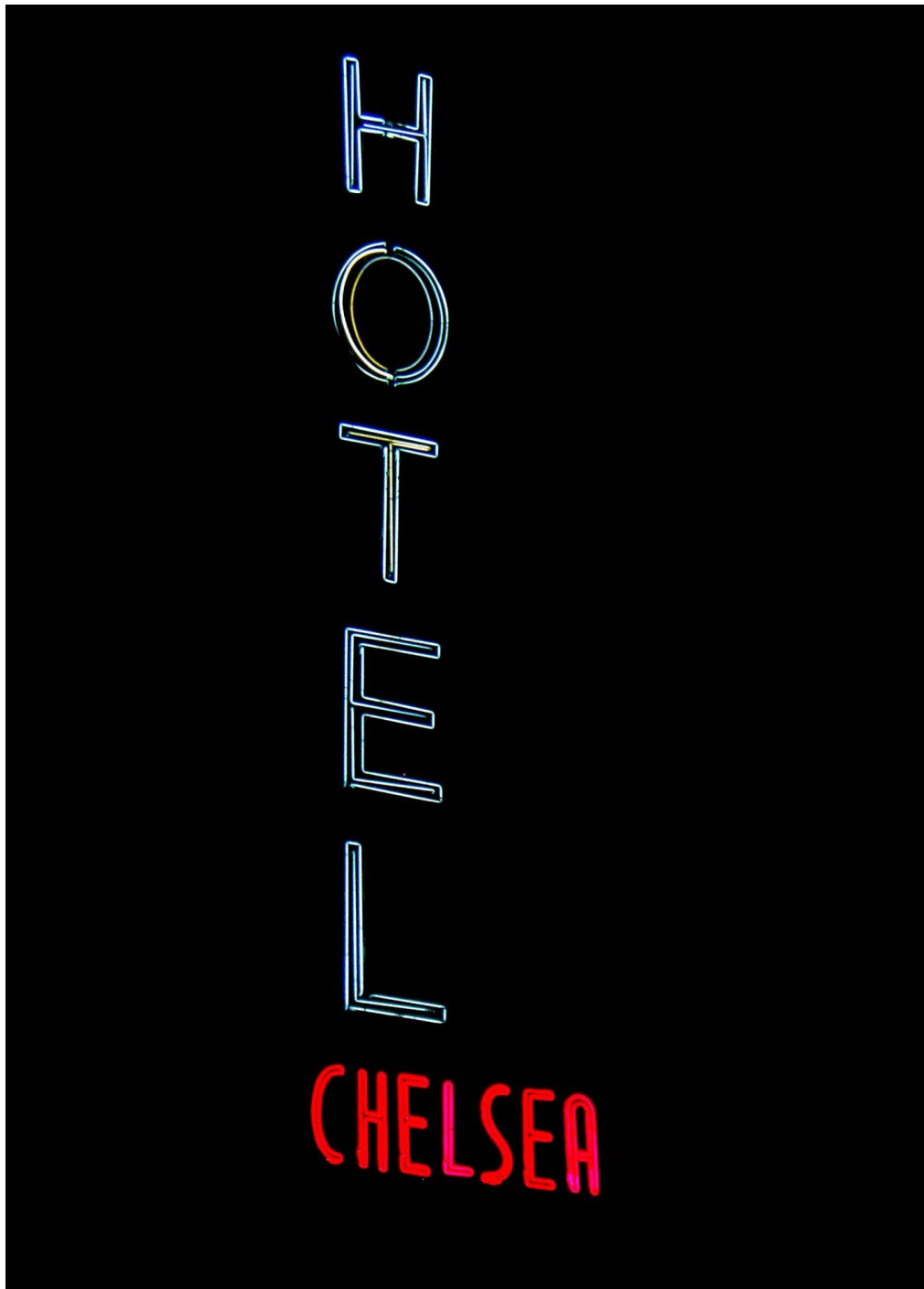


# The Chelsea Hotel Front Desk Historical Guide:

A Reference and Reader for Rare Individuals



The Hotel Chelsea- or “The Chelsea Hotel”- is known and revered the world over. For nearly 140 years this cathedral to bohemia has provided sanctuary and inspiration for numerous generations of artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers, and other creatives who have helped shape and drive the culture of New York and- subsequently- the world. The Chelsea was a constant touchstone, refuge, and asylum for creative gifts to flourish and find purchase in an ever-changing world.

In an age where so much culture is being sanitized, glossed over, and forgotten, The Hotel Chelsea’s reputation remains a stalwart to what made New York the greatest city in the world. It is an entirely unique opportunity within the hospitality industry to be able to work within such a legendary institution and to promote the specialness of this culturally holy place.

Art has proven, time and time again, to drive commerce in New York and other major cities but no other property in the world has the pedigree, leverage, history, and reputation of The Chelsea. New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers alike are going to want to experience or reexperience this legendary establishment.

