

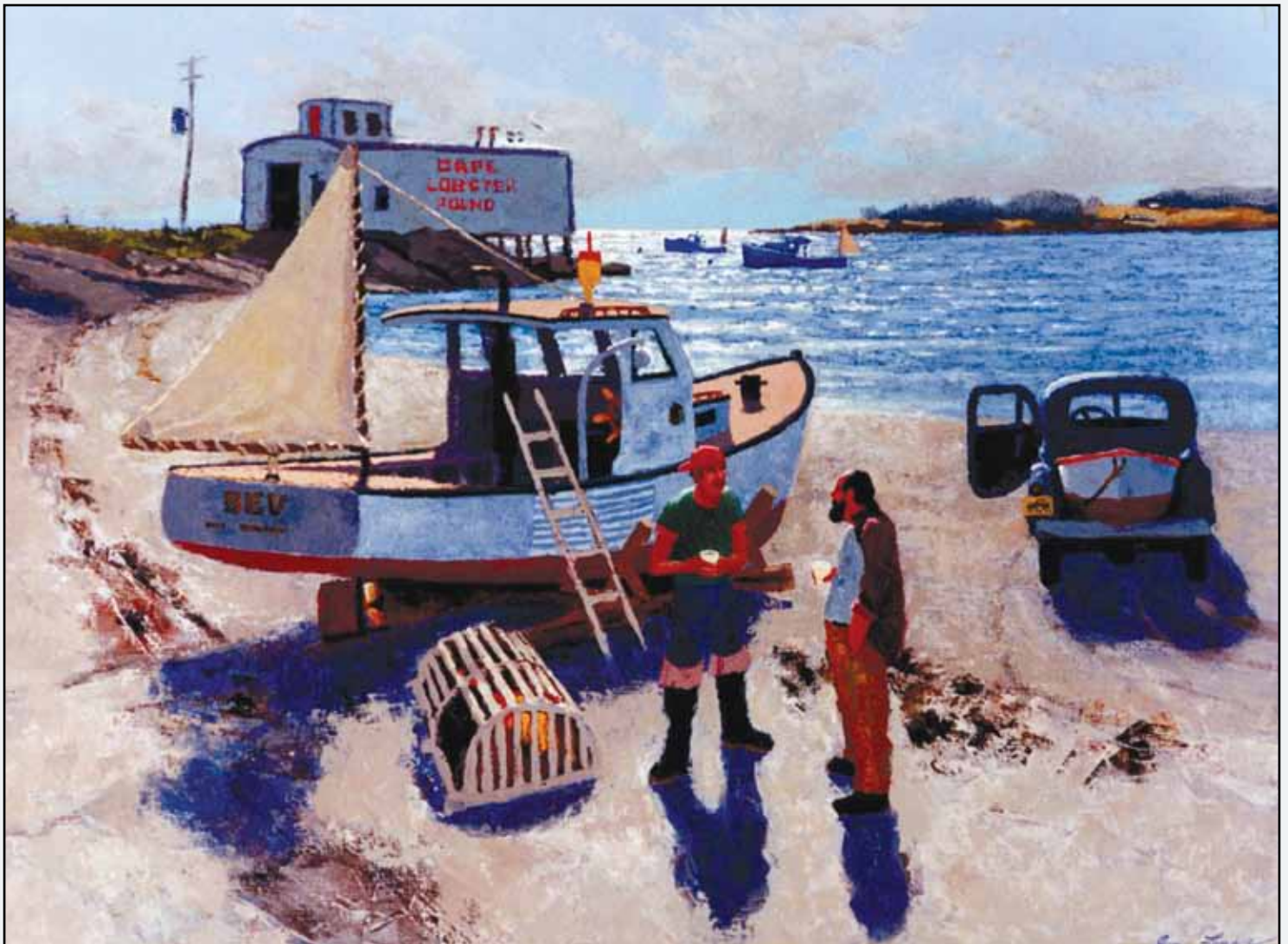
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Sampling 1970s Portland.

