

History-heavy Artists' clubs Far from secentary

By Joe Mysak



The entrance to the National Arts Club

Gramercy Park, roughly bounded by Park Avenue South, Third Avenue, East 18th and 21st Streets, is the only private park in New York City. Perfectly rectangular, the Park is surrounded by a black iron fence, the people who own the houses bordering have keys to the gate. This exclusiveness is not the Park's only unique claim, however; two of the oldest and most prestigious artists' clubs have their homes here: the National Arts Club, at 15 Gramercy Park, and The Players, at number 16.

The National Arts Club, founded in 1888

by Charles de Kay, a veteran New York Times art and literary critic, is housed in what used to be two brownstones, numbers 14 and 15. These were bought by Samuel Tilden, once governor of New York, who had the dubious achievement of losing the U.S. Presidency by one Electoral College vote, to Rufus B. Hayes. In the 1870's, Tilden commissioned Calvert Vaux, a noted architect, to redesign his twin houses in the Victorian style popular at the time. He did his job, and today one can see bay windows, stained glass, carved sand-

stone, and plentiful Gothic ornamentation with marble insets adorning the facade. Inside, a wealth of richly carved fireplaces, ceilings, wainscoting, and antique furnishings display the rare magnificence of the Victorian love of over-ornamentation. A stained glass dome crowns the club's bar. Paintings by the club's artists, both past and present, garnish the walls. These are mostly older American works, or portraits, outdoor scenes, and illustration. A few bronze sculptures are scattered throughout the club's deep, high-ceilinged rooms. A quiet, graceful ambience pervades, and, with just a bit of imagination, you can easily believe that it is 1906 rather than 1976.

The club's members have included such luminaries as Remington, Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt, Chase, Stanford White, Victor Herbert, Daniel Chester French, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and James Earle Fraser, the designer of the Buffalo nickel.

Despite the old, grand atmosphere, and the formidable list of early members, the NAC is not secentary. "We're quite active in the fields of artistic endeavor," said Hildgarde Fillmore Smith, the NAC's secretary. "We may seem like an anachronism, but, in fact, we're in the black financially, and we have been kept alive by our members. By love and sheer



The bed of Edwin Booth

guts. We were oh-so-revolutionary—we allowed women to join, for example, in 1896," she continued.

"We have about six hundred members; we hold various dinners, exhibitions, award ceremonies, shows, support scholarships, and bestow the NAC medal, which is given for superior achievement in art, literature, and music. This year, the one for literature went to Norman Mailer. His dinner ceremony couldn't have been better—he was perfectly witty and charming," said Smith.

Smith is something like the club historian, and commented about other award dinners: "Eudora Welty had such a good time at her dinner. There were people from magazines—The New Yorker—whom she hadn't seen for years. It was absolutely gratifying. We paid for her trip and room at the Algonquin. She returned the money, however, and said, 'I can't accept this. I had too good a time.' Miss Welty is really a very gracious person."

"And W. H. Auden—I remember sitting next to him at a dinner; he was really very sweet," recounted Smith. "When he went to Oxford, to become the sage, the poet laureate, it was something which he felt he had to do. That might have hastened his death."

In the past, dinners have been held for Gore Vidal, Buckminster Fuller, and Thomas Hart Benton, whose dinner was a "cultural riot" according to Smith. "We have held other dinners, too, besides the exhibitions and medals and such. But look: clubs have to mean something, they have to be active to count in today's world, and this we try to do," she summed up.

Right next door is The Players. Like the NAC, the entrance is a few shallow steps down. Instead of a long curvaceous canopy over the doors, there is a balcony with excellent, ornate, twisting ironwork.



The iron-studded gate of The Players

Two big, beautiful gas lamps flank the steel-studded doors. The brownstone house was built in 1845, but when Edwin Booth, the actor, bought it in 1887, he hired architect Stanford White, to remove its stoop and substitute the balcony and ironwork.

