

PLANT PEOPLE Season Two Episode One ‘Paradise Bronx’ Transcript

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN NARRATION: The Bronx has always been a special place. A place full of energy, culture, and resilience. The connecting thread is the people who live and work here, who have risen to meet challenges and triumphs time and time again.

The New York Botanical Garden was founded in 1891 and today stands as a cornerstone of the Bronx’s rich history, but it’s far from the borough’s only source of pride. Did you know the Bronx is also the birthplace of hip-hop?

At first glance, hip-hop and plants might seem worlds apart—but you'd be surprised by how deeply resilience and community connect these two. The Bronx stands as a powerful symbol of both.

This is Plant People from NYBG. I’m your host Jennifer Bernstein, CEO & The William C. Steere Sr. President at the New York Botanical Garden. On this first episode of Season Two, my guest is Ian Frazier. He's a writer and humorist, and the author of the book *Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York’s Greatest Borough*. Ian is here to talk with me about the Bronx’s rich history of rebuilding and revitalization driven by the people who call the borough home.

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN: I'd like to start with the title. Why is the book called *Paradise Bronx*?

IAN FRAZIER: Well, because the Bronx has been a paradise. People saw it as a wonderful place that people were delighted to come here. When they moved here in the early part of the 20th century, people who moved up from the Lower East Side to big new apartments in the Bronx, it was really fabulous.

And that was one of the paradise times. There were times in the Bronx that were just halcyon. And it was a place like, I guess you could say the Hamptons are today, where people had big estates. You would take the train up, the way you take the train to the Hamptons, and your host would pick you up with his carriage and take you to his estate. And it was a, you know, a rural retreat, a kind of an Arcadia.

That idea underlies the Bronx, I think. It's a very important thing that's part of the history of the Bronx. And when you ask people around the world, or around the country, what they think of the Bronx, you will get some negative answers. And, in some countries, 'bronx' means slum. And I really wanted to counter that idea.

After my book came out, I got letters from people saying, "Oh, my childhood in the Bronx was so amazing." You know, and I get many letters like that. So I just want to get rid of the previous perception, or take into account the previous perception while making it clear that that's not the whole story at all.

JENNIFER: Yeah, narrative really matters. It shapes people's understanding of the identity of a place and by extension their own identities. I remember when I first came to the New York Botanical Garden, I sat down with the then Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. and he said to me, "Tell a different story about the Bronx. Tell about the world class research that's happening here. Tell about the beauty of the borough." And that really stuck with me because I think there's a real need for that and there are lots of aspects to that story to tell.

One of the themes that we've been exploring on this podcast is that landscape and ecology are destiny in many ways. Cities are shaped by nature, even when that nature has become obscured by the city. You walked more than a thousand miles in the Bronx when you were writing this book. How has this borough been influenced by its natural terrain and vice versa?

IAN: Well, first, just its position. It's a place in between. And the fact that people from the New York archipelago, that is Manhattan and Long Island, which is Brooklyn and Queens and Staten Island, come through here to get to the continent. The Bronx is part of the continent. And the other boroughs of New York are islands.

And this is where islands attach to the continent. And that means that you have a lot of energy kind of zapping through this place. And that's always been the case, from when it was settled back even at the time of the Dutch. It's been a place in between. And that really, I think, influences how people live, and it can be a very, heavy burden to bear.

Witness the highways that had to be put through it. The people just, where are we going to put these highways? And they put them through the Bronx, and they did not take the residents of the Bronx into account enough.

So, that part of the geography has really influenced people. And then it's quite a varied geography. It's a kind of Upstate New York, woodland geography; very hilly, kind of up in the northwest corner and then you come down and suddenly you're in an oceanic landscape. You're at a place with salt marshes and beaches and you're on Long Island Sound. So it's a place that combines different landscapes and it is also a place, as I've said, in between.

JENNIFER: That in-betweenness, you carry that through line throughout the book, and it's really interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that period in the Revolutionary War when the Bronx was the neutral ground?

IAN: That was an interesting time, and it's not really all that well-remembered because it was quite a painful time. It was like a sort of partisan warfare with neighbors against neighbors and even relatives against relatives.

Well, what you basically had was the British controlled Manhattan. But to get up into the continent, to get up into the Bronx, that was a whole other step that they never really quite mastered. So that the Americans who were up kind of where the Croton Reservoir is now, they controlled the rest of the continent, the Bronx was kind of the interface. What's now the Bronx was part of Westchester County.

