When UofL graduate Ed Hamilton and his girlfriend, Debbie Martin, moved to New York City in 1995, their first stop was the legendary Chelsea Hotel—a place Hamilton calls the city’s “Rebel Mecca.” This was no pilgrimage. The couple has lived at the Chelsea ever since. Because if you’re going to move to New York to pursue writing, you might as well live in a place where the creative juices course through the halls like blood through the arteries. For so many of the artists, writers, bohemians, exhibitionists and lunatics who have lived there throughout the decades, the Chelsea Hotel is a living, breathing thing.

For Ed Hamilton—not to be confused with the well-known Louisville sculptor and UofL grad of the same name—it’s a home that has provided both the inspiration and subject matter for his first novel, Legends of the Chelsea Hotel.

“Chelsea was a haven for creative types from its very beginning. When it was built in 1883 as a luxury apartment co-op, it was surrounded by opera houses and theaters. At the time, 23rd Street was the heart of Manhattan’s theater district—before the district gradually moved up to Time Square. The Chelsea Hotel is where Thomas Wolfe wrote You Can’t Go Home Again, William Burroughs wrote Naked Lunch, and Andy Warhol made the film Chelsea Girls and Leonard Cohen wrote the song ‘Chelsea Hotel #2.’ It’s where the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas died at age 39 and where Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious, was found stabbed to death in 1978.

“It was a way to gather information,” he says. “A lot of people came to us and told us about their projects. We interviewed them and got their histories. I was just going to write a year’s worth of stories—describing all the crazy people I’ve met there over the years and all the strange incidents.

Over time, Hamilton’s columns began sorting themselves into different categories. He then hired an agent who helped him shape the material further and suggested that he bring in some more history, which always seems to come up when discussing the hotel. “People always mention Thomas Wolfe or William Burroughs or Andy Warhol. The history is just a common subject of conversation, and it has an influence too on the people who live there to kind of live up to the example that’s been created.”

“That’s what the book is about—how the history influences the present-day residents.”

How could it not? The Chelsea is where William Wolfe wrote You Can’t Go Home Again, where William Burroughs wrote Naked Lunch, where Andy Warhol made the film Chelsea Girls and Leonard Cohen wrote the song ‘Chelsea Hotel #2.’ It’s where the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas died at age 39 and where Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious, was found stabbed to death in 1978.

“It’s amazing what you turn up as you start to research the place,” Hamilton says. “Everyday you learn something new. Bob Marley used to stay there back in the 60s before the Wailers. Janis Joplin stayed there. The Grateful Dead played a concert on the roof one time in the 60s. ‘You pick up bits here and there. There’s never been a real history of the hotel. Somehow it doesn’t lend itself to that.’”

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