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The summer of 1967 was not a good time for Debbie Harry. Most nights were spent waitressing downstairs at Max's Kansas City. In those days people thought of Debbie Harry as "a girl with a problem," and Max's was a rough place to work.

First water and napkins and silverware, then the big salad bowl — people took as much as they wanted. And the dressing, "roquefort, house or Russian." Then drinks before dinner. Then the main course. Then dessert and coffee.

And always crowded and everyone in a hurry, freaks, artists and musicians — a demanding clientele. Always a fight to get from the kitchen to the table, always looking at all the success stories, all the stars and starlets and satellites, the "Girls of the Year," the "Girls of the Month," the "Girls of the Minute." Then back to the kitchen and start all over again. It was not a good time for Debbie Harry.

"Max's Kansas City was the exact place where Pop Art and pop life came together in New York in the sixties," writes Andy Warhol in his book POPism.

"Teeny boppers and sculptors, rock stars and poets from St. Mark's Place, Hollywood actors checking out what the underground actors were all about, boutique owners and models, modern dancers and go-go dancers — everybody went to Max's and everything got homogenized there."

One summer night, out of a big black limousine in front of Max's come four elegant people. Two men, two women — everybody in white and pastel shades of success. Floating on the warm winds of power and fame, gliding across the summer sidewalk like swans in the moonlight. The maître d' at the time is a young Italian boy, Febricio. Long on looks and short on English, Febricio is a hard worker and a kind-hearted soul. It's a hot and crowded Friday night and the quartet wants a table immediately. Febricio says, "There's a short wait." And then WHAM! One of the men swings a roundhouse right, a full knuckle sandwich. Poor Febricio, he's bleeding from the lip and almost unconscious. The owner, Mickey Ruskln, standing not more than two feet away, can't believe his eyes. The four people find themselves an empty booth, sit down and order dinner.

The bartender is all excited: "Mickey, Mickey, did you see that?"

"Yeah, I saw it. I don't believe it, but I saw it!"

"Do you know who that was? Mickey, that was Peter O'Toole."

"Well, I don't care who it was," says Mickey. "They're leaving momentarily."

"It's 13 years later and I'm sitting with Ruskln in the back office of the Chinese Chance, one of the few restaurants in New York with an unlisted phone number and one of the even fewer whose walls are adorned with original art by famous artists. Chinese Chance — the name is a poker term meaning drawing to an inside straight, and besides, the location at 1 University Pl. had previously been occupied by several failed Chinese restaurants — is Mickey Ruskln's new home away from home."

B. (for Bernard) Michael Ruskln is one of the last great patrons of the arts — a reputation based on the fact that, for more than 20 years, he's been willing to barter food and drink for the work of artists who have not yet become famous. Right now Mickey's in an expansive mood. He's in uniform — a pull-over sweater (bright pink) with one elbow worn through, a pastel-striped shirt with the collar not just frayed but actually falling off, too-short jeans, hot red socks and black leather cap shoes — and he's ready to reminisce. He puts his feet up, lights up a Vantage and muffs a few smoke rings across the gray Formica desk top.

"So," he says, "I went over to where O'Toole and his friends were sitting and I said, 'I'm sorry, I'm the owner and you'll have to leave.' They did." He smiles, and starts at the beginning.

"I was born in May 1933 in the Margaret Hayes Maternity Hospital in Jersey City. Mickey says, 'I was a nice Jewish boy, middle class. My father, who's still a practicing lawyer at 76, always did well.'

"My mother is very close to me, she still thinks of me as her little boy. My cousin is president of the whole Julius Schmid organization in England, and I have another cousin who's the head of Gimbel's."

"Wasn't everybody a nice Jewish boy from somewhere to begin with?" he smirks. "I remember crying my first day in school... then things skip and the next thing I remember is throwing up on my fourth grade teacher, Miss Buchanan, a very old lady. I had to throw up and I raised my hand to be recognized so I could leave the room. She didn't recognize me so I walked right up to the desk... I couldn't hold it in anymore, so I packed all over her. She got very upset and said, 'Next time you have to do that, just leave the room. Don't ask for permission.'"