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The Hotel Chelsea opened in 1884 as one of the city’s first apartment cooperatives. The initial crop of residents were, in fact, artists as the “Hubert Home Club” model (which the Chelsea was among) catered to them primarily. Financial stresses and the shifting of both residential and commercial ventures throughout Manhattan (Chelsea was originally more of the theater district and would become an epicenter for early film as well) caused the Chelsea to close and then reopen as a proper hotel in 1905 but went bankrupt yet again. It was purchased in 1939 by Joseph Gross, Julius Krauss, and David Bard and thus began the era of The Chelsea that is the most recognized and celebrated. The hotel’s management landed in the hands of David Bard’s son, Stanley Bard, in the early 1970’s. Stanley’s legacy is as infamous and revered as many of the hotel’s inhabitants as he and his unorthodox management style- if you want to refer to it as that- allowed many of the hotel’s most notable residents to pay rent with works of art- if they managed to pay anything at all.

Many books have been filled with the history and stories of the Chelsea from so many people over the years and, rather than attempt yet another one here, what follows can be described as a “drive-by” or overview of important figures, occurrences, and incidents with The Chelsea at the center of various orbits. Equally, you will be able to see and recognize how the economic ebbs and flows of both New York and the country at large have impacted the hotel and its inhabitants.



## *The Late 1800's/Early 1900's: A Rest Stop for Rare Individuals*

Among the names worth recognizing from the earliest of the days of The Chelsea, most notably **O. Henry** (great American short story writer who stayed at the hotel under an assumed name to avoid bill collectors), **Mark Twain** (room 428/4S- one of America's greatest wits and novelists, also said to have hid from creditors at the Chelsea), **W.E.B. Du Bois** (room 112, sociologist, socialist, historian and Pan-Africanist civil rights activist).

Another interesting bit of trivia is that some of the survivors of the *Titanic* were temporarily housed at the Chelsea, being that the ship was originally scheduled to dock at Chelsea Piers. Having tragic guests is a large part of the Chelsea's legacy and has fed deeply into the great many ghost stories. In this age of paranormal and real crime podcast and web series obsessions, we will surely find that people will be very interested in this history.

One guest during this era was socialite Almyra Wilcox who died of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills in her room in February of 1908. She penned half of a love letter that the New York Times quoted from in the piece covering her death.

### **WOMAN DIES IN HOTEL; TOOK DRUG FOR SLEEP**

Miss Almyra Wilcox Leaves Affectionate Letter Telling of Her Sufferings.

**NOT SUICIDE, CORONER SAYS**

Believed She Was from Castleton, Vt.  
—Had Jewelry, Furs, and Fine Clothing.

*"...attempting to "woo the sleeping god"*

Another similar tragedy that is sometimes cited in Chelsea Hotel ghost story lore is the story of Frank Kavecky, a treasurer for a benevolent society organization who was robbed of \$1,200 of the organization's funds while on the train (approx. \$37k in 2022 USD). Fearing that he would be accused of stealing the money, he checked into the hotel and shot himself in his room.

### **ROBBED OF HIS FUNDS, TREASURER A SUICIDE**

\$1,200 Collected by Officer of Hungarian Society Stolen in the Subway.

**FEARED CHARGE OF THEFT**

"His Word Would Have Been Sufficient," Says President of Society After Kavecky Shot Himself.

Of course, Chelsea Hotel suicides alone could be another stand-alone book and has contributed enormously to the stories and legends of paranormal activity and hauntings within the hotel.

Sherrill Tippins, author of the excellent *Inside the Dream Palace: The Life and Times of New York's Legendary Chelsea Hotel*, had this to say about the time she brought a medium in to stay with her in room 325 and assess the paranormal infestations:

*"We stayed together in Room 325/3W (I believe it was) for four nights or so. The medium confirmed that the building is extraordinarily well-populated with ghosts. She said they fill the lobby, constantly trying to tell their stories to the people sitting there. They linger disconsolately in the elevator, riding it up and down. At night in our room, she said, they crowded in around our beds by the dozens while I was sleeping, dressed in clothes from different eras from the 19th century on..."*

*...At each floor, she seemed to have a profound emotional experience: on one floor, a child-ghost kicked her; on another, she saw an elegantly-dressed female ghost eternally arranging her hair before a now-nonexistent mirror; on another she sense a "grey eminence" that others have called the Chelsea's "Gray Man." In the basement, she felt overwhelmed by the remnants of a sense of evil."*

## ***1940's, 50's, and 60's : The Beats and Other Literary Giants***

If there is a "big three" of the Beat writers, it is Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac (Room 406), and William S. Burroughs- all three lived at The Hotel Chelsea at various times.



*Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs*

Burroughs allegedly wrote *Naked Lunch* at the Chelsea- although this is difficult to substantiate as it was written incrementally and later compiled, having been inspired- however surreal and abstractly- on his travels and drug-lensed experiences in the United States, Tangiers, and Mexico. (Also worth noting: Brion Gysin, another Beat writer and associate of William S. Burroughs, lived at the Chelsea while having an affair with poet John Giorno in room 703/7E. He helped Burroughs develop "the dream machine" and also painted the painting on the east wall from the front desk.)



*Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs with the Dreamachine*

Legend has it that Jack Kerouac wrote portions of what is often considered the Beat Generation's manifesto *On the Road* at The Hotel Chelsea. This is sometimes disputed as it was likely written in a few places as even Kerouac contradicted himself many times on when, how, and how long it took to write. Herbert Hencke (Room 828/8S) is said to have coined the term "Beat Generation" in *On the Road* where he was immortalized as the character Elmo Hassel.

Allen Ginsberg was an occasional resident at the Chelsea for many years as one of the hotel's most recognizable lobby lizards. His presence at the hotel began during the 1960's and continued sporadically into the 1980's. Ginsberg's reach was well-beyond his poetry as he continuously rubbed shoulders with rock and folk musicians (most famously, Bob Dylan, accompanying him as part of the Rolling Thunder Revue in the 70's) as well as filmmakers and visual artists.



*Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg*

Another notable Beat writer who lived at the Chelsea was Brendan Behan (Room 428/4S): playwright, short story writer, and poet, Behan's legacy and legend is a little quieter compared to the others but was an associate of Arthur Miller, Harpo Marx, and Bob Dylan to name just a few. His early works predate what is commonly associated with the Beat era but found an audience with the 1960's countercultures..

### ***Beyond the Beats....***

The legend of poet, writer, and playwright Dylan Thomas (room 205/2C) is one of the hotel's most well-known, yet often misinformed. Some people believe that he died at the Chelsea but that wasn't the case.

He famously drank at The White Horse Tavern (they still have a lovely mural dedicated to him that has been there for decades) with some regularity but it was on the night of November 3rd, 1953, after a couple of drinking engagements elsewhere, that he returned to the Chelsea and was heard to brag "I've had eighteen straight whiskies- I think that's the record!"

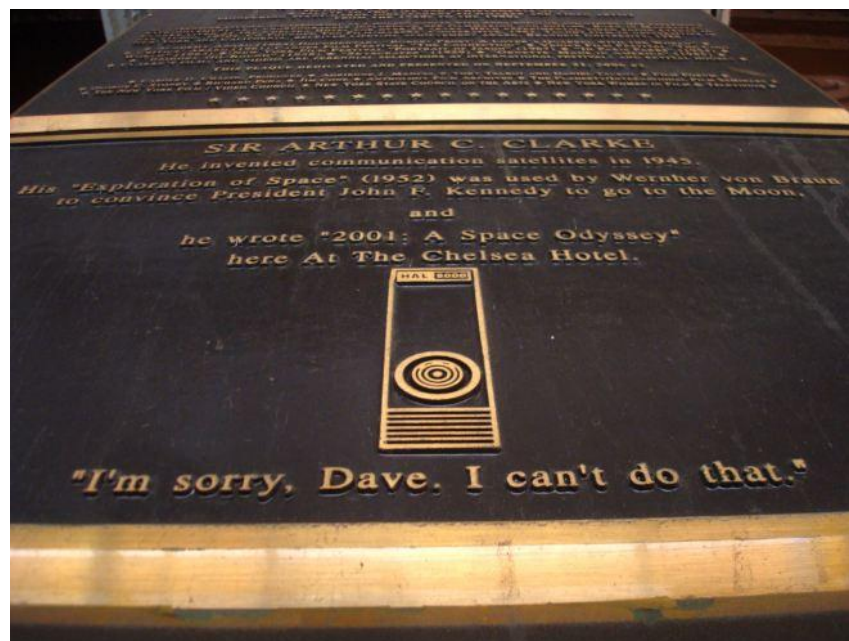
(Note: The barman/White Horse owner claimed that Thomas couldn't have had even half that amount.) Already in poor health, Thomas' health would decline in the following days before having to be admitted to St. Vincents Hospital, where he would die on November 9th, 1953.

Thomas Wolfe (Rooms 831/, 829/8U) and his work predates this era but his influence was huge on the Beats and beyond. He wrote *You Can't Go Home Again* at The Chelsea. (Not to be confused with Tom Wolfe who wrote *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, etc.)

The great Arthur Miller (Room 614/6L) wrote *After the Fall* at the Chelsea. His work as an essayist, playwright, and screenwriter includes *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and the screenplay for the film *The Misfits*. Another notable accomplishment includes having married Marilyn Monroe.

The legendary playwright and screenwriter Tennessee Williams, writer of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Night of the Iguana* also lived at The Chelsea.

