LET THEM IN

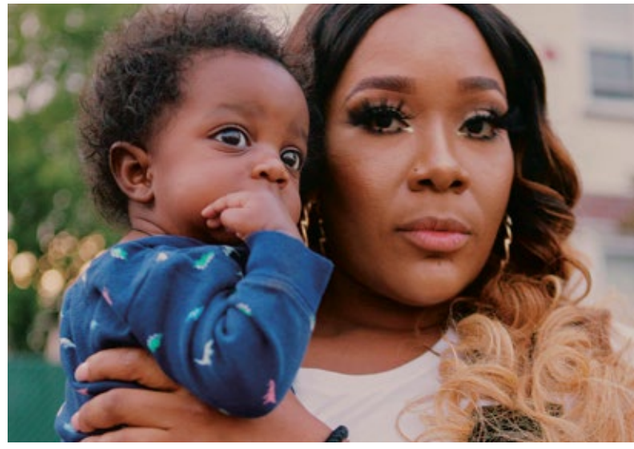
The Enduring Legacy of New York City's Summer Block Party

40.6897° N, 73.9661° W

Words by **Leah Rodriguez**

Photo: **Mary Inhea Kang**

Clockwise from top left: **Alexis Gines, An Rong Xu, Mary Inhea Kang, Mary Inhea Kang.**



On a Saturday in July, hot dog smoke overpowers the Canadian wildfire haze looming above Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Despite the elevated Air Quality Index (AQI), nearly ten block parties bump into the afternoon heat. Clusters of neighbors spread out across sticky stretches of hot concrete—no one wants to miss the chance to fraternize on their doorstep.

Throughout the summer, New York City residents of all backgrounds raise money, clear out the cars, and roll sound systems into their shared front yard for the day. They gather to break bread, catch up, help advance anti-violence campaigns and, of course, dance.

For one afternoon, city kids get a taste of the freedoms of a suburban childhood––their empty streets mimicking cul-de-sacs with sprinklers to roam through barefoot and snacks galore to eat. This is that rare opportunity to safely shoot hoops, skateboard, swim in kiddie pools, and play hopscotch. The Mister Softee ice cream truck stays parked, serving up endless cones to eager hands. I watch a shoeless young Black boy with envy, his only trouble in the world figuring out how to hold his scooter down with one hand and shovel popcorn into his mouth with the other while hopping along to "Cha Cha Slide." Today, he's unaffected by the NYPD's recent crackdown on cyclists, or any other rules for that matter.

Under the shade of brownstone awnings and makeshift shelters on stoops and sidewalks, adults forget about landlord feuds. Instead they sit, sipping open containers, sharing hookah coals, and playing cards. Hustlers push carts of plastic toys and bubble machines through the neighborhood, making an otherwise residential nook reminiscent of Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Before the pandemic, generations of locals worried block parties were on the decline. But as of late, some suspect the combination of an impending recession and accessible social media promotion is actually pushing the tradition into its next era. In 2025, block party permit applications for the summer months increased citywide by 4% from the previous year and were up 52% from 2023, according to the public database at NYC Open Data.

The internet, full of snapshots of inequality and disappearing culture, will have you believe transplants from the Midwest have ruined New York. Yet these mostly wholesome community celebrations tell a different story—at least on the surface—of unity, joy, and harmony, a shared craving for connection finding its path over division.

Today, relics of Bed-Stuy's rich Black history, like double dutch and older generations losing themselves in hip-swaying disco, remain intact, albeit against a more racially and economically diverse backdrop than a couple of decades ago. Cruising through these block parties feels like stepping into a bygone era. They offer a portal into a time when toddlers wanted to touch grass instead of iPads and one could bop to Michael Jackson without thinking too hard about the societal implications.

Although Brooklyn is at the heart of much of the city's block party media iconography, the model has flourished across boroughs. When fleeing to a vacation home as soon as the humidity spikes isn't an option, these celebrations offer a moment of escape from the daily grind. The seasonal staple is an antidote to the isolating anonymity of a big city—an act of resistance, a reward for sticking it out, a relic of old New York.

Photo: **Mary Inhea Kang**

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Block parties trace all the way back to World War I, and a New York in transformation. Coming out of a period of social clashes and turn-of-the-century economic uncertainty, neighborhoods saw a need to restore hope and pride as the greater city struggled to find its identity. In 1918, a street on Manhattan's East Side closed to make way for patriotic fanfare and to celebrate residents who had gone off to fight in Europe. For years after that, more and more streets got in on the fun. By the time my dad was growing up in the city in the '70s, he remembers nuns, gangsters, and sometimes both running the block parties in Manhattan's Washington Heights. He wasn't far from where, at a back-to-school party in the Bronx, DJ Kool Herc unscrewed the base of a streetlight lamp post and plugged in speakers, giving birth to hip-hop and an urban block party boom.

