

CHELSEA: ARTS & LIFESTYLES

The World Wide Chelsea Hotel

BY VIVIENNE LEHENY

Dozens of ghosts reside at the Chelsea Hotel. Within these hallowed walls, Dylan Thomas quaffed his last drink, Sid Vicious off'd his lover Nancy, and Arthur Miller penned the aptly-titled "After the Fall." Now, thanks to current hotel residents Debbie Martin and Ed Hamilton, legendary guests as well as unknown oddballs, past and present, have come to haunt the Chelsea Hotel online, at a smart, irreverent blog called Living with Legends (www.chelseahotelblog.com).

The couple has lived at the hotel for over a decade, but it was just last year that the idea of the blog sharpened into focus. One night, as Debbie watched eccentric tenants and famous guests stream through the lobby during one of the hotel's countless fire evacuations — a fire almost certainly set by one of these same people — it occurred to her that life at the Chelsea was perfectly suited to the evolving medium of a blog. She turned to her longtime partner, Ed, and popped the question: Would you write a Chelsea blog with me? Initially commitment-phobic, Ed quickly warmed to the idea of capturing the hotel's history while chronicling the moment-to-moment life peculiar to the hotel, and in April 2005 the blog made its debut. Along with regular columns like Monday's "All Tomorrow's Parties," a line-up of the coming week's events featuring Chelsea denizens, and Thursday's "Five Questions," quirky interviews with residents and hotel guests (or "transients" in Hotel Chelsea lingo), readers are welcome to propose or write stories. Right now Debbie and Ed are looking for Chelsea Hotel ghost stories, both authentic and apocryphal, for posting at Halloween.

Ed's "Slice of Life" column is his "dark but humorous look at the daily life of the Chelsea's famously mad residents, celebrated and obscure" — and also recently departed, like the Japanese man who drifted through the lobby dressed in a long white gown, giant wings and a halo. Or Dee Dee Ramone, who threatened to knife the construction workers hammering away upstairs because they roused him from his mid-afternoon stupor with their infernal banging.

Occasionally Ed himself appears as a famously mad resident. In one post, he explains how he antagonized a profoundly crazy transient who'd spent days ranting in the hallway about the management's efforts to gas her. Ed, unable to sleep or write, finally (and injudiciously) grabbed a fire extinguisher, knocked on the lady's door and announced he was the exterminator, "come to gas" her room. The ensuing meltdown earned Ed a visit from Mr. Lovano, the hotel's remarkably stoic manager, which Ed recounted in his March 21st, 2006 column:

"What did you do to that woman last night?" he asked. "Did you threaten her, or what?"

"Oh, hell no." I said. "I just said I was the exterminator."



Photo by Linda Troeller

Ed Hamilton and Debbie Martin, creators of the Chelsea Hotel's blog, Living with Legends.

Mr. Lovano didn't seem angry. If anything, he seemed slightly amused. Still, he shook his head in disbelief, and said, "Thanks a lot. We had just gotten her settled down."

"No problem," I said. And then, standing there in my boxer shorts, still groggy, an idea occurred to me. "You know, maybe we should get an exterminator. The mice don't bother me so much, but the roaches are all over the place."

Living with Legends is chock full of links to the work of writers, artists, musicians and other notables who've lived at, or created works about, the notorious flophouse. The blog averages about 700 page views per day and the readership continues to grow. Gawker, Gothamist, Curbed and MSNBC's Clicked are among the popular blogs that have linked to stories on Living with Legends, driving readership up to 6000 on those days.

When they began the blog, Debbie's instinct was to retain anonymity, reflecting, perhaps, her background in archival research and documentary film. She opted to write under the moniker AHCB #1 (Anonymous Hotel Chelsea Blogger) and

convinced Ed to appear as AHCB #2. The anonymity didn't last long as their hotel neighbors began to put two and two together. Then the first link-through from Gawker happened. Debbie reports that when Ed saw "about 5,000 people had read his story" he asked, querulously, "Explain to me again why my name isn't on this post?"

"I like to get credit for my work," adds Ed, who, by the way, is a nationally recognized fiction author whose work has appeared in *Smith Magazine*, *Pif* and *Eclectica*, and most recently in the collection "Class Dismissed: 75 Outrageous Mind-Expanding College Exploits." He also weighs in on America's stranger-than-fiction political scene as a regular columnist on *The Huffington Post* blog.

Living with Legends is the only non-corporate hotel blog on the web, yet despite its independence, Debbie and Ed have been charged on occasion with being too reverential. This strikes them as particularly funny since the hotel's owner, Stanley Bard, who "genuinely believes the hotel to be on a par with the Plaza, thinks we should be writing about dead celebrities rather than cockroaches and people

throwing themselves down the stairwell," says Debbie. "The famous, florid, intricately filigreed cast-iron stairwell," Ed notes, with a smile.

They've also been accused by one blog commenter of engaging in "shameless name dropping," which does seem rather beside-the-point, given the blog's title. Why ignore the fact the hotel was home to Marianne Faithful, Eddie Izzard, Rufus Wainwright, Ethan Hawke and Patti Smith? Is it better to pretend that David Duchovny, Julie Delpy, and Randy Quaid haven't kicked back here as recent guests?

While reports of these famous sightings are goofily exciting, it's the imbroglgios of the not so famous that are truly fascinating, and perhaps the most important function of this blog. Living with Legends acts as a kind of record of the rapidly changing neighborhood, now virtually unrecognizable as the setting for the hotel's bohemian years. "We saw this coming and we wanted to do our best to preserve as much of the hotel and its residents — and most of all its wacky "vibe" — as we possibly could before they were swept away forever," says Ed. "But we're not finished yet — neither the blog nor the community."