

Goodbye Georgia

A Vancouver landmark is about to take on a new form, but its legacy remains strong

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After eight decades in business, the Hotel Georgia will close its doors Jan. 2.

But it won't be knocked down. The venerable civic landmark is part of a \$350- to \$400-million development that will see the hotel renovated and restored, and a new 48-storey condo/office tower built next door. If everything goes according to plan, it should reopen in time to serve tourists for the 2010 Olympics.



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

Gallery: Goodbye Georgia

The grand old dame of Vancouver hotels, the Hotel Georgia, is facing redevelopment.

Developer Bruce Langeris of Delta Group is planning a huge New Year's Eve bash with musical acts on multiple floors. Between 600 and 800 people are expected to attend, with tickets selling for \$150 and profits going to charity.

It's fitting to have a big party to bid the old hotel adieu for a few years, because for most of its life, the Hotel Georgia was the party hotel in Vancouver.

Generations of Vancouverites had their first beer in the basement beer parlour, a favourite drinking spot for University of B.C. students for decades. When Errol Flynn came to town in 1959 for a week-long binge that ended with him dying in a West End apartment, his local "friends" propped him up at the Georgia lounge so that everyone would see him.

The Georgia was where Elvis stayed, where Frank Sinatra stayed and where the Beatles were supposed to stay.

Why? Because it was the entertainers' hotel. The late, great promoter Hugh Pickett always put his acts in the Georgia, partly because longtime manager Bill Hudson was very accommodating, partly because Hudson earned Pickett's gratitude by allowing Nat King Cole to book a room there in the early 1950s -- the first time a black person was allowed to book a room in any of the major downtown hotels.

"There came a time when I thought, the black artists, we've got to do something," Pickett recalled in Sean Rossiter's 1998 coffee-table book, *The Hotel Georgia* (Douglas and McIntyre).

"I said to Bill [Hudson], why don't you take a chance? Why not just do it quietly? You don't have to put it in the paper. Nat King Cole was the test case. If anybody noticed -- and how could Nat King Cole in the Georgia lobby have gone unnoticed? -- nobody complained."

Of course, entertainers also liked to stay at the Georgia because it was a hop, skip and a jump from the downtown nightclubs where they played.

"You could just walk up the alley from the Cave," says local big band legend Dal Richards. "Out the dressing room, up the alley and here they were."

The entertainers generally booked themselves into the corner suites, which were larger one-bedrooms and could be used for entertaining. When Elvis played Empire Stadium on Aug. 31, 1957, he stayed in room 1226 at the Georgia, at the southwest corner of the top floor.

"It was called the Lord Stanley suite, like Stanley Park," says the great rock and roll DJ Red Robinson.

"I was up in the room with him for a couple of hours. It was a big room, and there was a nice lady there with him. Not his mom -- Gladys didn't travel on that trip. And a couple of huge guys who looked like fullbacks on a football team who were around the door."

Elvis's room has been combined with several other rooms to make a suite. Richards worked as the Georgia's director of sales in the '70s, and recalls the suite had a secret.

"There used to be a bar up here," he says.

"It had the damndest thing. I don't know who installed it or why, but behind the bar there was a button you could press, and that would flush the men's toilet. If you were sitting there [on the toilet] you didn't know what was happening. What sort of imagination had that installed, I can't imagine."

The Beatles booked the 12th floor when they played Empire Stadium on Aug. 22, 1964. But word leaked out and thousands of kids camped out on the sidewalks around the hotel. So the Beatles decided to cancel their reservation and drove to Seattle after the Empire Stadium gig.

The Georgia played host to royalty in 1927, when the Prince of Wales stayed

there. (He later went on to become King Edward VIII, but abdicated the throne to marry divorcee Wallis Simpson.) Hollywood royalty such as John Wayne, Bob Hope, Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers, Sir Laurence Olivier, Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis were far more common.

Dancer Rudolph Nureyev stayed there, as did boxers Muhammad Ali and Rocky Marciano. You could go on forever rhyming off the musicians who rented a room at the Georgia, from Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong to the Rolling Stones, Lawrence Welk and Tommy Dorsey.

"The Las Vegas shows were always tested on the Canadian market at the Cave Supper Club, because the Canadian audiences in those days were very hard to arouse," says John Hykawy, 62, who has been bellman at the Georgia since April 8, 1966.

"If they aroused us here, Hollywood knew they had a million-dollar show."