Sci-fi writer and futurist Arthur C. Clarke famously spent a lot of time at The Chelsea where he wrote and enjoyed the success of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



## ***The 1960's and Early 1970's: A Rock'n Roll Hotel***

Patti Smith- musician, poet, writer, and Chelsea royalty (Room 204, 1017)- often explains while discussing her popular and fantastic book *Just Kids* that the Chelsea became the default hotel for the rock'n roll generation- not just because of some magical, magnetic pull to this creative Mecca- but, simply, that most of the musicians looked scraggly, destitute, and undesirable and couldn't stay anywhere else. Simply, the Hotel Chelsea would actually admit them. Those who started to inhabit the Chelsea walls in this era were the likes of Rolling Stones' late guitarist Brian Jones (room 206/2H), Bob Marley (room 211/2A), Jim Morrison (room 722/7P), Jimi Hendrix (room 430/4T), Jerry Garcia (room 620/6O), Joni Mitchell (323/3Y), and Bob Dylan (also room 211/2A).

*Note: Smith herself transcends any single era and creative discipline, arriving as a struggling poet at the end of the 60's with her equally wayward partner, Robert Mapplethorpe. Together they would find themselves: Patti, as a poet-turned punk rock priestess, and Robert as a provocative and groundbreaking photographer. Her friendships and collaborations with the likes of Sam Shepard, Jim Carroll, Harry Smith, and others make her an untouchable piece of New York history who still performs and writes to this day.*

Since the hotel didn't have a bar, El Quijote became the de facto place to congregate for food and drinks.

On Dylan, he famously wrote *Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* in his room at the Chelsea, returning years later to write *Sara*- a song where he includes the line:

***“Stayin’ up for days in the Chelsea Hotel***

***writin’ Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands for you”***

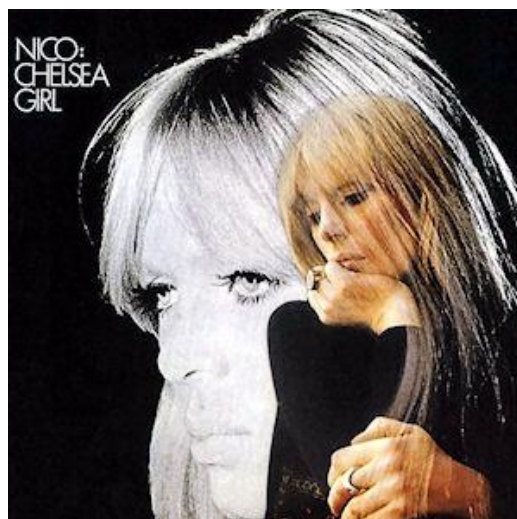
In the mid 1960's, Andy Warhol was revolutionizing pop art and had begun to broaden his artistic enterprises by including filmmaking as well as producing a local underground band, The Velvet Underground (after an erotic novel). The VU is said to be the band that bridged the channels between dadaism, avant-garde, pop, folk, blues, and rock into a cohesive musical entity that would largely inspire the subsequent generation of musicians and their musical movement of punk rock.

Andy Warhol famously shot *The Chelsea Girls* at the hotel, said to be mostly filmed in 424/4Q but is obviously in a couple of rooms. Among those filmed was Nico (of both solo work and The Velvet Underground's first album) and Edie Sedgwick. (The tragic story of Edie Sedgwick was made into a biopic called *Factory Girl* in 2006). Consistent with the narrative of that film, Warhol did eventually sour on Sedgwick's presence and, after filming her for *The Chelsea Girls*, edited her out of the film completely. She was said to have lived in 105, although she was moved at least once after setting fire to a room...a semi-regular occurrence in the Chelsea it seems.



(Andy and Edie)

Nico would go on to release a solo album entitled *Chelsea Girl*, featuring songs by Lou Reed, John Cale, Bob Dylan, Jackson Browne, and others. (Conveniently, all of whom were people she had had relationships with- smart!)



*Nico's Chelsea Girls album, 1967*

Among the Chelsea Hotel's most notorious tales involves guests and musical icons Janis Joplin and Leonard Cohen (Room 424/4Q). Ms. Joplin was looking for Kris Kristofferson (who wrote *Me and Bobby McGee*, a huge hit for her) when she met Cohen in the elevator. He facetiously said that he was Kristofferson which she knew very well wasn't the case. This would lead to an episode immortalized in Cohen's classic song *Chelsea Hotel #2* which would go on to be covered by Rufus Wainwright, Lana del Ray, and others.

*I remember you well in the Chelsea Hotel  
You were talkin' so brave and so sweet  
Givin' me head on the unmade bed  
While the limousines wait in the street*

In the early 1970's elements began to align and coalesce into what would become the punk rock movement in New York City. Many fingers point to The New York Dolls as being a huge inspiration to the next crop of bands- from Television to KISS. The Dolls' sphere of members and associates contained so many debaucherous characters, all of whom had vices consistent with the Chelsea's culture of the era. The late Johnny Thunders did live at the hotel while the others- Arthur "Killer" Kane, David Johanson, etc- were frequent visitors.

