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## IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Baltimore neighborhood a haven for cool  
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Yes, the Baltimore Museum of Art is there. So is Johns Hopkins University. But the secret treasure in Charles Village is Normals Books and Records, which, naturally, is anything but normal.

Founded by nine painters, writers, musicians and artists 16 years ago, Normals re-purposes what they call "remainders" -- used hardcovers and paperbacks -- and collectible signed works by novelists and poets.

If you get on their e-mail list, you could grab a first-edition Nabokov, Beckett or Capote. They also sell old gospel, soul, punk and Delta Blues records, plus Woody Guthrie, Otis Redding and Patti Smith vinyls. They seem to have every avant-garde film made since 1960.

Normals' renowned Red Room provides a venue for mid-Atlantic-area's best experimental music every Saturday night. Normals' own literary magazine, Shattered Wig, is sold at the famed San Francisco City Lights bookstore. Like everything in Charles Village, sometimes the shows are free, sometimes they cost \$5.

"Our motto is, 'Everything from the utterly obscure to the indispensable,'" said co-owner Rupert Wondolowski.

It's a good description of the entire hundred-block village in the northwest section of Charm City.



*Courtesy Photo*

Row houses in Baltimore's Charles Village known as "The Painted Ladies" are shown.

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"Charles Village is funky, artsy and eclectic," said Kathleen Cullinan, a former Baltimore City reporter who has lived in Paris, New York, California and Washington. "Charles Village," Cullinan said, "is the essence of what makes Baltimore so much more interesting than buttoned-up D.C."

If you romanticize the turn-of-the-century Paris of Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec and Modigliani, or pine for the New York of Pollock, Ginsberg, Kerouac and Dylan in mind - a pitch can be made for Charles Village in Baltimore.

Consider this an invitation. I used to live in Charles Village, and can attest my old neighbors and their hangouts are a lot fun.

And the streets are clean, too.

Suburban folks occasionally refer to Charles Village as The People's Republic of Charles Village, sometimes derisively, sometimes with affection. But, because of the inhabitant's drab fashion, which is pure thrift shop playful. Many do own decade-old Volvos, but everyone walks and bikes a lot, too.

The People's Republic-thing sticks because of the lefty political bent, and on that count it's guilty as charged. "Bowlers Against Bush," and "End the War, Hon," are popular local bumper stickers.

The village is bordered by the Baltimore Museum of Art and Johns Hopkins University, and the neighborhoods of Waverly, Harwood, Old Goucher, and Abell. The burgeoning Station North Arts District sits at the bottom. To give you an idea of the people you'll meet, I'll tell you about some of my old neighbors.

Downstairs from me lived Ben Wacks, a 20-something painter, guitar player and vegan cook. Sometimes he accompanied a two-girl duo at Creative Alliance shows in Patterson Park. Ben's former roommate, Alex Scally, is a musician, too. He's half of a low-fi, dreamy collaborative called Beach House with Melanie Legrand. They recorded a CD in our basement laundry room and then shopped it for a label deal. The CD they recorded in the basement was reviewed in Rolling Stone in 2006. Go figure.

Alex previously swung a hammer to make money before Beach House took off -- they're touring Europe this summer -- and Ben cooked vegan cuisine at the nearby Yabba Pot before taking a job cutting the grass at The Baltimore Museum of Art.

"Yeah," as Ben told me once, "we got 9-5 jobs." Or what pass for 9-5 jobs in Charles Village."

Next door to my right lived a young guy teaching with Americorp. He was from rural Arkansas. (Is Charles Village really that poor that they're sending volunteers from rural Arkansas?).

I ask him what he thinks of Baltimore and all he says is, "It's not like this at home." But he added, "It's nice to be able to walk to everything".

Across the street lived Ben's sister Beth, a former bicycle mechanic at Light Street Cycles with as many tattoos than any auto mechanic. She's the founder of the Velocipede Bike Project and recently won an Open Society Institute grant. They're a nonprofit that swaps parts and bikes, does repair work, and teaches bike maintenance to kids for free.

On the other side of me lived Michael Kimball. He's a novelist, whose work, "Dear Everybody (2008, Alama Books)," garnered international recognition. He writes at home during the day and sometimes complained my music was too loud, but he was cool about it every time. His wife, Tita, is a University of Maryland English professor. They'll always stop and chat on the sidewalk. Michael would probably join you if you asked him to go mountain biking.

