

Stardust Memories  
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The shot of the Queensboro Bridge, from a point just south of the bridge on Manhattan's eastern shore, is one of the enduring images of Woody Allen's 1979 film "Manhattan." The movie is filmed in black and white, and that, along with the hazy predawn light, gives the scene a ready-made nostalgia, the grainy wistfulness of a memory. In the foreground, Woody Allen and Diane Keaton, at the end of an impulsive all-night gambol through the city, are framed on a park bench by charmingly seedy urban props: a scrubby tree in a pot; a post canted at an angle, as though someone has run into it. In the distance rises the bridge, monolithic and dreamlike, garlanded with little white lights. "Boy," says Woody Allen's character dreamily, and heaves a sigh. "This is really a great city. I don't care what anybody says, it's really a knockout, you know?"

The scene is barely a minute long, but the New York it captures -- grubby, slightly down-at-the-heel, but queerly beautiful and irrepressibly romantic -- became, for practically an entire generation of moviegoers, the quintessential image of the city. By the time I tried to visit the same spot, some 30 years after the film, things had changed. The tree in a pot was gone, as was the post, replaced by a blue guardrail; a tasteful plaque on the fence reminded patrons to pick up after their dogs. Perhaps most dramatically, the view of the river was almost entirely obscured by a scrim of sycamores, which appeared to have grown up in the interim. And the bridge? The bridge was there, of course, but barely visible through the trees and half-shrouded in great swaths of dirty white tarp, like a disheveled Christo installation.

Nothing of the previous era seemed to remain at all. This revelation was critical, I felt, to more than just this quarter-acre. It is practically the municipal pastime, mourning the disappearance of the "real" New York, but the question seemed fair: Did the "real" New York City, as Woody Allen saw it -- a place that for him always "existed in black and white, and pulsed to the great tunes of George Gershwin," that "metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture," which he "romanticized all out of proportion" -- still exist? Had it ever existed at all?

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To begin such a search, it seemed best to start with a place from Allen's films that was as old and ostensibly authentic as possible. Besides the streets of the city itself, one of the spots that Allen used most extensively as a setting was the Carnegie Deli, in Midtown, which anchored the plot of his 1984 film "Broadway Danny Rose."

Set in the early 1970s, it's the story of soft-hearted, small-time agent Danny Rose (Allen), who represents dead-end acts such as a woman who plays the wineglasses ("the Jascha Heifetz of this instrument," says Rose) and a one-legged tap dancer. In the film, a group

of his (less hapless) peers -- aging comics with thick glasses, thick hair and plaid sportcoats -- get to telling stories about Danny Rose over coffee at the deli. The plot of Rose's most dramatic misadventure unfolds in a series of flashbacks involving a has-been lounge singer, the New Jersey mob and a tart Mia Farrow. But the scenes in the tidy, well-worn deli are the film's centerpiece, as the comedians reminisce about Rose and lament the decline of their profession.

"I don't know what works anymore," one comedian complains to another, talking about a joke he's used for years. "Last night it died," he says. "Died, I tell you, Marty; the audience sat there like an oil painting."

The Carnegie Deli today looks largely unchanged from its movie-star turn or, for that matter, from its inception. The blinking neon sign out front is a relic from its earliest days; the checkerboard floors are recognizable from the film, as is the high glass counter, piled with plates and steaming heaps of pastrami, the white-capped heads of the countermen just visible behind them. The place, on a Wednesday afternoon, was packed. But it was not packed with Borscht Belt comedians or gossipy housewives or jovial extended families with their broods of sturdy children, or any of the other old-New-York types I had envisioned at a venerable deli's tables. Instead it was doing a bustling business in tourists, people inspecting subway maps and flipping through guides to the city, the pages marked with Post-its.

