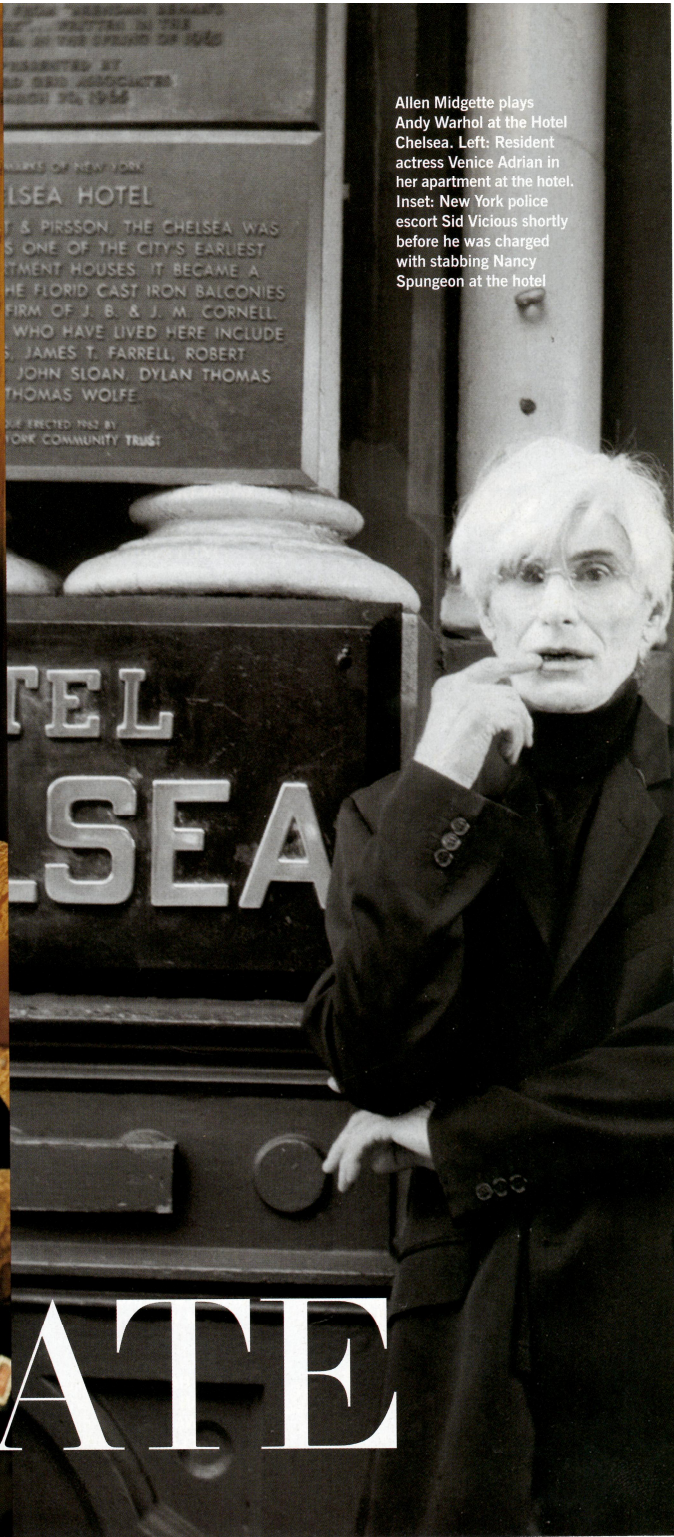


Freaks, dreamers, poets, posers – the rooms and apartments of 222 West 23rd Street have seen 'em all. A New York landmark of the mind, the Hotel Chelsea will soon celebrate its centenary. Britt Collins follows Bob Dylan, Bette Davis, Salvador Dalí and the ghosts of 1,000 parties along its atmospheric corridors



Allen Midgette plays Andy Warhol at the Hotel Chelsea. Left: Resident actress Venice Adrian in her apartment at the hotel. Inset: New York police escort Sid Vicious shortly before he was charged with stabbing Nancy Spungeon at the hotel

