



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

RELICS THE BACK ROOM



One afternoon not long ago, Danny Fields paid a visit to the old back room at Max's Kansas City, the storied night club that once stood at 213 Park Avenue South, near Seventeenth Street. Fields wore a soft fisherman's cap and sunglasses with zebra-stripe frames. On the way, he paused at the corner of Twentieth Street. Pointing west, he said, "I had



Andy Warhol and Jim Morrison

a loft down there, and it was five minutes from my place to Max's. Much of my life depended on that five-minute walk."

This fall brings a new round of memories of Max's, and its back room, where Andy Warhol held court in the mid-sixties. There's a book of photographs from Abrams Image, "Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll," with remembrances from Max's surviving habitués,

including Lou Reed, the guitarist Lenny Kaye, and Fields. An exhibition of those photographs opens at the Steven Kasher gallery on September 15th. These will add to all the other memories of Max's—so many that it's getting hard to tell whose memory is whose. "It's, like, Hey that's my memory, not yours," Fields said. "I want that back."

Danny Fields, who is sixty-nine, and whose many roles in the music industry have included co-managing the Ramones, was a young editor at a music magazine when he began going to Max's, in 1966, a few months after it opened. He had connections to Warhol's crowd (Eddie Sedgwick crashed with him for a while), which helped him get into the back room. He brought Jim Morrison there, in 1968, an occasion that did not go well. (Morrison peed in a wine bottle.) It was Fields who invited Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe into the back room for the first time, in the early seventies, an event that features in Smith's recent memoir, "Just Kids." Fields introduced Iggy Pop to David Bowie there, in 1971. "Someone called me to say David Bowie was there and wanted to meet Iggy, who was crashed at my place," he recalled. "So I go, 'Wake up, Iggy! Wake up! Bowie wants to meet you!' And five minutes later we were there."

Max's was conceived of by Mickey Ruskin, a local restaurateur, as an artists' bar, like the Cedar Tavern in the nineteen-fifties. Earlier, Ruskin had owned two coffeeshops and a bar in the Village, but "he discovered that poets don't drink," Fields said. "Artists do drink, but they don't pay," which was part of the reason Ruskin went out of business, in 1974. He died in 1983.

"Max's was where everybody got consolidated," Fields had explained, over lunch at Les Halles, on Park Avenue at Twenty-eighth Street. "You had all these changes in art, music, sex, the way people dressed, what they thought, how they lived, and you had to have someplace where you could go to figure it out." Max's, a generic, rectangular space in what was then a colorless part of the city, became that place. Artists, transvestites, musicians, and society people crossed paths there. There was no doorman, and security, such as it was, was handled by a diminutive socialite named Dorothy Dean, who worked briefly as a fact

checker for this magazine, and who would shame people who didn't belong into leaving. "To get into Max's, you had to be fabulous," Fields said. "To get into Studio 54, you only had to look fabulous. And once you could get into a club just because of the way you looked it was over."

Arriving at No. 213, Fields looked up at the awning of a Korean establishment called Green Café, which now occupies the site. Entering, he passed by a glass case stuffed with cupcakes and doughnuts and, near where Dean used to sit, a display of exotic bottled waters. Heading past a long steam table that held the remains of the lunch-hour rush—hardening nuggets of sesame chicken—he took a seat at one of a number of small square tables, across from an array of Kettle potato chips.

"This was it," Fields said. "This was the back room. That was the round table, over there, where Andy sat, with his entourage." He pointed toward the spot where several of the deli's staff, in white paper hats, were eating their lunch. "And there was the archway that led into the back room, where Patti and Robert were crouching. Jim Morrison sat there. He was not a nice person. And all this was bathed in the fluorescent red glow of a light sculpture by Dan Flavin, which hung up there in the corner of the room."

Nothing remained. For all its importance in the formation of modern manners, there was no sign that Max's ever existed. The manager of the Green Café had never heard of it.

"It's a place of commerce," Fields said with a shrug, gesturing at the racks of potato chips. "I think Mickey would have at least appreciated that."

—John Seabrook