

The City

Section 14

NEW YORK UP CLOSE

Listening Hard to Uncover the Mystery
Of Everyday Life, One Sound Bite at a Time

The car alarm comes as a rude reminder that this is a city of sound. Many New Yorkers, after suffering years of aural abuse, have tuned out. But three artists — Toshi Reagon, Everton Sylvester and Gabri Christa — bravely bared themselves and actually listened to New York City's streets.

Creative Time, the public art group that helped produce the towers of light at ground zero, last year commissioned the three artists to compose works about their neighborhoods. Each offers a distinct, often political, vision of community.

Last September, Toshi Reagon, who has lived in Crown Heights since 1998, took time out from gearing up for the 30th anniversary of Sweet Honey in the Rock, the band her mother founded, to spend an afternoon talking to her neighbors. She used the material to compose three songs, "Nostrand Avenue," "Rogers Avenue" and "Lincoln Place."

"It was amazing how many people didn't want to do it," said Ms. Reagon, who was accompanied by a camera crew. People flocked around the camera, but balked at her microphone. Years of reality television, Ms. Reagon speculated, have numbed people to the shock of their

own image. Somehow audio alone was rawer.

"Just hearing the sound of your voice is very intimate," she said.

Vanished ballrooms, jerk chicken joints, barbershops and churches appear in Ms. Reagon's songs, which intersperse her velvety melodies with journalistic sound bites and found sounds.

"Here you make the best of what you have," says one man with a deep, swinging voice. "There's nothing to make, you just got to live. No matter where you at, you got to live."

That note, Mr. Reagon said, was struck by many of the 20 or so people she interviewed. "They don't have this whole fantasy American dream story: Some day I'm going to be a billionaire," she said. "Almost everybody had this, 'If I get up in the morn-

ing, show up for work, and take care of my family I will be fine.' That sensibility is kind of lost in our culture now, but there it is, right in Crown Heights."

Everton Sylvester's song, "A Bed-Stuy Story," is a groovy and angry portrait of a neighborhood in flux. A spoken-word poet who was born in Jamaica, Mr. Sylvester blends images of a lost world (breadfruit, a cock's crow) with those of a found one (bagels, sirens). "I live in my building for five years now and my neighbors them still don't know me," he sings. "But solace come from anonymity. And every time I bite the apple, the apple swallow me."

In "Talking to Talk," Gabri Christa, a dancer and choreographer, blended snippets of conversation from her high school students on the North Shore of Staten Island with driving dance music by Vernel Reid, her husband.

Creative Time distributed the CD, which was produced by Danny Kaplian, free at takeout restaurants, cafes and bookshops in the three neighborhoods. The songs will be broadcast on WFUV (90.7 FM) on Friday and May 7. They can also be heard online at nytimes.com/thecity.

ERIKA KINETZ



Cityscape as soundscape: jerk chicken sizzles, a barber's clippers buzz, horns honk and bells toll.



Photographs by Joyce DePietro/The New York Times