

Web power to the people

By **Greg Gatlin**/ The Messenger

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Bill Lichtenstein was 14 years old when he started working the weekend shift at WBCN as a disc jockey in the early 1970s.

Lichtenstein, now 48 and a Cambridge-based filmmaker and radio producer, remembers it as a "remarkable period" when Boston was a crossroads for artistic, cultural and political expression, with music at the heart of it.

'BCN would broadcast from a dressing room in the old Boston Tea Party, a Lansdowne Street club that in the late '60s and early '70s played host to many of the major bands of the day, including The Who, Led Zeppelin and Bob Marley & The Wailers.

There were the bands that passed through and the ones that were grown here.

"There were churches in Newton, where I grew up, where on any given weekend for 50 cents you could go in the basement and hear Aerosmith, Modern Lovers, The J. Geils band," Lichtenstein said.

In between band sets on Cambridge Common, a weekly gathering spot, people would get up and make political speeches.

Lichtenstein says "virtually every important political, musical, countercultural person, writer and artist," came into contact with what was happening in Boston in that period. Now, he plans to tell the story through a documentary.

There's little doubt that Lichtenstein, a former ABC News producer who's resume of journalistic awards goes on for pages, will take an idealistic approach to his film.

"It was just an extremely powerful time," Lichtenstein said. "I think there was a sense that we were living in a period of time when change at a large scale was possible and every day seemed vital and important.

"For some time, I've been looking for a vehicle to tell the story of how people can help create social change through either speaking out, or as musicians, artists and writers."

When people think of where it was happening in the late '60s, Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and New York's Greenwich Village come to mind. But, says Lichtenstein, because of WBCN, college radio stations, the old Boston Phoenix, the club scene and all of the universities, Boston became an incubator for some important musical forces.

It was in 1974 that Jon Landau wrote in The Real Paper, a weekly that competed with the Phoenix, that he'd seen rock 'n' roll's future in a Harvard Square theater "and its name is Bruce Springsteen."

"He is a rock 'n' roll punk, a Latin street poet . . . skinny, dressed like a reject from Sha Na Na," Landau wrote. "When his two-hour set ended, I could only think, can anyone really be this good."

Lichtenstein left ABC after being diagnosed with manic depression in the mid-1980s. He went on to produce film, TV and radio programs looking at people who had recovered from serious mental illness, winning a Peabody award along the way. Today, his Cambridge-based Lichtenstein Creative Media produces "The Infinite Mind," a weekly public radio health and science program.

Fortunately for a documentarian, much of the Hub music and cultural scene more than three decades ago was well-chronicled. People who lived through it collected tapes, photographs and other materials.

Lichtenstein hopes they'll share those things over the Internet to help create what he calls "the first open-source documentary."

He says the music, and the Boston scene in that era had a profound impact on his generation. He aims to give young people today a window into the power music had in the late '60s and '70s to change the world.

"When you have a situation where Bruce Springsteen performing at a ([John Kerry](#)) fund-raiser is pictured as a revolutionary act," Lichtenstein says, "I think we've become very tame about the idea of artists and musicians speaking out."



Bill Lichtenstein wants to create an 'open-source documentary' of Boston in the late '60s and '70s. (Staff photo by Angela Rowlings)

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