But that area saw battles back and forth, skirmishes, raids, cattle-stealing, burning down of people's houses. The British stripped all these farms of fence rails and wood on their barns and stuff like that to build their own barracks.

So much of the Bronx – because all the stone walls were thrown down, and the fences were gone and burned – and people described just riding right straight through from the Harlem River all the way over to the sound and just nothing obstructing them because all the fences had been taken down.

So it was a very troubled time and people were not eager to remember it after it went by.

JENNIFER: It sort of reminds me of the period of highway construction; this idea where the people that live in this zone are sort of without agency as the world around them is changing in ways that really affect their lives badly, you know? And that has been a recurring theme, but also the resilience has been a recurring theme as well. What's a moment or a story from the book that you think sort of best captures the spirit of the Bronx?

IAN: The part of the book that I enjoyed researching and writing a lot is the part about the invention of hip-hop and it immediately followed on, when the highways came through. At the beginning of my book, I say, if you want to sum up the history of the Bronx in the 20th century, in one sentence, that sentence would be: The subways created the modern Bronx. The subways, which came up here in the early 20th century. And the highways, which came through in the mid-20th century, almost destroyed it. The construction of the Cross Bronx and the Bruckner and the Deegan and these were things that just created chaos for the people who lived here. And, that was kind of a thrill for me to see the Bronx respond.

I mean, when you think about the speakers that they used, where you'd plug the speaker into the streetlight, you cranked it all the way up and the streetlights would dim and the music would just be this amazing-- and in the Grandmaster Flash's autobiography, Joseph Sadler, who became Grandmaster Flash, when he came to hear Kool Herc – who was credited as, you know, one of the three inventors, but he's really the earliest – he came to hear a jam up at Cedar Playground, which is up on the Harlem River.

And he was blocks away; this is the first time he'd ever heard Kool Herc, and he's, he's blocks away, and he can hear this music. And as he gets closer he says, it was not only the loudest music I had ever heard, it was the loudest sound I had ever heard. And I just love that, that it's as if you had all of these, when you see pictures of the construction of the Cross Bronx, all of these huge machines they're bringing it. And you had these huge machines that came in and built these highways. Well, the Bronx found some huge machines to answer back.

And so that gave me a lot of pleasure to think about that and to write about that. To see this as an artistic response, as a writer, I like to think that art can move mountains sometimes, and that that was the case of it.

JENNIFER: You know, museums and institutions like NYBG also play an important role in shaping the narrative about a place. I mean, hip-hop is of course a global phenomenon. We are eagerly awaiting the opening of the long pursued Museum of Hip-Hop here in the Bronx in 2025. Can you talk about the importance of recognizing movements like hip-hop as agents of social change?

IAN: I think that, you see the Great Migration, you know, all these Black people coming up from the south to northern cities, and it looks like a demographic movement; or if you think of, when air travel opened North America to lots of Puerto Ricans coming in.

You know, rather than having to sit on a ship for however many days, you could get up here in a couple hours. And I mean, the population of New York City, you know, went, the Puerto Rican population went way up just in like 10 years. What did that mean? That means a whole different kind of music in the Bronx, for one thing.

I mean, the whole world of salsa music in the Bronx. And what you had with hip-hop was that there was a change in the immigration laws in the '60s that made it much easier for people from the West Indies to come up here.

And you had West Indies dance culture, which involved big speakers, and you had R&B that preceded that because it was part of the Great Migration, which started in the 1920s. But you had that combination. And that combination produced hip-hop. The fact that you had, kind of a music, the West Indian music that really emphasized, you know, complicated turntables and again, the big speakers and then you had kind of the expressiveness of R&B and suddenly they're together and all this stuff results from it.

Well, if you want it to say, where did that come from? I forget the name of the immigration law, immigration was controlled in a very racist way, starting in like 1924 that you would, you know, accept immigrants from white countries and not from, and not people of color.

And that when that changed, suddenly you had this amazing vitality showing up, you know, in music. You can have this experience, like, hearing not only the loudest music you'd ever heard, but the loudest sound you'd ever heard. And it's just like, this has never happened to me before. This is amazing. And so, you know, it just makes the whole place more valuable. And I can't wait for that museum.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah, telling the, the sort of full history of hip-hop, the genesis of it as you've just described, the way in which it was a reaction to what was happening at the time, and then of course the way that it's influenced the world. There's a very rich story to be told, so we'll all look forward to that here in the Bronx.

