

# They remember when Gaslight Square was the hippest place in town

BY TIMOTHY J. FOX  
Special to the Post-Dispatch

With apologies to the late Miles Davis, Gaslight Square was "the birth of the cool" for many St. Louisans.

In the first half of the 1960s, this neighborhood at the intersection of Olive Street and Boyle Avenue in the city's Central West End was the place to be and be seen for artists, comedians and musicians of all types. Bob Dylan, Barbra Streisand, Judy Collins, the Smothers Brothers and Lenny Bruce are only the most famous among the hundreds of performers who were part of Gaslight Square's early history.

In the second half of the decade, the crowds became younger and the entertainment racier. Residents fled as the newspapers published sensationalized reports of crime in the neighborhood. Gradually, the streets fell silent. The last businesses left in the early 1970s, and the neighborhood fell to ruin.

But in the minds and hearts of those who were there, this unique era of St. Louis history lives on — and St. Louis writer and Post-Dispatch contributor Thomas Crone has captured their voices and memories in his new book, "Gaslight Square: An Oral

History." Made up mostly of interviews Crone conducted with more than 70 people who lived, worked, played or all of the above at Gaslight Square, his book is a perfect complement to the many recent works in theater, documentary film and music that also celebrate its bittersweet glory.

Crone begins with an interview of Jack Parker, owner of O'Connell's Pub and J. Parker Antiques. Parker moved O'Connell's from Gaslight Square to its home at Shaw Boulevard and Kingshighway in 1972. "The departure of O'Connell's spelled the end of Gaslight Square and the end of an era, in many minds," Crone writes, before devoting the rest of his book to capturing that era. Organizing the remaining interviews into 10 chapters, Crone stays in the background and lets his subjects tell the story.

Many of his chapters focus on the "heyday" period of the early 1960s, when a young Dylan might be seen hanging out in a Gaslight Square coffee shop and the sounds of jazz, blues and folk music filled the streets. Crone's subjects include local celebrities such as Channel 9 personality Patrick Murphy, KDHX radio host Tom "Papa" Ray and painter Wayne St. Wayne, but many more are less famous characters who



JAMES RACKWITZ / POST-DISPATCH

**Gaslight Square was a stylish, lively spot in this view from the summer of 1965, looking east on Olive Street from Boyle Avenue.**

played pivotal roles in starting and sustaining the Square. For example, Richard Mutrux was one of the first to brave the supposedly "dangerous" neighborhood at Olive and Boyle to found the Three Fountains restaurant, the Musical Arts Building and the Gaslight Bar. Lee Young founded and ran the Laughing Buddha restaurant. Jorge Martinez ran afoul of the neighborhood association when he tried to open a dance hall called Twist City, after the new dance the twist: "What they thought was that it was a black dance and that it would bring a lot of blacks to the place."

Also represented are the various artists — singers and comedians, street performers, jazzmen and jazzwomen, ragtimers and folksters — who mixed among the tourists, students, beatniks and residents living in apartments above the bars and restaurants. The interviews are uneven in places — some folks naturally have more to say than others — but like the neighborhood itself, they come together in a potent brew that, by some strange alchemy, simply works. As developer Pete Rothschild puts it, "It's not the stores, not the music, not the people, but it's all of that together and the feel-

ing that I had when I lived it — which was just one of excitement. . . Sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, the beatnik era, but spiced with the Midwest."

Ironically, Rothschild's words also suggest one explanation for the neighborhood's decline. In a chapter called "Kids on the Block," Crone's subjects celebrate the freedom they felt as teenagers in Gaslight Square while they acknowledge that the problems younger people brought to the neighborhood, especially in the latter part of the 1960s, contributed to its fall.

Whatever the reason for the decline, the interviewees now seem resigned to it and to the neighborhood's latest reincarnation as a new housing development, Citirama. Even Jack Parker says, "For the health of the city, as a whole, we're much better off with what the rehabbers are doing. All of those old buildings had deteriorated to the point where they were nothing, anyway."

The buildings of Gaslight Square may be literally "nothing" today, but thanks to Crone's efforts, the memories they held have been preserved for all to learn from, ponder and enjoy.

Tim J. Fox is a St. Louis writer.

## Thomas Crone

**When:** 2-5 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Riddle's Penultimate Cafe, 6307 Delmar Boulevard

**How much:** Free, cash bar available

**More info:** 314-664-6369

## "Gaslight Square: An Oral History"

By Thomas Crone

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