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The New York Times

Revisiting Max's, Sanctuary for the Hip

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

IF a fiction writer were to sit down and conjure up a Manhattan nightspot where a John Chamberlain sculpture flanked the jukebox and [Debbie Harry](#) waited tables, where the earth artist [Robert Smithson](#) held court with Waylon Jennings, where struggling artists could cash their checks and pick up their mail, where the New York Dolls and Charlie Rich played (in the same year!) and where an unknown named [Bob Marley](#) once opened for a slightly less unknown named [Bruce Springsteen](#), he would probably be scoffed at for fabulist excess.

But when Mickey Ruskin, a shy, strange-looking impresario with a chipped gold tooth, opened [Max's Kansas City](#) on a nowhere stretch of Park Avenue South in 1965, it became that kind of fact-trumps-fiction place, ultimately one of the few New York clubs that could be said to have lived up to its legend. And the legend was not inconsiderable: It played an important role in nurturing at least two art movements (Minimalism and Pop); it enshrined a new, subversive generation of rock music; and it helped give birth to the counterculture itself, or at least provided it with a dazzling ideal.

“Truly, the [F.B.I.](#) would have done well by itself to close the place down,” said the sculptor [Forrest Myers](#), known as Frosty, who helped design the bar and restaurant for Ruskin with the help of the painter Neil Williams.

Back in the 1950s the Cedar Tavern was the most famous artists' bar in the world, but got that way mostly because its drinks were cheap and because it was near painters' studios in Greenwich Village. Max's, on the other hand, was out of the way and a little too expensive for people without regular paychecks, but it may have been the first New York bar designed expressly for artists. It became “a kind of Ellis Island” for a wave of them who came to the city in the 1960s and '70s, said Anton Perich, a photographer and early video auteur who worked there after arriving from Paris, failing as a busboy but allowed by Ruskin to stick around and take pictures. “It was the place where I felt safe,” Mr. Perich said.

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The demise of the original Max's in 1974 (it would continue as more of a straight-ahead music club under new ownership, one of the crucibles of punk, until closing in 1981) was brought about not by the F.B.I. but by Ruskin's tax problems and increasing drug use. But beginning Sept. 15 in Chelsea many scattered pieces of its history — including some never made public before, discovered in old film files — will be reassembled in two exhibitions, one at the [Steven Kasher Gallery](#) and another, focusing on Max's artist regulars, at the [Loretta Howard Gallery](#). In conjunction with the Kasher show Abrams Image is also publishing "Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll," a raucous photo book with reminiscences of the club from the guitarist Lenny Kaye, the artist Lorraine O'Grady and others, along with reproductions of time-yellowed artifacts like an [Andy Warhol](#) bar tab (\$774.73 for September 1969, minus a \$200 credit for a work of art identified only as "[Marilyn Monroe](#)").

While mountains of words have been devoted to Max's over the years in the memoirs of musicians and artists, the new book is only the second extensive treatment of the club's history, following "High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max's Kansas City," now out of print, a 1998 collection of photos and interviews edited by Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, Mickey Ruskin's longtime companion, who now runs the [Max's Kansas City Project](#), a nonprofit philanthropy that helps artists and promotes drug-abuse prevention.

The paucity of publications has been a result, in part, of the strict control that Mickey Ruskin exercised over the taking of pictures and most other kinds of documentation of the doings inside the club, which often involved casual nudity and more-than-casual drug use. (Amphetamines were the controlled substance of choice at the beginning, in the pre-cocaine days.) Newspaper photographers were rarely allowed in, creating a much different atmosphere than the one that prevailed at Studio 54 when it opened in 1977.

"It was an oasis, and nobody there wanted a record of what they were doing," said Mr. Kasher, who edited the Abrams book and helped discover previously unknown pictures of Max's from insiders like the music executive and writer Danny Fields, Mr. Perich and others. "This was a long time before the era of blogs and YouTube."

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As suggested by the title of the Loretta Howard show — “Artists at Max’s Kansas City 1965-1974: Hetero-Holics and Some Women Too” — the bar was mostly a boy’s club, as most of the art world then still was.

But female artists like Dorothea Rockburne, Lynda Benglis and Eve Hesse also hung out there. The artist and philosopher Adrian Piper did a well-remembered performance piece inside the bar in 1970, walking around with a blindfold and earplugs in a place that was all about looking and listening. Besides the Chamberlain crushed-metal sculpture, a [Frank Stella](#) on the wall and a red-fluorescent [Dan Flavin](#) work dominating the back room, the bar featured a collage by Ms. Rockburne and photographs by Brigid Berlin. Ruskin also usually deployed women — like the Warhol followers Abigail Rosen and Dorothy Dean, a Harvard-trained editor — to control access at the front door.

In her memoir “[Just Kids](#),” published this year, the singer [Patti Smith](#) recalls being taken there for the first time in 1969 by [Robert Mapplethorpe](#); they shared a salad and stared toward the back room, the holiest of holies, rendered so by Warhol, who had held court there for many years. After lots of hanging out the pair were finally admitted and seated at the round table where the coolest kids — the lead singers, the transvestites, the successful artists and the Factory regulars — still sat.

