

# Time Out

## New York

The obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment  
September 26–October 3, 2002 Issue No. 365 \$2.99

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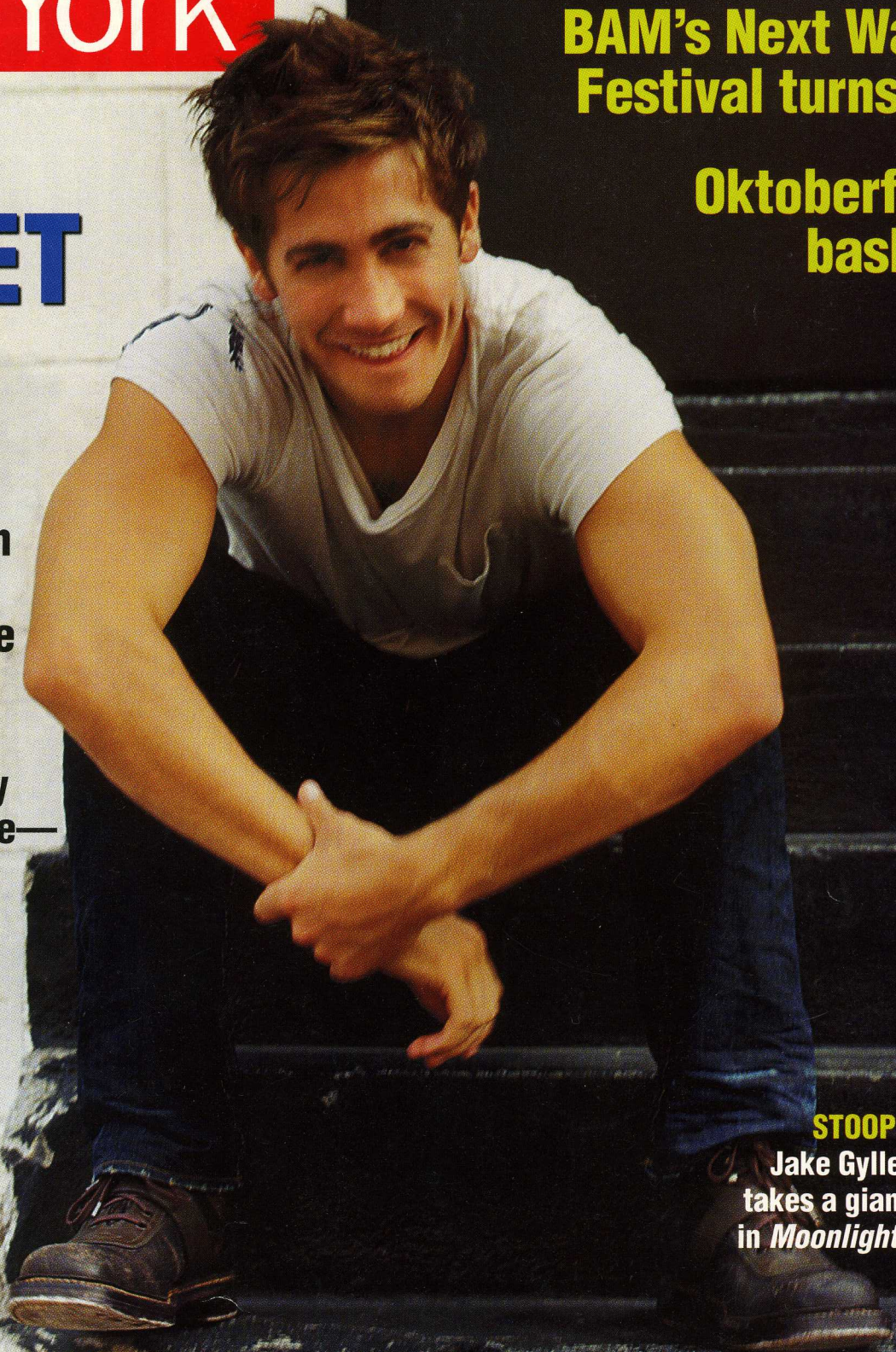
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**STOOP DOGG**  
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in *Moonlight Mile*.





# IN MY LITTLE TOWN...

...I grew up believing that New York was the smallest place on earth. Or so says Queens native and architectural historian Barry Lewis. Photographs by David S. Allee



**GOODS AND PLENTY**  
Lewis of Woodhaven has been a community stalwart since 1937.

I never understood the out-of-towner's view of New York. That this was a cold, impersonal, anonymous place where no one knew their neighbors. Now, I was born here. Back in 1945. At the now-long-gone Polyclinic Hospital on 50th Street, across from the old Madison Square Garden. And in Woodhaven, the neighborhood my parents took me home to, the words *cold*, *impersonal* and *anonymous* were simply not applicable. Not at all. Not ever.