JENNIFER: I want to talk about one natural feature that was almost destroyed by the construction of the highways. Visitors to NYBG will be familiar with the iconic split rock that is in our Native Plant Garden. In the book, you tell the story of another very important split rock. Can you tell us the story of that split rock and why it caught your attention?

IAN: Well, that's Split Rock is at the very northern border of the Bronx. This rock, which is a glacial erratic, that's a rock that has been carried to where it is by a glacier. It was sitting on the glacier, the glacier melted fourteen, 15,000 years ago, the rock ended up on the ground. And it's a big rock, like about the size of a house trailer maybe. And it's split right down the middle. But it is very striking visually.

It's one of my favorite landscapes I've seen anywhere. But the rock has always been there since before the Dutch. And when Anne Hutchinson, who was kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for heresy, when she needed some place to move, she came down here.

And she had a farm and she was there with a bunch of her children. And, this land was of the Lenape, and the Siwanoi tribe of the Lenape made it clear they didn't want people there. And they just said, you got to get out of here. And she didn't. They had already suffered some horrifying massacres at the hands of the Dutch.

And they came up to Ann Hutchinson's farm and killed everybody on it. And so that rock marked where Ann Hutchinson had lived and died and the people with her. And it had that significance. And when the highway came through, they were going to just dynamite it and get rid of it. And the historians of the Bronx and of, I believe, Pelham, objected, made a really good case for the importance of this rock, and the rock was saved.

When you go to it now, it always astonishes me that like three paces from the rock is I-95. And this rock, which is from, you know, tens of thousands of years ago, or 15,000 probably, years ago, is still there. And it tells you, it gives you a sense of the glaciers coming through, and it gives you a sense of this really remarkable woman. So there are all these feelings that you get when you look at this and thank God for historians. I mean, that's part of my theme of my book is that a historian can save a place.

JENNIFER: You know, I think we would all benefit from seeing more of that history around us because it would ground us in the places that we are in a different way, and maybe attach us to them in a different way that would evoke more of a sense of sort of current responsibility to their stewardship. I know that you visited NYBG a number of times when you were writing the book and in particular that you spent time in the Thain Family Forest.

So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the importance of this site in particular and how you think that the story of the New York Botanical Garden mirrors, or doesn't, the story of the Bronx.

IAN: Well, this is certainly one of my favorite places to go in the whole country because I liked it just as a place to come and walk around. When I learned what had happened here, who had been here, how this became a garden, the more you learn, the more, as you say, grounded or just almost proprietary you feel about it.

The beginning part of the book is about Gouverneur Morris. Who was one of the architects of the Constitution, he was a Founding Father, he was an ambassador to France during the French Revolution. And there's a red oak in the Thain Forest that began to grow four years before Gouverneur Morris was born.

And I don't know if that moves other people, but I would just go to that tree and just, wow, put my hand on it, you know? It doesn't look like that old and gnarled. It's a youthful looking tree. There's nothing like it in the city. And you think this is what the city was like? You could walk in and you would suddenly have these hemlocks around you?

And then of course, it has the Bronx River, which is the distinguishing feature of the Bronx and the reason that the Bronx is called the Bronx is because of the Bronx River. So, many, many things here.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah. I agree with you that when you start to understand more of the history, I think of any place, but for me this place, it does grow your sense of kind of propriety and attachment and really love for it. And so it's wonderful that you had that journey as well, as you were thinking about the book. And the forest was originally called the Hemlock Grove. It was the reason that the site was selected to be here because of the pristine nature right in that hemlock grove.

JENNIFER NARRATION: When we return, we'll explore the Bronx's rich history of resilience and transformation. We'll dive into its challenges and triumphs, and discover how institutions like the New York Botanical Garden and other local landmarks reflect the borough's evolving story.

[BREAK]

JENNIFER NARRATION: This is Plant People from NYBG. I'm Jennifer Bernstein and I've been talking with author Ian Frazier about the history of the Bronx. We've already learned about the birth of hip-hop and the Bronx's historical landmarks but it goes much deeper than that...

JENNIFER: So shifting gears a little bit, how do you think neglect, both environmental and municipal, has shaped the story of the Bronx?

IAN: I think there was a time when people thought that neglect had something beneficial about it. And I'm talking about after the highways came through, and parts of the Bronx declined drastically, there was a period where people thought that, basically, we'll just let this go back to grass.