## ***The Lobby***

Patti Smith and others have commented often in their writings and conversations about the importance of the lobby of the hotel. Smith claims that when she and Robert Mapplethorpe were unknown, they would sit in the lobby and wait to meet interesting and/or important people and that that networking was an essential part of their creative lives (which would extend to Max's Kansas City, CBGB's, etc). Most documentaries usually include stories of all of the famous and non-famous alike, loitering and conversing in the lobby.



Other notable greats who stayed and lived at the Chelsea around this era include abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock (rooms 1017 and 902), filmmaker Shirley Clarke (822/80), and composer Paul Bowles (room 603/6E).



## *Stormé DeLarverie*

This is as good a juncture as any to mention the Stonewall Uprising in 1969 and the role that Stormé DeLarverie- a Chelsea Hotel resident- played in this culture-shaking moment. Stormé was a biracial drag king and singer originally from New Orleans. It is said that she kickstarted the Stonewall Uprising when she resisted arrest at the Stonewall Inn, and was promptly beaten with a baton. Upon being taken away by police, Stormé yelled “Why don’t you do something?”...and they did. The rest is history.



Tall, androgynous and armed — she held a state gun permit — Ms. DeLarverie roamed lower Seventh and Eighth Avenues and points between into her 80s, patrolling the sidewalks and checking in at lesbian bars. She was on the lookout for what she called “ugliness”: any form of intolerance, bullying or abuse of her “baby girls.”

Stormé DeLarverie passed away in 2014.



## *Harry Smith*



Harry Smith's contributions to the worlds of animation, avant-garde filmmaking, and popular music are some of the most important and quietest of anybody's legacy in the 1900's.

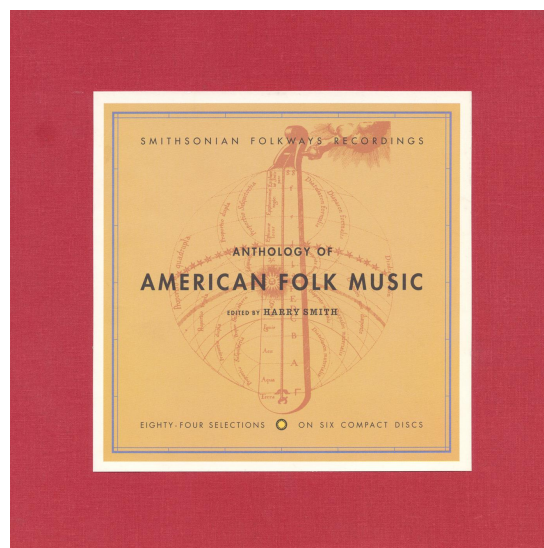
He is primarily known and respected for compiling *The Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952: a six album compilation of folk, blues, gospel, country, and cajun music that would be THE musical bible for many musicians that followed within the genres of folk and rock'n' roll. If that was all he ever did with his life, we'd still be talking about him and his importance.

However, he has a separate legend for being a highly eccentric, a hoarding archivist, a true bohemian, and a "majickian"- claiming to be the son of Aleister Crowley, among other wild claims. He recorded music with Allen Ginsberg and created mixed media animated/photography short films where he hand-painted single frames of film. (A few are available on Youtube.)

In Patti Smith's book *Just Kids*, she describes her friendship with Harry in a very loving and respectful manner, honoring his accomplishments, peculiarities, and his presence as a Chelsea fixture.

In 1991, Smith suffered a bleeding ulcer followed by cardiac arrest in room 328/3S. He was held in the arms of his friend Paola Iglori, as he sang "I'm dying now! I'm dying!".

He was pronounced dead an hour later at St. Vincent's Hospital.



## *A New-New York: Punk Rock at the Chelsea Hotel*

By the 1970's, rock'n' roll had become big business and, in turn, had turned very extravagant, bloated, and- by many young people's standards- dull and unapproachable. Paralleling this disenchantment was the city of New York going broke. In 1975 then President Gerald Ford famously declared that there would be no bailout.



The economics of this era allowed many struggling artists to be able to afford to thrive and nurture their creative lives with affordable workspaces and living situations.

New York is often credited for being the beginning of the punk rock movement as it is often traced back to the infamous club CBGB's. Originally meant to be a bluegrass club, CB's hosted bands as diverse as Talking Heads, The Ramones, Television, Suicide, Patti Smith, and many others who were all able to play on the same stage at a time when they couldn't get a gig anywhere else (As most clubs only allowed top 40 cover bands). Eventually, venues such as Max's Kansas City, The Mudd Club would allow this new wave and the label of "punk" became the catch-all word to describe them.

