

Pinch of Moog, a dash of light

by Richard Nusser

For more than a century Greenwich Village enjoyed an international reputation as a cultural incubator aswarm with avant-garde ideas and a host of resident geniuses capable of transforming them into great art. From Poe to Pollock, gifted people lived, loved, dreamed, and drank here. Old and new forms of expression merged in an atmosphere of learning and experimentation.

For a time, though, it has looked as if that tradition was about to fade away forever, given the present-day Village most notable for high-rise apartment houses, gaudy boutiques, souvlaki

stands, and Mafia discotheques. Rent and crime rates have soared. Theatres have closed and the club scene is just now struggling back to life after being swamped in a wake of rock 'n' roll festivals. The walking wounded of the welfare state and the drug culture threaten to drive patrons of the arts off the streets, back uptown, or to the suburbs to feed on straw-hat theatre and an occasional visit from the Boston Pops.

But thanks to a combination of circumstances, and a handful of individuals, it now appears possible that the tide may be turning. Economic conditions and an overabundance of talented artists in every field are contributing to improved conditions, but these factors alone won't insure a cultural renaissance here, or anywhere else, unless artists have places to meet, perform, experiment, and — last but by no means least — earn a living.

On the bright side we have Westbeth, for all the troubles it's gone through, producing artistic returns with dance concerts, art shows, theatre, and an in-house video hook-up that could be the forerunner of a much larger cultural communications system. Not to mention the sense of community that's being established there.

SoHo has survived and brought the art scene back downtown, where it once belonged. Several recording studios have sprung up here in the past year or so, attracting some of the biggest names in the music business. Even John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who call the Village their "spiritual home," want to settle here permanently.

Most of those endeavors have a state subsidy or an audience they can depend on for their economic survival. But the latest addition to the Village's avant-garde community, the media artist, faces a more daunting plight. These cultural pioneers hope to humanize technology. But synthesizing one's emotions on an acoustic guitar, or through the sound of one's own voice, is a few thousand bucks less expensive than pushing them through an electronic synthesizer. And there seem to be more capable media artists, representing everything from video to electronic music, at large in New York today than in any other place on the globe.

Credit for this is due the New York State Council on the Arts, among very few others. That agency has funded many of the projects involving people who are building a sound base for a technological arts movement. Seymour Kaback and Irving Koven are two names that might be added to the list of supporters.

Kaback, a prosperous air conditioning contractor, and Koven,

whose construction firm is responsible for several posh uptown salons (Gucci, Valentino, and St. Laurent's, among others), are co-owners of the Mercer Arts Center, a complex of five theatres, two cabarets, and three workshops that was initiated by the D'Lugoff brothers, Art and Burt.

Kaback and Koven took the place over by default, after the D'Lugoffs ran out of money, leaving the two contractors stuck with thousands of dollars worth of work completed and a theatrical complex the New York Times has dubbed "Lincoln Center downtown." After a shaky start, the place seems to be on its way to becoming a stimulating addition to Village life. Kaback hopes the theatres and cabarets will support the over-all cost of developing the center as a breeding ground for new talent.

It could happen. Rip Torn wants to start a resident acting company, and there is talk of staging a multi-media version of

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