

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away was a place called Max's

“...entering from the greater reality of elsewhere, one is only in search of the city, a place to hide, to lose or discover oneself, to make a dream wherein you prove that perhaps after all you are not an ugly duckling, but wonderful, and worthy of love...”

Truman Capote, *New York*

The years 1965-1974 were a period of upheaval and change in the United States as well as in the rest of the “free” nations of the Western hemisphere. What with the war in Vietnam, the Black Panther Party, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy (who can forget the black-and-white photograph of Kennedy dying on the kitchen floor of the Ambassador Hotel in L.A.?) and Martin Luther King, Paris '68, riots in the ghettos, the hippie movement, tensions between the USA and the USSR, the influx of all kinds of drugs, communal living, revolts on the campuses of universities and colleges across the land, sexual liberation, Watergate, women's lib, escalation of international terrorism, the rise of weird religious cults, the wars, the wars, the wars... and finally, the first — and so far, the most serious — oil crisis, reminding everybody how all this wealth, leisure and abundance of consumer goods was built on Third World misery and pure uninhibited exploitation of the “poor huddled masses” familiar from the inscription on the Statue of Liberty.

The oil crisis of '73 brought all this to an end. Along with the war in Vietnam coming to a grinding halt in '75 and leaving the USA — the superpower to end all superpowers — dazed and confused, humbled, even, when its population realized that this stupid and senseless war was LOST. It was a period where everybody questioned everything, where nothing was sacred, where old-time beliefs and convictions were constantly questioned and attacked. The so-called silent majority responded by electing the ultra-right wing Richard M. Nixon for president. For a period he was probably the most revered AND the most hated man on the planet, until he brought about his own downfall. American politics has been jaded ever since. Cynicism pervades every aspect of it.

Not only in society as such was everything questioned, exposed, ridiculed and/or turned upside down, but also within the arts things changed drastically, maybe even more so: films got so much more realistic, downbeat, interesting, odd and pessimistic than ever before. The Film School Brats and their kin — Scorsese, Coppola, Bogdanovich, Friedkin, Ashby, Altman, even Spielberg and Lucas for a while (before *Jaws* and *Star Wars* fucked them, as well as the movie industry, up... for good!) — showed us the underbelly of this beast called the USA in hitherto forbidden ways. Believe you me — L.A. ruled! Literature turned strange, elitist and spacey — and in the process lost its readership to the popular novel, almighty, but impossibly bland TV and cinema. So the real news was what was then called “new journalism” (or “gonzo”), as practiced by Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, among others; even old-timers like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer got in on it. And what about the visual arts? Get out of here — everything was possible, nothing was sacred and the field became so wide, so expansive, so FAR OUT that it still hasn't recovered. No more old-fashioned painters in their garrets with

brushes and oils, no sireee. Conceptualism beat craft any old time. THAT'S the name of the game. Has been ever since, really.

New additions to the sacred halls of the Fine Arts were made (and later, subtracted again): Comics. Posters. Science fiction. Industrial design. Crime stories. Rock 'n' roll. The documentary. And, as an extension of the widespread underground cinema, the burgeoning experimental video scene appeared. In other words, commercial art. Pop culture, as it was lovingly labelled. Genres and forms of expression that previously had been frowned on, basically. They all had their time in the sun. Some even peaked. And, almost importantly, boundaries were blurred. If you were willing and able, most anything could be mixed in some way or the other. "Multi-media" was definitely a buzzword among those in the know. And who but Andy Warhol to bring it all back home in '66 with his Exploding Plastic Inevitable

At the time, the most important cities seemed to be San Francisco, Paris and London. In retrospect it seems that Los Angeles, Tokyo and New York City played an equally important role in this turning of the tides. But by popular opinion at the time, London was swinging and San Francisco was hip, while L.A. — this wonderful hybrid of (too much) sunshine and noir — oozed "plastic"... but in a good way. And New York was... what? Cold? Monolithic? Passé? Rundown? Truth be told, not a lot of the era's great music came out of N.Y.C. Except, of course, the Velvet Underground. Who were *the greatest*. Not that anybody gave a toss at the time, but there you go... prophets are rarely appreciated in their own time.

Ah, but N.Y.C. was so different back then. N.Y.C. in the late '60s through the '70s and '80s, even into the early '90s, was a rundown, seedy and strangely uninviting place. Remember how it nearly went bankrupt in '75? Full of crime, freaks, hustlers, junkies, homeless people, drugstore cowboys and dilapidated buildings in dire need of restoration, yes, whole areas of a strangely decrepit yet enticing atmosphere. A city characterized by street violence, illegal drugs, racial and ethnic tensions, homelessness and widespread pessimism among its residents about its future. Anyone who visited the city back then can attest to the fact that 42nd Street really was full of whores and grand old cinemas showing the hardest kind of hardcore porno movies. And Times Square was a sleazy and sometimes downright dangerous wonderland for buying drugs and sex of just about any kind.

BUT — and this is important — it also meant that rent was cheap in many of the declining areas of the grand metropolis. Which meant that young (and sometimes even talented) people — read: wannabe artists — could go and live there. So for a while the city was overflowing with young, daring and often downright reckless young peoploids who had escaped different small towns and rural areas across the U.S. and gone to the Big Apple in search of kicks, adventure, the Holy Grail and maybe some kind of career.