# SURREAL ESTATE

## IN RESIDENCE

### 1930s

EUGENE O'NEILL playwright  
THOMAS WOLFE writer  
VIRGIL THOMSON composer

### 1940s

AGNES BOULTON writer  
BETTE DAVIS actress  
EDITH PIAF singer  
GORE VIDAL poet/writer  
JOHN SLOAN artist  
ROBERT FLAHERTY film-maker  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS playwright  
WILLEM DE KOONING artist

### 1950s

DYLAN THOMAS poet/playwright  
JIMI HENDRIX musician  
LEO KATZ artist  
PATTI SMITH musician

### 1960s

ANDY WARHOL artist  
ARTHUR C CLARKE writer  
ARTHUR MILLER playwright  
BETSY JOHNSON fashion designer  
BOB DYLAN musician  
BRENDAN BEHAN playwright  
DENNIS HOPPER actor  
DONALD SUTHERLAND actor  
JANE FONDA actress  
JIM MORRISON musician  
JONI MITCHELL musician  
PETER FONDA actor  
ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE  
photographer

### 1970s

ALLEN GINSBERG poet/writer  
DEEDEE RAMONE musician  
HARRY SMITH artist  
LEONARD COHEN musician/poet  
MILOS FORMAN film-maker  
QUENTIN CRISP actor/writer  
SID VICIOUS musician

### 1980s

ALICE COOPER musician  
GARY OLDMAN actor  
JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT artist  
JON BON JOVI musician  
VENICE ADRIAN actress

### 1990s

ANTHONY KIEDIS musician  
NICK CAVE musician  
SINEAD O'CONNOR musician  
TOM WAITS musician

### Today

ETHAN HAWKE actor/director  
JULIAN SCHNABEL artist  
RUFUS WAINWRIGHT musician  
JIM SCLAVUNOS musician



Actor Quentin Crisp filming a documentary in 1993. Clockwise from below: designer Zaldy Goco with singer Rufus Wainwright in Zaldy's apartment. Courtney Love at a fashion shoot at the Chelsea in 1997. Musician DeeDee Ramone on the balcony of his room in 1993. Opposite: actor Ethan Hawke at the hotel in 1999



TONY NOTARBARADINO, RUFUS WAINWRIGHT, PREVIOUS PAGES: ASSOCIATED PRESS, RITA BARROS, TONY NOTARBARADINO, HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY CESSY LIMA AT JUDY CASEY

Once in a while you come across a special, magical place that perfectly captures the spirit of an era. The Hotel Chelsea in New York is just such a place. Since its opening in 1905, this infamous SoHo venue has attracted a stream of wild-eyed, stormy creatures: Sarah Bernhardt liked to sleep in a coffin on the seventh floor; Arthur Miller wrote *After the Fall* there; and his daughter, the writer and film-maker

Rebecca Miller, spent much of her childhood at the Chelsea, where Lou Reed was a neighbour and Henri Cartier-Bresson sometimes read her bedtime stories.

On October 11 1978, Sid Vicious allegedly stabbed his girlfriend Nancy Spungen in Room 100. Tom Waits did his first interview for *Rolling Stone* holed up in his sunless tomb of a room. And others such as Edith Piaf, Tennessee Williams, Henry Miller, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix have all slept, loved, lived and dosed here, indulging in epic melodramas and other bohemian pursuits.

Today, still smouldering with sex and bohemia, the Chelsea continues to offer refuge for wounded souls, drifters and dreamers. Three hundred of the 400 rooms are apartments, rented out on a permanent basis. Ethan Hawke has moved back in after his split from Uma Thurman; Tom Waits stays intermittently because, he says, it is the only place he feels at home; and artist and director Julian Schnabel likes to keep an apartment in the Chelsea, despite already owning a home in SoHo. Even indie music's pin-up boy, Rufus Wainwright, whose 2002 album *Poses* recounts his Chelsea experiences, still seeks solace within its walls between tours.