The Club, incorporated in 1888, moved into Booth's house immediately. Among the founders, besides Booth, were Joseph Jefferson and John Drew, the actors, Samuel Clemens (whose cast-iron is on display in the pool-room) and General William Tecumseh Sherman. The organization, then, from its inception, was not only theatrical—as was the Garrick Club in London, where Booth was royally received, and from which he patterned "The Players"—but embraced all the arts.

"In addition," according to Louis Rachow, the club's librarian, "The Players was formally charged with the primary duty of building up a library relating especially to the history of the American

Library, naturally, has a vast Shakespeare collection. It also houses the John Mulholland Magic Collection.

Something seemed too familiar about The Players: a love of Shakespeare, gatherings of actors and actresses, called "Pipe Nights," the Victorian ambience—but of course! A deep, unique voice, a colossus—I asked Rachow, "Basil Rathbone—was he ever a member?" Rachow checked the membership books, and it turned out that he was. After solving this mystery, I was ready for the sanctum sanctorum of the Club.

That turned out not to be the "Sarah Bernhardt Room," which is a tiny elevator that the famed singer was once trapped in, and which now boasts a huge color photograph of her, but Edwin Booth's bedroom. It contains everything that was in it preserved exactly as it was when Booth died in 1893.

A photo of the infamous John Wilkes Booth hangs near the canopy bed.



A view of The Players' extensive library

stage, and the preservation of pictures, bills of the play, photographs and curiosities." Edwin Booth's own library of a thousand volumes formed the core of this selection, which in 1907 changed its name to the Walter Hampden Memorial Library, in honor of the club's fourth president. It is permanently chartered by the State of New York, a fact of which the members are justly proud.

Part of the charter states the reason for the Library: "to establish and maintain for the use of the public a library devoted to the advancement of the arts in general and the drama in particular." And indeed, several researchers—not club members—were poring over the Library's books when I visited.

The books and relics of The Players are crammed everywhere. "We have about 15,000 books and periodicals, 25,000 photos, and seven hundred scripts and books of plays, both American and English," said Rachow. Original furnishings of the Club's are scattered throughout the Club. Since Booth was a famed Shakespearean actor, several dozens from Shakespeare are carved into many of the fireplace mantles, such as "Sit by my side and let the world slip/ For we shall never be younger." The

"Edwin Booth buried every reminder of his brother, except that single picture. He was very sensitive about that, too. Whenever a member would inadvertently mention John Wilkes in any way, Edwin would simply leave the room," noted Rachow.

The NAC and The Playersare, primarily, gathering places for artists, be they actors, writers, painters, sculptors, editors, publishers, cartoonists, musicians, or "patrons" of the arts. The NAC has 24 apartments with studios for resident members. The Players has several overnight bedrooms as a convenience to members. Both clubs has dining rooms and bars. But the essential thing that both share is a feeling for the arts.

To close on an anecdote: I asked Smith of the NAC whether the two clubs, which now seem very close, ever had any small wars between them. "Yes, there was a time when we were very cold to each other. During Prohibition, several of the old maids here watched The Players very closely for evidence of liquor. And sure enough, one night they called the police, and a big raid took place. I think they kept some of it in that little elevator of theirs. Anyway, you can imagine—there was a cold war until repeal."

Country Pickins'

By DAMIEN RONA

Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Jessi Colter, Tompall Glasser, The Outlaws (RCA). The real "outlaws" of country music are not these self-conscious, rhinestone non-conformists—who are about as non-conforming as Robert Blake, he of the phony hipness—but rather the Mel Tillises and Merle Haggards who just play damn good music without worrying about the frills. Outlaws is a collection of cuts by the four Austin-based singers. Now, anything with Willie Nelson on it is probably worth owning, and the two Glasser tunes are new also, particularly his hit, "Put Another Log on the Fire."

On the other hand, you also have to put up with Waylon Jennings and his untalented wife Jessi Colter, neither of whom can be forgiven their self-imposed images because they can't salvage them with talent. Jennings' songs are typically marked by a strong, monotonous bass line accompanying his drone; his duet with Colter on "Suspicious Minds" is enough to make you chuck the whole thing out. Buy a Willie Nelson album instead.