The food was familiar -- the restaurant has served the same traditional Eastern European and Jewish deli fare since it opened in 1937. My matzoh ball soup came in two parts: matzoh ball, in the bowl, and soup, decanted tableside from a little metal tureen. The matzoh ball was bigger than a baseball. The sandwiches of the two diners next to me were similarly massive, and though we did our best, we left our lunches half-ravaged on the plates.

On the way out, I stood in line for the cashier behind a tall, gray-haired man in a suit, who was deep in conversation with the countermen. "There are no real Jewish bakeries anymore!" the man was saying. "They're all gone! Even in Brooklyn!" He rattled off a list of the disappeared. A guy standing at the end of the counter, gray and balding, nodded. "My high-school reunion is coming up," he said. "They want to rent a bus and tour around Brooklyn. I said, you'd better take a drive around first!"

The man in the suit handed his check to the woman behind the cash register. The wall over the register was covered with autographed head shots of actors, including one of Allen; it was slightly rippled with age, and a pink stain had spread over part of Allen's face. The woman's assistant, a young man in a shag haircut, thumbed through the man's bills. "Breaking in a new guy?" the man in the suit said amicably. "Everything changes, eh?"

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Perhaps, I decided, it was simply unrealistic nostalgia to expect to find an entire community, an entire way of life, carrying on untouched in the Carnegie Deli. But it occurred to me that unrealistic nostalgia was a sentiment familiar to Allen, and to his characters; he built it into the neuroses of at least one film's lead, played by him. In the 1977 film "Annie Hall," Allen's character, Alvy Singer, tries to trace the roots of his failed relationship with Annie (Diane Keaton) by sorting through pivotal moments in their romance, as well as formative moments in his past, all cast in the same romantic half-light.

One of these fits of nostalgia takes place on Coney Island, the beach community and metropolitan resort destination at the southernmost tip of Brooklyn, where Alvy grew up in a house built under an old wooden roller coaster. The movie's flashbacks of Coney Island are brief but evocative: Navy sailors in their dress whites, dolled-up girlfriends in tow, buying hotdogs on the boardwalk; the bumper-car ride where Alvy's father works; the little bungalow shuddering as the rattletrap coaster goes by overhead. It appears to be the 1940s, which was actually a time of decline for the neighborhood, but Allen's vision captures the derelict magic it would have held for a third-grader. The seediness has charm and vigor; the place feels mysterious and alive.

In real life, things got worse before they got better for Coney Island, which suffered well into the '70s before undergoing a modest revival during the economic boom of the '80s and '90s. In 2006, a developer bought a large portion of the beachfront amusement area with plans, yet to materialize, to build a billion dollars' worth of hotels and upscale entertainment. But it retains the reputation of a place whose appeal transcends, or perhaps arises from, its shabbiness, its wholehearted devotion to the frivolous, and maybe, I thought, that charm had persisted.

The Coney Island boardwalk is a silvery, sand-swept expanse of planks along a three-mile stretch of land between the beachfront road and the Atlantic. Some of the planks are so loose that they dip underfoot, like piano keys. On a brilliant Saturday morning, the beachfront businesses were just opening, a crush of food stands whose fading, hand-painted signs jostled for attention -- baked clams, hot buttered corn, ice cream, hot sweet sausages.

The boardwalk was filling with people who, while not sailors and glamour girls, seemed at home there: shuffling older couples hand-in-hand; barrel-chested joggers with large gold necklaces, lumbering heavily along in pairs; a cluster of bronzed and oiled middle-aged partiers reclining in lawn chairs in front of the smoothie stand, the women in bikinis and the men with their hair slicked back, their shorts pulled high on their legs, shouting at each other at close range.

Once there were amusements up and down the boardwalk; when I visited, there were a few remaining, including the now-closed Astroland, the Cyclone roller coaster, as well as the defunct AstroTower, still standing like a monumental cigarette, to provide the park's distinctive skyline.