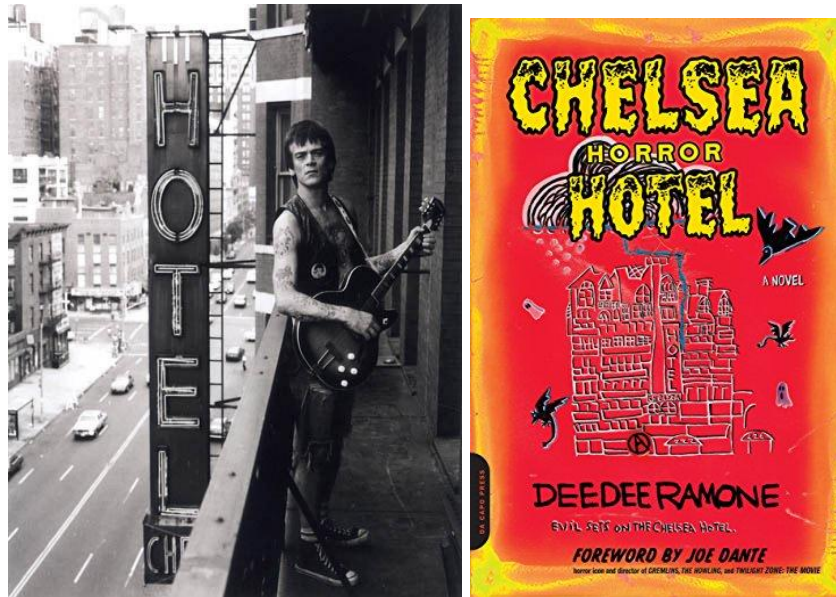
Richard Hell (of Lexington, Kentucky: writer, poet, and formerly of pioneering band Television before starting his own band, Richard Hell and the Voidoids), was spotted by then manager of the New York Dolls, Malcolm McLaren. He liked Hell's clothes which were safety-pinned together and torn. (Hell explained that an ex-girlfriend had cut up his clothes in a fit of rage and that he had had to pin them together. He eventually started to do it intentionally. Richard Hell never lived at the Chelsea Hotel but, oddly enough, his grandfather did). McLaren would return to England to his own King's Road clothing store/boutique SEX, where he would go on to assemble and manage a band...The Sex Pistols.



*Richard Hell*

Nearly all of the musicians of this scene and era came and went through the Chelsea doors for various reasons. Some lived here while others had bandmates who were residents- and a great many had drug habits that were both fed and facilitated via the hotel.

Dee Dee Ramone (principal songwriter/idiot-savant of The Ramones) has the honor and legacy of being both a regular guest and a tenant at various times throughout his life and career. He also wrote a horror-themed comic book entitled *Chelsea Horror Hotel*.



## ***Sid and Nancy***

The inevitable...

Some Chelsea residents and historians resent the fact that despite a century of greats moving through the hotel prior to their brief and tragic stay, much of the Chelsea's legacy is often set aside to accommodate the story of Sid and Nancy: a couple of young, punk junkies who lived at the hotel for such a brief period. Nevertheless, the death of Nancy Spungen remains the hotel's most notorious and legendary incident.

To summarize: following the Sex Pistols' final performance at the Winterland in San Francisco in January of 1978, the band imploded and the band members went their separate ways. Bassist Sid Vicious reported to New York, arriving at JFK in a Valium, Methadone, and alcohol-induced coma. Upon being released he reunited with Nancy Spungen and the two traveled to Paris to film the Sex Pistols mockumentary *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*. From there they went to London where Sid played a show with a punk rock super group of sorts to get the money to return to New York. It was then that they moved into the Chelsea, settling in room 100 (after setting fire to their first room).

On October 11, 1978, following a party where many drugs, only a few people, yet, a thousand stories emerged, Nancy Spungen was found dead on the bathroom floor the following morning. Vicious had ingested approximately 30 Tuinol tablets along with his usual diet of alcohol and heroin- so his various accounts of the previous evening's festivities were all over the place and full of contradictions. He was arrested, charged with murder, and eventually bailed out by the Sex Pistols' record label, Virgin Records.



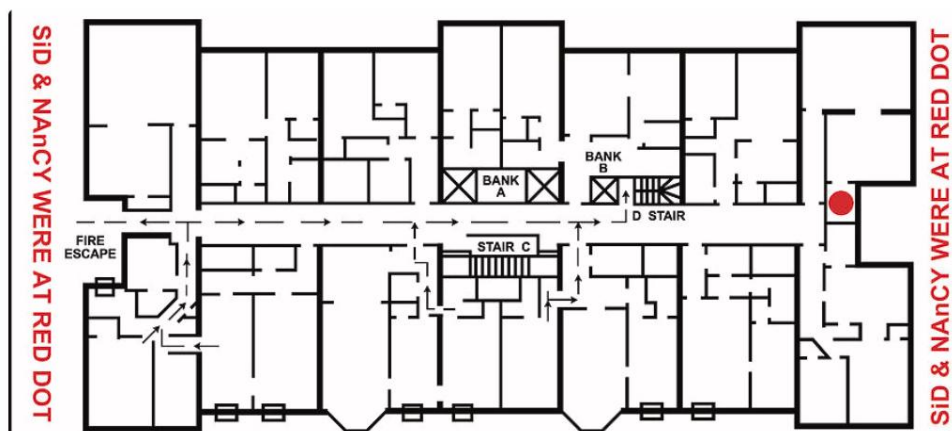
Only a few weeks later Sid got into a fight with Patti Smith's brother, Todd Smith, which landed him at Rikers Island. Despite the violence and abuse that he suffered at Rikers, he did effectively emerge detoxed from his heroin habit. On January 18, he appeared in court and things looked a little more positive as his bail was reduced. (The judge applied the condition that Vicious not frequent night clubs.)