BY OLIVIA GUNN

IMAGE ASSEMBLY, SKYLINE BY COREY TEMPLETON; PORTRAITS BY PAUL LUISE



Paul Luise

Memories flicker across their faces; secrets dance upon their grins. Over the span of two hours, I'm told the story of the 10 years they spent passionately and wholly devoted to life in a section of Portland abandoned by those who lacked the artists' eye. Like Neverland, only those who believed it could see it, but I'll be honest, it's a tale you'd have to see to believe.



Denis Boudreau



Paul Luise snapped this portrait of the 1974 Old Port Artists Wharf Show exhibitors. Standing, left to right: Norman Miller Thomas, John Legere, Jane Wray, Robert Drinon, Michael Willis, Howard Clifford Jr., Robert E. Laveault, Joseph Cousins, Normand St. Pierre, and Edy Bishop-Bubier. Seated, left to right: Ellsworth Greene, Karen Osborne, Lenny Hatch, Karen Marchetti, Jennifer Lord Gilman, and Wende Legere.

Characters as vivid as those from the pages of J.M. Barrie challenge my millennial's imagination, the foundation of which has slowly begun to buckle under student loans, rent prices, and Twitter.

From Stanley the Stripper, who dressed in drag and hung around the Crow's Nest; to Hell's Angel Jake Sawyer; and Dave the Dog Man, whose nine dogs followed wherever he went, I've replayed the stories over and over again in my mind and I still can't tell you if the members of this tribe were the first or very last of their kind.

ONCE UPON A TIME

It was 1972. Photographer Paul Luise was 21 and enrolled at PoGo (USM) when he went to see a show for artists Denis Boudreau and Howard Clifford at Joe Cousins's Longfellow Square Gallery. After the show, he was invited back to Cousins's and Clifford's studio on the corner of Fore and Ex-

change streets.

"We're going down Exchange and there are no street lights, no parking meters," Paul laughs. "So I'm trying to follow peoples' voices as we're walking, and Joe Cousins says to me, 'If you trip over something, don't worry. It'll either scamper or groan.'"

You had to scale up three flights to get to the studio.

"We start going up the floors, and the place is total chaos. It looks like it's been

bombed out. When we get through all of the grunge," Paul says, with Denis listening, "I mean the streets smelled like urine." He smiles, the fragrance coming back to him. "When we get up into the gallery, it's white walls, hanging plants, all this stuff. It was just so cool to see all of this beautiful creativity within this chaos."

He shapes the image with his hands, still amazed by what he witnessed 40 years ago when Denis cuts in. "Geodes."



"This isn't me—I never wore pants like that" says poet Martin Steingesser. "The sticks themselves are beautiful, and I like them to show below the bottom of the chaps, which is what I wore." At the inaugural Old Port Festival in 1972, the original Shoestring Theatre was an outpost of Bread & Puppet. Starting in 1981 Nancy Tyndall and Steingesser were leaders of the parade on stilts.

URBAN MYTH



Artists Phil Willard, Howard Clifford, Karen Osborne, Joe Cousins, Bob Drinon, Jon Leger, Wally Cantwell, and Denis Boudreau (seated). Only Karen, Joe, and Denis are alive today.

Paul looks to Denis, who lost his eyesight in recent years to effects of the Vietnam War, “What did you say?”

“Geodes. You know, the rock you break open and there’s all kinds of crystals inside.”

Paul turns to me. “Yeah, that was it.”

As the men’s wives, Sarah and Janet,

catch up, every so often chiming with in with their own memories, the two men go back and forth, painting vignettes of their days in the Old Port.

“We lived the way we wanted to,” Denis says. “Nobody told us what to do. We walked around barefooted, we did what we



Paul Luise and Denis Boudreau revisit their much-gentrified stomping grounds 40 years later.



URBAN MYTH

Clockwise from
6 o'clock: Howard
Clifford, Jon Legere,
Joe Cousins,
Bob Drinon, Denis
Boudreau



the Old Port *were* the college kids. If they insulted a waitress or one of the local women, they'd get their asses kicked."