Historically, block parties across the country have been largely anchored by block associations or block clubs, collectives that emerged out of the National Urban League's neighborhood unions. These organizations were formed in the early 1900s to acclimate Southern Black migrants to cities—especially as the Great Migration moved up north and far from home.

Authorities largely turned a blind eye to the often-illegal parties, however the implementation of permits and paperwork soon became a way to disrupt block parties—incidents that have played out publicly in established Black and brown neighborhoods. Almost every year sees its share of conflict on the block. As recently as 2024, the NYPD forced a Juneteenth block party in the South Bronx to move inside after shutting it down.

But sticky bureaucracy isn't enough reason for grassroots advocates and neighbors to abandon annual block parties. Harlem-based actress Marija Abney launched the arts platform The Soapbox Presents after organizing uplifting musical performances on her stoop in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Today, there's still an appetite for this type of fellowship. Neighbors started asking Abney about the next stoop party back in February, and 3,500-people turned out at the group's 4th Big Band Jubilee Stoop Session jazz concert this June.

"I take so much joy in cultivating a safe, intergenerational space for Black and brown folks to just be, to laugh and to sing, because the world can seem so heavy when we navigate the streets normally," she says. "To be able to come to a space and leave all of that outside the block and know that right here you're safe… it seems like it should be something that's granted to everyone, but Black and brown folks often don't feel that." She pauses, and then can't help a smile. "To be able to provide moments where Black folk can exist, that means so much to me."

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For Chad Vill, known as DJ Chill, block parties in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill section were a formative element of his youth.

"I used to look forward to the block parties like Christmas—not be able to sleep," he says. It was the one time he could play football in the street and race children from the neighborhood without worrying about getting hit by speeding delivery trucks or weaving taxis. Block parties are where he learned how to do the Electric Slide. The annual event became a family reunion, bringing in relatives from other boroughs and out of town.

But as Vill aged, the parties became more infrequent. His friends were pushed out of the neighborhood by rising costs, and the new residents who came in didn't appreciate their value. They saw the block gatherings as an inconvenience. Ironically, it would take a global pandemic and the isolation that ensued to bring them all together.

Every night during the early COVID-19 lockdowns, Vill's mom Gail, president of the St. James Place Block Association in Clinton Hill, went outside to join her neighbors in cheering for essential workers. Her family teased her enthusiasm and dedication at first, but then her husband, Jo Vill, a retired New York City Transit Authority worker who moonlit as a DJ, decided to spice things up by playing music out of their brownstone. Vill linked up with his dad on the turntables, and soon they became known as Saint James Joy, their ad hoc dance party quickly spreading by word of mouth.

"Before COVID, we had people living on the block for five, six, seven, eight years, and we didn't even know they were on the block," Jo, who moved onto St. James Place 36 years ago, tells me. "We try to break that dynamic to draw people closer together so we can look out for one another."

Without a dress code or a cover charge, the event continues to entice crowds from all over with its genre-bending beats and welcoming energy. Five years on, it's one of the few places you can pull up to with your baby, your best friend, and your dad to vibe with people still brave enough to dance like no one's watching, even when everyone's phone might be.

Vill speculates that the uptick in block party attendance might be a result of inflation, with club tickets too steep and high rents forcing some of the city's most popular nightclubs—from Williamsburg's FREEHOLD to Bushwick's Paragon—to shutter in 2024.

To the chagrin of native New Yorkers who remember simpler, cheaper days, some other organizers have capitalized on the block party momentum by charging for entry. The St. James Place Association Block Party on the other hand accepts donations to keep it running, but vows to stay free for the public.

Some associations do see block parties as a different kind of economic driver however, using the occasions to infuse cash into local businesses. At the STooPS 2025 Summer Festival Stuyvesant Heights, a collaboration between 200 Decatur St. Stuyvesant Ave. Block Association, St. Philip's Episcopal Church, and Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church, religious organizations keep everyone hydrated while vendors sell mac and cheese bites, fish cakes, essential oils, and neighborhood-branded swag. Chad says the foot traffic at the St. James Place Block Party also benefits nearby shops, attracting dancers in search of fuel.

The Vill family outside their St. James Place home.
Photo: **Joe Swide**

Photo: **An Rong Xu**

Tune in to Saint James Jay's curated block party playlist.

While the block party might be the St. James Place Block Association's buzziest event, it's one of several ways they work to uplift the community. The organization also hosts tree pit cleanups, bagel breakfast meet-and-greets, and T-shirt fundraisers for efforts like textbook scholarship contests for college-bound students.

Regardless of their good intentions, the popularity of the St. James Place Block Party hasn't evaded criticism. A TikTok video from their five-year anniversary block party last spring received over 25,000 views and is filled with comments holding up the audience as evidence of gentrification. "Joy bc they can afford $5000/mo rent," one user wrote.

Jo, however, isn't entertaining the gatekeeping. "Personally, I don't care because who's here is here," he says. "We were just providing music—music that inspires you, uplifts you, and gives you some kind of hope. And that's what we continue to do. And whoever showed up, showed up, and they benefited from it. I don't listen to the naysayers."

