

Out There

The Lower East Side's newest arrivals inspire an interactive soundtrack

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Immigrant song



MORE IS LES Guillermo Brown, William Parker and Victor Gama jam.

A fishmonger hawks his wares in Chinese. Somewhere behind him, steam escapes through a manhole cover in sharp blasts. Jazz improvisations mingle with the dribbling of a basketball, the squeak of sneakers.

These are the sounds of Folk Songs for the Five Points, a website that uses ambient recordings from the Lower East Side to explore the lives of recent immigrants. Visitors to the site choose audio clips from a library of several dozen and create their own modern-day folk compositions.

David Gunn, who created the site during a six-month stint with the Tenement Museum's Digital Artist in Residence Project, is an immigrant himself. A London native, he moved to New York in 2004 and became fascinated with the Lower East Side (once known as Five Points). "The tension between past and future, between the historical populations and the newer hipster groupings, is far more overt than in other parts of the city," Gunn says.

You can sample Portuguese musician Victor Gama jamming with jazz bassist William Parker and percussionist Guillermo Brown, a Cantonese opera rehearsal, field recordings of ice-cream trucks and leaking hydrants, and a Dixieland band that played at the Feast of San Gennaro parade. Gunn's team will add new sounds periodically, and visitors can even upload their own. Meanwhile, a save feature allows anyone to record and post favorite mixes. "The project is all about allowing other people to have authorship," Gunn says. "How do you negotiate all the cultural materials that surround you to create your own sense of self?"

—Karen E. Steen