The few businesses that did exist included Zeitman's Grocery, whose sign lingers as one of the few remnants of the time there was a distinct smell of menthol about the store. Today, Dock Fore Restaurant sits in its place.

WHEN WE WERE COOL

Denis tells me it was a place they claimed because of the cheap rent (\$40 to \$50 monthly) and the fact that nobody else wanted to live here. "We did whatever we

damn-well pleased."

Butch Green and Lenny Hatch were already in residence as the pioneers of the Old Port community, having arrived in the '60s and taken their place at 45 Exchange Street. Originally, Denis had shared a studio there with Michael Willis, where they paid \$7 a month. Friends Jon Legere and George Dole had studios on the third floor.

A year went by before Legere revealed this perfect space at the Mariner's Church to Denis, and soon three artists—Denis, Paul, and Jon Legere—split the entire top floor into studios. When Paul arrived, Denis and Jon occupied two-thirds of the floor and offered

La Vie Bohème

A detail from John Legere's *Lobster Business*, oil on canvas, on our cover in 1998.





Peggy Greenhut Golden at Posters Plus in 1978.

Paul a side he remembers as rich with the smell of a fire the space had once endured. He paid \$50 a month, which he assumed was his portion of the entire rent.

Legere had the biggest studio, which became somewhat legendary. According to witnesses, he rigged a giant bed that hung from the ceiling 35 feet up, and could be raised and lowered. Perhaps I should have pushed for more details on this topic, but something told me it was best left to the imagination. Denis says the studio was so large it had its own atmosphere. Often, snow would develop from the nails protruding through the frosted shingles.

Most of the members in this urban arts village were in their 30s or 40s, still struggling with authority and all that comes with it. Instead of conforming to the times, they lived and worked as though it were 1874 in France.

“I had big impressions,” Paul admits. “I was thinking like the French Impressionists. All these guys were going to be known.”

Days were spent working in their separate studios. Then, come five o’clock, everyone gathered in one of the two local bars, the Seamen’s Club or Old Port Tavern. It was what Denis calls their “regimen.”

The Seamen’s Club was where Bull Fee-ney’s operates today. At five, you’d drop whatever brush or lens you were using and head for happy hour.

“We’d meet, and the businessmen in the community would come down and party with us because they wanted to hear all of our crazy stories,” says Denis. “They’d come through the door and buy everyone a drink, and we’d go there because it was happy hour and there was free food. So, we’d eat and drink all night without spending any money.”

On one particular evening, Gov. Ken Curtis showed up with his wife and another



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URBAN MYTH

er couple. He was beckoned to the tables of artists, who wanted to talk about funding for their work. After about an hour, Paul remembers someone sending their apprentice out for cold cuts and rolls, which they made into sandwiches under the table during their meeting with the governor.

FROM HERE TO HYPERBOLE

It doesn't sound as if there were really designated days of the week, though Paul says he often went back home on weekends to get a break from the parties and the after parties, which both men remember quite fondly.

During the long winters, it was a race to find a someone with heat at the end of the night, and when all else failed, well, "There were always women," Denis says frankly.

I try not to overthink this, but when "groupies" are mentioned, I can't help but laugh. "Groupies. You had groupies?"

"It made sense then," Denis says. "Still does."

Denis must have had a leg up on the oth-



Pritam Singh Developer, Seeker, Art Collector

Pritam Singh, born Paul Labombard in 1952, came to Maine when his father was assigned to Brunswick Naval Air Station, a bustling P-3 base. As the story goes, starting with a \$500 loan to purchase his first property, Pritam soared to prominence as a visionary developer in the Old Port in the late '70s and '80s. He transformed familiar buildings such as the warehouse at 99 Silver Street into stylish condominiums. His Market Street Market project has been the site of a succession of popular restaurants. Just as he finished creating the Inn By The Sea in Cape Elizabeth in the mid '80s—decorated with valuable Audubon folios—he purchased the Truman Annex in Key West for \$17.25M.

