SO! Podcast #73: NYC Highline Soundwalk

Andrew J. Salvati

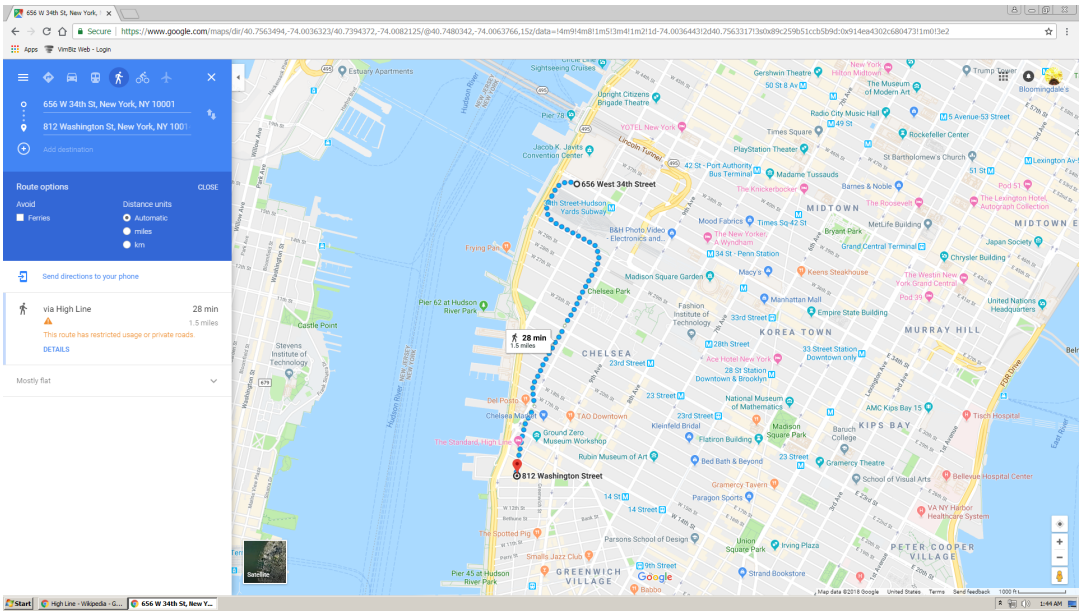
Blog post published January 31, 2019 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/0rf2n-kg019

Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Place And Space, Podcast, Sound Studies, Soundwalk, Urban Space



Recommended citation

Salvati, A. J. (2019, January 31). SO! Podcast #73: NYC Highline Soundwalk. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/0rf2n-kg019