And it did. A lot of it did go back to grass. And the idea which was kind of famous or notorious was the idea of planned shrinkage. That New York would become a white collar place and so it wouldn't be able to support, say, you know, the number six subway line. And they were gonna close subway stations, you know. And they actually did close Bronx firehouses and firehouses in other boroughs with the idea that, well, do we need to serve these neighborhoods?

When they were doing that, it was like, well, the South Bronx, which is, that was created by the Cross Bronx Expressway, the part south of the expressway, well, we're just going to kind of let that, what, decay? Disappear? I mean, there were almost a half million people living in the South Bronx at the time. And you're just going to let that go? I mean, who do you think these people are? Where do you think the people who work in the city live?

The word neglect sometimes is connected with the word benign. And I don't think there is such a thing as benign neglect when it comes to cities. I think you really gotta pay attention.

JENNIFER: So one of the major themes of the book is the role that grassroots community leaders have played in the resilience of the borough. Who are some of the unsung heroes or civic leaders that you came across in your research?

IAN: Well, there are a lot of them. And their names are on street signs now. And so, if you go down James A. Polite Boulevard, and then you think, who is James A. Polite? And then you go, and there's a Baptist church there, and you ask people who he was, and then you'll hear all about this guy who grew this congregation.

If you go and you walk by the Banana Kelly Development Corp., you see that there and you wonder, what does Banana Kelly mean? And you go and you find Kelly Street, but there's nothing that says Banana Kelly. And then you find there's a street that's kind of, banana shaped; in the straight line grid, there's this banana-shaped block of Kelly Street.

And then you find out that there were families that lived there when the fires were all around, and they didn't want to move, and there were condemned buildings that were just waiting to catch on fire. And they took over those buildings. And, the people who did that, Harry DeRienzo, was the head of Banana Kelly for many years.

There are just, lots of, lots of names of people who, whether they, they got a park built, or whether they, uh, started some housing corporation or, whatever they did to preserve a neighborhood.

JENNIFER: It was the people of the Bronx that saved the Bronx.

IAN: Right.

JENNIFER: ...from that era – the Bronx is Burning Era – and, and I think you illustrate that so beautifully in the book. And you know, we have a program here at the garden called Bronx Green-Up, and through that program we have assisted community leaders in establishing community gardens all throughout the borough; about 300 at this point. And each one is the story of a person or a group of people who decided that a place mattered and that the people in that place mattered and that they were going to take it on and do something about it.

IAN: I have a whole chapter about it – Decade of Fire. This is a movie made in the Bronx, and you can find it on YouTube, and it shows you what happened during the fires and how the people fought back, and it's a really inspiring movie. And, it was made by this woman named Vivian Vázquez. And she lived in a part of the Bronx where there was a lot of fire and she had a very disrupted childhood because of it.

But when she got to be a grown-up and she was a teacher and teaching reading but she just decided I'm gonna look into this and see why did the Bronx burn? Because at the time the notion was the Bronx had burned its own buildings down.

And she said, I just know that, I knew that wasn't true.

JENNIFER: I thought that that was an amazing part of the book, and it's a, it's a widespread misapprehension about that era. Because it is the, I think, common understanding that it was the people of the Bronx burning the Bronx, you know, and it goes back to that maintenance conversation we were having earlier, the buildings weren't being maintained. And there wasn't the investment in the public infrastructure to do anything about it, and so they were catching fire largely because of that, right?

IAN: Right, and they, you know, because of Urban Renewal, which was another disastrous program, lots of people who were essentially kicked out of Manhattan ended up in the Bronx. That was the one place that they could still afford.

JENNIFER: The book describes different paradise phases in the Bronx, times of investment, connectedness, hope. We think a lot about the future of the Bronx and New York City more broadly and the role that nature should play in that future here at NYBG. The Bronx, of course, is an environmental justice community and its residents bear, as you said earlier, a disproportionate burden from air and water pollution, air pollution having a lot to do with the highway infrastructure here. What lessons can we take from the past to ensure that we create a green and healthy future for the Bronx?

IAN: I think just looking at the plants, just paying attention, because you can be driving up, like, to the entrance to the George Washington Bridge, for example, and you're in your car, and you're sitting in an entrance ramp, and you look at what's growing next to the entrance ramp, these are wild, crazy weeds growing all over the place. I mean, if you just pay attention to one plant, the phragmites reed, and you just see phragmites is everywhere. I mean, it's any kind of moist place. But I remember cattails from my youth.

That's another kind of wetland plant. And when you get phragmites, you don't have cattails.

JENNIFER: You don't have a lot of things. You have phragmites.