I wanted to see the bumper cars, some version of which Alvy's father had operated in "Annie Hall." Bumper car technology does not seem to have changed since the 1940s, and the bumper car ride at Astroland looked much like the ride in the movie, a dim and cavernous stage updated with a few illustrations of women in bikinis and a man dressed vaguely like Captain America. The operator was a slim and melancholy man named Richard Kennedy, who gave his age as 38 but looked older and had a large gold stud in his nose. He was from Coney Island, he said, and had been coming to the boardwalk since he was young. He had worked at Astroland for 13 summers; in the winters, he works "something off the books."

I asked if much had changed on the boardwalk over the years, and he waved a hand at something obvious to him that was no longer there. "Oh, it used to be all crowded up and down, everyone on the rides," he said. "It's not like it used to be, back in the day."

But to me, Astroland, though scrubby, looked hale. The scene there might not have been the one Kennedy remembered, but it was a scene nonetheless. Like the rest of the boardwalk, it was thronged with people for whom Coney Island seemed not a page in their guidebook but a piece of their daily lives. Leaving Astroland, I wandered up the boardwalk; in the crowded handball courts next door, a tall, lean man tanned the color of fried chicken, with a fantastic head of silver hair, was shaking hands with his competitors after a game. His hand, when he took off his handball glove, flashed lily white.

Was it possible, I wondered, that the past was a shifting target? That nostalgia was relative? Do we all have our own personal golden age, by which we will always measure the present, and by whose standards the present will always fail? It made sense that, for a filmmaker, such a dissatisfaction with the present might feed the impulse to continually tinker with the past. Toward the end of "Annie Hall," after Alvy's efforts to reunite with Annie have failed, he stages a play in which their doomed relationship ends happily instead. "You know how you're always trying to get things to come out perfect in art," he comments, to the camera. "Because it's real difficult in life." If this was part of what drove Allen's films, where would I ever find the New York he had created, that had seemed so real?

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Perhaps the most swoony and unreservedly nostalgic of Allen's New York movies is "Radio Days," from 1987. Set in the 1940s, it tells two consummate New York stories: that of radio and its stars, in their Times Square studios, and that of the slightly shabby and volatile but close-knit household of the movie's young protagonist, Joe Needleman, whose family listens avidly to the radio from their home in Far Rockaway. Both stories are given the supersaturated hues of untouchable memory.

Built into the film's pretense is the understanding that radio was a doomed medium; this is ultimately a film about a vanishing world, and its joy and love, seen from this distance, are increasingly melancholy. "I've never forgotten any of those people," the narrator concludes at the end of the film, "or any of the voices we used to hear on the radio,

although the truth is, with the passing of each New Year's Eve, those voices do seem to grow dimmer and dimmer."

After poking around, I found that though most of the establishments of World War II-era Times Square have transformed themselves many times since, there is a bar and restaurant that was featured in the movie, the King Cole Room in the swank St. Regis Hotel, that still exists. In the movie, the tinkling sounds of a New Year's celebration at the King Cole Room are piped into the narrator's living room in Far Rockaway, where they drift around like gilded dust, dazzling and unreachable.

The St. Regis today retains that sort of shimmering cachet. Even the lobby glows goldenly, an expanse of butterscotch marble and gilt trim. In the late '80s the hotel was renovated, and the restaurant, as it appeared in the movie, was dismantled. The current King Cole Bar and Lounge was rebuilt in the back of the hotel and is a darkly lush enclave lined from floor to ceiling in cherry wood and lit by the luminous tones of a mural of Old King Cole, by Maxfield Parrish, behind the bar.

On a weekday evening, I propped myself against a column in the bar, which was crammed, in the way that elegant people downing a scotch or two can be crammed, swaying, with dignity, on the dainty bar furniture and on each other. The crowd was mostly men, all in sharply cut suits and jewel-toned ties and glossy shoes, but they were older than a power-banker crowd, and had an artfully rumped, leonine look: loosened ties, wild coronas of hair.

