

# Pete's Candy Store

by Travis Drageset

**P**ete's Candy Store occupies a turn-of-the-century brick storefront in a single-family townhouse that was erected in the late 1800s, at a time when Williamsburg was largely industrial. Known originally as Funzi's, the venue started out as a soda fountain and luncheonette where Alfonso Trotta's wife Lucy would cook in the shop's narrow kitchen for the men who worked in the neighborhood. "The lunch crowd, workers from the factories or whatever, would come in from 11 'til 2 and my grandmother would be out back making sandwiches," says Robert, Alfonso's grandson, a construction manager who now lives with his wife and kids in the upstairs apartment that was once occupied by his great grandparents and five members of his extended family. "And my great grandfather Louie had a wine press in the basement. There would just be barrels of it all around down there and he'd pour it for his friends at the barbecues my grandfather would have out back. On Sundays the younger guys would come by after bowling to play cards or jacopoe in the back room. My grandmother would be upstairs hitting the floor with a broom handle – bam, bam, bam – to call them when it was time to come up for dinner."

"Any other gambling?" I ask.

"Well, numbers, or one thing or another. But that was mostly before my time."

Robert goes on to describe the neighborhood of his youth and the activities that took place on Lorimer Street in front of the Candy Store. "It was a different neighborhood back then. It was all second and third generation families. Italian families. Greenpoint had the Polish and Irish. The Puerto Ricans were on the South Side, and this was the Italian area. When I was a kid there'd be thirty of us in the street at a time playing slap, skelzee, hot peas and butter, kick the can. Whatever you didn't need anything to play."

Decades later, in the late 80's, Funzi's came into its current appellation. "Pete Caruso, a business partner of my grandfather's, took over the store and changed the name, but even after that it was just called Funzi's by the people in the neighborhood."

"Robert is in here all the time," says Pete's bar manager Stevie. "He'll come in after work for a beer, and just to hang out when his wife and kids are out of town during the summer. He has a lot of great stories. "

Robert seems to try not to lament too much about the past, but says enduringly, "Now it's all single people. Some of my friends still live here, but it's changed quite a bit. There used to be a lot more factories still in operation nearby. Now they're all gone."

To the onlooker, neighborhoods like the one surrounding this section of Lorimer Street still retain some of that past flavor, whether through the old guard who have stuck around through the changes, or through the youth culture that has a strong appreciation for the roots of the area. Sue Inzerelli, who grew up across the street in 708, and now lives with her husband in 720, remembers the store back in the day. "When I was a little girl in the 40s I'd come over for sodas and ice creams. Alfonso and Lucy were very nice people. Everyone was always welcome. The place had a very neighborhoody feel." Now Lucy walks over for bingo every Wednesday night at 7.

This and more online at [www.wburg.com](http://www.wburg.com).

In 1999 Pete's was taken over by Pennsylvania-born set designer Andy McDowell and his business partner the singer-songwriter Juliana Nash who sometimes performs in the Candy Store's much lauded back room.

"I really lucked into the spot," says Andy. "When I found it, it was a lunch counter. Kind of disheveled, you know. And the back room was just two small, beat up little rooms. I'm not quite sure what went on back there in the past, but we thought it would make a perfect room for music."

Julianna, who studied opera at the New England Conservatory of Music, says of their vision, "We wanted the place to reflect ourselves, Andy and I, and still keep the feel of the neighborhood place it had been for so many years. Basically, we wanted it to be the kind of place we'd want to go to, and so it is. We have music every night, drinks aren't too expensive, and we were chosen by Time Out's Best Of New York for best trivia game, which we hold every Wednesday night," she plugs.

On my first night at Pete's players of all sizes, ages and persuasions filled the tavernish, baroque-red space that is the front room for bingo night. The place was loud, almost loud enough, but not quite, to drown out Neil Diamond, who was belting "Holly Holy" over the sound system. I shouted an order for a sandwich into the bartender's ear. He had the look of a surfer and a thick Czech accent. (When I stopped by before business hours the day before with a friend, she had swooned in spite of herself.) In a few minutes he handed over the finished product with a you're-watching-me-awfully-carefully kind of a smile. I ate to the accompaniment of game-related hollers and "Sweet Caroline" and watched the match escalate. Beer pitchers were poured and margaritas were downed, and as explanation for the competitive edge, or maybe to keep the players' enthusiasm up, some of the night's prizes were announced mid-game by Michelle, the night's emcee. "First Prize, a new skateboard with full coverage grip tape. And... some children's books." The crowd went wild. If it hadn't been for the subway ride over I'd of thought I was somewhere in Iowa.

