

# John Coltrane and Ray Charles recorded at this Englewood Cliffs studio. What's its fate?

*3-min read*

**Robert Brum**For The Journal News/lohud

ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS — Echoes of an era when Thelonious Monk, Ray Charles, Dizzy Gillespie and other jazz legends left their imprint on modern jazz still reverberate throughout Rudy Van Gelder's studio.

The Steinway with its top scratched by Monk's jottings; the Hammond organ where Charles found his groove; the spot on the Cherokee-red floor where Dizzy puffed his cheeks during a solo, look much as they did in the 1960s.

This room — with its soaring cathedral ceiling and meticulously balanced acoustics — is where Van Gelder changed the way jazz was heard by giving hundreds of recordings the immediacy of live performance.

Van Gelder's wizardry at capturing genre-defining recordings by immortals like John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock and Bill Evans has earned the modest building off Sylvan Avenue state and national historic recognition.



When he died in 2016, the optometrist-turned-audio savant from Hackensack left the storied studio to his longtime assistant, Maureen Sickler.

“You can’t make an ugly sound in this room,” Maureen Sickler said on a recent afternoon, as she and her husband, trumpeter Don Sickler, showed a pair of visitors around.

Playing a few notes on his horn, Don Sickler, the studio’s coordinator and consultant, added: “What’s magical about this room is ... you can hit any note on the trumpet and I can hear all the overtones in that note differently in this room than anyplace else.”



The Sicklers have carried Van Gelder's legacy forward by sticking to recording acoustic jazz, with Grammy Award-winning musician/composer/bandleader Jon Batiste and guitarist Al DiMeola among their clients.

"The musicians who know Rudy's history and know about the studio, they're mostly the kind of people we are recording now and they know us so they feel comfortable," Maureen Sickler said.

## **A sacred place**



The studio's inclusion on the New Jersey and National historic registries in 2022 recognized its musical and cultural significance, but the design by Frank Lloyd Wright protege David Henken is notable as well.

Henken was a founder of Usonia in Westchester County, N.Y., a 100-acre cooperative community of homes constructed in the 1940s and 50s of natural materials in harmony with their surroundings. Usonia's layout and the homes' low-slung, flat-roofed designs were considered radical at the time.

Van Gelder's studio and home display elements of Usonian design, said Jennifer Rothschild, a preservationist who advocated for the site's historic designation. She met Van Gelder at the studio, where he lived in a small upstairs apartment, just days before he died at age 91.



The building, set back from a busy stretch of Sylvan Avenue, is composed of wood and concrete whose colors blend with the heavily wooded property.

“In Englewood Cliffs, which is such a commercial hub, you have this little gem still surviving without any really modern modifications,” Rothschild said. “It’s a treasure.”

The Black musicians who recorded their most revered albums there in the 1960s and 70s set the tone for the next generation of players, she noted.



“People regard this place as a really sacred kind of spot that captures that history and keeps it going forward,” said Rothschild, of South Nyack. “It’s not

just the studio, it's not just the commercial establishment. It's really the cathedral of jazz, and that's the way people look at it."

Mark Morganelli, who produced a 1991 record by pianist Kenny Barron at Van Gelder, recalled being awestruck when he arrived.

"You get goosebumps, going in there knowing major jazz history occurred in this room," said Morganelli, a trumpeter and executive director of Tarrytown's Jazz Forum.

## **The abstract truth**

Maureen Sickler absorbed Van Gelder's secrets of capturing the essence of a live gig by an intuitive positioning of the musicians and microphones to draw out the artists' best performances.

"I learned by watching Rudy so I pretty much do what was visible to me when he was here," said Sickler, who like Van Gelder engineers sessions by herself. "He was not interested in teaching me anything except what I needed to do to help him."

The studio doesn't advertise and has a minimal online presence. Property taxes alone on the 1-acre parcel are upward of \$40,000 a year.



The Sicklers do have a publishing business, Second Floor Music, which is publicized through the [jazzleadsheets.com](http://jazzleadsheets.com) website.

While its place in history is assured, its future is less certain. The Sicklers — Maureen is 76, Don, 79 — have no clear succession plan in place.

Maureen Sickler is finalizing a historic preservation easement that would protect the property from redevelopment. The idea of turning the estate over to a nonprofit is under discussion.

“I think it’s important that the studio survives and that young musicians can come here and play,” Maureen Sickler said. “It’s a unique experience to have your music sound the way this studio makes it sound.”

## Ten memorable recordings engineered by Rudy Van Gelder:

Oliver Nelson, "The Blues and the Abstract Truth"

Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, "Moanin'"

"Duke Ellington & John Coltrane"

Horace Silver, "Song for My Father"

John Coltrane, "A Love Supreme"

Hank Mobley, "Soul Station"

Lee Morgan, "The Sidewinder"

Donald Byrd, "A New Perspective"

Dexter Gordon, "Gettin' Around"

Herbie Hancock, "Maiden Voyage"

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