

DROPPING IN JIM SULLIVAN

Harvard Square, the way it was

Just about everyone, when they first moved to this area, used to fall in love with Harvard Square. I know I did in 1978.

Living in West Somerville, I was in the Square all the time, soaking up its music and atmosphere, its nightclubs and coffee shops. Yet I was told by longtime Square denizens that the Square wasn't what it used to be. And that's exactly what I was telling people by the mid-'80s, as corporate America raised its acquisitive snout and gobbled up the small, the cool and the funky. Today's Square, with a few scattered exceptions, is a nonenclosed mall.

For Steve Nelson, Harvard Square was losing its cool around 1973-74. "You started getting chains coming in, and that changed it," he says. Nelson, who's 62, now runs a video production company

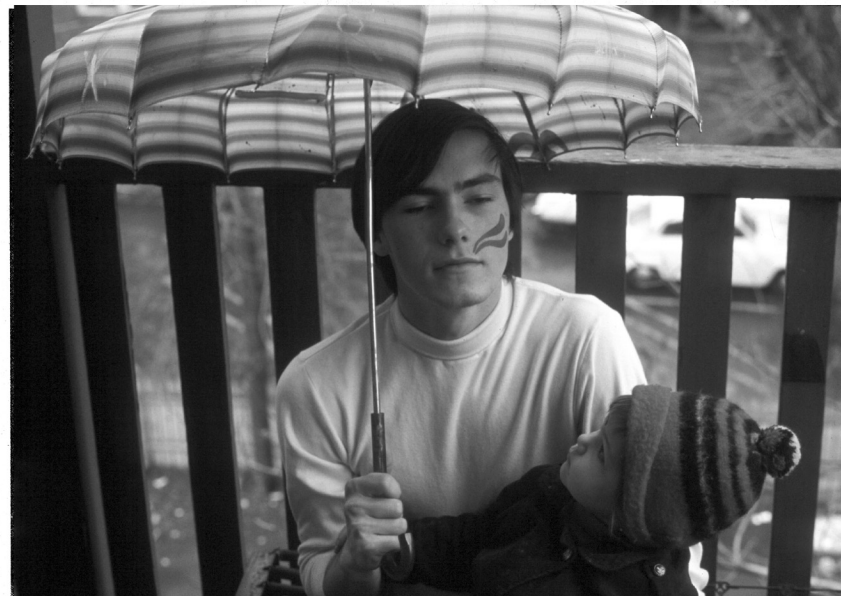
based in Gloucester. From 1967-68, he managed a hip Boston rock club, the Boston Tea Party on Lansdowne Street, and took photographs of Boston and Cambridge through 1973.

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"The Square: Stills from the Scene, Harvard Square and Cambridge, 1967-1973," New England School of Art & Design, 75 Arlington St., 2d floor. Through tomorrow, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Forty-four of those Harvard Square photos, culled from 1,000 or so in Nelson's collection, make up an exhibit that hangs through tomorrow at the New England School of Art and Design in Park Square. There are famous people, members of the J. Geils Band and Jonathan Richman, for example, but Nelson's show is primarily about the Square of that era, with hints of

the pending transition, as in a shot of the Goodwill store with a high-rise office building going up behind it.

"What I was doing," says Nelson, "was just capturing that world around me, the



PHOTO/STEVE NELSON

"Turn On, Tune In" is among the images that salute a bygone Harvard Square.

anthropology of it. I had an academic background as an observer of society and culture. I wanted to show that sense of transition from a sleepy place to an active place that was a magnet to people. When I first came there in 1962, it was just a quiet college town. The whole '60s explosion hadn't happened yet; the world was going on as it always had."

Nelson's photos were taken during the '60s, but the images that define that era — the long hair, the protest movement, the racial strife, the social ferment — aren't the focus of his exhibit.

"I'm just reflecting day-to-day lives," Nelson says from his Gloucester office. "A lot of people characterize the '60s as a political time and it was, but day to day it wasn't. For most of us, it was a fun, great time and we got on with our lives. I was after the commonplace and more mundane, as opposed to huge events. Even though I could have, I never took pictures at concerts."

The photos here are "places that were offbeat and off-the-beaten track. One of

the reasons I hung up so many images was I wanted to create an environment, the texture of daily life in the Square, to convey a feeling of what it was — a very peaceful, creative and colorful time. I think they stand up pretty well as photographs."

There's one of Paul Shapiro, guitarist for the band the Hallucinations, and one of Nelson's wife, Jan, both at the Patisserie Francaise, which Nelson recalls as a place to talk, read and drink endless cups of coffee. "It was an aimless life," Nelson recalls with a laugh, "and in a way we were 'dropped out.'"

There are shots of a hawkler selling the old Cambridge Phoenix, one of former WBCN-FM DJ Jim Perry. There are little old storefronts, a Chinese laundry on Mt. Auburn Street, a spot called Cardell's, a cheap eating place opposite the Harvard Square Theatre (which was not the multiplex it is now, but a large one-room hall). Many photos have vivid red, white and blue color schemes. "I was a draft resister and a civil-rights activist," says Nelson, "and I saw myself as a patriot."



PHOTO/STEVE NELSON

The T gets its close-up in Steve Nelson's exhibit that runs through tomorrow.