The hotel advertises itself as 'a rest stop for rare individuals', and stands on the corner of West 23rd Street, solemn and purposeful, like a grande dame who has seen better times. Its vintage neon sign glows like a welcoming beacon. The faces may have changed over the years but, thankfully, the interior retains many of its original features, such as the wrought-iron sunflower balconies and the extravagant marble staircase that leads up to the antique glass dome (the same one that Mickey Rourke chased Kim Basinger up in *9 1/2 Weeks*).

The Chelsea was originally designed and launched as New York's first luxury co-operative apartment complex in 1884, when 23rd Street was a fashionable theatre district. The hotel included (and still does) apartments of one to seven rooms, private penthouses, high ceilings and wood-burning fireplaces. However, financial and other problems contributed towards bankrupting the business and, in 1905, the Chelsea was converted into a

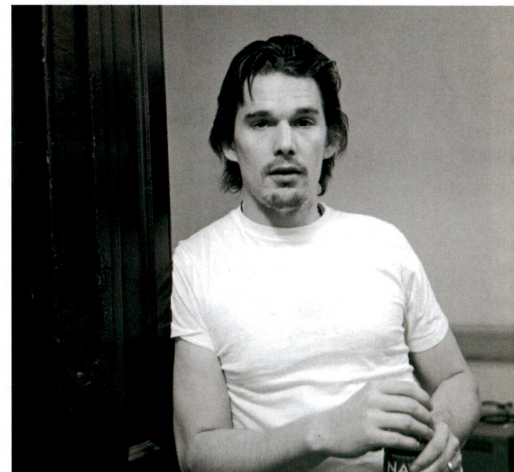
400-room hotel. It lured artists and writers, who appreciated its shabby elegance and took liberties with paying their bills – so much so that the hotel was bankrupted again in 1939, only to be saved by Jewish refugee and businessman David Bard.

Under Bard and his family, the Chelsea flourished as a creative hotbed and, during the Sixties, gained a reputation as the ultimate rock 'n' roll hotel, housing such names as Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe the photographer, Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison and Jackson Pollock. On most nights during the late Sixties, Salvador Dalí could be found perched on a corner stool in the bar with his magnificent diamond-collared cheetah beside him, preening his moustache and watching the languid habitués around him.

'I felt at home there almost at once, relaxing in the Chelsea charm, its unique air of uncontrollable decay. It was not a part of America,' wrote Arthur Miller in *Timebends*. 'No vacuum cleaners, no rules, no taste, no shame... it's the high spot of the surreal.' The Beatles' biographer Barry Miles also spent much of the Sixties in the Chelsea. 'It was the kind of hotel where anything goes,' he recalls. 'That's what I love about this hotel,' says Leonard Cohen, who, over the years, resided in many of the grand rooms. 'You could walk in with a bear and no one would care.'

From the moment you enter the elegantly gothic, musty lobby,

you feel sheltered from the ugliness of the outside world. It's like wandering into a dream – dark, surreal and exhilarating. Your senses are assailed by moody paintings on the walls, bizarre sculptures and papier-mâché dolls hanging from its crumbling vaulted ceilings. The mahogany reception desk, with its surly, elderly clerk, who seemingly haven't seen the sun for years, is straight out of a Forties film noir. Everyone seems to be floating around with a permanent hangover, too hip and blasé to bother with reality. In the two coffin-sized lifts that move in slow motion, you're likely to see a famous face. I caught a glimpse of Nick Cave, a dark, sketchy figure in his undertaker's suit, before