“Robert was at ease,” Ms. Smith wrote, “because, at last, he was where he wanted to be. I can’t say I felt comfortable at all. The girls were pretty but brutal.”

When Ruskin first asked Mr. Myers and Mr. Williams in 1965 to take a look at the site a bit north of Union Square where he wanted to open the club, then occupied by a run-down Southern-food restaurant, the two artists were confused.

“We thought, ‘How are we going to get people over here?’ ” Mr. Myers recalled recently. “After 5 o’clock that neighborhood in those days would just die.”

It was the first restaurant interior Mr. Myers had ever designed, and he said his idea was make it look sleek and clean, like a gallery space, with red booths and white walls.

“Mickey was into art,” Mr. Myers said, “and so we decided that this was not going to be a working-class bar, or a poets’ bar. It was going to be an artists’ bar.”

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Maurice Tuchman, a longtime curator at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) and the curator of the Loretta Howard exhibition, said he remembered visiting Max's in the mid-1960s because it was a place where any good contemporary-art curator had to check in.

“And I was so bowled over by the presence of so much new art that was so prominently displayed all over the place,” he said. “Mickey didn't talk about it. No one talked about it much, but there it was. It sent an intense subliminal message that art was the subject at hand.”

Mr. Perich added: “They were not in museums, back then, these pieces. The only place you knew you could see them was at Max's.”

Flavin's red-light work, which memorialized victims of the Vietnam War, and Mr. Chamberlain's sculpture next to the jukebox, evocative of [James Dean's](#) crashed car, always struck him as “pieces of the American-dream-gone-wrong puzzle,” he said, a theme that resonated with a crowd desperately trying to discover a new kind of American dream.

Throughout Ruskin's tenure at Max's, that crowd was usually full of artists, many of them unknown and never to be known. They came for a free steam-table lunch of chicken wings and chili served every afternoon. And they stayed into the night.

“Basically if you were an artist, he wouldn't keep you out,” Mr. Myers said. “Which is unusual because artists at that time didn't really have much social power.”

In an interview conducted in the early 1970s by Mr. Fields, the music producer, Ruskin — a middle-class New Jersey boy who left a job as a lawyer [to seek a more exciting life](#) — described how little he knew at first about art and music even as his club came to revolve around them.

His first bar, the Tenth Street Coffeeshouse in the East Village, became a poets' hangout through almost no effort of his own, except his welcoming spirit. When he opened the Ninth Circle in Greenwich Village in 1962, he hoped only that it would become a “beatnik” hangout, as he told Mr. Fields. But Mr. Williams began drinking there and

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introduced Ruskin to fellow artists like Mr. Myers, Mr. Chamberlain, Larry Poons and Carl Andre.

It was a propitious moment not only for the New York art scene but for Ruskin as a club owner. “Poets really aren’t drinkers, and artists are,” Ruskin explained, one of his sociological aperçus that is often repeated.

The story goes, however, that a poet, Joel Oppenheimer, was responsible for the club’s odd name. He suggested the Kansas City part because of the general feeling that it would sound more authentic for a place featuring steaks; Max’s was either borrowed from the poet Max Finstein or, more probably, added simply because it sounded like a reliable restaurant proprietor’s name.

Yet no one sought out the spot for its food. Even the dried chickpeas that were always on the table and strangely featured on the sign out front (“Steak, lobster, chickpeas,” though the sign made it look like “Steak, chick, lobster, peas”) were sometimes too hard to eat and better used for throwing.

Most of the art that once hung or sat in the bar has long been dispersed to the winds, much of it sold by Ruskin, who died from a drug overdose in 1983 at the age of 50. At the Kasher gallery exhibition the Flavin light sculpture will be recreated. (It couldn’t be obtained for the show; a version of the work sold for \$662,000 at [Christie’s](#) in 2009.) The old Max’s space itself is now an upscale Korean deli, where only the steam tables evoke its past life.

In the interview with Mr. Fields, printed in the Abrams book, Ruskin often sounded elegiac, even at what probably should have been a high point for him, with the fame of his establishment and of his role in creating it assured.

“I wonder, if there is no Max’s, does that mean that there is no Mickey Ruskin?” he pondered. “Is Max’s all I ever want to do?”

It wasn’t quite. Before his death he created other nightspots, including one in TriBeCa, long (too long, as it turned out) before TriBeCa became what it is today; it closed for lack of business. But it was only on Park Avenue South that Ruskin proved to be a kind of

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prophet, one who seemed to understand that a place as successful at defining its times as Max's would not be allowed to outlast them.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 19, 2010

An article on Sept. 5 about the Manhattan nightspot Max's Kansas City misstated the professional background of Danny Fields, who used to frequent the club and take photographs there. He was a music executive, not a music producer, from the 1960s to the 1980s.