Duff Goldman, of Ace of Cakes fame, calls Charles Village home. His Charm City Cakes bakery is just a couple blocks away in Remington. Normals is Baltimore filmmaker John Walters' favorite bookstore, and Daniel Higgs, of the critically-acclaimed band Lungfish, has an annual Christmas show at Normals' Red Room.

"It's a strange mix in Charles Village," Ben said. "There so many musicians, artists and writers, and everybody is doing something, but there are also nonprofit types, the college kids, and lots of blue-collar workers. Really, only the college kids stand out. They're the only ones with any money."

And that's the best thing about Charles Village: you can scrape by pretty good on a little income and creativity.

"We moved here because of my wife's teaching job," Michael Kimble said. "We lived in Brooklyn first, then Lubbock, Texas, because of her job. We couldn't afford a house like this in College Park or Washington. But when I checked, the cost of living in Baltimore was 5 percent more than Lubbock. Five percent, on the East Coast, can you believe that?"

The high-paying jobs disappeared from the city after the crash of the Industrial Revolution in the 1970s. That left the town scrambling ever since. People are broke, but not without hope poor. But there is music, art, literature and friends. Plus, a lot of free stuff. In Charles Village, for example, there is The Book Thing, which gives away, for free, a million books a year (seriously, even The New York Times has written about it), and the Baltimore Free University (OK, it's not free-free -- there is a \$10 donation), plus the Velocipede Bike Project and other stuff.

Johns Hopkins has loads of free lectures, concerts and movies, open for the public. You can even use their library without a student ID, just a driver's license. The Baltimore Museum of Art, with one the best Matisse collections anywhere, is free. So is the Walter Art Gallery in Mount Vernon. The Baltimore City Paper is among the best alternative free newspapers in the U.S.

The nearby Mill Valley Cultural Arts Umbrella provides a popular community Internet radio station, featuring live and recorded local musicians, singers and songwriters, as well as news and current topic talk shows.

Wynman Park too, in Charles Village, is free. The Jones Fall River is close and you can ride your bike for 15 miles on the Gwynns Falls greenway trail and see much of the city without having to dodge traffic. It's also a great place to walk with your dog or sit and read a book.

Now, there are a few things if you visit Charles Village that cost a little. The punk, hip-hop, alt-country, and rock shows at the Ottobar are usually \$5. Ever hear of Entrance? Or Human Bell? They're both crazy good. The Charles, our art house movie theater, is along with Hopkins and the BMA, our only other attraction that could possibly be called "state of the art." Charles Village is more about challenging the state of the arts.

Actually, that might be all there is to pay for unless you go out to eat. The Yabba Pot, One World Caf? -- another vegetarian joint -- the Silk Road Caf? on the Hopkins campus, and the Paper Moon Cafe are inexpensive and delicious. You can get lunch or dinner for less than \$10.

The landmark Charles Village Pub on St. Paul Street is a good place to pass a rainy afternoon. (I got offered my first job in Baltimore there after a bartender didn't show up for a shift and I'd been hanging around all day.)

The other wonderful opportunity here, if you visit, is to use your stay as a spiritual retreat. OK, a vegan, inner-city retreat.

There's a Buddhist meditation group that offers free meditation and yoga once a week, an active Quaker House and a cool Roman Catholic Church, St. Philip and James that does gay and lesbian outreach. Plus, the enormous, multi-purpose St. John's United Methodist Church, which is part homeless shelter and part neighborhood center, always has stuff going on. Their motto: "We worship a radically inclusive God."

St. John's offers reggae, spoken word and local bands at their donation-if-you-can-afford-it Roots Caf? shows. They also offer free Tai Chi lessons and host the annual Buddha Day in Baltimore.

St. John's also puts on an annual Spaghetti Disco fundraiser for the Charles Village community association and sponsors regular "Hard-hitting Songs for Hard-hit People" benefits to raise dough for the shelter.

Friends and family from out of town always asked me why everything was free in Charles Village. Well, for two reasons: we're mostly starving artists so we can't pay for anything, and secondly, we like to share.-- --

We like to share so much, you'll probably have to sublet someone's apartment to actually stay in Charles Village. There aren't any B & B's here, or hotels -- they're downtown. I suggest taking a sublet for two months in the summer. You can find a studio apartment for \$600 to lease from one of the college kids on the bulletin boards at Eddie's Market or Video American.

The great thing about Charles Village, as Ben said, "is you'll meet one person and be set. Suddenly you know everybody and things are going on every day."

And you can work on your novel while you're here. You can bring canvases to paint. But you can't sit home and watch the television. TV is the only thing people here are willing to kill.