So time went by, high school, college, law school. By 1957 Ruskln was wearing three-piece, pinstriped, continental suits and working toward a junior partnership in his father's law firm, a situation that left him bored almost to the point of insanity. One day he saw an ad in the newspaper, "Rent or Own a Coffee Shop."

"So I rented a coffee shop," he says. "Well, I originally rented it. It didn't cost me anything. I just paid him a month's rent, I think it was $300."

"It was on East 10th Street, a beatnik coffeehouse. Lots of atmosphere. Within six weeks I was making enough money to quit working for my father and boy the place for $1,000. What happened next, what started me on the road to success, was that those poets came around and asked me if they could have poetry readings there. I had nothing to lose, so I said OK. They started to have these poetry readings and I met all these poets. It was really my first exposure to intellectuals."

"A lot of them were people who were fairly well known now: Diane Wakowski, Bob Kelly who teaches at Bard now, Jerome Rothenberg who translated The Poet, Rochelle Evans the playwright, Clayton Eshelman, Paul Blackburn, the Katzman Brothers from the East Village Other. It was the first time in my life I'd ever been surrounded by creative people and it was really a lot of fun..."

He served steaks, lamb chops, hamburgers — "Simple stuff that I could cook by myself. I was washing dishes, cooking. I was the porter, I was everything." After a while, Mickey found himself a partner. He closed the 10th Street operation and moved to a new place called Deux Megots, which was another success that enabled him to open the Ninth Circle.

"It's a gay place now. It wasn't then," Ruskln says.

"Did you still have poetry readings?"

"No, No, what happened was when we..."
opened the Ninth Circle the original Cedar Tavern closed down and then Dylan, which had been the other artist hangout, closed down, and I felt the art world, much more interesting than poetry. I think painters are the smartest people in the world. The first artists I met were Court Winter, Chamberlain and Neal Williams.

The Ninth Circle was the big success that, after a year or so, Mickey was able to sell his share to his partner and take his wife and kids to Europe. North Africa, Morocco, Egypt, Eastern Europe. Back in New York, he was faced with a strategy problem: He had a clause in the contract when he sold the Ninth Circle that said he couldn’t come back to the Village in a commercial enterprise for at least two years. So he found a place on Park Avenue South and 17th Street that had been an old luncheonette and it was for sale cheap because the landlord had tried to operate it himself and didn’t know enough about the restaurant business.

Max’s Kansas City opened in December 1965. “I had never met Mickey at that point,” recalls his friend Larry Poons. “In 1956 I opened a coffeeshop called the Epitome, which was the first to feature live poetry readings. When Mickey opened his place on 10th Street the next year, I had my first rival. Anyway, John Chamberlain and Neal Williams asked me to come with them to the opening of Max’s, which was a huge place whose size was emphasized by the fact that nobody had shown up. We got there at about 4:30 in the afternoon, and by 7 Mickey was pacing back and forth. When he gets nervous, he really gets nervous, and he was walking around like a slow-motion skier. Finally he hit on the idea for the three of us to go from booth to booth, ordering a drink at each one—we’d already had a bit too much to drink by then—to give Mickey the illusion of 100 glooming afterimages of all of his tables.

Despite the dismal opening, all of Mickey’s friends from the Ninth Circle soon came over to Max’s. And Albert Grossman, probably the most successful rock entrepreneur-tour in the music business at that time, lived nearby at 4 Gramercy Park.

“Grossman came in a lot,” Mickey says. “And I remember him one time bringing around this group and saying, ‘I want to set up a tab for these people, they’re going to be in New York for a while.’ That was Janis Joplin.”

People would say, “You’ll like this place. A lot of artists go there.” The music stars went there because they had heard the artists were there. It was a good trick.

By New Year’s Eve Andy Warhol had discovered Max’s and was coming in regularly, always with a large entourage. There was a big circular table in the back room and pretty soon Andy started a claim to that table. And then there were the fringe hangouts that came in to meet Andy or to be with Andy or to impress Andy. It became a bit of a scene back there.

Max’s was one of the few places in New York where one could feel comfortable. The food was better than it had to be, and it cost less than it should have, and you knew that if you got past Mickey and the maître d’, you could put it all on the cuff. “I didn’t give a tab to that many,” Mickey says. “I traded for art more than giving a tab. That’s how I got the art on the walls.”

