

Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building

206 West 118th Street (aka 150-158 St. Nicholas Avenue, 206-212 West 118th Street)

Built: 1895-96

Architect: Julius Munckwitz

Style: Renaissance Revival

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendarling, April 4, 2023; Public Hearing, June 6, 2023



Hotel Cecil & Minton's Playhouse Building, 2023, LPC

The Harlem nightclub Minton's Playhouse flourished in the Hotel Cecil for more than three decades. Famous for hosting important house bands, star headliners, and informal jam sessions, it was here that the pivotal jazz style known as bebop took shape in the 1940s, transforming the direction of American music. From this period forward, the hotel attracted many Black musicians as guests, including leading jazz, blues, gospel, and soul performers.

Located on the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 118th Street, the five-story Hotel Cecil was built in 1895-96. Designed in the Renaissance Revival Style, the architect was Julius F. Munckwicz. Operated as a residential hotel, this grayish brick structure offered furnished apartment suites for long and short-term stays. From 1941 to 1961, it was listed in consecutive editions of the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, guidebook that was popular with African American travelers. Trumpeter Miles Davis remembered the Hotel Cecil as "first class ... the rates were reasonable, and the rooms were big and clean."

Minton's Playhouse opened in the hotel's former dining room in 1938 or 1939. Named for the club's owner, Henry Minton, it was managed until 1969 by Teddy Hill, who formed a small house band in 1941 that included drummer Kenny Clarke and pianist Thelonious Monk. The house band played popular songs and accompanied guest singers and soloists, including such notable musicians as Charlie Christian, Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Ben Webster. On Monday nights, when most Manhattan entertainment venues were closed, Minton's held open jam sessions where bebop innovators like Dizzy Gillespie could drop in and experiment. He remembered his initial performances with the house band as "wonderfully exciting" and as "seedbeds for our new, modern style of music." After World War II, bebop peaked in popularity and Minton's was frequently credited for playing a significant role. Though leading critics like Ralph Ellison and Le Roi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) questioned the club's unique and singular importance, they acknowledged Minton's had been a "rendezvous for jazz musicians" and that modern jazz had "probably" started here. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the club continued to present jazz performances, including groups led by, among others, Eddie Lockjaw Davis, Erroll Gardner, Carmen McCrae, and George Benson.

Hotel Cecil was damaged by fire in 1974 and Minton's Playhouse closed. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, the building was sensitively refurbished and opened as supportive housing for homeless men and women in 1988. It contains approximately 89 residential units, as well as office and commercial space. The first floor is currently occupied by the Cecil Harlem restaurant and a jazz club restaurant named Minton's Playhouse.