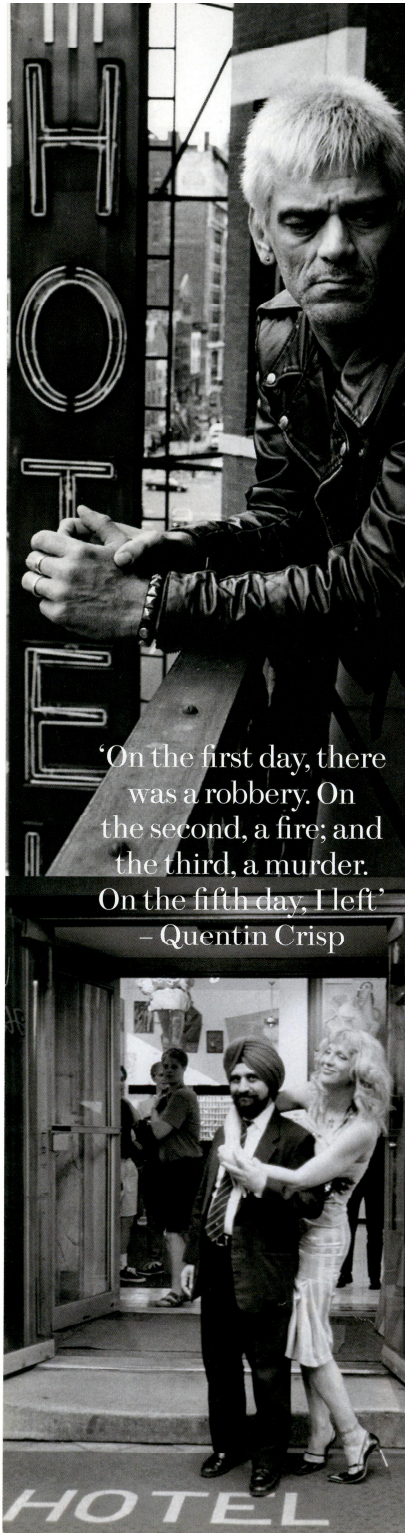


**'No matter whose biography you read, the Chelsea is in there, and you're like, whoa! I need to go to this hotel' – Ethan Hawke**

he was swallowed by the gaping blackness, where, as Arthur Miller once said: 'You could get high on the residue of marijuana smoke.'

Ethan Hawke first fell in love with the Chelsea when he came to New York as a struggling actor. 'I ended up staying a few nights at the Chelsea just because it was a cool place to stay,' he says, talking on the phone in between rehearsals for *Henry IV* at the Lincoln Center. 'I'd heard about it when I was growing up, and I was always in love with that bohemian lifestyle. You'd read about the punks staying at the Chelsea; Kerouac and Ginsberg writing novels and poetry here; Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe fighting in the lobby. My God. No matter whose biography you read, the Chelsea is in there, and you're like, whoa! I need to go to this hotel.'

The Chelsea wasn't, and isn't, to everyone's taste, of course. The late Quentin Crisp, one of the UK's grandest and most celebrated



'On the first day, there was a robbery. On the second, a fire; and the third, a murder. On the fifth day, I left' – Quentin Crisp

raconteur, stayed for just five days when he first came to the US in 1979. Shortly before his death in November 1999, Quentin told me, over lunch at his local diner in the East Village that, although the hotel's notoriously lax morals and louche lifestyle led him there in the first place, he didn't stay long because 'it was complete anarchy'. 'On the first day I was here, there was a robbery,' he rasped. 'On the second, a fire; and on the third, a murder. On the fifth day, I left.' He returned, however, in 1981, for a further three years. He shrugs. 'Well, this is the hotel where all the great stylists have lived.'

If that is so, it has much to do with the hotel's infinitely tolerant owner and manager Stanley Bard. He has been at the helm for 47

years since taking over from his father David in 1957. He regards the hotel as a living entity. 'I don't want to have missed any moment in the life of the Chelsea Hotel,' he says. 'But this place will obviously outlive me. I constantly worry about what'll happen when I'm gone, if profit takes over. These people are only protected by my feelings for them. A world without artists would be barren and empty, like a world without trees and flowers.'

So, to what does he attribute the Chelsea's allure? Why this hotel and not another? 'Everything,' says Bard, seated in his office just off the lobby, surrounded by yellowing papers and empty bottles. The walls are plastered with fading pictures: Bard with Arthur Miller, Bard with Ed Koch. 'This is more than a hotel. We try to make artists, people such as Arthur Miller and Ethan Hawke, comfortable. We try to protect them from worldly concerns and foster an ambience in which they can create.'

