

## TALES FROM THE CITY: New York

words JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

**SO THE BOYS AND GIRLS** at Gavin Brown are losing their clubhouse. Yes, by now it should be well known that Passerby, Brown's drinking-hole-cum-gallery accompaniment to the activities at his main gallery, the 'starship' Enterprise, has finally cut off the swill. If you didn't know that Passerby was closing or even that it existed, and if you have never drunk there, then you are hopelessly unhip, an exile from the one true turn-of-the-millennium 'scene' that could lay claim to the tradition of Max's Kansas City, Fanelli's and the Odeon, the place that minted curated disinterest, that fêted Cecily Brown, that sported a Piotr Uklanski dance floor, that took you in regardless of whether you were drunk or stoned. Man, it was *the* place. Or perhaps, the *place*. But whatever it was, if you didn't take part, it's not that you missed something, it's just that it was better than you.

Apparently it was better than me, too. When Passerby opened, in 1999, I was

ensconced in New York's various libraries pursuing a degree. Of course I'd heard of Passerby from friends, but rather than haunt the newest art bar, I was taken with the city's dives. From Broadway Dive on 103rd Street and Broadway, to Yogi's on 74th, to Rudy's at 44th and Ninth, to Red Rock West (before the owners got wise to velvet rope tricks, those savages), to the Hog Pit at West 13th in the middle of the now-overstuffed Meatpacking District, to the Nancy Whiskey Pub on Lispenard and West Broadway (at that time one of the few fine New York City establishments with a shuffle puck table), to Puffy's Tavern at Harrison and Hudson streets in Tribeca, once home to one of the surliest barmaids to be found behind taps; these were the places where I chose to drink, mostly with friends, but often alone (the only dignified way to do it).

What distinguished these joints from Passerby, I suppose, was, well, their *modernism* (bear with me here). The dive



is what you get when you strip a bar down to its essence, when you've reached the limit case of what a bar can be before it swings over into something different, such as a flop house. I did not realise it at the time, but this is what I looked for in a bar. Passerby, I believe, had DJs, which would seem something of a requisite when you install a pastiche of a disco floor. It's not that at my

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bars there was no dancing; there was just no dance floor, which necessitated stealthily navigating the city's cabaret laws that prohibit dancing without the proper licensing, as well

as the occasional drunk in the corner. The women who inhabited such places, otherwise well-heeled girls who were slumming it, checked their reservations at the door. God bless them. I don't know what the girls at Passerby were like, but I am fairly certain they weren't going to entertain some drunk-ass asking them to two-step to a little Robert Earl Keen at 3 am.

But what also distinguished these places, and continues to today, is their utter lack of pretence, nowhere more apparent than in the knowledge that if one of these places had ultimately to shut its taps, it would not post a website about it. No such modesty accompanies the closing of Passerby, which went live with newyorkisdead.biz, a last hurrah for the self-satisfied merriments of those who never failed to pass on by. But as a friend of mine noted recently, at Passerby, 'After a few rounds, you could be forgiven for thinking you were at the centre of things.' Indeed.



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