There were places to go and sights to see, but probably none hipper or stranger than Andy Warhol's original studio, known as the Factory — so baptized by photographer Billy Name, as it manufactured people, ideas, concepts, film, even art — which was located at 231 East 47th Street from 1963 to 1967. Due to a total laissez-faire atmosphere, one of the strangest crowds ever assembled gathered there. People with

names like Ultra Violet, Ondine, Ingrid Superstar, Viva, Candy Darling, Nico and International Velvet. Or just plain names, such as Jackie Curtis, Eric Emerson, Edie Sedgwick, Taylor Mead, Gerard Malanga, Paul Morrissey and Joe Dallesandro. Although the names don't mean a thing when it came to deviant behaviour, and some of them even made up the characters in Lou Reed's only ever hit single, *Walk On The Wild Side*. A bunch of fucked-up A-heads, transvestites, wannabes, art groupies, out-of-work actors, junkies and assorted flotsam and jetsam looking for kicks, adventure and maybe even a glimpse of the Truth away from the surrounding American Normalcy, which has a tendency to appear quite insane.

These people and countless others of their ilk living in and around Manhattan needed an after-hours waterhole to go to and "relax." And — according to Ultra Violet, one of Warhol's countless "Superstars," there was only one place that really mattered: "Max's Kansas City is where the Pop Scene, Pop life, and Pop Art fuse. It is a two-story restaurant and bar at Park Avenue South and Sixteenth Street, the big hangout of the sixties. Mickey Ruskin, the owner, has operated previous establishments — Deux Magots on East Seventh Street, the Paradox, the Ninth Circle, the Annex — that attracted poets, poetry readings, painters, sculptors. At Max's, the heavyweights of the art world hang around the long bar, and in the back room, kids, groupies, dropouts, beautiful little girls of fourteen who've already had abortions, get noisy or stoned.

"Going to Max's is like going to a gallery opening. You dress up or down. The last time I was at Max's I wore an old lace nightgown dyed violet. Tonight my ultra mini will stop traffic.

"In the back room, lit by talented light artist Dan Flavin, red and yellow neon tubes produce an air of mystery and modernism. Taped rock music bounces off the walls. Mickey has a flair for recognizing who is somebody in art and who will be somebody. For booze and food he exchanges paintings and collages that years later will make their way into museums. The barter system keeps the place noisily animated, for even the least solvent artists can drink with abandon..."

As Danny Fields, an observant bystander of the era, recalls, "Before that neighbourhood was populated and trendy like it is today, it was grim and deserted at night, and so Max's was a destination; no one just walked in off the street. There were musicians, poets, painters, journalists, celebrities ... sort of an A-list of an alternative universe.

"When they came here, the Cockettes were there every night; Candy Darling and all the great drag queens (though Candy was way beyond a drag queen); Jackie Curtis; the theatre crowd; John Vaccaro from Theatre of the Ridiculous. Germaine Greer, the great journalist Lillian Roxon, other club owners — just everyone you could possibly want to know. Kennedys were always there.

"Downstairs Max's was a restaurant, and upstairs was at first a disco just for people who were at the restaurant — who had to go up a flight of stairs in the back to get there and dance for a while [...] Later they turned the upstairs into a club to which the public could go..."

The excellent album *The Velvet Underground: Live At Max's Kansas City* can obviously serve to enlighten and entertain the listener on a number of different levels.

One can, of course, listen to it out of love for the music of the Velvet Underground, the ultimate N.Y.C. rock 'n' roll band, 'cause although it has been called the “first legitimate bootleg album” — as it was recorded by Warhol associate Brigid Polk (a.k.a. Berlin) on a small portable cassette recorder — it is a thoroughly enjoyable and fine showcase of how the Velvets sounded just before group leader and founding member Lou Reed quit for good.

Bass player Doug Yule recalls the summer and the place: “Max’s was the place to be in 1970. On any night the bar was filled with a cross-section of New York’s subculture: musicians, actors, artists, entrepreneurs, drag queens, and wannabes. Weekends the crush was a little heavier, and the crowd thickened as the evening wore on [...] Walking into Max’s the first time was like walking into the bar scene in *Star Wars*; a slow pan across alien beings engaged in unfathomable activity. Divine sat at a table across the aisle laughing too loud in a baritone falsetto. The walls were covered with pop art, and a laser — reflected off mirrors from a studio on Park Avenue — cast a jagged, blood-red disc on the wall that trembled sympathetically with the city’s vibration.”

So if you’re looking for a snapshot of how things were on any ordinary evening at Max’s, listen to these words from our sponsor... sorry, Mr. Lou Reed himself: “If you want to know what Max’s was really like — and now you can’t — it’s there, for real, because Brigid was just sitting there with her little Sony Recorder. It’s in mono, you can’t hear us, but you can hear just enough. We’re out of tune, per usual, but it’s Sunday night, and all the regulars are there, and Jim Carroll’s trying to get Tuinols, and they’re talking about the war. We were the house band. There it is.”

Finally, to quote the journalist Ashley Kahn, it was a time and a place that makes it glaringly obvious that “...what’s most absent now [...] is the general trait the Seventies clearly inherited from the Sixties. Call it the Pursuit of the Unbeaten Path, of not giving in to knee-jerk impulse to limit oneself to a safe, corporate mind-set [...] free thinking and chance-taking just ain’t what they used to be...”

Oh well — some went to Woodstock, some went to the moon, some went to Max’s and some went completely bonkers. Go figure.

KLAUS LYNGGAARD, HASLEV, AUGUST 2004.

Ultra Violet: Famous For 15 Minutes. My Years With Andy Warhol (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) Recently re-issued (Atlantic/Rhino 8122-78093-2) and expanded into a two-CD version of superior sound quality, it furthermore contains a booklet with a number of illuminating quotes from the band and hangers-on about Max’s. The quotes from Doug Yule and Danny Fields included here are from that booklet.

Victor Bockris/Gerard Malanga: Up-Tight. The Velvet Underground Story (Omnibus Press, 1983). The book is dedicated to Mickey Ruskin, by the way.