

## RAYBON KAN

Three decades of  
standup comedy

## A WEEKEND AWAY

Fraser Island,  
Kerikeri and  
Te Karaka Lodge

## PUZZLES EXTRA

Relax with more of  
your favourite  
brainteasers

HOTEL DE BRETT

# STORIES, SPARKLE, STYLE

As Hotel DeBrett turns  
100, we revisit the shops,  
the legends and the  
glamour of High St





# Friends in

Auckland's Hotel DeBrett turns 100 this year.

**Lindy Davis** looks back on the history of the hotel, and High St.

**T**alk to Auckland Boomers who socialised in town back in the day and nearly everyone will have a High St memory. By the time the 1980s rolled around it was the epicentre of fashion, music, trendy bars and nightclubs.

Quite simply, it was the place to see and be seen in an era of big hair and even bigger shoulder pads, plucked brows, Champagne — lots of it — and 'F\*\*k off Fridays.'

The surrounding streets would fill with suited professionals clutching leather briefcases, clothing designers, fashionistas, journalists and media moguls fervently striding down the lane with the promise of a decadent night ahead.

Home to some of the best record stores in the country, musos could be seen queuing late Friday afternoon for an album release outside Peaches or Music City in Vulcan Lane.

Known for its edgy artistic vibe, the area was home to fashion boutiques, record stores, book shops and a colourful club scene.

The High St precinct attracted an eclectic late-night music scene, with various musicians, DJs and poets performing in make-shift bunkers.

You needed to be in-the-know for those select invite-only events.

Vibrant clubs like the Box and Cause Celebre were places to be seen after 11pm and high-end clubs like Mirage and Melba would attract a wealthier clientele.

**M**urray Crane, founder and director of Crane Brothers, has been a fixture in High St for the past 26 years since he opened his menswear store at the base of the Hotel DeBrett.

Before starting his own business, Crane worked at fashion store Zambesi and Moonsoon Menswear and recalls outfitting cast members for the glamorous local TV series *Gloss* based around a family who ran a fashion magazine business.

He remembers the hotel being the starting point for Friday and weekend socialising in the city. The house bar was a legendary haunt for after-work drinks and its restaurant Delmonico's was popular for live jazz.

Crane recalls how weekend shopping wasn't a thing in the 80s and 90s and Friday afternoon drinks became a real culture, usually meeting at Hotel DeBrett.

"There was always a mad energy about it and something going on in one of the bars or the rooms upstairs and you'd often get preferential treatment if you were local.

"There wasn't a Viaduct, a Britomart or shopping venues like Newmarket, so all the cool places were saturated in one area."

In an era before cellphones and the internet, people were naturally more social, he says.

Cigarettes were popular and people would slip out to the garden bar, or pretty much smoke anywhere, including a tightly-packed bar. "Some Friday nights I didn't bother to go home, I'd just turn up to work on Saturday and sail on through."

High St was well recognised as Auckland's fashion and style district, with boutiques like



Zambesi, Workshop, World, Karen Walker and Scotties making it a one-street destination for the fashion conscious.

Fashion boutique Workshop was an institution on High St and manager Annamae Chilcott, fondly remembers Friday nights spent at DeBrett's House Bar.

"A group of us would head to our hairdresser friend, Brent Lawler's place to get hair and make-up done. Dressing up was the most important thing for us and I had a fabulous wardrobe to wear any night of the week, courtesy of Adrienne Winkelman [now in nearby Chancery Square]."

It was all about power dressing and glamour, with smart jackets, puff-ball skirts, nipped-in waists, coloured silks and sequins.

"The House Bar was an intimate space with old-world charm. It was often a mix of DJs, hairdressers, fashion designers and creatives,

People looked glamorous. It wasn't a tracksuit and sneakers era."

Chilcott remembers frequent evenings at Delmonico's, swooning over the very debonair Grant Chilcott as he crooned melodies from Gershwin and Cole Porter. "I really fell for him... I sat at the table totally transfixed."

The couple married in 1989 and the rest is history, she says.

**F**ilm and television production designer Tracey Collins worked as a set and costume designer for the Mercury Theatre in 1990 and lived below a music studio in Vulcan Lane.

"It was an exciting time and would get seriously noisy on the weekends with bars on both sides and Alfie's night club with drag shows up on High St."

She attributes the hugely popular music and club scene to the vision of Peter Ulrich and Simon Grigg, both instrumental in profiling New Zealand music.

"We'd often start with drinks at DeBrett's and then head to the clubs. There were lots of arty types living in old warehouses in High St back then."

"I remember it was really lively and social and the weekends were full of stylish, fashionable people."

There was always an after-hours bohemian group who basked in a heady mix of smoke and sweat emanating from clubs like the Cause Celebre and the Box, where the best of Auckland's musicians and DJs would party the night away.

International icons like Eric Clapton, Janet Jackson, Mick Jagger and Billy Idol would be seen mingling with local musicians like Nathan Haines and Ben Harrop.

With the rise of fashion magazines like *Pavement*, *Fashion Quarterly* and *Cha Cha*, New Zealand was rapidly exposed to high-end luxury and edgy alternative fashion. It was an era of prestigious parties, glitzy balls, gallery openings, design studios, flowing champagne and the requisite pink cosmopolitan.