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Above, the third floor of the Mariner's Church—an artists' studio in the '70s and today a banquet and meeting venue. At right, artist Edy Bishop and her daughter Robin, who died tragically in a hit and run accident as a youngster. Left, Bull Feeney's on Fore Street, which was once the Seaman's Club.

er fellows since he'd managed to find a forgotten gas pipe that had a valve on it in his studio. He went for five years paying \$50 rent, heat included.

On any given night, you could find somewhere to be with something to do and someone to do it with, and the guy who seemed always to have something going on was rebel-man Jake Sawyer.

"Was Jake an artist, too?" I ask innocently. Paul and Denis crack up.

"He was an artist all right," bursts Denis, "a con-artist."

After serving in the Army and winding up incarcerated in multiple prisons including Folsom, Jake joined the Hell's Angels. When he returned to the east coast, he was a regular in the Old Port. Sorry, not a regular, more like a legend.

"One night, Jake told me to hold the front door open, and that's after he spilt beer on the dance floor," Denis tells us. "I swung it wide, he started his motorcycle, and he drove it right inside—you know, a big chopper. He drove it past the bar, onto the dance floor, spun around on the wet floor, drove up the stairs, and out the back door."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Why not. I realize there will be no way

to truly fathom how these guys lived. Were that to happen in the Old Port Tavern today, most of the police would be downtown in a heartbeat, an impressive force. But then, BC (before craft beers)? It was just another night, and now it's just another memory.

As 30-somethings, Paul and Denis lived lives entirely alien to my 20-something existence. Their weeks were filled with what they loved most: their art, their friends, their town. And while we all strive for something like it, I'm not sure a life like that could ever exist again. Not unless you have the money for it.

GRIMMER TALES

But this is not to romanticize every aspect



A bygone Cape Elizabeth beach house party: Debbie Isaacson, former *Press Herald* editor and Pepperclub restaurateur Eddie Fitzpatrick, and the late art critic Philip Isaacson are on the grass in front of assorted artist friends. Howard Clifford and Kenny Rosen stand behind Sharon Townsend (in denim shirt) at left. Pat Hardy, in red pants, with DeWitt Hardy behind her stand at center. Joseph Nicoletti, Richard Wilson, and Frederick Lynch are the men at the picnic table. Judith Sobol stands behind them and Patty Rosen is at far right.

FROM TOP: PAUL LUISE (2); PORTLAND ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE 60S, 70S, AND 80S FACEBOOK PAGE; COURTESY DIANE HUDSON

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of the time. They, too, experienced the loss and the pain none of us is exempt from. As Denis tells me, "there were good times, but there was a lot of dark stuff going on."

The murder of Nikki Cleveland, a local real estate agent and close friend and supporter of the artists, casts a cloud over the otherwise happy conversation. Cleveland disappeared after showing a cottage in Yarmouth in the summer of 1981; her body was discovered 17 days later. Joel Caulk, who became known as the "Want-Ad Rapist," was charged with the murder, convicted, and he received a life sentence.

Then there was Cowboy, a loner who showed up one day and hung around for a while. "A really great guy" until the FBI showed up and arrested him for shooting a cop in the Midwest.

It's from these headline-tales that the cultural intimacy of Portland at the time is revealed. "Everything that happened, you knew about it," says Paul. So, I ask about poet James Lewisohn, and all at once everyone has something to share. Paul starts, "He would be considered a modern American poet. I was into that group, and in the '60s they were all very dramatic guys."

"He was partying with us that night, and got so drunk," Denis interjects. He's referring to the night in 1974 when Lewisohn shot and killed his wife. "He had an inferiority complex. He was short, very short. And he owned a gun, which is a bad combination."

Even so, Lewisohn, convicted murderer, was awarded a \$7,500 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1977.

CHRIS DENISON

URBAN MYTH



Building the "mall" at 10 Exchange Street: Ian Valentine, Walter Cantwell, and John Dunn in 1978.

GROWING UP

As a haunt, the Old Port that Paul and Denis knew existed from 1970 to about 1983, though both of them were out by '79. Paul moved west for a few months before returning to his home in Limington, and Denis bought a house.

