



VISITING
MENONITES
BEND A
LOCAL EAR

UNITED STATES OF THE PARK

The civilizing madness of Washington Square Park, the original gorgeous mosaic. By Nancy Jo Sales

A hot afternoon in the park. The arch shimmers white in the baking sun. Sprawling into the square are thousands of people, so many you can barely move. The feeling is that of a party where the uninvited have stormed the doors. There's a wild-eyed old man with a duck bill on his nose zooming around on a pink little-girl's bike. Gleefully, he crashes through a cloud of soap bubbles being blown by a reedy fellow in a Z-100 shirt. Two stoned 15-year-olds, swimming in baggy jeans, try to catch the bubbles with their mouths. They laugh. A *Mad About You* couple sits on a stone wall, taking it all in serenely.

One proffers the other the remainder of a knish.

A bunch of just-graduated NYU students, all bald heads and hairy underarms, are cross-legged on the ground attempting to play Prince's "Kiss" with four out-of-tune guitars. A tall, toothless homeless man with a guitar of his own stands by, grimacing. He sidles up and kicks in with a bluesy riff, and for a minute, everybody sounds better. The NYU students bounce their heads à la *Wayne's World*. The homeless man grows self-conscious and ambles off.

A six-foot model, a wraith in Gucci sunglasses, scoops up her basenji and lopes out of the park. Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick enter holding hands; no one bothers them. They

stroll past Chucko, a portly middle-aged clown in enormous red shoes and a yellow polka-dot top hat. "It's not like 'Here's a balloon sculpture, kid, now gimme a dollar.'" Chucko says, screechily twisting a long-necked dinosaur for an impatient toddler. ("Bloon!" she demands, shaking her palm.) "I just did Conan," Chucko says, "there's a check in the mail, and it's fun to walk around in a clown suit."

The park is teeming, but the crowd is curiously soft-spoken. You can hear the cry of the hirsute Italian man getting drenched in the middle of the fountain. He turns his face to the sky. "You done good!"

"WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK IS THE CENTRAL chill spot of the Village," offers one habitué, "and a microcosm of the entire city." Created in 1828 as a military parade grounds, it was soon coveted as a place to chill by New York's growing wealthy class. In the 1890s, the old Knickerbocker families moving into the Georgian townhouses on Washington Square North hoped the space would serve as a barrier between them and their poor black and Italian neighbors just south. But they were wrong. The park has never served as a divider—much the opposite. Recent immigrants soon relaxed on the benches alongside proper ladies with baby carriages, one of which could have held Henry James ("I know not whether it is owing to the tenderness of early associations," the writer remembered fondly in *Washington Square*, "but this portion of New York appears to many persons the most delectable"). The park has always been a crossroads within a crossroads, the original gorgeous, if occasionally intoxicated, mosaic.

"Who took my fucking beer?" says the guy they call Louie the Loser. He used to be a contortionist, known as Rubber Band Man, until he got started drinking and grew a belly. "Give me back my beer!" Louie screams. Master Lee, currently performing in the fountain, ignores him, too busy juggling fire and apples. For his finale, a blindfolded Master Lee will cut a cucumber in two with a three-foot sword on the stomach of an audience member, usually some hapless-looking young man. Master Lee makes the young man stick the cucumber halfway down his pants.

The park has bred an infinite variety of performing subspecialties. There's Joey Joey—"no relation to Louie Louie or Duran Duran"—whose unique talent

is to heft corpulent girls from Staten Island and Queens on his shoulders as he rides around on a unicycle. He's a wiry little guy.

There's Al, the comic who makes his living insulting hecklers: "You *Brady Bunch*—watching motherfuckers!" And there are the Calypso Tumblers, six phenomenons of the gym who spring around like steroid kangaroos, relaying messages of racial harmony. "We're all one people!"

Later, a lazy shout goes up from the crowd lounging around the circle: "Showtime!"

A longhaired hippie dude's carving a pot pipe out of soapstone; a pretty Puerto Rican couple's cuddling on the steps. A thirtysomething mom is pausing on an evening walk with her 7-month-old. About 50 other people are resting in the summer twilight. "Brokin' Glass," says the hippie dude, not looking up from his work. "Brokin' Glass," echo several fans languidly.