Not too far from St. James Place, a community-driven street party in Bed-Stuy struggled to overcome its own controversy. Tompkins Avenue Merchant Association (TAMA) and Bridge Street Development Corporation launched block parties in 2010 that picked up steam in 2020 as part of the city's Open Streets program, an initiative to provide safe outdoor gathering space and promote local businesses. By the following year, the event morphed into a street festival that spun out of control with residents issuing complaints of disrespectful guests coming into the neighborhood, leaving trash behind, disrupting parking, and ignoring curfews. "This is not a block party," TAMA wrote on their Instagram account in fall 2024. This summer, the event faced ongoing cancellations and postponements as the organizers sought a more sustainable and equitable solution.

The truth is, a successful block party is a kind of urban alchemy. Will you get enough signatures from your neighbors? Will your permit be approved? Will it rain? Even with some of the best neighborhood organizers on the case, there are myriad variables and very few guarantees.

Biking through Bed-Stuy, I admire how many neighbors got it together against all odds. Each block might have its own flair, but many have the same iconic duo: that cotton candy or popcorn machine and an open fire hydrant. It's also easy to pick out which block collected the most dues or has the most member participation. Bounce houses are used to assert dominance—one is rarely enough of a flex.

At first glance, these street parties come off as impromptu and effortless, but block associations plan the summer events up to four months in advance. Sherril White, treasurer of the Hancock Block Association in Bed-Stuy and a resident of Hancock Street for 30 years, has organized the block party for the past 15 of them. A week before this year's blowout, White tells me this one will be special. This year, they will host a ceremony to rename the street Tyreon W. Cook Way after her late husband, a first responder who died due to a 9/11-related illness.

Whenever White meets someone new at a community board meeting who learns she's from Hancock Street and has a good memory from her block party, she's filled with a sense of pride. "The block party means a lot to me because it's the time that we use to bring everyone together, the neighborhood and families. " she says. "I just like seeing everybody happy."

Photos: **Mary Inhea Kang**

Photo: **Uliana Storoshchuk**

Photo: **Alexis Gines**

White has noticed association participation decline though, no matter how much the group advertises. With more engagement, she hopes to purchase a projector and expose kids to films shot in the neighborhood, like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. The cult classic gave way to one of Brooklyn's most high-profile block parties, organized by the director to celebrate its anniversary.

As neighborhoods shift and key rituals get lost in the shuffle of New York's transience, community organizers across the city continue to use block parties as a vehicle to meet residents' cultural and social needs.

"By activating on the block, we make it so you don't have to go to more conventional, traditional institutions that can feel unwelcoming," Abney says of Soapbox's activations taking place in various neighborhoods throughout the boroughs. "You should be able to practice and continue your culture on the streets where you live."

While the initiative becomes more high profile, drawing outsiders and mixed reactions, Abney works to keep the message clear. The Soapbox Presents kicked off block party season with an announcement calling for their Instagram followers to "Respect the Block!" with some house rules that included, "Don't litter" and "Do bring good vibes only."

"We always have a good time, but we're not a block party production company," she says. "This is mission driven. We hold what would be considered a party on the block, but this is about cultural preservation."

From block parties in Staten Island to Queens, families, nonprofits, mutual aid groups, and law enforcement collaborate to feed, empower, educate each other, and pay homage to their closely-held traditions. Whether it's cumbia in Corona, or mariachi in Jackson Heights, each cookout has a distinct aura, block association T-shirt design design, and form of entertainment. During the Harlem Open Streets block parties every Sunday of the summer, souped-up vehicles, bucket hats, and Nutcracker street drinks are abundant outside of Melba's Restaurant. In the Bronx, local precincts and politicians spearhead some of the events, while on less residential streets, Latino families set up dominoes tables without an agenda. In pockets like Hollis, Queens that still feel untouched by the shock of rapid development, a banner of multicultural flags hangs over the pavement as teenagers gyrate to Caribbean rhythms. Even besieged by war, Ukrainians find an August afternoon to celebrate and come together in Manhattan's Ukrainian Village.

Event promoters and big brands may keep trying to scale and replicate them, but the grassroots magic of block parties is difficult to reproduce. Saint James Joy now plays other venues and has dreams of expanding internationally, yet fans tell the Vills nothing beats seeing them on the tree-lined stretch between Lafayette and Greene Avenues.

On New York's dripping summer weekend afternoons, blocked off streets dissect neighborhoods. But stretched yellow caution tape isn't a barrier—it's an invitation. Ducking the line, you can spend hours meeting residents and newcomers alike (that is, if you treat the stoop with the respect you'd bring to a stranger's living room). White recently boogied into a block party on Howard Ave. for the first time. After decades of attending gatherings around the city, she didn't think twice. "Go with a happy attitude," she says. "People just going to let you in."

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