



New York NEWS

On songwriter Irving Berlin's 127th birthday,

courts overlook Chinatown's Pelham Cafe

venue of early gig

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The first floor of 12 Pell Street in Manhattan was once the site of the Pelham Cafe, run by gangster-impresario Mike Salter, and where songwriter Irving Berlin got his start as a singing waiter. The club was where Berlin wrote his first song. Photo Credit: Newsday / Anthony M. DeStefano

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It is an easy place to overlook.



But the old five-story brick building at 12 Pell St. in the heart of Chinatown, covered with "for rent" signs, is a major landmark in American music history.

The building's empty first floor, which had recently been used as a Chinese beauty salon, was where in 1904 a fledgling

Most Popular

Jewish immigrant songwriter from Russia named Israel Baline began working for tips as a singing waiter in a notorious saloon known as the Pelham Cafe.

The Pelham was run by another Jewish immigrant from Russia named Mike Salter, who became a gangster and impresario of his day. At the club, Baline wrote his first song titled "Marie From Sunny Italy" and changed his name on the sheet music -- and for the rest of his life -- to Irving Berlin.

While Monday marks Berlin's birthday in 1888, there is no official New York landmark designations commemorating him. The closest is a small notice on the wall of his old town house at 17 Beekman Place in Manhattan, now the consulate of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

Berlin is one of the most prolific songwriters in U.S. history, churning out a long list of popular anthems and melodies such as "God Bless America," "White Christmas," "Puttin' on The Ritz" and "There's No Business Like Show Business."

Berlin's work was nominated for an Academy Award seven times, winning for best song with "White Christmas" in 1943. He died in 1989 at the age of 101.

"He went from being a nobody to a somebody," was how author Laurence Bergreen, who wrote the critically acclaimed book "As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin," described the importance of those Pell Street days for Berlin.

Berlin had been a struggling street musician when Salter took him in. Chinatown at the time was like Paris' demimonde -- a place of opium dens, prostitution and shady characters -- Bergreen said. The upper floors of 12 Pell St. were said to have been used for prostitution, Bergreen noted.

"In a very precarious world of no welfare, tremendous crime and predator behavior, this guy, who was a semi-outlaw offered a refuge [to Berlin]," Bergreen said.

It turns out that Berlin wrote his first song on Pell Street as a challenge from Salter. According to Berlin's daughter Mary Ellin

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Barrett, Salter noticed that a nearby saloon on Doyers Street had a waiter who had written a song.

" 'The boys down the street have written a song, why can't you?,' Salter asked Berlin and the cafe pianist," Barrett said. "And they wrote 'Marie From Sunny Italy.' "

Berlin carved out a nice reputation for himself at Salter's dive. One night, Prince Louis of Battenberg, later a first sea lord of the British Royal Navy, visited the Pelham Cafe and, according to newspaper accounts, offered a 10-cent tip to Berlin, who, Bergreen reported, wanted to frame the coin.

But things ended badly for Berlin and Salter. One night, a drunk Salter discovered about \$25 missing from the cafe's cash register and accused Berlin, who had been asleep, of taking the cash. Salter fired Berlin.

Berlin then gravitated to Tin Pan Alley in midtown Manhattan and started his inexorable career to fame and fortune. At the height of Berlin's career in 1936, Hollywood's establishment gave him a 25th anniversary in show business party inside a replica of the old Pelham Cafe, complete with sawdust on the floor.

Years later, Berlin made a late night visit to Pell Street with a newspaper columnist. Berlin gazed nostalgically at 12 Pell St. and then went to Doyers Street and the old Chinese mission where he played music for some down-and-out men.

While Berlin built a musical empire, Salter fell on hard times. Authorities closed down the Pelham, and Salter, beset by legal problems, was never the same. He died penniless in Brooklyn in 1922 and was buried in a plain pine box. Berlin was one of his few old friends who attended the funeral.

"Berlin had a soft spot for him," Bergreen said.

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