A man who said he was from Africa tried to hold my hand and wanted to know, not unkindly, what I was doing there; when I told him I was writing a story about Woody Allen's Manhattan, he said: "I live near Woody Allen! I have spoken to Woody many times. I do not think he is that funny. Or, he is, but not my taste."

A few waiters moved nimbly through the crowd. One stopped to tend to me. "It's not a bad crowd tonight," he said, when I observed that it was busy. "Usually we have to break things up. There's a guy we call the opera singer who's always here." He pointed discreetly at a white-haired man in a navy suit, smiling to himself at the bar. "He's quiet now, but you wait -- any minute he'll start screaming and yelling."

Despite the bar's high-tone clubbiness, it felt convivial, more like a place where people came to see others than to be seen. The patrons were, I thought, a fair approximation of the ritzy creative types that had frequented the bar in "Radio Days," passing the time with an unselfconscious pleasure that would, in retrospect, become nostalgia. It seemed like the kind of place, at the kind of time, that people would one day miss bitterly.

A man named Bill Tomaskovic, drinking a double scotch at one end of the bar, struck up a conversation; he said he had been coming here for years. He was from New Jersey, but had been coming to Manhattan his whole life, first as a kid, to shows at Radio City Music Hall, and then for his job. Bracing myself for an ode to the good old days, I asked him if things had changed much, but Tomaskovic, 54, wasn't having much to do with nostalgia.

"When I started working in the city," he said, "it was the bad years. Dinkins. I used to come into the city through Port Authority, and when I came out onto the street I had to step over the bums. Back then we called them bums," he added.

He understood what I was asking, though, and after a moment he leaned forward on his seat. "You know," he said, "I'm a big movie buff. I like the old ones . . . [Fred Astaire] did a movie called 'The Band Wagon,' where he plays a movie star who comes back to New York City from L.A. to do a stage play. So he's walking down 42nd Street. It's the '50s. All of his friends are laughing and talking. And he's not; he's staring at everything. He sees a theater house that they changed into a movie theater. He says, 'But that used to be the -- !' He can't believe it. Everything's changed." Tomaskovic paused to make sure I was following him. "And this is the '50s!" he said. "You think of people today saying, 'Oh, it's not like it used to be, but -- ' " He shrugged.

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The more I watched Allen's early New York films, the more they seemed to be different versions of the same movie. Actors and eras sometimes change, but the heart of the narrative never does: characters' minor dramas against the mundane pageantry of the city, the idiosyncratic and irrepressible rhythm of its daily life. And ultimately, of course, the city is Allen's star. Faithful to his muse, he gives it a dozen headlining roles, stubbornly ignoring its bad days, its fits of pique, its long dark moods. No matter what decade it is, no matter what boom-time fever or economic gutter the city actually is in, the performance he coaxes from it is always the same: chaotic and delightful, romantic and seedy, a brilliant, good-hearted mess. A knockout, no matter what anybody says.

Allen's recent movies have not been so much about New York City. Once, it seems, he barely left Manhattan; now each successive movie ventures farther and farther afield, to London, to Spain. Why, I wondered -- had he finally run out of material at home? Had the strain of loving something that was always changing become too much, even for him? One of his long-standing connections to the city was a regular gig playing clarinet, first at a now-defunct club downtown and now at Cafe Carlyle, in the Carlyle hotel. Was this simply a jazz lover's weekly indulgence, or was he trying, at this longtime mainstay of the Manhattan nightclub scene, to re-create a bit of the past?

The Carlyle, on East 76th Street, opened in 1930, and the lobby areas are less grand spaces than sleek little vertically scaled jewel boxes. The main room is decorated floor-to-ceiling with an art deco Dorothy Draper scheme of black-and-white marble and trim gold upholstery that looks delicately edgy today.

