

## Showtime at Max's Kansas City

***Max's Kansas City was the ultimate New York in-spot in the 1960s and 1970s. The nightclub's blood-red back room was a decadent womb for Andy Warhol and his "Superstars": rock stars and drag queens, jetsetters and artists, hustlers and hangers-on. Henrik List writes about the nightspot that was the nexus of an era and looks back on his years as a nightclub operator in Copenhagen in the 1990s.***

***By Henrik List***

I: Lou Reed saluted a few of them in *Walk On the Wild Side*: Holly who plucked her eyebrows, shaved her legs "and then he was a she"; Jackie who thought she was James Dean, "then I guess she had to crash / Valium would have helped that bash"; and Candy who "came from out on the Island / In the back room she was everybody's darlin' / But she never lost her head / Even when she was giving head."

The transvestites Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling moved in the decadent inner circle of "Superstars" surrounding Andy Warhol and his Factory in New York in the late 1960s and early '70s. Squeezing every last drop out of their "15 minutes of fame," they wallowed in sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, hanging with Candy Andy practically every night of the week in the mythical back room Lou Reed was referring to, at the Max's Kansas City nightclub.

From 1965 to 1981, Max's Kansas City (on Park Avenue South, near Union Square) was the home away from home for artists, bohemians, writers, journalists, rock musicians, fashion designers, models, photographers, actors, filmmakers, gays, freaks, pushers, gangsters, jetsetters and drag queens — from the beats through the hippie, glam and punk generations. Sure, there were other legendary in-spots in New York during this period — the Paradise Garage and Studio 54, CBGB's and the Mudd Club — but none kept it up at such a high pace for such a long time as Max's. Perhaps because it was not "just" a nightclub, but an ingenious hybrid of bar, restaurant, art gallery, music venue and private club, open most of the 24 hours of the day, becoming a prism for more than two decades of subcultural tendencies. Today, at the start of the third millennium, now that everything is retro and young people are looking back to the sixties and seventies in everything from street fashion to rock music, the *Max's Kansas City* photography exhibition, running through October 24 at Nikolaj Art Center in Copenhagen, looks like a cross between a treasure chest and a Pandora's box, bursting with ideas and inspirations, anecdotes and history.

Max's took it to the *max*, from the mid-sixties up through the mid-seventies (when it became more of a music venue and the cradle of the budding punk movement.) Max's is where Jim Morrison peed into a bottle of wine and handed it back to the waitress, saying, "By the way, this is very good wine. I saved some for you." Where Mick Jagger was banned after he walked around with a live mouse in his mouth, scaring the female guests. Where Iggy Pop cut

his stomach with a broken bottle at one of his first shows in New York. Where at least half of the clientele was always shooting up in the bathrooms during the long instrumental intermezzo of *Heroin* by the house band, the Velvet Underground. Where Lou met Iggy and David Bowie, discovering their shared tastes in make-up and hard substances. Where beat guru Gregory Corso sat at a table jacking off in front of a girl who had rebuffed him, then shook her hand with his palm full of come. Where Yoko Ono persuaded John Lennon to move to New York. Where Debbie Harry waited tables before she was the lead singer of Blondie. Where bisexual Eric Emerson fucked Jane Fonda in the bathroom while her husband, the French filmmaker Roger Vadim, watched. And where the socialite Andrea “Whips” Feldman performed a nightly back-room event known as “Showtime,” strutting on the tables amid glasses and plates, while the patrons watched as she stripped, sang or stuck champagne bottles up her snatch — until her suicide in 1972. Feldman was one of many at Max’s who lived hard and died young, like Max’s owner and proprietor, Mickey Ruskin, himself, who, like so many other “family members,” OD’ed on booze, coke and pills — though in 1983, a full 10 years after he sold Max’s and ended the golden, hardcore years of the nightclub’s history.

Max’s Kansas City peaked as the ultra cool, dark side of the counter culture, leading into Nixon, Watergate, Vietnam, disillusion and punk in the seventies. Mickey Ruskin, a nice, suburban middle-class kid with a law degree from Cornell, first opened his bar and restaurant (plus VIP back room) on the ground floor — later expanding with the upstairs music venue — because he wanted to create a forum for his artist friends. The artists paid their tabs with paintings or sculptures, which were displayed on the premises, and Ruskin had a hard time scratching cash out of his regulars — which ultimately led to the nightclub’s demise. Lou Reed mentions how for three years he lived on free food at Max’s — even if it was “bad steaks and awful salads!” (CHECK DIREKTE CITAT???)

