

NEIGHBORHOODS

Hamilton Heights: Broadway in the 140s and 150s

HEAT IN THE DEAD OF WINTER

There's a honeyed swing to Broadway in the 140s and 150s, despite the weather. Women pick their way over ice patches in champagne-stem heels. Even under heavy coats the outline of their hips isn't lost. Men in fedoras gather together on street corners and sing to them as they pass. One of the group whispers, "I've lived fifty-one years, but all that counts for nothing if now I must live without knowing your name." Once a predominantly Cuban neighborhood, the area is still Caribbean in flavor, but these days mostly Dominican. Love and lust are taken very seriously here in Hamilton Heights.

SIDEWALK SALES AND SCENES In another season, the men may wear Panamas and sit at green lights in long low cars letting the ladies go by. Actually there aren't a

lot of unaccompanied women around. The ones who are out join the curbside vendors, selling baby socks or the earrings they've made. Some women carry heavily laden plates—of richly scented porks and sausages,

sweet yucca root—to a neighbor. And an occasional woman is out in her black dancing dress and red shoes at midday, as jive as any macho. But this is a neighborhood of men. It's the men who choose among the nightgowns and panties sold on the street here and on the beaches at home in the Dominican Republic. Some of the toughest looking of the tough guys may have a two- or three-year-old on their shoulders. Children are also taken seriously in this part of town. Frilly party dresses in shop window after shop window look as if they're made of cake, and probably as many toys are sold on the streets as panties.

ROUNDING THE CORNER Hamilton Heights has hills and slow curves running up and down; in the facades of noble old buildings, in the grand courtyards and Goyas of the Hispanic Society of America (at Audubon Terrace, Broadway and 155th Street) and in

the merengue playing in the grocery stores. Merengue is just about everywhere, in fact, one song hooked to another: blasts from a record shop featuring Johnny "Caballo" Ventura, blasts from four speakers in a hatchback on the street, blasts from a dance club, where dancers' shoulders are still and hips will swing for hours.

THE DARK SIDE For all its eroticism; its nostalgia; its tidy rows of Cuban sandwiches in every coffee shop (a succulent combination of roast pork, plenty of garlic, ham, swiss cheese on grilled crusty bread); its restaurants, named after those in Havana (Floridita, at 141st Street, features such weekend specials as stewed goat); for all its guava and mamey ices sold on the street; the sugar cane to suck; the coconuts opened by men with machetes—this is nevertheless the land of cocaine lords. Below all the chatter, the *mi amors* that punctuate every sentence, people are uneasy. An old-timer points down Broadway, past a glorious barbershop called Cesar's (3828 Broadway), out of the 1920s, past the vintage seedy Metro Bar (3789 Broadway). He sees beyond the old botanicas in the 140s, one that sells a potion entitled, "Tame Him." Beyond the more updated botanicas that have video games amid the candles and the statues of African gods masquerading as saints. He waves away millions of

sneaker stores. "I felt safer in Vietnam," the old man says, "than I do here. I remember when we had heroin addicts and we complained. We didn't know when we had it good."

SECRET RECIPES But not everybody is afraid. Two tiny brittle women walk arm in arm into a fish store full of the catch from warm Caribbean waters—shrimp, grouper and snapper. Each has buried a husband, and, after that, all the changes in the neighborhood seem like the doings of silly children who, they say, "should be slapped until they shape up." The pair has a mean recipe for a Caribbean stew, and one ingredient, turtles' penises, is still available, "*gracias a la Virgen.*"

ELIZABETH HANLY



Clockwise from top: Broadway boogie-woogies northward from 153rd St.; a frilly frock at 143rd St.; a street market; a sandwich shop's wares.