

# The New York Times

HABITATS | PROSPECT-LEFFERTS GARDENS

## Musicians Preferred; Loud Music O.K.



**BREAK TIME** The musician tenants of 75 and 99 Ocean Avenue include, from left, Greg Ritchie, Joris Roelofs, Maria Neckam, Massimo Biolcati, Peter Seymour, Jeremy Udden and Dan Tepfer.

By **DEBORAH BALDWIN**

Published: April 30, 2009

CARMEN STAAF, a 28-year-old New England Conservatory-trained jazz pianist, does what she has to do to make ends meet. Last year, she played accordion in a musical about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, starring puppets. More recently, she played ragtime piano with a xylophone band — in a dog costume.



But those gigs were nothing compared with talking her way into a \$920-a-month studio apartment big enough for a bed and a baby grand. “I kept pestering the landlords,” said Ms. Staaf, a finalist in a jazz competition this month at the Kennedy Center in Washington. “I sent them a list of friends who lived in the building. I sent them my CD. It was like I was auditioning.”

Wait — her CD?

You’ve heard of singing for your supper. At 99 Ocean Avenue, in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, [Brooklyn](#), you can sing for your shelter.

And end up living next door to someone just like you.

There’s Peter Seymour, 31, who has played string bass for the Cleveland Orchestra and whose chamber-music ensemble Project played to a standing-room-only crowd at Joe’s Pub in March. He lives upstairs from Mark Small, 34, a saxophone player who tours with the singer Michael Bublé, and next door to Dan Tepfer, a pianist and composer who recently performed at the Village Vanguard with the venerable jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz.



“I am very proud of them,” said Ivona Hertz, who owns the building and a sister building, at 75 Ocean Avenue, with her husband, Joseph.



The warm feelings are mutual. Ask Mr. Tepfer, 27, about his brilliant career — he won the 2006 Montreux Jazz Festival solo piano competition and a Cole Porter fellowship from the American Pianists Association — and he’ll tell you: “I played at Ivona’s office party.”

When they bought the buildings 10 years ago, Ms. Hertz said, drug dealers were as thick as thieves, and the neighborhood had none of the creature comforts of nearby Park Slope. But the buildings sat right on Prospect Park and over a subway stop. The setting was perfect, in other words, for struggling artists who frequent Manhattan and like to play Frisbee.

One musician moved in, paid his rent on time and recommended another, who recommended another. Noise complaints paradoxically went down, Ms. Hertz said, and evictions did, too. “It really works both ways,” she said. “We really have this symbiotic relationship.”

Word spread as fast as “The Flight of the Bumblebee.” At a time when cheap studios are in hot demand and other landlords want proof of steady work and a co-guarantor, Ms. Hertz mainly wants to know if you have friends inside and can carry a tune.

“I heard about it from Massimo,” said Jeremy Udden, a 30-year-old sax player, referring to the acoustic-bass player Massimo Biolcati, who was drawn in by a guitarist who has since moved on.

Today the stairwell railings are festooned with bikes, and the halls are alive with the sound of music. All told there are something like 40 musicians in the two buildings, an improvised community of creative souls who keep similar hours and share an impulse to jam.

“It helps me get through the tough side of being a musician in New York,” said Greg Ritchie, 29, a drummer who got Joris Roelofs, 25, a Dutch sax and clarinet player, to move in, too.

If the wind along Ocean Avenue kicks up dust, litter and drifters, this side of the park also offers certain advantages. Gesturing at his 203-year-old string bass, Mr. Seymour said he was drawn here “because I play this instrument, I need a car, and you can find a parking spot 100 percent of the time.”

And the odd bedbug invasion aside, consider the alternatives, say the French couple Willemine Dassonville, 28, and Julien Augier, 33. She’s a ceramist, he plays drums, and they fled a house-sitting gig in Greenwich, Conn., where, Ms. Dassonville suggested, they were dying of ennui.

Other tenants have escaped from what one described as “roommate situations,” or what you might call “high-rent fatigue.” Mr. Small, whose \$900 studio accommodates a drum set, a guitar, a keyboard, a flute, a clarinet and “various saxes,” says he can’t help but compare his setup with a friend’s near Carnegie Hall. “She pays \$2,200 for a place smaller than mine,” Mr. Small said. “I have a queen bed. She has a twin.”

Studios typically are 190 square feet, plus a kitchenette, a full bath, a small hallway and two or three closets. To make space for his bed, Mr. Tepfer built a loft over his baby grand. Mr. Ritchie squeezed an upright piano into a closet. Mr. Seymour, who had a spacious loft in Cleveland, has been so comfy in his minute digs that he persuaded an actress, Kim Carpenter, to move in, too. There’s plenty of elbow room as long as they don’t open a drawer.

You have to wonder if visitors from out of town are surprised by some aspects of life on Ocean Avenue. The lobby at No. 75 has a baffling décor, marrying an indescribable green with a vast emptiness. A stairwell window at No. 99 is pierced with round holes suggesting — well, parents, let's not go there.

Some apartments overlook Prospect Park and others a Caillebotte tapestry of train tracks and brick buildings, while a third group sits on a small courtyard, exchanging daylight for relative quiet — from the outside, anyway. One courtyard dweller and vocalist, Maria Neckam, 23, speculates that her predecessor wasn't much of a jazz fan: Witness the dents in her tin ceiling.

Generally, there's a tacit no-music-after-10 policy, and any boom-chica-boom you hear before then can be considered a reminder to get back to work. "Everyone is very respectful," Mr. Seymour said. Or at least they are most of the time: When he and Ms. Carpenter had trouble sleeping one night, they knocked on Mr. Tepfer's door and handed him a plate of cookies.

Some studio dwellers hope to trade up to one of the rare one-bedrooms, which Ms. Hertz doles out based on the same combination of pestering, patience and credentialing that gets people into the buildings in the first place.

Mr. Biolcati, 36, has already made the leap, furnishing his new place with sparse restraint: shelves by Ikea, books by German philosophers. It's quite a change from the deluxe digs in Los Angeles that came with a fellowship he once had at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

But "I'm here for the music, not to be pampered," he said.

"It feels like home," he added. "When I'm on the road, I miss it."

---

A version of this article appeared in print on May 3, 2009, on page RE5 of the New York edition with the headline: Musicians Preferred; Loud Music O.K.

**See the article online at:** <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/realestate/03habi.html?pagewanted=all>