a vortex of African American art, music, and forces galvanizing the nation to change. Into this milieu stepped the photographers of *Look* magazine, capturing an indelible portrait of the city, today preserved for posterity thanks to a grant from Save America’s Treasures. **LEFT: HARLEM, 1958.**

MOST OF THE FIVE MILLION IMAGES TAKEN FOR LOOK, WHICH RAN FROM 1937 TO 1971, RESIDE AT THE Library of Congress. Except for those of Gotham. They were donated to the Museum of the City of New York, thanks to Grace Mayer, its first curator of prints and photographs. She wooed *Look* in the 1950s, when museums typically did not acquire photographs. For decades, the 200,000 images went largely unviewed. The \$64,000 grant, matched with \$65,000 from the William E. Weiss Foundation, allowed for much needed archival storage of negatives, contact sheets, and prints. The materials were rescued from their original acidic envelopes, placed in polyethylene sleeves, then stored in binders with acid-free liners, and are now safely housed in a climate controlled area of the museum. Perhaps most significantly, each binder was indexed with assignment dates and descriptions. No longer was the collection a jumble of unidentified pictures. “The finder’s guide was really the key to understanding the collection,” says Donald Albrecht, co-curator of two exhibitions, *Willing to Be Lucky* and *Only in New York*, from which these images were drawn.

While its rival *Life* catered to the educated, *Look* had something for everyone, with the promise to advertisers of “reader interest for yourself, for your wife, your private secretary, for your office boy.” Thus there is a vast array of themes. “*Look* tended to be a bit quirky, more democratic, and less authoritative,” Albrecht says. Or, as one former editor told him, “the fun one to work at.” The images evidence a spectrum of sensibilities. Photographers like Arthur Rothstein and John Vachon forged their socially conscious styles in the Depression.

Stanley Kubrick—who came to *Look* at the ripe age of 17—pointed a filmic but no less socially aware lens on the lives of the city, notably those of boxers and showgirls, informing his later career as director of the iconic *Dr. Strangelove*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *A Clockwork Orange*. The pages of *Look* also featured the images of esteemed fashion photographers like Michael A. Vaccaro. The work was crafted in a hothouse of creativity, the darkroom of the magazine’s

LEFT AND RIGHT: Harlem, summer 1949.



LEFT AND RIGHT: JOHN VACHON/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

The images reveal the city both “as a newly minted

Emery Roth & Sons-designed headquarters at 488 Madison Avenue, today in the National Register of Historic Places. Photographers were encouraged to explore, experiment, and shoot what excited them, and the cheap price of film fostered a freedom not unlike that of digital today. The images reveal the city both “as a newly minted national capitol, yet also as a small town,” Albrecht says.



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The liveliest photos depict a city that never slept, in

ABOVE AND RIGHT FRANK BAUMAN/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

AWAY FROM TOURIST ATTRACTIONS SUCH AS BROADWAY AND CENTRAL PARK, THE CITY has always been one of “micro-neighborhoods,” says Eric C. Schneider, a native of Yorkville on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Author of *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, he describes the place at that time as a patchwork divided by class, race, ethnicity, and religion. “There were literally hundreds of neighborhoods in New York, much as in other cities, though more numerous of course because of the city’s size.”

John Vachon’s photos of Harlem, shot in 1949, and those of Paul Fusco and Robert Lerner, shot in 1958, are among the most telling portraits of the place in that era. In the 1920s and ’30s, the northern stretch of Manhattan around 125th Street had earned fame as the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance, where Langston Hughes penned “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and Cab Calloway jumped around the stage of the Cotton Club wielding his famous baton. “I’d rather be a



hallways and rotting, rickety staircases, their rat-infested rooms and grease-caked stoves where the roaches fight one another for space, their crumbling plaster and Swiss-cheese ceilings.” With no one of political clout living in Harlem, drugs, prostitution, and illegality flourished.

The encroaching decay, fast overtaking a swath of land no bigger than four square miles, is evident in the images from *Look*. A poster for the film *Road House* peels forlornly on a wall. Unemployed men—for whom

long-gone nightspots like the Palladium, where the mambo craze got its start.

lamppost in Harlem than the Governor of Georgia,” was the saying of the time, as its borders swelled with newcomers from the south, excited to have a place of their own. It wasn’t all roses, however. “People have this idea that Harlem was like a promised land for blacks,” says Michael Henry Adams, author of *Harlem Lost and Found*. “But it wasn’t a perfect place more than any other place.” Discrimination was alive and well in Harlem’s retail establishments, which lost their exclusive patronage as stores elsewhere in the city slowly integrated after World War II.