As Neil sang on, a lull took over as the replenishing of drinks and the emptying of bladders ensued. Everyone seemed to know the routine. "LA's fine, the sun shines most of the time, and the living is easy," Neil sang, and Bob, one of the night's musical performers, waltzed through as if in his living room.

When the game continued there was a brief sing-along during "Cracklin' Rosie" and then a young blonde in rose-colored glasses shouted out the word all had awaited. There was a stunned moment, then applause and cheering of rock concert proportions and rockabilly attired band members looked on as she was awarded her prize, Michelle only missing a beat to reprimand a man who had continued his crooning into the next song. "We don't sing along to the slow songs, sir. You can get kicked out for that."

When I made the transition to the back room, which has the look and feel of a small vaudevillian theater, I came across a couple of regulars I met earlier, Philip, a pilot who used to work for Tower Air, and Adam, an eye doctor. They're arguing about whether or not Radiohead's new album is crap, so I slink by.

The opening band for Tuesday night's regular feature, Greg Garing, was Sheriff and the Good Timers, the lead singer of which wears a badge and a white felt cowboy hat. The band's drummer had been misplaced, so they started without him as a five-piece: ukulele, fiddle, steel guitar, guitar, and upright bass. They begin with "I'm Just a Used To Be" and segue seamlessly into "More Pretty Girls Than One", and no one minded about the drummer, who didn't resurface until well into the set.

When Garing and band took the stage they carried the room "out across the Blue Ridge Mountains" to the home of the late Bob Wills. Garing, the ultra musically informed country-blues and bluegrass interpreter, blends an amalgam of downtown grace and nattiness with a knowledge and respect for the music. His performances are interpretations of the styles in which he has steeped himself and bring them not only into the present, but show the path they've taken over the years. He is a modern journeyman in a truer sense than many of today's tongue-in-cheek genre interlopers.

Other weekly occurrences at Pete's include The Reverend Vince Anderson on Sunday nights and the Howard Fishman Quartet every Thursday. Anderson's show, a tent revival-meets-Captain Beefhart affair, was spiritually elevating on the hot July night I attended. With near pathological religious fervor the Reverend preached about many of the "mundanities that bring meaning to even the dullest of lives", and shared the "metaphorical value" he had experienced that morning in finding a rat in his toilet bowl. (He flushed it, in case you're wondering.)

Anderson's baritone saxophonist, who he refers to as his ex-wife, wore red fishnets, platform shoes, a strapless black dress with a slit torn up to hip level, and a carnation placed dead center atop her head. Her solos were sublime, as much for the visual as for the playing.

The Howard Fishman Quartet, a darling of the critics who play 1920s, 30s and 40s-style jazz standards and originals that somehow transcend nostalgia, combines its members' varied backgrounds with an improvisational compatibility to create shows that are as seductive as a black swan. They were in the middle of a stint at Joe's Pub at the time, where they were performing a work-in-progress opera based on the plight of the Donner Party, so they played a few of those numbers along with their usual repertoire. For the hour and a half that they were onstage I was taken back in time by the band and the music and the room. They seem to be channeling some remoteness that feels like listening to an old 78, or to the gig that brought one of those recordings to fruition. The band's violinist, Russell Farhang, says, "We perform so often that we don't rehearse. We treat performances as exploratory sessions. Each set is like a play."

Fishman, in addition to being a dedicated full-time musician, is also an actor/director specializing in the work of Eugene O'Neill. In the tradition of American reinvention, he has made his life into his artform and credits standard interpreting blues performers of the 30's and 40s like Lonnie Johnson and Jesse Fuller as his inspiration. "Lonnie Johnson's singing was so unaffected and unadorned, and he would sing with such humility and sincerity that it just breaks my heart every time I hear him." His band, made up of Farhang, a classically trained violinist, Jonathan Flaughter, a jazz bass player with a funk bent, and trumpet player Erik Jacobson, a composer from both a jazz and a classical background, compliment and stretch Fishman's blues-base into an ever-evolving deviation from what's unappealing about modernity. They're the perfect adornment for Pete's. Elegiac at times, but with such conviction that they're as vital as they are transformative.

Pete's Candy Store also employs a handful of local-to-Williamsburg bands on a semi-regular basis, such as Bootleg Remedy and The Kings County Moonshiners. And the likes of Will Oldham, Laura Cantrell and Nic Endo of Atari Teenage Riot have been known to show up, scheduled or otherwise, to hum a few bars.

Pete's is located at 709 Lorimer Street, between Richardson and Frost, near McCarren Park.

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