Max’s was the only restaurant in town with so much high-class, expensive art. Chamberlain had a big piece right in front as you came in, and beyond that it was like being in the Whitney or the Museum of Modern Art.

Then there were the hot waitresses. All of a sudden there was an incredible collection of beautiful waitresses there and musicians. There was a time when Tom McGuane was in town and wanted to fall in love, that’s where they went. People used to say, “There’s no such thing as a waitress at Max’s who isn’t looking.”

Helen Marden, who met her husband, Bryce, while she was a waitress at Max’s, says, “We had a real Max’s romance. Neither of us had any money, and we would always go to Max’s for food, because Mickey would let us eat for free. (Although Mickey was always a great romantic, he was painfully shy with women. ‘I didn’t get laid till I was thirty-six.’) ’

“Eric was the first punk. He’s known for having taken the longest piss on film. A movie called Lonesome Cowboys. There’s a scene where they’re all asleep in the dessert and he gets up first and he pees for about seven or eight minutes.”

Eric was being supported for a long time by Johnny Winters, his wife, and they got run over and killed by a truck. The Rolling Stones all went to art school before they turned to rock. And the first wave of punk went to art school. Eric was an artist. Most of the beginning bands were artists, art students if not artists.

By 1974 the scene changed; the attention was back to Max’s. Again Mickey felt it was time for a move.

“What happened was, I went broke, I took the two other places and sold them, which kind of dragged me down. And now I’ve had this habit of spending much more money than I have.

It wasn’t enough for Mickey to cash his friends’ checks, to feed them and provide free drinks. He had to pay. His softball team was the first example. Mickey was not content to play in the New York Softball League. He got a bunch of people from out of town, people like the staff of Barney’s Beanery in L.A. It was not uncommon to see Mickey flying in airline tickets, not to mention the cost of hotels and food, for a softball game. As painter Dan Christensen, manager of the team, puts it, “Mickey always supported us well.”

Bankrupt and depressed, Mickey found himself out of work for the first time since he left his father’s law firm in 1957. A mutual friend introduced him to a young restaurateur named Richard Saunders. Richard had just opened a place called the Local near NYU, and he needed a front man. Really in a rush, he asked a ready-made clientele of celebrities and upstarts, he hired him on the spot.

“Richard and I have been together ever since. After a while I was asked to move to the Locale [they added an “e”] and we decided we needed a bigger place, so Richard opened the Lower Manhattan Ocean Club.”

The Ocean Club was an inside joke. The place was big enough, the food was good enough, it had a good dance floor and featured punk bands on weekends, and yet it did n’t even really need it. Richard became a master at somehow getting people to come to weird neighborhoods, but Tricia was too out of the way to get past the squat in 1978, and Richard decided to move uptown.

After three months of searching, he found a defiant Chinese restaurant in the ground floor of an apartment building. He felt that if he had found the Treasure of the Sierra Madre, the Fountain of Youth and the Keys to the Kingdom, that’s what he had found.

“And,” Mickey laughs, “here we are. Life begins at 47. Come on. Let’s go out front. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I’ve never been there,” the waitress says. “You come here on a Friday night and there are 87 varieties of hair color, leather clothes... What brings them there? You don’t look very New Wave to me.”

“I didn’t look like a hippie in the heyday of hippie, either, I have no explanation.”

They’re all back now. The artists, the rock ’n’ roll crowd, and, of course, the extras, the bit players, even the beautiful waitresses.

Through the front door come Harvey Keitel and his barroom buddy, Bob DeNiro. It is odd that Richard should so levitate, like those giant balloons that float downtown on Thanksgiving mornings.

Terry Ork, the first New Wave investment brought to city hall, comes over. “I want to tell you a joke...”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did Jesus cross the road?”

Ruskin smiles. “Because,” he says, as if in response, Ork finishes: “He was nailed to a chicken!”

Over at the takeout, Debbie Harry is singing “Call Me,” but she’s competing with Ork’s chicken joke and a hundred other conversations. Keitel and DeNiro are bellowing like young buffaloes in heat.

“More porridge, please!”

Another rough night for Debbie Harry.