IAN: You have phragmites, you have a phragmites desert. And if you look around and see, we're getting certain kinds of deserts here, you know, we're getting ragweed by the, where did that come from? Or...

JENNIFER: Knotweed.

IAN: Knotweed is another one. Or the vines, like porcelain berry I think might be one of them. Where they just, you'll just see a tree and it looks like they poured a bucket of green paint over it. It's this vine has just totally encompassed the tree and is pulling it down to the ground.

There are exhibits in the Garden about invasives and about plants that are new here that didn't used to flourish here. And I do think I'm glad that kids come here and learn about different plants because, as they say, everybody should know, when you see a whole lot of phragmites not a good sign.

JENNIFER: You know, it's interesting. You talked about that era where the sort of operating theory was let it go to grass. And that was also, an approach to sort of, forest management for a long time. It was like, let the forest be. But we know now that if we don't intervene and address invasive species, we'll create a much less biodiverse place. And so we have changed this place. Humans have changed the entire Earth; there's really no part of the planet that we haven't impacted. In New York, we've made profound change. And so now we're responsible. And we have to take up that responsibility. And I think it does start with paying attention to what's happening around us.

So, Ian, of course, you're a humorist, a writer, a historian. Listeners to this podcast know that among our crowd, plants, as we've just been discussing, take center stage. So I want to ask, have your many visits to NYBG made you a plant person? And if so, do you have a favorite plant or tree at the Garden?

IAN: I cannot claim to be a plant person, even though I do pay attention to plants and I do try and identify a plant when I don't know it.

I am the descendant of plant people who tyrannized my youth. My grandmother was, was quite a plant person and I spent much of my youth weeding. And that was also punishment for me. It was like, you know, if I did something wrong, my parents would make me weed the pachysandra. So I've had to get over the idea of this is a punishment. But, my favorite plant in the Garden is that red oak. I mean, that, I just, I go back to it whenever I'm here.

But, other favorites, I mean...we lived in Montana for a long time and I like the pines and the spruces and the hemlocks, but it's always really fun to go into the conservatory where there are all those tropical plants. And, and I love being able to do that. I remember doing it in the middle of winter where you're out and suddenly you're in a tropic place.

JENNIFER: Yeah, the conservatory is wonderful that way because you can visit all around the globe by walking through the conservatory and you can really be immersed in different kinds of ecosystems in that way and it's also, I will say, the best facial in New York City because you walk into that conservatory and you're just hit with all of the wonderful moisture, and warmth. Particularly in the winter it's really, really wonderful.

Well, I will take that as a challenge because I think, you know, we see it as our mission to convert people into plant people. So I have faith that over time we'll win you over.

IAN: I would hope so. Yeah.

JENNIFER: So is there anything you want to leave our listeners with where they can learn more about you, about the book?

IAN: I mean, obviously I would hope people would read the book. And I would encourage people to find a place in the book that maybe interests you and go and look at it. I come in on [New] Jersey Transit.

And the windows on a lot of the trains were washed with some kind of horrible corrosive something or other and they turned the windows into like when you have a bad cataract in your eye; they're all blurry. And I have mentioned this to the conductors and I know I'm the only person mentioning it.

Why? Because everybody is looking at their phones. And I would just say, look out the window. There's so much amazing stuff. Just even, you know, walk on the High Bridge. It's just a great experience to see. Look at what the canyon of the Harlem River is like. This is a wonder of the world. The geography here is truly amazing.

So I, I would leave people with, you know, explore the city and see what's out there. I think reality has a message for all of us and it ain't on your phone. There's a message out there. And if you just walk around – I read graffiti. I try to read it. You know, I go back, I revisit graffiti. I mean, who put that there?

Think about the kid that climbed up there and risked his life. I mean, there's so much and, and everything is putting us into screens. Don't go into the screen. Look and see what's out there. And this is a great place to see what's out there.

JENNIFER: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

IAN: You're welcome.

JENNIFER NARRATION: The Bronx stands as a powerful symbol of growth, culture and community. As Ian Frazier reminds us, this borough's story is one of constant evolution. A place where art and nature intertwine, showing us that resilience is deeply rooted in both the people and the spaces they occupy.

In our next episode, we'll speak with Dr. John de la Parra of the Rockefeller Foundation, and NYBG's own Dr. Alex McAlvay. John and Alex will discuss the

ways NYBG and the Rockefeller Foundation are working together to revolutionize our food systems using technology, community engagement, and age-old agricultural practices.

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