**F**ormer Air New Zealand flight attendant and part-owner of Club Mirage, Emerald Gilmore (Emerald Alba back in the early 80s), says "Meet you at DeBrett's" was the common call among friends.

The entry to Mirage was downstairs from High St, a cavern filled with glamorous fixtures, mirror balls, a dance floor with flashing lights and the continuous sound of Champagne corks popping

Top, Hotel DeBrett and the Corner Bar, circa 1965. Murray Crane's menswear establishment is in the same building. Photos / Dave Murray, NZME

# High places



from bottles (then \$15) that were drunk so quickly that the silver Champagne buckets became redundant.

Gilmore remembers a heading in a Herald article: "Emerald sparkles as Champagne flows".

"The dress code was high standard and there was plenty of money going around," she says.

"People would meander from DeBrett's to Mirage. It was sophisticated, modelled along the lines of Annabelle's in London."

She recalls one customer wearing jeans arguing incessantly to get entry. He petulantly removed his jeans and stood there in his shirt asking, "Am I good now?".

Actress Geeling Ching, who starred in *Gloss*, described Club Mirage as like a local Studio 54 where brandy alexanders, grasshoppers, white Russians and martinis were on the menu.

Auckland restaurateur Judith Tabron spent two years as the executive chef for Hotel DeBrett.

"It was such a dynamic bunch of people working there. Don Fletcher and Maurice Crosbie, the owners at the time, brought great energy to the hotel. There was always a beautiful set that would come after work and once I'd finished my shift, we'd dance the night away at Alfie's club."

Sandi Reefman, owner of women's fashion store Renaissance in High St during the 80s, says her Friday evenings at the hotel would start with a requisite seabreeze cocktail.

"I just remember the Corner Bar was everyone's meeting point. It was long and narrow, buzzing with great music and interesting people."

Secrets and stories from the street were often retold by Auckland socialite Judith Baragwanath in her notorious Felicity Ferret column. Given she attended most social events, it was impossible for gossip to escape her.

The often-excruciating details of certain "hoi polloi" were exposed uncompromisingly in Warwick Rodger's *Metro* magazine. Baragwanath remembers sitting on a chair outside Club Mirage at 3am while a friend cut her mane of hair.

Despite the numbers of bar hoppers and club goers, ex-*Metro* designer Danyel Simich recalls always feeling safe around the High St vicinity, regardless of how late she stayed in the city.

"People were out to have fun in the 80s. Most clubs were heaving all night long with great bouncers who kept an eye on things."

"I'd usually start with an espresso at Potter Blair, then champagne at Melba and head to DeBrett's House Bar to settle in for the night. Being design-orientated, I admired the fine Art Deco woodwork and mosaic stone inlay at the entrance — it felt so sophisticated."

On the corner of High and Shortland Streets, the DeBrett is one of Auckland's oldest hospitality spots. It was originally developed in 1841 by businessman Thomas Henderson as the Commercial Hotel, to service



The house bar at Hotel DeBrett, circa 1959 and today; the restaurant in 2009; the hotel from Shortland St around 1925 (centre with the verandah roof).



Auckland socialite Judith Baragwanath once had her hair cut at 3am outside Club Mirage in High Street.

travellers, merchants and sailors given its proximity to the port. The area around High St was largely home to warehouses and workshops, and it was used as a service lane for workmen.

A fire 17 years later destroyed most of the original timber building, paving the way for a new three-storey brick construction.

The Commercial continued for more than 100 years before Dominion Breweries bought the property in 1959.

After refurbishment it reopened as Hotel DeBrett and soon established itself as one of the city's most fashionable hotels. It was one of the first to include seating in the bar area, a departure from the typical Kiwi bar where customers stood around high tables or perched on stools drinking as much as they could before the "six o'clock swill."

Women's toilets were installed in 1968 to cater for the increasing trend for women to socialise in bars.

The hotel was closed in 1983 for a full refurbishment, reopening with 25 guest rooms, five bars, a restaurant and ground-floor commercial retail. But with the stock market crash in 1987 fortunes shifted and Hotel DeBrett's glamour faded, slowly transitioning to become a backpackers' hostel.

In 2007 when Michelle Deery and John Courtney bought the building and began a comprehensive two-year restoration, mindful of its heritage architecture, and in 2009 DeBrett's was awarded first place in the heritage category at the Auckland Architecture Awards.

Today the boutique hotel has 25 rooms and suites filled with mid-century furniture and art pieces including hand-crafted chandeliers by Judy Darragh and an impressive spiral staircase and glass-roof atrium.

Olly Gunman, director for the Location Group which bought DeBrett's in 2024, says every detail of the building carries history. "Our focus is on preserving that legacy while ensuring it remains a vibrant part of High St."

The hotel is managed by Habitat Hotels and Apartments which has plans to open Vivace Restaurant & Bar, run by restaurateurs Mandy Lusk and Eugene Gibson, in DeBrett's this month.

Murray Crane equates the longevity of his brand to the history and stability of the Hotel DeBrett building.

Some of his original customers bring their sons or grandsons into the store for suit fittings.

"I love being here and love what I do. "There's not really anywhere else I'd want to be."