He recounts how Arthur Miller came to live at the Chelsea after splitting up with Marilyn Monroe. 'He was feeling very low and heartbroken, but he soon recovered and began working again.' Bard, now in his seventies, is currently putting together a collection of photographs and writings that he hopes to publish in time for the hotel's 100th anniversary in 2005.

'Many things happened here,' he continues wistfully, before describing how the Chelsea was the only hotel that gave a room to the Irish playwright Brendan Behan, after he had been thrown out of every other establishment in New York for trashing rooms, and insulting customers and staff. 'He was always drunk and smelling of whiskey, but they're all like that here,' smiles Bard.

He goes quiet when I mention the junkies, the rock 'n' roll casualties. 'I don't think Sid killed Nancy. He told me he didn't,' he says, unprompted. 'Really it was only ever bad when the Grateful Dead came.' A fog descends over his face when I mention the suicides (both Sid Vicious and Dylan Thomas died on site). 'What suicides? That didn't happen.'

**T**he hotel achieved worldwide notoriety through a film made by Andy Warhol, who shot *Chelsea Girls* at the hotel in 1966. The film centred largely on Warhol's muse, It girl and amphetamine queen Edie Sedgwick who was, by all accounts, the original Chelsea girl. Feline and extraordinarily flamboyant, Edie was as legendary as the hotel itself. With eyes

as big as teacups and the colour of Hershey bars, and the long, fragile limbs of a greyhound, she was the inspiration for many of the hotel's celebrated resident songwriters. Dylan penned *Just Like a Woman* for her, and she was supposedly the subject of the Velvet Underground's *Femme Fatale* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*. She partied constantly (for which, read 'took heinous amounts of drugs') with Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and Jim Morrison. 'Edie was a lovely, beautiful girl, but she was extremely difficult,' remembers Bard. 'She caused me a lot of heartache.'

During the two years that she lived at the Chelsea, between 1964 and 1966, Edie caused several fires in her room, number 105, with her Valium hazes and forgotten cigarettes. One night she nearly burnt the whole hotel down. 'I remember that night vividly,' says Judith Childs, a Sixties resident, who once lived across the hall from Edie. 'It wasn't her first fire, but it was the worst. I had just brought back my husband from the hospital so he could die at home. And literally hours later, the entire floor had to be evacuated. She was nearly dead when they dragged her out unconscious. And her poor cat died. That was tragic.'

Although she died from an overdose more than 30 years ago, Sedgwick remains a source of fascination for many of today's resident artists. 'I came here because of Edie Sedgwick,' says 37-year-old fashion designer Zaldy Coco, who collaborates with Gwen Stefani on her LAMB clothing line. 'The moment I found out that Edie lived here, I was obsessed with the Chelsea. She was amazing. And all the