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ALBUMS

Tompall Glasser, Waylon Jennings, Jessi Colter, and Willie Nelson: Outlaws or Establishment?



Randy Scruggs, Jim Gordon and Reggie Young participating, this drive is completely worthless; how she ever became typed as a country singer is beyond me.

James Talley, Trying Like the Devil (Capitol). Talley's first, brilliant album was a compendium of authentic country music genres, ranging from dirt bowl ballads to western swing. Here he becomes more complex and the album is even better, as he combines an authoritative knowledge of musical styles around the theme of blue-collar workers. Talley is equally effective and moving when being caustically amusing ("Are They Gonna Make Us Outlaws Again?"), angry ("Party Haters"), or beautifully emotional ("Give My Love to Marie"). She's the One! I am also delighted that he takes a leftist populist point of view. Although I have always

tried to reconcile art and bad politics (which you have to do if you're into country) it's a pleasure to have politically-infused country music which is not crypto-fascist. One of the best records ever.

Gary Hill, Booga Billy (Capitol). Gary Hill very likely hasn't had an original thought in his life, but it doesn't really matter, for this is a delightfully entertaining record. Actually, eclecticism is probably Hill's strongest point. Not a forceful enough vocalist to concentrate on any one style, he is a most effective dabbler, sounding at times like Jerry Jeff Walker, Jerry Lee Lewis, Mickey Gilley, and even George Jones, and he has a marvelous semi-robotic in his voice. Booga Billy is what good-time music is all about and he even makes a Jessi Colter song palatable, which is no mean achievement.

Cheap

FEEDBACK

With the closing of the Johnson Hall office this week, Columbia took another step toward its evident goal of stamping out all traces of the human element in its dealings with students. Miss Waltemeyer and her assistants were efficient administrators, but they were also human beings who knew the dormitory residents by name, and who never put their own red tape above individual needs. For two years in a row I was allowed to defer payment of my room deposit until I heard whether I had gotten a job. I'd applied for And, though no one could turn a Columbia dormitory into a luxurious residence, the Johnson Hall office tried to provide some of the little amenities of life. There was always change at the lobby desk for people in a hurry to catch a bus, there were vacuum cleaners one could borrow, there were even flower boxes and board-games available for residents.

Well, any bureaucrat can tell you that this was a terrible situation. Nowadays, in the name of efficiency and centralization, the Johnson Hall resident who wants anything has to trek over to Livingston, stand in line for half an hour, and finally peer through a little opening in a glass barrier to ask his or her question. The answer is often a blank stare and a line of double-talk that ends, "I don't know, come back tomorrow." But, of course, these are times of tight money, and centralization is cheap. How can poor, starving Columbia be expected to pay for a small and efficient office in Johnson Hall when it can barely scrape together \$16.5 million for a new dormitory? Or more to the point, a new concrete storage hall for students?

Susan Wood

1976 Summer Work-Study Program

The 1976 Summer Work-Study Program will begin Thursday July 1, 1976 and will end Wednesday September 1, 1976. Financial aid recipients in need of a summer job should contact their Divisional Financial Aid Office to determine eligibility for the program. The Office of Student Employment will refer students to positions June 7 through June 18.

Catholic Campus Ministry

Summer Office Schedule
10 am - 2 pm, 110 Earl Hall
Counseling, confessions, info library about NYC, lounge...

Daily Mass: 12:15 pm
Sunday Mass: in June at 12 noon
in July and August at 10 am

St. Paul's Chapel

kikki things
2613 Broadway 666-7870 1215 Amsterdam Ave. 666-0700

Two pocket braided jeans, Reg. \$22

Our Price

\$13.99

Tank Tops all colors, Reg. \$7

Our Price

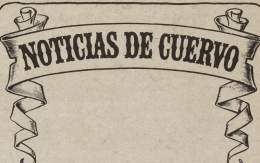
\$4.75

Multi-Colored Sun Dresses, Reg. \$27

Our Price

\$19.99

top brand name items



If a tree falls in the forest
and there's no one there,
who are you going to drink
your Cuervo with?



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