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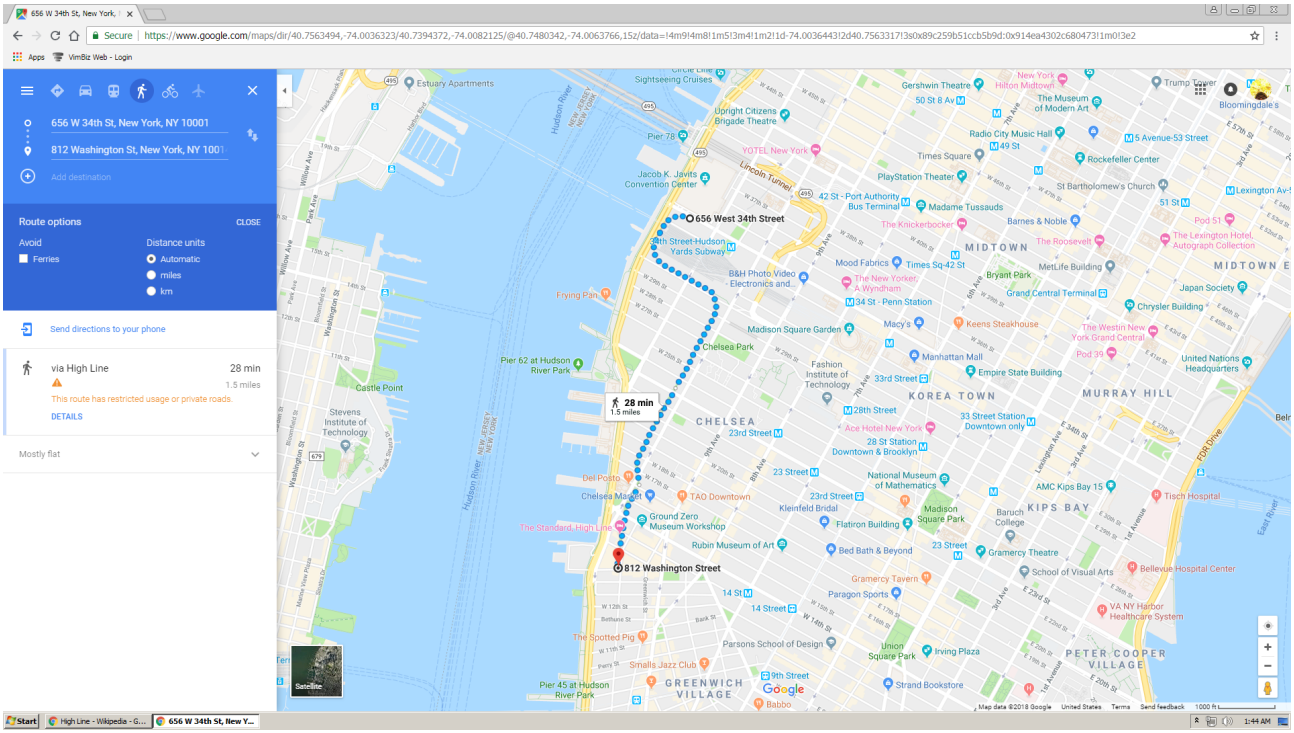
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In a recent profile, *New York*magazine's Justin Davidson called the NYC High Line, a "tunnel through glass towers," an urban beautification project that had been designed with local real estate prices in mind, which has since become a "cattle chute for tourists," wending its way through Manhattan's Lower West Side from Gansevoort Street to 34th, and lined on each side by newly sprouted luxury apartment towers designed by some of the world's preeminent architects. Conceived in the mid-2000s and completed in several phases through 2018, the High Line has been an epicenter of gentrification: From the 10,000 square foot glass-and-steel wedge of 40 10th Avenue, to twisty twins of 76 Eleventh Avenue, to the massive Western Yard project, the sounds of the High Line – as I experienced them this past August – are redolent with the city's rising inequality, and the remaking of working class neighborhoods and small businesses into stretches of upscale high rises and posh boutiques.

Having not visited the High Line for a year or so – and having never walked the route from end to end – I decided this past August to make this viaduct-turned-urban greenway the subject of a soundwalk. How, I wonder, might the *sound*of this space reveal its complex relationships and uses to the city surrounding it – its use as a public park, a tourist-trap, a space for small business, a featured attraction for builders and real estate agents marketing location? The whole walk is about a mile and a half, and I have about an hour to play with before heading up to midtown to make a research appointment, so I hoof down to the Meatpacking District to pick up the trail at its southwestern terminus.



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Climbing up a set of stairs directly next to the Whitney museum, the shrill sounds of the streets gradually melt away and I emerge into a peaceful grove of birches and thick shrubs. It's relatively quiet at the moment, and one gets the sense of being in a rooftop garden – an urban meadow at once removed from the city, yet still immersed in its ambient hum. As I walk the length of the route, these city sounds become the leitmotif of my journey: the din of traffic along the avenues and cross-streets; the distant car horns; the sirens; the weekday morning sounds of unseen trucks loading and unloading their wares at nearby businesses; the constant drone of rooftop air conditioners; the sounds of tourists conversing in myriad languages; the inescapable jingling of mobile phones. And it's from these latter sounds that I can begin to see – particularly as I'm here at an off-hour – why some local residents are a bit ticklish about the High Line's popularity with out-of-towners.

But overlaying all of this are the sounds of construction – the drills, circular saws, massive trucks, and heavy equipment of every description – that pierces the air on every block. Such sounds are not unusual in New York City, of course. But here, on each side of the High Line, the scale of such projects is enormous, and I can't help but think of each pop of a nail gun, each hammer, each whirring crane, and creaking construction elevator making its sonic contribution to the glass and steel monstrosities piling up on the site of former slaughterhouses. Here, in this tumult, is the city-as-palimpsest: the writing-over of the industrial past with a plutocratic future.

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Andrew J. Salvati is a PhD candidate in Journalism and Media Studies at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. His research examines the ways in which American history is packaged in popular media forms including film, television, computer games, mash-ups, and podcasts. Andrew currently live in New Jersey with his wife and two cats.

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