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## Baritone Braves Illness To Celebrate The Spirit Of Greenwich Village

By [Anne E. Johnson](#) - September 22, 2025

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Pianist Lynn Raley and baritone James Martin performed a program called "Village Voices," including three world-premiere song cycles, as part of The Village Trip festival. (Photo by Liz Thompson)

NEW YORK — It's tough enough for a singer to have to perform while ailing. It's another level of challenge when the performance is not just a solo recital but the opening night of an annual music festival. Baritone [James Martin](#) must have felt the weight of the world on his shoulders on Sept. 19, when he performed a program called "Village Voices" to open the eighth [Village Trip](#) festival. Despite the allergies or illness wreaking merciless havoc on his vocal cords, he powered through two-thirds of the scheduled pieces, leaving no doubt of his professionalism, musicianship, and charisma.

While it would have been nice to hear the collection of songs by Leonard Bernstein (whose daughter, Jamie, was seated in the front row), Joni Mitchell, and others in the program's final section, Martin had clearly left it all on the floor by singing three world-premiere song cycles. The purpose of The Village Trip festival is to celebrate the arts, both historical and current, of Greenwich Village. That includes venues (such as the pleasant space and clear acoustics of St. John's in the Village, on 11th Street, the church used for this concert), works about life in New York, and pieces by people associated with the area. This program took joy in all of those aspects.

Martin began with the premiere of [Maria Thompson Corley](#)'s five-part song cycle *The Convex Beauty of Sailing Souls*. The Village connection was T. Lloyd Thompson, whose poetry Corley set. Through metaphor and contemplation, the poems evoke memories of fear, grief, and love during the AIDS crisis, the way it decimated Greenwich Village on both a public and an intimate scale.

"Shipwreck," the opening movement, pitted rhythmically ragged vocal fragments against a swirling piano accompaniment, played by [Lynn Raley](#). The most intricate movement, "Memos," focused on death. While Raley moved between traditional and extended techniques, including strumming the strings, Martin sustained long, sorrowful notes. "For a high school friend" considered the pain of anticipated grief. The vocal line, lyrical and chromatic, always returned to triads, as if reconciling with fate. The final movement, "October 7, 1983," attempted to find hope: "Sometimes good things come from despair." Raley's playing was as delicate as Martin's singing was expressive.



Another premiere was [Carman Moore's](#) *A Village Triptych* (note the pun on the festival's name). The setting of Gamel Woolsey's poem "Winter Blues" was sly and syncopated, with Martin managing whimsical melismas as he sang about how cozying up with somebody can keep out the cold weather. Martin sounded hesitant, with vague intonation, in the angular and atonal movement "The Dream," but he rallied for "Ouroopia," the final movement, on a poem by Lennox Raphael. Throughout this and the other works, his diction was so pristine that the lack of a printed text was never an issue.

Since 2018, [David Amram](#) has been affiliated with The Village Trip, first as artist-in-residence and now as artist emeritus. Amram, who is 94, spoke before the premiere of his *Five American Voices* song cycle, mentioning that he lived in the Village for 40 years, "until I couldn't afford it anymore." It was important to be reminded of the harsh reality that the Village is no longer a viable residential area for most artists.



Composer David Amram, 94, was present for the world premiere of his song cycle "Five American Voices." (Photo by Cliff Pearson)

Amram's new song cycle ventures all over America and represents many sorts of Americans; Martin demonstrated versatile acting skills and sparkling energy as he jumped from one character and perspective to another. First, Amram sets Carolyn

Cassaday's "I'll Be Grateful for Children as Long as I Live." Is there a touch of sarcasm in the title? Maybe the slightest hint. Martin somehow transformed into a harried but loving mother. Then, suddenly, he became a child for "Christmas Eve in Kentucky with Mama Whitehead," a story-song telling the preposterous but delightful tale of a woman determined to get her kids a Christmas tree even though their daddy's down in the mines. She takes her shotgun and shoots down a cedar.

Raley proved himself an adept jazz pianist in "Blues for Langston Hughes," which ends with a winking quote of the "Happy Birthday" song. Pianist and singer switched gears again for the Cajun-flavored "Why New Orleans Matters," a very different kind of jazz. The words by Tom Piazza were written in response to the trauma of Hurricane Katrina. All in all, *Five American Voices* is a pleasing amalgam of diversity, good humor, and pathos. Very much like Greenwich Village itself.

The spirit of Langston Hughes reappeared as cellist [Michael Cameron](#) came onstage to play in "The Weary Blues," [Dorothy Rudd Moore's](#) setting of a poem by that great New York writer. The vocal line felt like the natural, inevitable outcome of the words, with the cello adding textural intensity. Then, as a farewell gift, Martin left us (hopefully headed for some strict vocal rest) with something not on the program: Maria Thompson Corley's breathtakingly beautiful arrangement of the spiritual "Deep River," most memorable for a passage with Cameron playing the melody of the folk song "The Water Is Wide" in counterpoint against the voice.

The Village Trip festival continues through Sept. 28. The many upcoming events include "Stand Up and Be Counted: The Village Trip Comedy Night" (Sept. 23), the ensemble Poeta Musica playing classical works inspired by the Village (Sept. 26), and a rock- and pop-music walking tour called "Greenwich Village to Woodstock" (Sept. 28). For tickets and details, go [here](#).

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**Anne E. Johnson**

<https://annejohnson.com/>

Queens-based writer Anne E. Johnson covers classical, rock, and jazz for PS Audio's Copper Magazine and reviews indie rock recordings for Stereophile. At the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College she earned a master's degree in musicology focused on medieval theory. She's on the editorial staff of Early Music America Magazine, and her writing on early music has appeared in The New York Times. As a singer and instrumentalist, she's active in the New York Irish traditional music scene and teaches music theory at the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan.

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