BY THE TIME THE LOOK PHOTOGRAPHERS ARRIVED ON THE SCENE, THE RENAISSANCE was over. Many jazz masters, some at the heights of their careers, succumbed to the new scourge of Harlem’s streets—heroin. Saxophonist Charlie Parker died at the young age of 34; trumpeter Miles Davis, vocalist Billie Holiday, and a roll call of greats all battled addiction. After the death of a 12 year old, actor Al Fann wrote his award-winning play, *King Heroin*. As drugs moved in and crime took over, the middle class began to move out. “It was two steps forward and two steps back,” Adams says. While it was positive that they could leave to pursue the American dream, they left behind a wasteland of abandoned buildings and poverty-stricken residents. Notes the 1964 *Time* article, “Half of Harlem’s buildings are officially classified as ‘deteriorating’ or ‘dilapidated,’ but no classification—official or otherwise—can adequately describe their garbage-strewn

card games and cheap alcohol were a popular pastime—sit on a curb. Children—mostly from single-parent homes—climb a chain-link fence with no supervision in sight, the ground strewn with debris. In another image, a question mark hovers behind them. Or they happily jump rope oblivious to a white child crying out “I Am So an American!” in a billboard posted by the Institute for American Democracy. It shows “how social relations were scripted in advertising,” says Fusco of the poster, quoted in *San Diego Magazine*. “It also combines the issue of racism with the issue of national identity.” A *Look* article, “Behind New York’s Façade: Slums and Segregation,” presented readers with an eye-opening view of a neighborhood famous, but rarely frequented by anyone but its residents. The article includes “a wealth of statistical information” about segregation’s inherent flaws. For African Americans and other minorities who wanted to live in Manhattan, Harlem was the only choice. “You don’t want to live in a slum. You didn’t make it—you in-

LEFT AND ABOVE: *The Palladium*, January 1961, like the *Savoy Ballroom* not only a showcase for new styles and trends, but a venue for integration.

herited it. But you'll find all the exits barred by the invisible barrier," notes the article. Harlem's murder rate was six times higher than any other area of New York, and tenants were rent-gouged by rich landlords oblivious to their requests for repairs. "There is no fun, no glamour here," notes *Time*. "There is little excitement even in the violence and sin." Despite the deteriorating state of affairs, hundreds of thousands stayed, and the sense of community nurtured the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. The Hotel Theresa, "the Waldorf Astoria of Harlem"—today listed in the National Register—became home base for Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity, established to help black people reconnect with their mother continent.

PHOTOGRAPHER PHILLIP HARRINGTON'S SERIES OF PHOTOS, TAKEN BETWEEN APRIL and August of 1953, vividly illustrate New York's ever-changing demographics, as a large number of Latinos, particularly from Puerto Rico, moved into "Spanish Harlem," also known as El Barrio, on the east side of Fifth Avenue and north of 96th Street. Harrington's images show gatherings of young men watching their turf. "Street corner groups of young males could be obnoxious, but they also kept their blocks safe by their presence," Schneider says. "For poorer kids, the block was everything, their claim to being someone, their assertion of rights in a city where poor people usually had none." The hit musical *West Side Story* was a sign of the times, although in real life the clash depicted would more likely have been between Latinos and blacks, not whites as in the story.

Though topics like race were not the standard (more often that was the province of *Life*), in 1954 *Look* turned its lens on the Brooklyn Thrill Killers, an infamous group of Jewish neo-Nazi teenagers

who murdered two men. Instead of focusing only on the crime, photographer James Hansen turned the spotlight on the neighbors, with a headline saying "Could This Happen to Your Boy?"

In the pages of *Look*, such depictions contrasted with the generally upbeat image of life in Gotham. The liveliest photos depict a city that never slept, in long-gone nightspots like the Palladium, where the mambo craze got its start. Or the Savoy Ballroom, like the Palladium a venue for integration.

Its advertisers tempted away by TV, *Look's* last issue hit the newsstands on October 19, 1971, with *Life's* demise only a year later. For photojournalism, it was the end of an era when, to quote *The Digital Journalist*, "photographers were the stars."

AS THE BIG APPLE BECOMES MORE HOMOGENEOUS, SO MUCH of it just isn't there anymore, which makes the *Look* collection all the more noteworthy. Though many

bemoan the loss of old New York, the one area that has arguably changed for the better is Harlem. Encouraged by home-grown pride—attracting newcomers such as ex-President Bill Clinton, who moved his office here in 2001—a new renaissance has completely transformed the Harlem that once was. Blocks of buildings have been brought back to life, some thanks to federal historic preservation tax credits—like the Apollo Theater, currently saving for an additional restoration and expansion, and the circa 1908 Park and Tilford building, now the site of chef Marcus Samuelsson's popular Red Rooster restaurant. New stores and businesses are plentiful, and people feel safe. But not all of the change is good, Adams believes. While he applauds the improvements, he says it's a "cosmic joke" that people who have lived and suffered here their entire lives are being forced out for lack of money, just as new resources are arriving. "Harlem today is like Harlem of yesterday—it's the best of times and the worst of times," he says.

