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Meet me downtown

By **Stephanie Schorow**
Friday, August 5, 2005

To the beat of rollicking melodies by the band Cheap Champagne, hammers began falling at a former bank building on Exchange Street in Lynn's Central Square, preparing the future home of the LynnArts Community Arts Center.

That was more than a decade ago, recalls longtime Lynn resident and musician Joe Boyd, then among a cadre of citizens who hoped that arts could succeed where other commercial projects had failed in reviving Lynn's moribund downtown.

"It wasn't at a time when we could see all the money at the end of the road — so we had a celebration," says Boyd, a LynnArts board member. He asked buddies from Cheap Champagne to provide some musical juice while the old bank was being busted up, because, hey, who knew how long the arts center would last?

This Saturday, Aug. 6, Cheap Champagne — reconstituted as Sweet Loretta's Snake Oil Jug Band — returns to Central Square for another kind of celebration. A revitalized summer festival kicks off Saturday morning just outside the now-thriving arts center, underscoring the role the arts are playing in the re-development of the inevitably labeled City of Sin.

Billed as "Meet Me Downtown," the 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. event will feature children's activities, music, arts and crafts and food, set along Central Square and Union streets, partially blocked for the day. A farmers market will offer fresh produce; tin whistle player David O'Docherty will roam the streets, and singers like Tony Gallo, Julio Bare and Crystal Panjammers Steel Band will perform on a main stage.

Former Cheap Champagne musicians, now part of Sweet Loretta's, will be back, a sign that arts may bring "a more lasting change" downtown, says Boyd, now coordinator of alternative studies at North Shore Community College

While annual fairs have been held in Central Square for decades, this year's event is bigger — with about 50 tables for vendors and community groups — and is being held in August, rather than September. But the event harks back to early traditions, when the city ran a "Meet Me Downtown," festival, says Susan Halter, LynnArts associate director. "What is important to me is that people have a good experience at the festival," she says. "If vendors have a good time, they'll want to return. A surprising number of vendors are doing this for the first time and seeing what it's like to sell their wares."

Those wares range from homemade soap to sea-glass jewelry to kites and specialty teas. Food will be served by Frederick Ficks, the Gula-Gula Cafe, Sweet Pete's Ice Cream, Big Scoops and the North Shore Caribbean Association. Lynn Parks & Recreation will fire up the grill for hot dogs and hamburgers. Add face painting and balloon art, and the fair could blend with any typical New England sunshine fest.

"I think for Lynn residents, (the festival) encourages people to come back downtown," Halter says. "For new residents who are moving in, it makes them feel good that hey, this is a place where something is going on."

Indeed, Lynn's Central Square, a shopping destination back in the 1960s, isn't exactly hopping on an average work day. Shuttered and papered storefronts still line the streets, and the light foot traffic hardly impedes the cars negotiating the labyrinth of one-way streets. Longtime residents still talk of the failure of the Union Street mall, a development that contained — legend insists despite dubious facts — the only McDonald's to ever close. It joins the list of other Lynn also-ran plans, from an aborted effort to change the city's name to turning Lynn into a high-tech mecca during the '90s Internet boom.

But Halter, Boyd and others believe lasting revitalization is coming, particularly after zoning laws were changed to allow mixed residential and commercial use in long-abandoned downtown buildings.

"They say, 'City of Win,' now," Halter says. Or maybe "City of Spin." But undeniably, artists and artistic yuppies are moving into Lynn attracted by the more affordable loft space created by new zoning. For example, Boston refugee Steve Feldmann bought a condo in the re-modeled Boston Machine Lofts and in May opened the Gula-Gula Café



Sarah Slifer, left and Lida Winfield get into the music at the Lida Winfield Performance Art Studio. - Staff photo by Nicole Goodgue

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(www.gula-gula.com) across the street at 56 Central Square.

Why come to Lynn?

"Lynn is a very, very cool city," says Feldmann, a casualty of the high-tech bubble burst. "We're close proximity to the ocean, it's a quick train ride to get downtown (Boston) and the lofts out here were amazing.

"Basically, it all came down to potential," Feldmann says. "Lynn had the most potential and the most bang for the buck."

Feldmann followed a longtime dream by opening the European-style Gula-Gula café, named for the Prague bistro where he met his wife. The café was the first Central Square restaurant granted a liquor license in 10 years and maybe the first in decades with an actual wine list.

Feldmann promotes the arts regularly with exhibits and sales of paintings, often by local artists, that dot his cafe's walls and regular music performances, including an Aug. 6 performance by David Morales, a Lynn politician who moonlights in flamenco and bossa nova.

"This is a huge city with a diverse population," Feldmann says. "Having an arts festival brings all the people together in the downtown. I'm not sure it will make a difference in the long term, but it's a cool thing to have."

The arts festival will also bring in a taste of classic theater with scenes from Moliere's play, "The Mock Doctor," performed by the Iron-Rail Stage Company. The performance, scheduled for noon Saturday, is taken from the company's festival of one-act plays by Moliere, "Moliere's Shorts," which runs through Aug. 7 at LynnArts. Iron-Rail Stage artistic director Matthew Woods recently moved his community theater company from Topsfield to Lynn and renamed it for a trolley system he had heard once ran here.

"I just happen to be convinced, as I was talking to people, there really is a resurgence and interest in the arts coming to Lynn. The whole Central Square area is under development," Woods says. "It seems to be on the cusp. Why not take that opportunity?"

The City of Sin may, however, have a way to go before it gets labeled the Left Bank of the Saugus. Gula-Gula employee Krystal Naranjo, 18, a lifelong Lynn resident, still gets worried looks from friends when she tells them she works downtown — in a café, no less. "So I took her here and she was like: 'Oh my God this is so cool,'" she says.

Naranjo remembers shopping on Union Street as a child with her grandmother before retail business dried up. Indeed, longtime residents "have a lot of nostalgia — a lot of people remember when the downtown was vital — they want that to happen again," Boyd says.

For a day at least on Saturday, they may get their wish.

What's happening and when

"Meet Me Downtown: Lynn's Annual Festival of the Arts" Main Stage schedule:

10-10:30 a.m. Crystal Panjammers Steel Band

10:30-11 a.m. Walnut da Lyrical Genie, spoken word art

11 a.m. to noon Julio Bare

12-12:15 p.m. Iron Rail Stage performance

12:30-1 p.m. Crystal Panjammers Steel Band

1-2:15 p.m. Tony Gallo

2:15-2:30 p.m. Shekinah Dance Ministry

2:30-3 p.m. Crystal Panjammers Steel Band

3-4 p.m. Sweet Loretta's Snake Oil Jug Band

For information on the arts festival, call 781-598-5244 or go to www.lynnarts.org and click on "Meet Me Downtown." Meet Me Downtown is sponsored by LynnArts, Inc., Mayor Edward J. "Chip" Clancy Jr., the Office of Economic and Community Development, and Lynn Housing and Neighborhood Development.

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