On February 1, 1979, after completing his detoxification program, Sid Vicious was officially released from Rikers Island. Upon arrival in Manhattan he and a friend instantly sought heroin and reported to a party at 63 Bank Street where he overdosed late that night and died.

Sid's mother claimed that she found a suicide note in his leather jacket proclaiming that he and Nancy had a death pact, causing many to believe that his overdose was intentional. He also purportedly wanted his ashes scattered over Nancy's grave; a request denied by her family.

Eventually, some friends of Sid's made the trip to scatter his ashes- save the small amount that went up the nose of Howie Pyro. (Yes, he snorted some of Sid's ashes.)

Stanley divided room 100 between a couple of units to confuse/disrupt future fans and visitors from making it a macabre worship destination. .



## ***Chelsea Hotel BBC Arena Documentary (1981)***

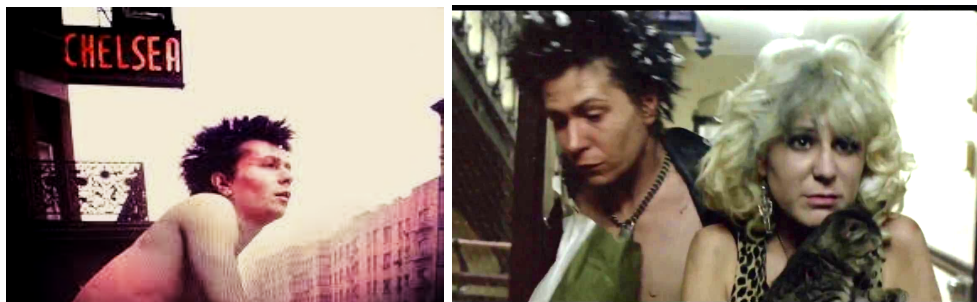


The acclaimed BBC documentary series *Arena* made what is, hands-down, the best document of Chelsea Hotel life, culture, and legend in 1981. Directed by the late, great Nigel Finch, it features Chelsea giants such as William S. Burroughs (dining with Andy Warhol in Room 222), Quentin Crisp gushing about his love of New York in his trademark manner, Viva showing her son his own birth, Jobriath composing music in the pyramid penthouse (not long before his death, an early AIDS casualty in 1983), Virgil Thomson (showing his apartment and discussing his friendship with the likes of Gertrude Stein), Alphaeus Cole (who would go on to die in the hotel as the oldest man on earth at the time at the age of 112), Nico performing the song *Chelsea Girls* in a room, and much, much more. I highly advise everybody to watch this incredible bit of Chelsea Hotel and New York history.

## ***Sid and Nancy (1986 film by Alex Cox)***

*Sid and Nancy* is a biographical film directed by Alex Cox, co-written with Abbe Wool, and starring Gary Oldman and Chloe Webb, also features supporting performances from David Hayman, Xander Berkeley, and Courtney Love.

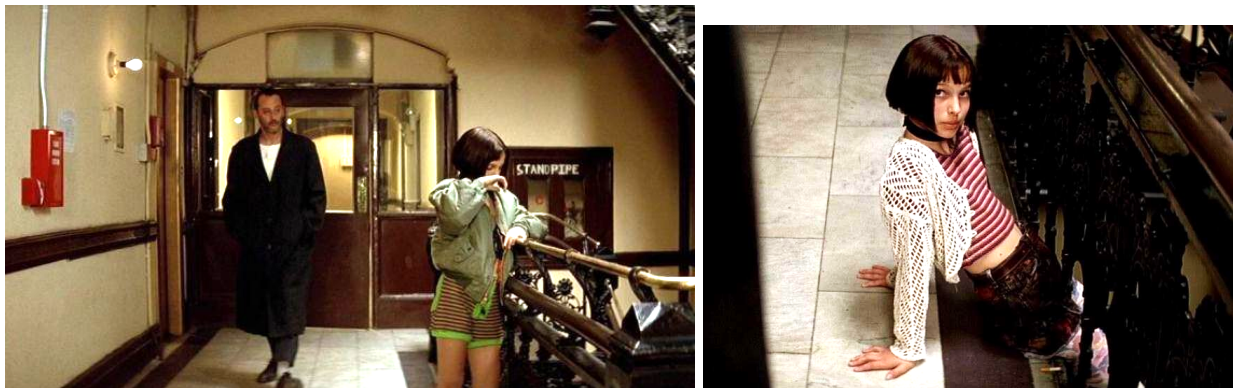
The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1986, and was released theatrically in the United States later that year. Despite failing to recoup its production budget at the box office, the film was received positively by most critics and developed a cult following. It features some fantastic footage shot inside the hotel and a great scene of Gary Oldman on a 23rd street side balcony with the Hotel Chelsea sign behind him. (Also featured on the Criterion Collection's blu-ray menu screen of the film.)



