



Esquire

The Swank Life

Welcome to the Cocktail
Nation, where you can drink
martinis, swing to Bobby Darin,
take her back to your bachelor
pad, and still feel good
about yourself in the morning

By Randall Rothenberg

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL LAVINE



THIS IS THE 999999S, AS IN “DRESSED TO,” AND most people are.

Men are wearing wing-tip shoes; some sport narrow ties; others, à la Dean Martin in *Ocean’s Eleven*, have wide collars spreading out over the lapels of gabardine jackets or (like Joey Bishop, same flick) cardigan sweaters. There’s more than a little sharkskin. The women’s attire varies: Suits with padded shoulders, hats with veils, and elbow-length gloves conjure the spirit of Ida Lupino; leopard skin, vinyl knee boots, and striped miniskirts evoke the Playboy Mansion of the Donna Michelle era. All make their way to the second floor of Flamingo East, the New York bar that hosts the weekly party. There, “Born to Be Wild”—not Steppenwolf’s original rock rendering but an easy-listening version by Enoch Light and his Light Brigade—glides from the speakers.

Keith Grady is surveying his domain. Tall and somewhat gaunt, his black hair parted in the middle and pomaded back from his high forehead, Keith is wearing his “greeting outfit”: three-button black suit, white shirt with two-button cuffs, and silk scarf. He looks swank. As “Windy”—not the Association’s original but an instrumental easy-listening version by the Sounds of Our Time—wells up, he muses about his East Village party’s attendees and their motivation.

“Hard to say,” Keith says. “Sunday nights in New York, it’s tough to come out. Most people work. Here, there are a lot of freelance artists and trust-fund kids.”

“It’s such a relief from the heaviness of techno and house,” offers Steve Spain, one of Keith’s two deejays. At forty-three, Spain—whose daytime name is Steve Bonilla—has nearly two decades on Keith and most of the 999999s’ celebrants. A record-store owner in Brooklyn’s Park Slope neighborhood, Steve has made a second career out of this new party scene, pulling from his closet dozens of forgotten vinyl albums that for years he dared not tell friends he cherished. But when Esquivel’s *Space-Age Bachelor Pad Music*—a collection of decades-old recordings marked by wordless vocals, blaring horns, sliding guitars, whistles, and ping-pong stereo effects—was rereleased on CD in 1994, Steve knew something had changed. He had expected a trickle of buyers in their fifties. Instead, he got a flood.

“It was kids. Only kids,” he says. These days, at the 999999s, his most requested song is Herb Alpert’s rendition of the theme from *Casino Royale*. “Kids,” the wiry Spain says, “really react to melody.”

By midnight, hundreds are. Scores are swing-dancing to “Chattanooga Choo Choo”—not Glenn Miller’s original but an easy-listening version by Manny Delgado. Others sway, seated,

at the candlelit tables that line both sides of the ballroom. The rest are crowded up to a bar framed by red-velvet curtains and uplit by pink neon. There, a lone server, her breasts peeking from a black cocktail dress, serves up cosmopolitans and manhattans by the dozen from a red Campari cocktail shaker.

Keith puts down his dirty Bombay martini (gin, vermouth, and a crushed olive) and starts up a bubble machine for the 999999s’ floor show. A woman dressed in early Julie Christie and a Bobby Darin doppelgänger take the stage to sing “Mame.” “They like to enact what they’ve seen in the movies,” observes Steve. He spots a girl he knows. “Wanna mambo?” he asks. He hands his turntables over to the second deejay, Simon.

It’s well after 2:00 A.M. A young man in a porkpie hat pushes through the bar crush to make a request.

“Dude,” he asks Simon, “do you have any Elvis?”

Simon, who is placing the needle on the theme from *Star Trek*—not the television original but an easy-listening version by an organ orchestra called Kings Road—doesn’t even bother looking at him. “No,” he says. “Not here.”

No, not here. This is the Lounge.

AFTER A THIRTY-FIVE-YEAR DORMANCY, THE LOUNGE IS open again. Vamps in cocktail dresses and mugs in fedoras are slinking inside to pour their souls into the highball glasses that also hold their hearts. In the background play the smooth sounds of a generation past.