Allen played on Monday nights with a Dixieland ensemble called the Eddy Davis New Orleans Jazz Band, and while table reservations were pricey and went quickly, there were a few less-expensive seats at the bar, first come, first served. By the time the doors opened, there were a few of us waiting: two middle-aged women who had been schoolgirls together in Argentina; a furniture designer from the Netherlands, with silver

industrial-looking spectacles and a mop of curly gray hair; and a pretty blonde of no more than 25, wearing an abundance of black eyeliner and a pair of very high, very pale yellow patent-leather heels.

We were a funny bunch, each of us, it seemed, on a pilgrimage. The furniture designer, who was in town to show a piece of his -- a portable workstation in the shape of a sphere -- said he loved Woody Allen movies, the old ones, and that some years before, he had designed a conceptual piece of furniture based on a scene from "Sleeper." This was his first visit to New York, and he had spent all his free time walking around the city, looking for scenes he would recognize. "I am interested in the local ambiance, not the Statue of Liberty or the Brooklyn Bridge," he said. "I wanted to see if I could find the taste, the smell of a place; the reason he stayed here for so many years." So far, he said, he had been disappointed. "Even when I went to Times Square, I thought it would shake my heart," he said, "but -- " He shook his head.

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The blonde, whose name was Annita Adamou, was from Greece; she had come to the city for a year to study acting. Her classes were almost finished, but she hoped to see Allen before she returned to Greece. "I want to talk to him," she said, a little shyly, "to see if he wants me to be his new muse, after Scarlett Johansson."

The tables were filling up with a mix of what looked like well-heeled tourists and well-heeled locals. And suddenly there was Allen, a few feet from me, assembling his clarinet at the last empty table in the cafe. He looked precisely as he did in his movies, in wide-wale corduroys, a shapeless sweater and those large-framed glasses, which he kept removing to inspect his reed. Sitting with him were two large men, kicked back in their chairs, who seemed to have been imported for this particular moment to provide a buffer from the crowd, as well as a deliberately casual, street-corner ambience. They regarded him fondly and made small talk. "Well, I missed the Celtics," said Allen, who apparently had been out of town.

Onstage, Allen was subdued to the point of lethargy; he shrank into his chair, and between numbers he folded his hands over his clarinet and brooded at the carpet, or closed his eyes as though waiting for the whole thing to be over. But the music was buoyant and persuasive, old toe-tappers from the Jazz Age, with sunshiny bursts of brass and nimble banjo jigs. The bandleader let Allen pick the songs; during Allen's upper-register solos, which put a dramatic frill on the choruses, he turned pink from giving them everything he had.

It was music that had once been ubiquitous and now barely existed at all, and its presence in the room was like a memory, rich and unadulterated. When the show was over, and most of the musicians had packed up and left the stage, Allen began singing an old tune under his breath: "Jada, jada, jada jada jing-jing-jing." The banjo player grinned and joined him: "That old melody, sounds so soothing to me . . ." Allen pulled his sweater back on over his head, emerging from the neck hole with his glasses crooked, still singing softly.

Annita and I followed Allen out of the club and into the little jewel box lobby as he drifted along, looking bemused and making quiet wisecracks, in a clutch of people wanting to shake his hand. "Woody Allen, would you please sign my bill?" asked a tall man, holding out a dollar.

"But then it won't be worth anything," said Allen, looking worried.

"Mr. Allen, I love your movies," Annita broke in breathlessly. "I am from Greece."

"I had a wonderful time in Greece," said Allen, and then he was ushered through a side door and was gone.

Annita and I walked the few blocks together to the No. 6 train. The evening was cool and still, and the Upper East Side neighborhood almost silent. On the platform, we ran into the women from Argentina, who were glowing from the evening. They hugged us, chattering about the cafe and the band. "Even the hotel!" one said, sighing deeply. "The people having dinner, the little girls all fancy in their dresses . . ." She gazed off down the platform, still dazzled by the vision.

"It was just like in the movies," she said.