Brokin' Glass, the park's reigning poet, stands before them squeezing his nipples, pumping his buttocks back and forth, rolling his head. Since he resembles a librarian, this odd preparation has a comic effect. People begin to laugh, not uneasily.

Brokin' Glass: "Whassup, y'all?"

A few people: "Whassup?"

Brokin' Glass begins:

I'm 28, I'm single, no kids, and life's great.

You're right, she's all that—the better I've had up to date.

Have I ever neglected you? Told you once, you couldn't hang?

Your father brought you here, me and him have in common one thing,

And nowadays it brings your mother such joy,

That in the middle of the night if you're awake you can hear her say . . . "Oh, boy."

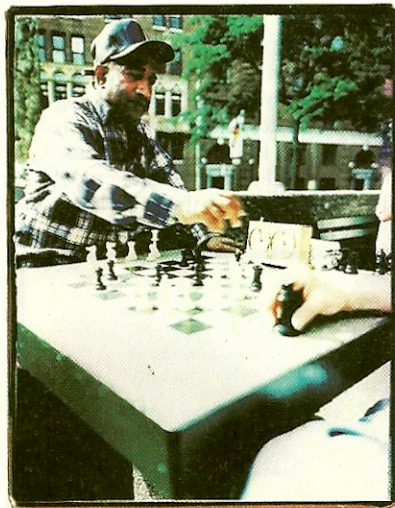
So there'll be no catch on the grass, baseball games, school proms . . .

To put it bluntly, kids, I'M JUST BONIN' YOUR MOMS!

"This park is the only place I'm not harassed by police," Brokin' Glass says with a shrug.

PERFORMERS COME AND GO. THE CHESS CIRCLE, at the southwest corner of the park, is a multi-culti social club that in its own way is as firmly established as the Friars. There are men, fewer women, who come here every day and have been doing so for years. "Decades," says Teddy, just Teddy, a former actor in his fifties. He has a gray mustache and always wears a woolly driving cap. "Chess is the great equalizer,"





ABOVE, PERFORMANCE-ART APPRECIATION; LEFT, CHESSMAN SWEET PEA IN MID-MATCH.

Teddy offers. "Nobody's black or white or Chinese when they're sitting across a chess board. They're just a mind."

There's a large contingent of out-of-work people here who are addicted to things other than chess. Drug deals go on; one fabric salesman complains of being in the middle of a game and having a sack of marijuana tossed across the table, landing on his lap. Professionals of all kinds—accountants, lawyers and particularly Wall Street businessmen—pass through; as do tourists riveted by the entries in their guide books urging them to go and try their skill against the chess hustlers.

"I feel slick," says Sweet Pea.

Bobby "Sweet Pea" Plummer is the chess circle's most infamous character. He can currently be seen in a TV ad for the *Daily News*. Perhaps three or four

hustlers in the chess circle are qualified to be masters, but in speed chess, which guys like Sweet Pea play (at \$5 for three games), winning is often as much up to style as skill.

"You're a dead man," the diminutive Sweet Pea tells his opponent. "I got so much coming at you. I got the kitchen sink and the kitchen sink's brother."

Sweet Pea's black leather visor shines. The gold bandanna around his neck lends him a jaunty air. Five elderly men are standing around watching him annihilate an NYU professor, one five-minute game after the next. The professor, a mild Frenchman with a three-day beard, scratches at his chin. His clock is ticking.

"I got you thinking," laughs Sweet Pea. "He feels sorry for you 'cause you're old," says one of the old men.

"He's been feeling sorry for me for three hours," Sweet Pea snaps.

"I gotta sit down," says the same fellow, trying to push his way onto Sweet Pea's bench.

"Get out of here, man, you're bothering me." Sweet Pea pushes back at the man with his hip.

Sweet Pea bangs the clock. "Why don't you give up, man," he tells the professor. "You are washed up, face it."

The professor manages a saving move. Sweet Pea's side of the clock clicks on a little longer than usual. "Never panic under pressure," he says.

He continues his attack with a bishop. "Bishops are strong, boy," he exclaims.

"Those motherfuckers are monsters!"

"You know," remarks one of the kibitzers, "he hasn't stopped talking since this morning."

"He hasn't stopped talking since he was born," another says.