Other films that have used the hotel as a filming location around this time include *Nine ½ Weeks* (1986), starring Mickey O'Rourke and Kim Basinger.



A little later in 1994 there was Luc Baesson's excellent *Leon: The Professional*, starring Jean Reno and Natalie Portman.



In 1997, despite being from New Jersey, Jon Bon Jovi appeared in a video for a song of his entitled *Midnight in Chelsea* which was filmed here for otherwise obvious reasons.



## ***Christina Superstar of The Club Kids***

The Club Kids were a group of young New York City dance club personalities popularized by Michael Alig, James St. James, Julie Jewels, Astro Erle, DJ Keoki, and Ernie Glam in the late 1980s, and throughout the 1990s would grow to include Amanda Lepore, Waltpaper (Walt Cassidy), Christopher Comp, It Twins, Jennytalia (Jenny Dembrow), Desi Monster (Desi Santiago), Keda, Kabuki Starshine, and Richie Rich.

Given their legendary diets of various illegal drugs, the Club Kids passed through and occasionally lived at the Chelsea but the best documented is Christina Superstar. (In the film *Party Monster*, Christina is played by Marilyn Manson.)

Largely disliked by the crowd, she is certainly worth knowing about for her friendship with the late Nelson Sullivan. Nelson documented thousands of hours of his life on videotape which has steadily been uploaded to Youtube. He was one of the few friends that Christina had and there are a few videos of him coming to the Chelsea to visit her in room 323/3Y.

Christina died in her room at the end of May, 1989, and was not found for as long as five days.

One of the streaming services is set to air a Nelson Sullivan documentary in May, 2022, so guests might become more aware and curious about his and Christina's friendship.



*Nelson Sullivan with Christina Superstar in a still from one of Nelson's videos*



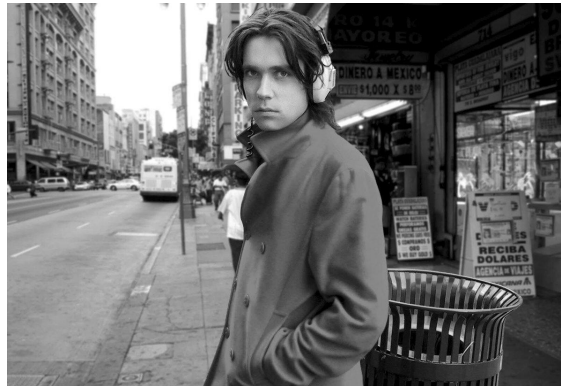
## ***The 90's and 00's: Madonna, Ethan Hawke, Rufus Wainwright, etc.***

In 1991, Madonna returned to the Chelsea (as she had stayed at the hotel in the early 80's for a spell, shortly after arriving in New York) to be photographed in room 822/80 for her **Sex** book which was released in 1992.

Ethan Hawke lived at the Chelsea on a couple of occasions and filmed his directorial debut feature film (he had made a short film before) *Chelsea Walls* (2001) in the hotel.

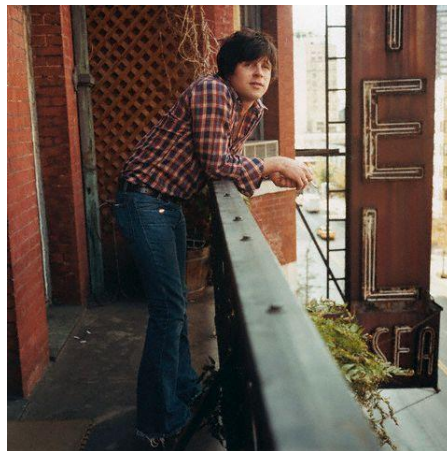


Rufus Wainwright wrote his critically-acclaimed second album, *Poses* (2001), while living in room 617.



Ryan Adams wrote songs while living at the hotel for a stint, including *Chelsea Hotel Nights*, included on his 2004 album *Love Is Hell*.

He is, by most accounts, an epic jerk and has since been canceled so...oh well.



*Some jerk.*

## *The Tenants*

As of opening we still have approximately 45 tenants who still call the Hotel Chelsea their home. Among them are legends in music, photography, dance, the art world, fashion and design, and beyond.