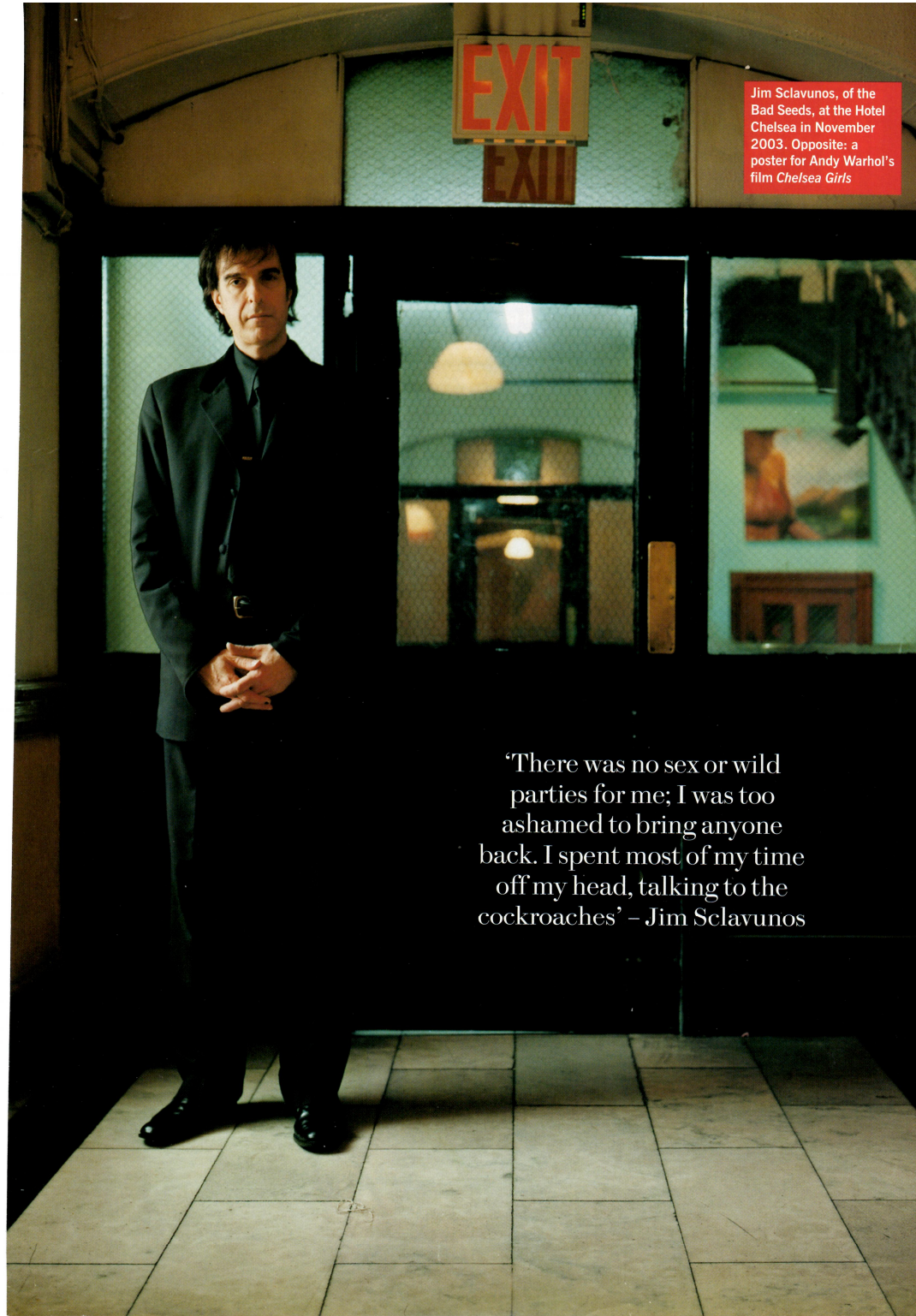
dramas, fires and the madness... there is still a lot of that. The moment I step out of my front door, the weirdness begins. There are so many mad characters running around, even the dogs and cats that live here are crazy. There is a certain unreality. It's like living in a movie.'

Its inhabitants were, not surprisingly, always falling in and out of love – and in and out of each other's beds. This was the hotel where Jack Kerouac and Gore Vidal, both in the bloom of their youth, had their famous encounter in the Fifties. Gore wrote in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, that they owed it to literary history to couple. 'We were coming on to each other like two pieces of trade. And, well,

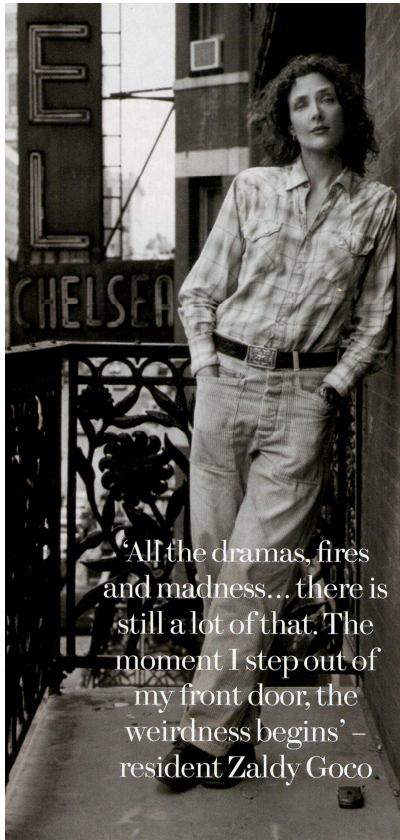


Feline and extraordinarily flamboyant, Edie Sedgwick was as legendary as the hotel itself

