

Inside Toronto

JOHN BARBER



Groovy, creative Yorkville past fading fast

Nick Jennings spent yesterday morning giving an interview to a Scottish academic who is writing a dissertation on the coffee-house culture of Toronto's Yorkville and New York City's Greenwich Village in the 1960s.

Within an hour he was giving another interview, reading from a handbill listing the acts coming into The Riverboat, at 134 Yorkville Ave., in the first few months of 1969.

"Blues great Buddy Guy, Toronto's own Neil Young, Doc Watson — a legendary performer — Jerry Jeff Walker, Canadian jazz guitarist Lenny Breau, Gordon Lightfoot. . . .

"That's just the listing for The Riverboat," he added, noting that there were about 40 other clubs and coffee houses in Yorkville at the time, almost all offering live music every night of the week.

"The sidewalks were packed with people, four deep, doing the Yorkville stroll. You could just drift into any nightclub and see international stars or homegrown talent," said Mr. Jennings, a veteran music writer whose book, *Before the Gold Rush*, chronicled the vitality of the Toronto music scene in the 1960s.

Of course, the distinction between homegrown talent and international star wasn't always obvious — or important — to the throngs who came to listen and groove in Yorkville. It was just so much the happening place, so buoyant and creative, as exhilarating and unfamiliar to us Torontonians as it was to the angelic Saskatchewan girl who came here and sang:

Night in the city looks pretty to me

*Night in the city looks fine
Music comes spilling out into the street*

Colors go waltzing in time
"Joni Mitchell's *Night in the City* is about the vitality of that street at its height," Mr. Jennings said. It's a quality he wants remembered as Toronto's most changeable neighbourhood changes once again, with up-

townish apartment buildings en-

croaching on its somewhat tired and tinselly boutiques.

The original Yorkville scene didn't die a natural death, according to the author; it was "engineered" out of existence by a thousand petty ordinances and officially sanctioned real-estate speculations — to the "everlasting shame of Toronto City Hall."

Mr. Jennings is protesting against the destruction of 134 Yorkville Ave., former home of The Riverboat, which will be replaced along with all its neighbours on the north side of the street — a heavily altered but still recognizable Victorian row — with a hideous nine-storey hotel. But he knows it's a lost cause.

"We don't do enough to celebrate the cultural history of this city," he complained, noting that the owners of the Hard Rock Café on Yonge Street didn't even know, until he and a friend told them, that they were operating in the same building where Bob Dylan met Levon and the Hawks and "went electric."

Mr. Jennings compares The Riverboat to Liverpool's Cavern Club, birthplace of The Beatles, which is a heritage site that draws visitors from around the world. "In other cities and other countries this would not be happening without serious thought," he said, curling his lip at talk of a "token plaque" to mark the site of The Riverboat and to commemorate the Yorkville scene.

Others are more fatalistic. "You cannot stop people from building these types of buildings," said Bernie Fiedler, the German immigrant who opened The Riverboat in 1961 — and some years later employed young Nick Jennings as a dishwasher. "I wouldn't mind if they put up some kind of plaque."

Mr. Fiedler added that he has met with Yorkville businessmen to discuss incorporating elements of the old legend — maybe the club's original electric sign, which he still has — into the new development. "I may or may not give that away," he mused. "It depends very much on what happens."

What's happening so far, to judge from the drawings for the new hotel, is an absolute disaster. The latest compromise solution doesn't promise to be much better: Local residents have asked developer Peter Cohen to fire his architect and replace him with a fashionable design-build contractor — not even an architect — who specializes in wedding-cake chateaus for Toronto's rich and vulgar.

Whatever gets built, that plaque will have to work awfully hard to recall Yorkville's glory days.

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