**Q&A with Stephen B. Crump**

**A Q&A with one of the founders of the Cooper Young Business Association.**

**by** [**Chris McCoy**](http://memphismagazine.com/topics/chris-mccoy/)

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**This is not the first time Stephen Crump’s picture has graced this magazine’s pages. His artwork was the subject of a major feature in the November 1977 issue, back when this fledgling publication was called City Of Memphis. At that time, the Memphis native had just moved back to the city to start a furniture-making business, operating out of a small shop on Young Avenue. Little did he, or our readers, know what kind of impact he would have upon the development of the Midtown neighborhood he would call home for the next few decades. As a founder of the Cooper-Young Business Association, Crump was instrumental in launching the Cooper-Young Festival, a major factor in the creation of its distinctive mystique. I caught up with him recently in Cafe Olé, where his then-new furniture studio once shared space with a barber shop.**

**What were your Memphis roots, Steve?**

**I grew up in what is now the “near east”—the Poplar and Goodlett area. My dad’s an attorney, but he is an engineer by nature. I have a brother who is a successful architect, another brother who has an engineering degree. We have that sort of three-dimensional, engineering mindset.**

**My parents collected and patronized local art and artists. We always went to the Memphis College of Art, and took classes there. Sometimes the whole family would. I always focused on sculpture. When I got to college, I tried my hand at pottery because I loved functional design. The clay was just a little too fluid for my engineering personality. I would have loved to have been a potter. But I discovered wood, and it was a good medium for me.**

**Did you make that discovery in school?**

**I did. I was doing wood sculpture because I loved crafts. Back in the 1960s, crafts were huge, and the [Memphis] College of Art had weaving, tapestry, and jewelry departments. They were big departments. Not so much any more.**

**But I decided since I loved craft and woodworking, that I would pursue it as a career, and focus on functional work. What I like about wood as a medium is that the range of scale is everything from jewelry to houses. Instruments, boats, furniture, you name it. Everybody loves wood.**

**So after I finished up at Rochester Institute of Technology, I moved back here. I almost settled in Maine to be a boatbuilder. That’s a big fork in road. I often think about that.**

**What was Cooper-Young like back then?**

**This was kind of a rough neighborhood, the kind of thing that attracts artists and musicians. There were a lot of older residents, but there were young, creative people moving in because it was affordable. There were a lot of artists’ studios around because it was cheap rent. Not a lot of supervision, you know. I had a lot of friends here.**

**I was one of the founders of the business association and the festival, along with some of the other business owners and interests. The city administration at that time was anxious to see the neighborhood turn around as sort of a model program involving community development and city planning. But there was not a lot of government money. It was mostly grass roots with only encouragement from the administration of Dick Hackett, and sponsorship from Boatmen’s Bank.**

**We had our first festival in 1988. It was successful. We moved it to September from the last weekend of October. It was beautiful, a crisp blue day like today. We had Joyce Cobb and some vendors. About 3,000 people showed up on the corner.**

**About a hundred thousand show up now.**

**Over 125,000 this year. It was nuts. It was the biggest one yet. I love it. And most of the same founding people are still here.**

**The festival put a public face on the neighborhood. We had the business association and we were trying to encourage people to invest in their facades to make it look good. We wanted to attract people. And that’s what happened.**

**It’s funny, my friends and I used to joke about what a great restaurant this corner would make. It just looked like a restaurant. My buddy who ran Milo’s liquor store at night was going to run the cash register. We had a head waitress from Paulette’s who wanted to run the front of the house. I had a Lebanese friend from Clarksdale who was going to run the kitchen with his family recepies. We had it all worked out.**

**Steve Hammrick came up from Oxford, where he had started Cafe Olé. He said, I want to open a restaurant, and I really want to be on that corner. So in 1991, he opened the first restaurant in Cooper-Young, and it’s still going.**

**I moved my studio to a warehouse on Lamar. I called it the Cooper-Young annex.**

**About the time Hurricane Elvis came through [2003] I got to thinking. A lot of my friends had moved to within an hour of Memphis and built art studios on their property, and it seemed to be working for them. I thought I should consolidate my overhead. I looked at South Main. I didn’t persist because I kind of wanted a house with a yard. But man, that would have been a good investment! I ended up out in Fayette County with a studio and house out there. But I just miss the hell out of Midtown.**

**Do you have any memories of wild times in Cooper-Young you’d like to share?**

**We had a great little business down here called Puss N’ Boots. John Albright, and his wife Linda. They were so nice. She looked like a creature of the night. Very sweet, but very dark, with pale skin. John had more piercings than anyone I knew at the time. Nice guy, but very intimidating.**

**For one of the festivals, they were up in their picture windows advertising basic floggings, spankings, and for $20, you got the deluxe treatment. There were people in the window getting flogged and stuff. It was entertaining while it lasted.**

**When John McIntyre had his sculpture studio over there across the street, you never knew who was going to show up.**

**He always decorated the stages for the early festivals. We would get the City Parks stage — it was a trailer that would unfold into a stage — and he would paint murals all over it. The artistic atmosphere is kind of hard to describe.**

**If you could describe it with words, it would have been described a long time ago.**

**It’s the post-graduate school of weirdness.**

**What would you like to see the future hold for Cooper-Young and Midtown?**

**I would like for it to continue to grow, but to remain non-corporate. All the restaurants are individually owned and operated. If not one-of-a-kind, they’re small franchises. The shops are not a corporate landscape. I would like for that to continue.**

**I don’t think there’s a big danger of that (corporate scenario) happening. Look at Broad and Downtown. They’re pretty much all small businesses and entrepreneurs. It’s not like you have out in the suburbs. I want that to continue.**

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