Jim Sclavunos, of the Bad Seeds, at the Hotel Chelsea in November 2003. Opposite: a poster for Andy Warhol's film *Chelsea Girls*



'There was no sex or wild parties for me; I was too ashamed to bring anyone back. I spent most of my time off my head, talking to the cockroaches' – Jim Sclavunos



Clockwise from left: writer and film-maker Rebecca Miller. Woody Allen in 1992, during shooting for *Manhattan Murder Mystery*. Jon Bon Jovi. Singer Nico at the hotel in the Sixties. Hairdresser, painter and current resident Gerald DeCock in 1998



'All the dramas, fires and madness... there is still a lot of that. The moment I step out of my front door, the weirdness begins' – resident Zaldy Goco.

### Music inspired by the Hotel Chelsea

- 'SAD-EYED LADY OF THE LOWLANDS' Bob Dylan, 1966
- 'CHELSEA HOTEL NO.2' Leonard Cohen, 1974
- 'CHELSEA MORNING' Joni Mitchell, 1969
- 'MIDNIGHT IN CHELSEA' Jon Bon Jovi, 1997
- THE ALBUM 'POSES' Rufus Wainwright, 2000
- THE ALBUM 'CHELSEA GIRL' Nico, 1967
- 'THE CHELSEA HOTEL' Graham Nash, 2002
- THE OPERA 'LORD BYRON' Virgil Thomson, 1966



I fucked him.' And the Chelsea, appropriately enough, was also the place Tennessee Williams, a part-time resident, sought the kindness of strangers and transient hearts. And even after he ceased living there, he took his ever-changing selection of young boys – 'pretty heads filled with the bright confetti of lunacy' – to the Chelsea for wild sex.

The rumours and legends about all the stars that have resided at the hotel appear overwhelmingly romantic and exciting to today's generation of artists. But the reality of life at the Chelsea was much harsher. 'There's no mystery why everyone came here in the Sixties. It was a fucking dump,' says Norman Gosney, who has been buzzing around the building and its inhabitants since leaving London in the late Sixties. He now lives in the rooftop Gothic tower, complete with a wild English garden. 'That's why Warhol and his circus came,' he continues, 'the rock stars and whores. Because it was cheap and you could do drugs or whatever the fuck you wanted; it was like a Moroccan bordello. George Harrison spent a lot of time here because he was shagging some bird on the quiet while he was married to Pattie Boyd. What he didn't know was that Eric Clapton was shagging Pattie.'

'The Chelsea is fucked up,' agrees Jim Scavunos, drummer with Nick Cave's band, the Bad Seeds. 'Like many other young musicians in the Seventies, I came here reaching for the sky, only to find this twilight zone of loneliness. I lived in a room the size of a jail cell with dirty walls and a broken bed. Apart from my daily run-ins with Nico in the lifts or Allen Ginsberg cruising the lobby, I rarely saw any celebrities. Or, if there were any, I was too high to notice. There was no sex or wild parties for me; I was too ashamed to bring anyone back. I spent most of my time off my head on LSD, talking to the cockroaches or drifting in and out of Irish whiskey bars, which dominated the neighbourhood at the time.'

However, he agrees that he has marked his life by the periods he has spent at the Chelsea. 'It has this strange pull on you. In the early Nineties, after I got bored of New York, I moved to LA for a short spell, but soon returned here. It's a very strange, sheltered world. You can get anything at the Chelsea – you just have to know who to ask.'

**E**very room has a story to tell. Dylan Thomas entered his fatal coma in Room 205 after a session at the nearby White Horse Tavern. Nancy Spungen died while Sid Vicious was in a heroin-induced rage in Room 100 and, a few months later, he died of an overdose in the same room. 'That was the first room I lived in, and it was really creepy,' says Venice Abbott, an actress and manager of Plaid, New York's hip nightclub. Now 32, she has lived at the Chelsea since leaving California in 1988. At the time, I had no idea about its history, but a lot of weird things happened there. I used to wake up in the middle of the night because the TV would just switch on, or the chandelier above the bed would suddenly light up. I was spooked, so I asked to be moved. I ended up in Edie Sedgwick's room.'