Sweet Pea shakes two fists in the air. "I am the attack master!"

Queen takes knight. "You are in jail, mister."

Knight takes queen. "You are surrounded!"

The professor smiles. "It sure looks that way."

He gets up, enclosing Sweet Pea's winnings in a handshake. "Good games, Sweet Pea."

The professor climbs on his mountain bike and pushes on out to MacDougal Street.

ALMOST FROM THE BEGINNING, CITY authorities have seen the park as something that had to be cleaned up, whether of riffraff, dogs, or marijuana. These campaigns have met with limited success, although Mayor Koch did manage to impose a midnight curfew, over the loud protests of many park denizens.

Since Giuliani made "quality of life" a priority, drug-dealing arrests have more than doubled, from 400 to nearly 1,000 a year. According to some local businessmen, however, the problem appears to be on the demand side. "This is one big gorgeous mosaic of pot smokers, is what it is," says a dealer who asks to be called Bud. "You get tourists, you get guys from the financial district, NYU students, AIDS patients. Japanese. Famous people. David Lee Roth got arrested in here buying weed."

As an afterthought, he says, "You looking for something today?"

The dreadlocked Jamaicans occupy the chess circle and the fountain area. "Talk to me, baby girl, I got ki-yind bud from Jah-may-kah." "Lively up yourself." The badass homeboy dealers steadily roll around the park—step, hip, roll; step, hip, roll. They're phat and flashy in their neon Polo and Nike gear, forthright in their hustle: "Don't make me stand out here all day—"

Bud says this is their "office," and it is an all-day, everyday job. "I'm glad it's getting to be summer," he says. "Sometimes you're out here in the rain or cold."

But today it's warm, and the homeboys lean against the fence, watching the girls go by. One of them gets a look from a young lady in behind-defining jeans. He springs off the fence and rolls.

RICHARD LEVINE MET MONICA HALL JUST A few steps from the park, in an NYU

classroom. They were undergraduate drama students together.

"I remember after class sitting in the fountain and telling each other how old we were," says Hall. She looks like Pocahontas, in pigtails and gold-framed glasses.

"You were drunk," says Levine. He's a nice Jewish boy with Frank Zappa hair, in ripped jeans.

"Oh, yes, I was drunk!" Hall remembers, laughing. "It was the last day of classes. I was light-headed. You had to walk me around."

"I took care of you," says Levine.

They live together now and plan to be married sometime next year. "We have a lot of different memories of this park," Levine says. "It's a very romantic park."

"I like it around 6:30 at night," says Hall.

"It's magical," he says.

"It's enchanting," she agrees.

"The lights go on, and there's something otherworldly about it," he says. "I can feel the presence of spirits."

She looks up at him. "Yes."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE GOES ON IN THE dog run, at the south-central corner of the park. As the owners bask on the benches, leashes and iced-Starbucks cups in hand, a frail woman in her eighties walks around the pebbled yard, carefully petting every dog. Her name is Amy Goldring, and she lives nearby. "A lot of these dogs know each other well," she says, patting the flank of a bristly mutt; he's stopped for a moment from his game of biting a Lab. "They'll go to the gate and wag their tails when they see someone they know coming."

Goldring has candy-red hair and red pencil eyebrows; she's wearing a red beret, a puffy purple jacket, orange sunglasses. She carries two mysteriously heavy tote bags. "A lot of strange people come in here," she says. "I just come to see the dogs."

The dogs shoot after balls; pebbles fly up with a crunch. The dogs horse around, tails wagging continually. The scene here is cross-cultural, too: There's a Dalmation, a Shih Tzu, a Chow, a keeshond, a weimaraner, a French bulldog, assorted mutts. They're wet; many of them have been standing under the spray of a hose one of the owners is training into the air for general use.

They're getting wild. Suddenly, there's a commotion. "There's a young boy dog here," frets a short-haired young woman in expensive sandals. "A puberty dog."

"Bubba!" "Amos!" "Chin-Chin!" The

scene's becoming something out of Pasolini. Owners flip-flop hysterically through the cloud of dust.

"You don't want him; he's a boy," a woman with a tight perm tells her Siberian husky, who's happily humping a chocolate Lab.

"Why not?" one fellow asks wryly. "This is the Village."