Ruskin loved freaks and outsiders, and always gave them preferred access ahead of Hollywood stars or rich kids who were used to skipping the line. Most night, he manned the door himself, and he decided who got in. Many celebrities didn’t. Shortly after the opening of “Bonnie and Clyde,” Warren Beatty was ordered to change his clothes — Ruskin would not let him in dressed in a suit and tie — while Janis Joplin, conversely, had to go back to the Chelsea Hotel to take a bath; she was too plain filthy for Ruskin. Afternoons and early evenings, ordinary businesspeople and others were allowed in — there had to be some revenue, after all. Meanwhile, Max’s was the first club in New York to let in transvestites, even though it was then against the law for men to appear in public in women’s clothing. With the artists and the rock stars came the groupies, with Warhol came a slew of fairies and fag hags with names like Ultra Violet and Viva, and with the Velvet Underground came “the dark brigade who never saw the sun,” punk’s black-clad storm troopers, and bands like the New York Dolls, MC5, Television and the Ramones.

The regulars were one thing. What was truly special about Max’s

was that the real heavies went there as well: mayors and Hollywood studio heads, famous writers and Kennedys, leaders of industry and movie stars — if Mickey was in a good mood, that is, and let them in. Eventually they all made it in, everyone from Federico Fellini to Miles Davis, William Burroughs to Twiggy, the Rolling Stones to Robert Rauschenberg, Dustin Hoffman to the feminist Germaine Greer. All rubbing elbows with over-the-top gay icons like Taylor Mead, hardboiled drag queens like Candy Darling or the girls giving five-dollar blowjobs in the phone booths — as upstairs, the likes of Bruce Springsteen and Bob Marley gave their first performances in New York. While the innermost inner circle threw chickpeas (the house snack), snorted cocaine, dined on bad steaks, had their picture taken by the busboy Anton Perich, swilled champagne from bottles that had been up vaginas and gossiped about who was blowing whom in the blood-red back room.

**II:** Running a nightclub can be an art unto itself. Working there, going there, can be an art. When Mickey Ruskin opened Max's Kansas City, I had just been born. I was riding around on a chopper bicycle in Esbjerg, with my Prince Valiant haircut and my wide-leg pants, when the glam rock/proto-punk scene crested in New York. When I made my first trip to New York in the mid-eighties, Max's had long since closed down. But the dream of the nightclub as a medium — an art and subcultural forum, where it's not the size of your bank account, the title on your business card or the brand of your clothes, only your style and personality that decide who gets in — I lived out this dream with my friends in the late eighties and early nineties. For a few years, we ran such clubs as Einstein, Snuff and Sputnik in downtown Copenhagen, started the Club Tent at the Roskilde Festival and threw huge New Year's house parties, with DJ's like Little Louie Vega, and techno raves, with bands like the Underground Resistance, in discos and old industrial spaces. And it was all good and well.

Then came a time, in the fall of 1990, after we moved our Thursday club Einstein from the slack, seventies disco Trocadero to U-Matic, when, for some reason, for a few glorious months, there was a special magic in the air. We actually succeeded in creating a local, small-scale Max's where *everyone* who was *anyone* in Copenhagen at the time simply had to come — from writers and ballet dancers to media moguls and millionaires, from Hell's Angels gang members and drag queens to Christiania's Pusher Street barons and suburban hip-hoppers, from models and back-alley junkies to rock stars and neoexpressionist painters. We mixed our cocaine with the heroin of the bar flies from Floss and dropped *heavy* speedballs; we stood sweating in the door in our designer suits, sorting out the crowd and anointing the 500-600 people who got in (I still have enemies because of that!); we popped Ecstasy tablets like gummi bears and washed them down with Jack D; we had Ice Cube and Depeche Mode stopping in to spin records after their shows; we got blowjobs in the "VIP basement" from perky teenyboppers of good families; we were the toppermost of the poppermost, our pockets stuffed with fat rolls of hundred-kroner bills, as we

slogged over to Cosy Bar to “wind down” with high-octane beer and fatties Friday morning. While it lasted....

As sometimes happens, in any city with any kind of nightlife, there is a place or two where everything clicks and comes together, in music and fashion, underground and spirit of the times — plus sex, drugs & rock 'n' roll, of course! — whether it's the Moulin Rouge in Paris in the 1890s or Einstein in Copenhagen in the 1990s (no comparison otherwise!) And for those who always got in, the people at the front of the line and those who went along for the ride through all those long, euphoric, pulsating nights of a period when a nightclub suddenly caught on fire, as a symbolic nexus of an age and a scene, the party will never be the same again.

*The photographs are by Anton Perich, from the “Max’s Kansas City” exhibition, curated by the Danish photographer/artist Jacob Fuglsang Mikkelsen and running through October 24 at Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center. Read more about Max’s in “High on Rebellion – Inside the Underground at Max’s Kansas City” by Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, the wife of Mickey Ruskin.*

#### **Citater spredt over siderne:**

“It was a party every night. It was not the kind of place you could buy yourself into, you either belonged or you didn’t belong.” (Lou Reed on the back room at Max’s)

“Max’s was at the intersection of everything.” (William S. Burroughs)

“Max’s Kansas City was the exact spot where Pop Art and Pop Life came together in the sixties — teenyboppers and sculptors, rock stars and poets (...) Hollywood actors (...) and go-go dancers — everybody went to Max’s and everything got homogenized there.” (Andy Warhol)