Before Gary Oldman played Sid in the film *Sid & Nancy*, he lived in Room 100 to try and get into his character's head. Today, the room no longer exists. Bard converted it into several smaller rooms to stop visitors leaving burning candles, wreaths and used syringes outside the door. Most of the rooms and apartments have been immortalised in one way or another. The cover of Moby's

album *Play* was shot in one of the rooms in November 1998; Mario Testino has shot various Gap and Diesel ads in the apartments; and the Strokes held a photo-shoot on the roof last August.

The seminal composer George Kleinsinger lived in one of the apartments for 25 years, and transformed it into a bird and reptile sanctuary, with live tarantulas and pythons. Monkeys and lizards ran wild between the rooms, which were divided by floor-to-ceiling aquariums. He even had a small adult alligator for a while, which he used to walk up and down the corridors or sit with in the hotel bar.

Painter and hairstylist Gerald DeCock, the apartment's current resident, chose to live here specifically for its bizarre, morbid past. 'George died in what is now my bedroom, but it has a peaceful vibe,' he says. 'His ashes were scattered on the roof. I've been told I have ghosts – I hear a lot of creaking at night – but I like that dark aspect about the hotel. The halls are scary, too. They remind me of those ancient mental hospitals. It was really atmospheric during the blackouts last summer: people walked up and down the stairs holding candles. And I've seen some weird things happen here. Once the elevator door opened and Chaka Khan was standing there, holding a huge knife – I decided to take the stairs.'

**'There's no mystery why everyone came here. It was a dump. That's why Warhol and his circus came – the rock stars and whores. Because it was cheap and you could do whatever the fuck you wanted' – resident Norman Gosney**

My favourite room is number 600, a grand, sumptuous apartment with wooden floors, bathroom ceilings and a bronze fireplace. Until recently, it was rented to a famous gay couple, who published love stories under the pseudonym Judith Gould in the Nineties. Then one day they vanished...

'I think I stayed in that apartment with my girlfriend,' says Jim Scavunos. 'It was like a mausoleum, all marble and chandeliers. Whoever lived there left in a hurry, and the suite was rented out to us with all their things still in it. It looked as if they had fled or died; there were walls of books, and classical and jazz records everywhere, crumpled clothes, prescription drugs and ashtrays with fresh cigarette butts. It was a little spooky. We didn't steal anything, but we couldn't resist looking through their things and imagining their lives.'

Not everyone is lucky enough to find their new home ready for them, or even empty, when they arrive. 'Stanley originally rented me my apartment while someone else was still here,' says Gerald DeCock. 'It was awful. I'd been waiting for the right place to come up for years so, when I finally got the apartment, I left Paris, where I was working for French and Italian *Vogue*. I walked in with my stuff and that singer from the Chili Peppers, Anthony Kiedis, was living here. He was furious when I walked in. I went downstairs to ask Stanley what was going on. He said, "Well, you know, I couldn't find him... he's a rock star."

The Chelsea isn't for everyone, and there's little doubting that it is past its heyday, but there is still a long list of wannabe residents, waiting patiently for someone to die – or to be murdered. They will probably be waiting a long time. Most of the permanent guests wouldn't swap their life in the Chelsea for any other. 'I feel safe here and can't imagine living anywhere else,' sighs Venice Adrian. 'I will keep my apartment in the Chelsea for ever.' With its magnetic pull and undeniable drama, perhaps the Chelsea is the East Coast equivalent of that other legendary rock 'n' roll venue, the Hotel California – 'You can check out anytime you like, but you may never leave.'

*The Hotel Chelsea, 222 West 23rd Street, New York (+1 212 243 5700; www.hotelchelsea.com). The 100 guest rooms cost from about £105 a night; suites, from about £180 a night.*

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