The hose gets dragged into the center of things. Someone's thumb increases the pressure of the stream turned on pleasure zones. "This'll break it up—" Owners address one another, laughing awkwardly or trying to sound like they know how to handle it, like dog people. "I, uh, he's never done this before—" "The best thing to do is just let them ride it out—"

"New Yorkers are separated from their families," muses Amy Goldring. "Dogs are good love objects."

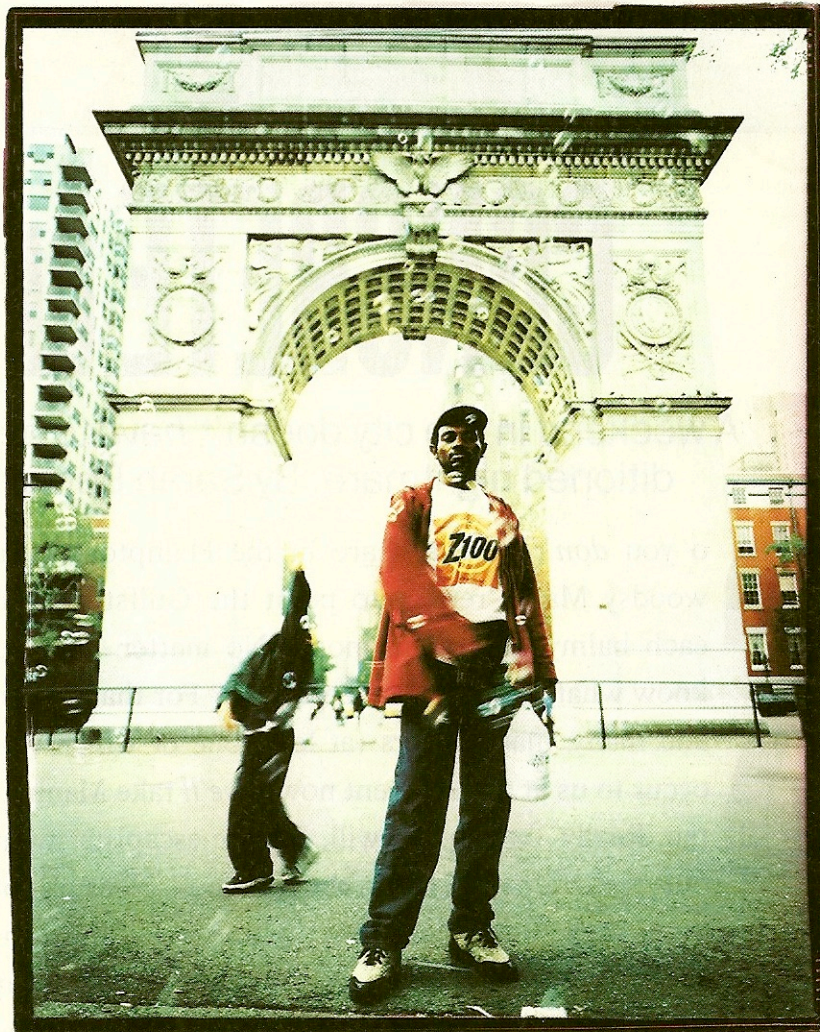
PREACHER MIKE CAME HERE BY HIMSELF from Trinidad 22 years ago. It wasn't long after he landed in New York that he came to Washington Square Park, and he

hasn't been away from it much since. He sits in the chess circle all day long, a Don King-haired man in a windbreaker.

"See that tree right there?" Preacher Mike asks. He points to an elm that's more than 200 years old. "The first time I came to this park, I was sitting under that tree and suddenly an unseen force grabbed me. I couldn't move for ten or fifteen minutes. *Your fate is now*, the force said. *It's beginning to arise*. The heavens opened. It had never occurred to me before that what I read in academic form could be experienced.

"This entire place took on a different view. The spirit showed me the seven arches"—he points to the seven entryways of the law school across West 3rd Street—"corresponding to the seven churches in Revelation. It showed me the seven wheels of Ezekiel." Preacher Mike indicates seven stone circles cut high on the NYU dorms on MacDougal Street.

"My eyes began to open to all this," he says, sweeping his hand around him. "God is so detailed."



PEACE, LOVE & A WAND: BUBBLE MAN.