Errol Flynn didn't stay in the Georgia during his last week on earth. But Norman Young says everybody in the city knew that he was drinking there.

"He drank right on the street in the Cavalier Room," says Young, the retired head of UBC's theatre department.

"The business it did was unbelievable, because everybody wanted to be drinking in the same place as Errol Flynn. What's fantastic is when Errol Flynn went to the toilet in the basement, God, the place was full. All of them standing in a line at urinals trying to get a peek at poor old Errol. It was amazing.

"I'll tell ya, you'll meet a million guys in Vancouver my age [he's 80] who all have peed at the same time as Errol Flynn."

Has he?

"Yes, of course," he laughs. "God, his face was like a crushed rose, just so red, the veins were so broken and everything."

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The Georgia opened its doors on May, 7, 1927, at the height of the optimism that accompanied the Roaring Twenties. It was quite a year: Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic, Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs and Al Jolson's "talking picture," *The Jazz Singer*, changed movie history. Vancouver's most opulent theatre, the Orpheum, would also open that year, on Nov. 7.

The Georgia's first owner was Henry Tobin, a war hero who apparently earned the undying gratitude of his troops by refusing to send them on a suicidal charge during the First World War (they later called themselves "Tobin's Tigers").

The Georgia was designed in the Georgian Revival style by local architect Robert Garrow and Seattle architect John Graham. The 12-storey hotel featured 320 rooms, a ballroom done up in an Aztec motif and a basement tavern with arched entrances that evoked olde England.

It was reputed to be the first Vancouver hotel to feature bathrooms for every room. The construction cost was \$1.5 million, and the deluxe furnishings brought the bill up another \$1 million, making it the swankiest hotel in the city.

The Vancouver Sun marked the opening with a six-page special Hotel Georgia Edition, and the opening gala was a swish reception featuring 200 local bluebloods. Entertainment was by the hotel's own big band, Frank Stuart's Hotel Georgia Orchestra.

Radio station CKWX set up shop on the 12th floor in 1927, and did live broadcasts of another big band, Harry Pryce and His Hotel Georgia Orchestra. But the radio station the Georgia is most associated with is CKNW, which had studios on the mezzanine floor for decades. Jack Webster did his broadcasts from the Georgia.

Many entertainers staying in the hotel, such as Hollywood bombshell Jayne Mansfield, dropped by NW's studios to be interviewed.

Bellman Hykawy vividly recalls Mansfield's short stay.

"She was very quiet and very diminutive," he says.

"Apparently she had an I.Q. of 163. But she caused us a lot of problems. It's a long story . . . something about her giving away all our blankets to an Indian tribe in North Vancouver, and letting her miniature poodles run around her suite urinating. Of course, the carpet was ruined, but she never paid us for that."

The big to-do, however, was when a local native chief who had been partying with Mansfield didn't come home. His irate wife phoned in the morning, threatening to tell the media, so the staff went through every room on the 12th floor until they found him. (No, he wasn't with Mansfield.)

A lot of alcohol has been consumed at the Georgia. Both Dal Richards and Norman Young had their first drinks there.

"From the '20s and the '30s to the '40s and the '50s, all the elite at UBC went to the Georgia or the Devonshire [next door] to drink," Young says.

"It was the place to go, during classes or in the evening. I spent more time in the Georgia than I did in class while I was at university, I can tell you that."

In the Georgia's early days, the basement beer parlour was divided into a "ladies and escorts" section and a male-only section. Young says enterprising young men could get around this by inviting somebody's sister out along with a group of five or six male "escorts." Once you were inside, there were lots of

single women, so sis was sent home.

Young was once banned from the Georgia for six months.

"I was playing around with this woman, with my back to the door," he recounts.

"I was entertaining this woman, juggling with oranges. We were getting along fine, and all of a sudden she got this look on her face and started arguing with me. Then she picks up her purse and she takes this swing at me.

"I duck and it hit Bill Phoenix the manager right on [the face], broke his glasses. That's why I was banned. What had happened was, her husband was coming in the door."

The basement beer parlour later became the Vancouver Press Club and the Chameleon Room, but hasn't been open for a few years. The lounge where Errol Flynn drank is closed as well. But new owner Bruce Langeris is intent on reviving them, and the hotel. If he has his way, when it reopens in 2010 the Hotel Georgia will once again be the premier hotel in town -- and the best place to have a drink.

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