

THE ENTERTAINERS' HOTEL

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM F1

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 long-time manager Bill Hudson was very accommodating, and 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 divorcée 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 Rudolf 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,



Rocky Marciano is counted out at the old Vancouver press club in the Hotel Georgia. The hotel also hosted Elvis, Frank Sinatra and was supposed to put up The Beatles.



The grand old dame of Vancouver hotels, the Hotel Georgia, is facing redevelopment, but will retain some of its heritage features, such as (left) the original ballroom and (right) the lobby clock. The project is part of a major redevelopment in the area.



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

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."

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 con-

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struction 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 IQ 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 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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GEORGIA HOTEL TO RETAIN CHARACTER

BY JOHN MACKIE
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The Hotel Georgia will close Jan. 2. When it reopens in three years, it will be totally different.

The 12-storey hotel will be renovated and turned into a high-end boutique hotel, like the Wedgewood and the Opus. A 48-storey condo/office tower will rise next door to a height of about 150 metres, making it one of the tallest buildings in Vancouver.

"I think the value of the project is going to be well in excess of \$350 or \$400 million," says Bruce Langeris of Delta Group, which owns the property along with Goodman Real Estate of Seattle. "It's a big project."

He's not kidding. The public parts of the Georgia — the exterior facade, wood-paneled lobby and legendary basement bar — will be restored and retain their original character. The ballroom upstairs will be taken apart piece by piece so that seismic upgrading can be done, then reassembled. But the ballroom will be larger when it's reopened, and the original promenade on the mezzanine beside the ballroom will be restored.

The big changes will be in the upstairs rooms, which are small by today's standards. The rooms will be demolished and rebuilt to a modern luxury-hotel standard.

"We'll reduce the hotel from 313 rooms, which are small, to 200 rooms, plus or minus," says Langeris.

"Our goal is to create a boutique hotel... and

that it will lead the market in Vancouver, from a hotel perspective, in terms of rates and occupancy. We look at the Opus and the Wedgewood, which really set the standard in terms of rates achieved, and we think we can offer what they have and more in terms of presence and amenity and location."

The Georgia is now operated by the Crowne Plaza chain, but another hotel management chain will likely take over. W Hotels was rumoured to be interested, but all Langeris will say is that his company is still looking.

"We had been in discussions with a major hotel group that sort of took the approach that it was a very upfront hotel with a flashy brand name," he says.

"[But] we want a hotel management group that will respect the Hotel Georgia, as opposed to the Hotel Georgia brand and history being pushed into the back and some flashy other name being prominently placed."

Delta Group and Goodman bought the Georgia and the condo site a year ago for \$62.8 million. The previous owner had another tower designed by architect Bing Thom, which created a stir when Thom successfully campaigned to make it higher.

Thom is no longer on the project, and his controversial "crystal tower" has been replaced by another striking highrise designed by Jim Hancock and Hilda Heyvaerts of Hancock-Bruckner IBI. Malcolm Elliot and Allan Endall of Endall Elliot are the architects working on the Hotel Georgia restoration.

The project goes to the city's development permit board Feb. 26. Plans for the tower include 35 stories of residential with 156 condos, eight storeys of offices and seven storeys of underground parking.

The condos won't be cheap: Langeris ant-



This rendering shows the Hotel Georgia and a 48-storey condo/office tower that will rise at Georgia and Howe. The Georgia closes its doors Jan. 2 for a renovation that is expected to cost between \$350 million and \$400 million.

icipates them going for \$1,200 to \$1,500 a square foot, which means a 1,000-square-foot condo would be \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million. Marketing should start next spring or summer, with occupancy in 2010.

"Everybody keeps raising the bar in Vancouver about what the quality is," he says. "Now it's our turn to see how we can do that."

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