

Sept. 21, 1997---

NEW YORK - Coney Island has the smell of an underdog.

Even in autumn in New York, the aroma of workingman's sweat drifts through the air around Nathan's hot dog stand, which has stood for 81 years at the heart of America's spiciest playground. The greasy odor slaps you in the face as you disembark from the D train at the end of the line in Brooklyn.

On other days, the Atlantic Ocean breeze across the 12th Street boardwalk cleanses the humble soul. Coney Island defies the winds of change.

And it is an island only in name.

Dutch settlers bought the peninsula from Native Americans in 1654. The land was termed an island because of a tiny creek that separated it from the rest of Brooklyn. The Dutch pegged it Conye Eylant for the conies, or rabbits, that populated it. The name evolved into Coney Island.

Between the 1820s and the 1850s, Coney Island was a retreat for the wealthy. The trip by boat or steamer from Manhattan was too pricey for the working class. However, by the end of the 19th century, group excursion fares made Coney Island a destination point for the masses, whose factories and unions held daylong events at the beach.

The madcap mirth of Coney Island tumbles into the fall. Visionary painter/underground performance artist Joe Coleman is the subject of a "Halloween in Coney Island" party on Oct. 31, at Sideshow by the Seashore, Surf and West 12th Street. The new Coney Island Museum, located in the former second-floor Bluebird Casino around the corner at 1208 Surf Ave., is open weekends year round. And the local Polar Bear Club goes swimming all winter long at 1 p.m. every Sunday from the Coney Island beach.

Working class Russian author Maxim Gorky (Gorky means bitter) came to Coney Island in 1905. "He thought it was the proletarian disaster," said Joseph Errante, stage-hand and ticket taker at the Sideshow by the Seashore, the last non-traveling sideshow on Coney Island, which features "The Human Blockhead," "Madame Twisto" and "Koko the Killer Clown" among others.

"Gorky thought the workers should be organizing the revolution instead of trying to have a nice time on their one day off every month," Errante said while taking tickets from true believers. "This will always be and always has been a place for poor people and poor working people."

When the subway system finally came to Coney Island in the 1920s, the turnstiles started to click. Paradise by the sea became known as ``The Nickel Empire" because of the 5-cent subway fare.

``It is blatant, it is cheap," said author Reginald Wright Kaufman. ``It is the apotheosis of the ridiculous. But it is something more; it is like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone Park. To not have seen it is not to have seen your own country."

And it is the cheap lure of a sideshow act like Koko the Killer Clown that keeps Coney Island kicking. Passersby are attracted to Sideshow by the Seashore due in great part to a circus banner of a menacing Koko with the tagline (Koko likes peanuts and subway tokens). Once customers cough up their cover charge, they find out Koko is a dwarf.

``When I was young I liked freak show stuff," the 30-something Koko (Tony Torres) said after one of his 11 daily weekend performances. ``So I went to work with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. About 10 years ago I caught my wife in bed with my best friend. I shot her 69 times. I shot him twice. We were living in lower Florida. I served six years of a 50-year sentence. Ringling Brothers wouldn't hire me back, so I ended up here."

Truth or fiction?

That's the beauty of Coney Island.

And Coney Island is making a beautiful comeback.

The funky strip of urban sand attracted 15 million people during this year's prime season (Memorial Day-Labor Day). ``It's the best season we've had in at least a decade," said Dick Zigun, president and founder of the not-for-profit Coney Island, USA. Programming such as the group's Halloween party is made possible, in part, by grants received from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Brooklyn delegation of the New York City Council, corporate and individual donations.

``We had absolutely perfect weather this year," said Zigun, a former Yale drama student who also is artistic director of Sideshows by the Seashore. ``Coney Island got a lot of good press. And not to put a knock on New Jersey, but all the accidents on rides happened (at locations) in New Jersey. The rides are safe at Coney Island."

Coney Island is anchored by two amusement parks: Astroland (home of the world famous CYCLONE) and Dino's Wonderwheel Park. Even on the heels of the Depression in the late 1930s, Coney Island was the home of the world's two largest amusement parks (Luna and Steeplechase - a third park, Dreamland, was built in

1904 and burned down in 1911), a dozen roller coasters, three freak shows and more than 200 snack bars and restaurants.

Today, there are four roller coasters (the Thunderbolt is still standing, but hasn't operated since the early 1980s), one sideshow and a dozen snack bars and restaurants. And any time of year is a good time to visit historic Rudy's tavern and restaurant, where the back bar is covered with vintage black and white photos of Coney Island. When the night is still young, old Puerto Rican women slow dance to Jimmy Rosselli's "When Your Old Wedding Ring Was New" on Rudy's jukebox.

"I grew up at Coney Island," said Errante, 34. "My sister is a successful entrepreneur. She says, 'Why do you still go down there? What do you see there?' When you're from the other ocean, they say you have to go to the other water. You can sense the weight, any time of year. Catch a sunset. Look how Spike Lee's crew has illuminated the parachute jump. (In mid-August Lee was filming his basketball film "He Got Game" on Coney Island and he paid to restore the lighting on the parachute ride.) It looks like 40 years ago."

I coerced Ray Normandeau, a former Coney Island pitchman, into hanging out with me during a late summer afternoon at Coney Island. Dressed in baggy white shorts, a faded blue T-shirt, black socks and wearing thick black glasses, Normandeau looked like he, too, belonged on Coney Island 40 years ago. We rode rides together and reminisced.

Normandeau first came to Coney Island in 1963. A veteran of the rugged carnival circuit in Canada, he began working on Coney Island in 1966. "I wanted to be a nightclub comic," Normandeau said. "But my act stank. I figured I needed microphone experience.

"For my first season I was told to just listen and watch. The next year, if I worked well, they'd make me a talker. You just didn't walk in and get a talker job. The talker was important, they brought in the money. You have to be able to modify your pitch based on who is standing in front of you, how to get people to move forward. The closer they get to the merchandise, the more likely they're going to buy."

In 1967 a regular Coney Island talker got sick. Normandeau was asked to pinch-pitch. He quickly began dragging in customers in American, Spanish and French. Normandeau became a professional talker. This, of course, was at least 20 years before Jerry Springer and his freak shows.

Normandeau, 53, said his toughest Coney Island pitch was in 1971 for "The Girl to a Gorilla." While standing in line to ride the Wonderwheel, Normandeau recalled, "This girl stood on a stage and before your very eyes she turned into a gorilla. And if it's done well, it's incredible! A pitch is a pitch. Is one really harder than the other? But to tell someone that before their very eyes they're going to see a girl turn into a gorilla. . . . It's like your trying to take their imagination."

Normandeau's eyes spun behind his Harry Caray glasses. We boarded the 150-foot-high, 150-foot-wide Wonderwheel, a rickety ferris wheel done up in loud shades of yellow, red and pink. In 1989 the Wonderwheel was designated an official New York City monument by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

From the top of the Wonderwheel, there's a beautiful view of the Atlantic Ocean and the Coney Island boardwalk from one side and the borough of Brooklyn on the other side. The air is not always peaceful, as riders are shrieking while the Wonderwheel cars rapidly descend, rocking back and forth.

After we wobbled off the Wonderwheel, Normandeau looked across Surf Avenue at an empty building across the street from Sideshow by the Seashore.

"When I first came here that building was a bank," Normandeau said. "So you had a bank between the freak show and a hot dog stand. I remember working for a freak show on Surf Avenue. A man named Mario Bandetti was doing an escape act. He jokingly said he worked in a moth-eaten costume. I guess there was a few holes in it. But this is not Broadway. This is Coney Island."