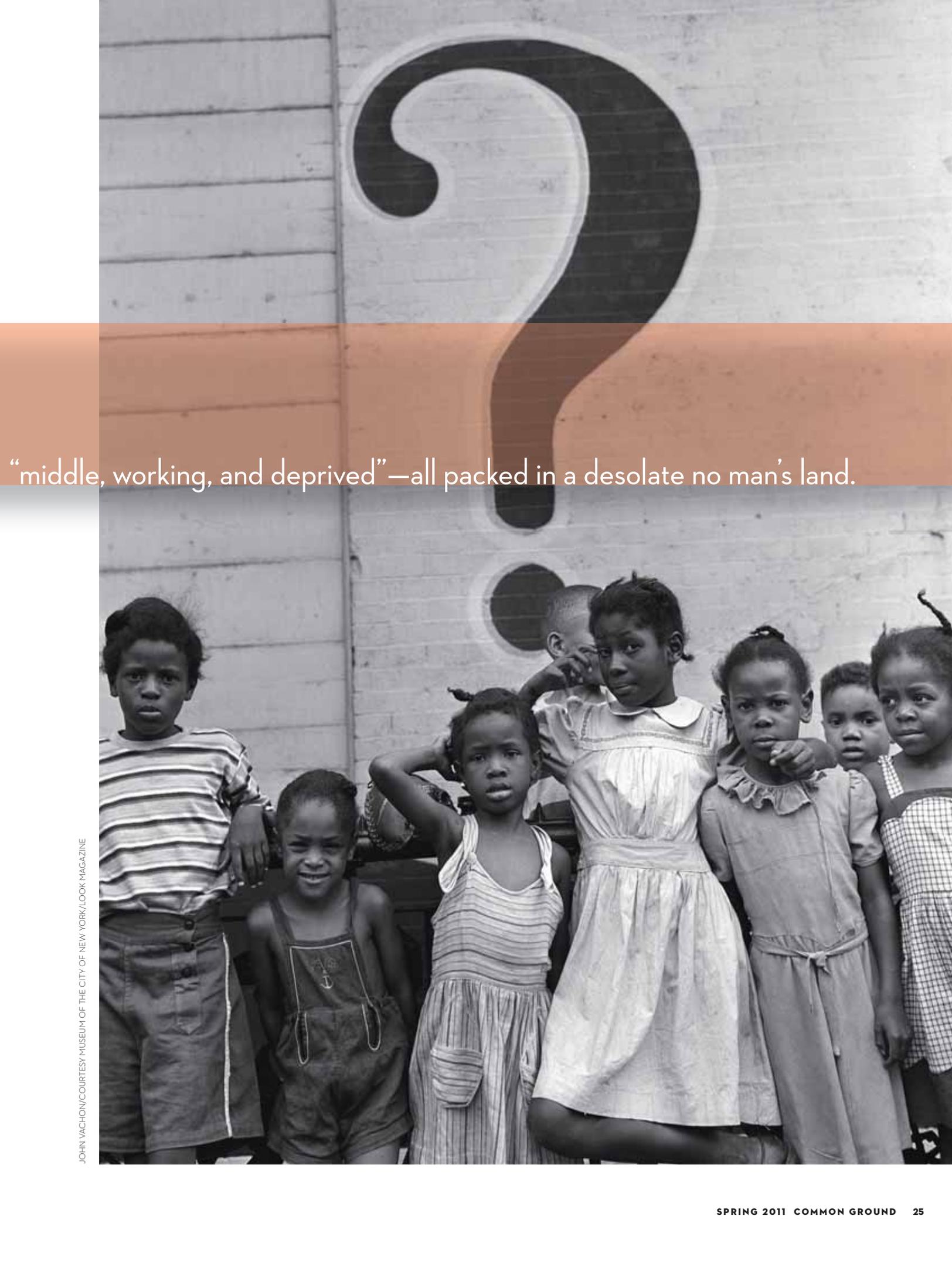
contact points **web** Save America's Treasures Program www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures/ Museum of the City of New York www.mcny.org/



PAUL FUSCO/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

ABOVE: Winter in Harlem. **RIGHT:** Posing for a *Look* photographer, 1949.

Harlem was home to three classes, said a 1964 *Time* article—



“middle, working, and deprived”—all packed in a desolate no man’s land.