Woodhaven was in Queens, technically, but its residents thought of it as an extension of Brooklyn, so much so that we called the border the "city" line. We even got off from school on Brooklyn Day in June, much to the chagrin of my Manhattan cousins. And we had the el (no, not the L), the continuation of the Broadway/Brooklyn "elevated" line that ran over Jamaica Avenue. Its

rumbling set the rhythm of "the Avenue," including the "el pause," when conversation stopped in deference to its screeching; and then conversation resumed as if nothing had happened. Did noisy trains and rusting pillars dampen our enthusiasm for Jamaica Avenue? Never. It was where it was at—where we shopped, hung out, drank ice-cream sodas, went to the movies.

And it was where my family's business was, and still is. Lewis of Woodhaven, the neighborhood's department store and, when I was growing up, the largest retailer on the Avenue. At Lewis's, each counter was a different department: one for hardware and electrical stuff, another for pots and pans, yet another for underwear and sweatshirts. We probably had 400,000 different items, and my father, my uncle and my grandfather could locate at least 300,000 of them instantly. That's how well they

knew their business. Our only competitor was a Woolworth's across the street, but according to my father, it didn't count because it was only a "chain," run by "managers," not owners.

The original Lewis's, on Jamaica Avenue near Forest Parkway, opened in 1937. But my father and my uncle Julie, who were like Siamese twins in everything they did in life, couldn't work under the same roof together, so in 1954 my father opened a branch at the other end of Woodhaven, five blocks down the Avenue. And for the rest of his life, my father swore my uncle didn't know how to run a business. There were Julie's customers and Larry's customers, and like the natives of Glasgow and Edinburgh, they never met, mixed or intermarried, even though they lived within catcalls of one another.

Woodhaven was the kind of place where everyone watched out for you, especially if you





“The Brodys lived in back of the candy store. The Gorins lived upstairs from the butcher shop.... Home and business were an extension of each other.”

were a kid. Every adult was your parent. And when I was eight, the advantages of this were hard to see. I'd already concluded that two parents were enough, and didn't need the rest of the grown-ups in "town" telling me what to do. But I couldn't get away from it. I had an extra onus: I was the Lewis kid. Everyone shopped in my family's two stores, and they knew I was Larry's son, not Julie's, and wanted to know if the store carried a certain whatsis. I explained to them that I was only a kid and it was my father who ordered the whatsis, but they assumed that every Lewis baby came out of the womb knowing when three-pronged outlets would be in stock. There was no dissuading them.

My family's business may have been the biggest on the Avenue, but it had plenty of company. Under the el, you could buy just about anything. And every store was identified with its owner. Arnowitz was the haberdasher and Gorin the kosher butcher (who knew exactly how my mother liked her flanken). There was the Jewish candy store run by the Brodys, where on Fridays you got egg creams and homemade blintzes (Mrs. Brody's Jewish answer to Catholic no-meat holy days); and there was the German candy store run by the Schmidts, where you got hand-dipped chocolates and fresh-made ice creams.



**INDEPENDENCE DAYS** The author's family took pride in the fact that their store was run by its owners, not by dispassionate "managers" like those at the chains.

Weinman was the draper (I went to camp with his son), and Jason sold toys (my father and Jason were good friends, though technically competitors). There was Kligman the furniture king and Doc Rothbaum, who ran the pharmacy (his son Gary and I were best buddies). And at the other end of Jamaica Avenue was Doc Masin, the other pharmacist, who played *pokah* with my father and their cronies once a month.

What is it that makes that time stand out from how things work today? Besides the obvious—the personal relationships (sometimes too personal) and the territorial vigilance so native to

the mom-and-pop business—Woodhaven's merchants lived in Woodhaven. They lived among their customers. The Brodys lived in back of the candy store; you could see their apartment when they left the door open, especially on hot summer days, or at lunchtime when the table was set. The Gorins lived upstairs from the butcher shop. We lived in the Wyckoff, a 1920s courtyard building right in back of my father's store. It was a two-minute commute, and I lived in the store as much as I did at our apartment. Home and business were an extension of each other, a way of life that probably stretched back to ancient Rome. Our customers were our neighbors, and we saw them at the movies, strolling the Avenue, eating in the local diner.

Woodhaven was as tight as the smallest town in the Dakotas. Soulless? Impersonal? Anonymous? I don't think so. It was the Italian/Irish/German/Polish/Greek/Jewish New York version of any Thornton Wilder town in Ohio. And my family owned Lewis's. I knew what I knew because *le tout* Woodhaven came through our doors. My father may have closed up his branch in 1997, but my cousin and

my brother are still in Julie's store, supplying the neighborhood with its mason jars, its electrical outlets, its bags of marbles and, in a nod to the newer residents, its *calderos*. My family knows who their customers are and what the neighborhood needs. They're not stocking items for Madison, Wisconsin, or Madison Avenue. They're stocking for Woodhaven.

Most people think this sort of business has all but disappeared from our city's streets. Nope. Think again. As the following pages prove, New York, in neighborhood bites, is just the biggest small town in the world.

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