"Denis said the end was coming when Greater Portland Landmarks asked if they could do tours in our studios," Paul says. "We were all anxious because we wanted to sell our stuff, but at the same time, Denis said, 'When people start seeing what we've done with these places, they are going to start seeing the value.' He said, 'This is the beginning of the end.'"

And so it was. Paul remembers the day when rent for his studio above OPT went from \$50 to \$400 a month. Denis recalls having to rent a secret studio just to get work done because of all the visitor traffic.

"There were three stages of the Old Port," Denis tells me. "The early stage in the 1800s, when it was the root of Portland for business. Then it was dead for awhile. Then the artists planted the seed and they occupied the Old Port for 10 years before it got gentrified. It was our piece of heaven because the rent was dirt cheap, nobody bothered us, and we were free-range."

Having met with Paul and Denis before this year's Old Port Festival—they lay claim to participation in developing the original idea—I find myself caught up in reflection walking through the over-crowded streets, trying to find just one of the stages. Could it be true what they say? Or were these two spinning me tall tales?

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URBAN MYTH

Standing in the crowd on Fore Street as some folksy artist sings of everlasting love, I turn to see the faded Zeitman's sign and, across from Bull Feeney's, the Mariner's Church. Overwhelmed by the swarming streets and hundreds of conversations I can't help but overhear, in that moment I feel I'd

David "The Dog Man" Koplou

**Sign Painter, City Council Watchdog
Left Portland, 1988.**

Update:

Brian Kyes, police chief of Chelsea, Massachusetts, was speechless. "I was up in Portland just the other day, meeting with the Portland Police Department." Afterward, "I walked through the Portland Public Library and took in the photo exhibit on the lower level [*Our Place, Our Times, Portland Through The Decades, 1930s to 2000s.*]" I looked at a photo and did a doubletake. It was David Koplou! I took a photo with my cell phone and showed it to others in my office. "Who is that?" he asked a colleague, then watched the slow dawn of recognition. "It's Koplou."

"His hair is much longer now," the chief says of Koplou in Chelsea, "but it's him."

Court contests follow Koplou as reliably as his dogs once did ("I haven't seen him with dogs in Chelsea"). For decades, he's been famous for appearing *pro se*, with opponents grimly praising his legal acumen. But his cases never reached the Supreme Court, as urban legend, fanned by the internet, claims. To see Koplou in action at the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine, visit <https://casetext.com/case/state-v-koplou>

(See related story, page 133.)



give anything to step around the corner and climb the steps at 368 Fore Street to a whole new lifestyle as Paul did in 1972.

As we're wrapping up, it's obvious Denis could keep going. He says he could go on for

PHOTO: ALBUM COVER, DETAIL

days about those times and the friends he so loved, like Jake Sawyer, John Legere.

"I saw Lenny Hatch today," he tells me. "He said the Old Port days were the happiest days of his life. And I can vouch for that. They were the happiest days of my life."

There were at least 35 artists living in the studios by the late 1970s, including Maury Colton, Peyton Higgison, Alison Hildreth, Middy Childman, Ken Thomas, and Norman Thomas, all members of the Lost Boys on Neverland Island. Each plays a role in one another's history and is written into a story that's shut off to any new chapters.

Forty years from now, I wonder what story I'll be written into, if any at all. I wonder if I'll ever find my Neverland, the place where I'll never grow old and never forget or if, like Paul, my Neverland will find me. ■

To read *Portland Magazine* feature stories that cover this period in depth, including coverage of Harvey Prager, Cathy Moulton, and James Lewisohn, visit portland-monthly.com/portmag/2015/7/1970s.



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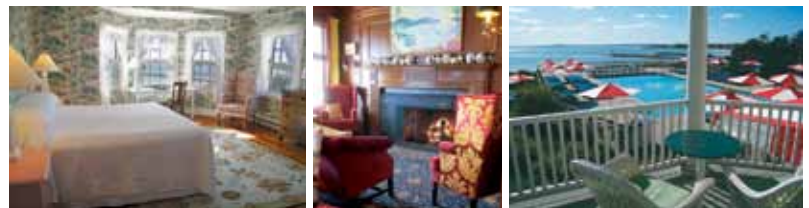
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