During the three years of its ascendancy, Lounge has gone by many names, each of which captures but a small slice of its total gestalt: Space-Age Bachelor-Pad Music, Martini Culture, Cocktail Nation. But Lounge is so much more than a mixed drink, retro music, and a fine cigar.

Lounge is torch, and mod, and cool. Lounge is that cat Louis Prima and those cads the Rat Pack. Lounge is tiki bars and hi-fi systems. “Lounge,” says Wayne Watkins, “is a lifestyle.”

A producer at Capitol Records, Watkins has seen a set of thirteen compact discs he issued and called the Ultra-Lounge series—featuring such forgotten acts from the

fifties and sixties as Plas Johnson, Les Baxter, and Yma Sumac—reach sales of some three hundred thousand units in the past twelve months, exceeding projections fifteen times over and emboldening Capitol to schedule nine additional Ultra-Lounge discs this year.

The company has company. Multidisc compilations have come forth from Rhino (*Cocktail Mix*), DCC (*Music for a Bachelor’s Den*), and RCA (*The History of Space Age Pop*). Individual iconic artists—among them Juan Garcia Esquivel, Martin Denny, and the 101 Strings—have flowed in such rereleased volume that music retailers are dramatically expanding their



Passing the tiki torch: Vic Damone with “the Millionaire” of Combustible Edison.

easy-listening sections to accommodate them, making the Lounge phenomenon a rare bright spot in a recording industry undergoing its worst slump this decade.

"People who were listening to Nirvana albums two years ago," says Frank Davis, the creator of the Web site Vik Trola's Lounge of Self Indulgence (www.chaoskitty.com/t_chaos/lounge.html), "are saying today, 'Hey, Julie London can swing!'"

So is a growing clutch of neo-Lounge acts. Some have already drawn wide attention, like Cocktails with Joey, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Friends of Dean Martinez, and Japan's Pizzicato Five. In some cases, artists old and new are joining in a cognitively consonant merger of retro and neo: Henry Mancini tunes have provided the foundation for two albums by alternative rockers this past year, while Hollywood Records is due to release a Lounge collection whose tracks include Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé performing Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun" backed by a thirty-piece orchestra.

Lounge has spawned a visible scene up and down the continent. In Los Angeles, swingers—well before the movie *Swingers*—have been motoring from the Dresden Room (where Marty and Elayne croon "Blue Moon") to the Lava Lounge, a Polynesian playhouse where the haunting surf-revival group the Blue Hawaiians serves as house band. In New York, the swing band Beat Positive alternates between the ultimately hip Fez and the ultimately suburban Greatest Bar on Earth, while weekly deejay-backed gatherings draw hundreds to downtown taverns.

Like the Naugahyded dives (sometimes called EZ clubs), nightclubs new and old have witnessed an invasion of twenty-somethings through forty-somethings, finding their alternative to alternative rock at Bimbo's and Bruno's in San Francisco; the Electrolush Lounge and the Waldorf's Polynesian Room in Vancouver; Philadelphia's Five Spot; Club Velvet in Minneapolis; and Orlando's Sapphire Supper Club.

"Since we've been doing this," says goateed Boston rocker Brother Cleve, a member of Combustible Edison, the best of the neo-Lounge acts, "I've seen the rise of martini bars. The cigar thing is tied in with it. The *Swingers* movie. Supper clubs with three-page martini menus. What happened, that all this started coming back?"

PLATO HAD ONE ANSWER. "MUSIC," HE WROTE IN *THE REPUBLIC*, "overturns everything."

Victor Simpkins has another. "Life is very difficult today in many ways, especially sexually. The list of noes is huge. Inhibiting. Unnatural. That's why a lot of this has to do with the formality of another time," says Simpkins, forty-two, who descended into the L. A. Lounge scene to produce the movie *Swingers*. "In a world where sex roles have broken down, unhappily and uncomfortably, this whole Lounge thing allows for a more stylized and predictable relationship between men and women."

Maybe that is the key to the Lounge revival. Its totems—the "signifiers" that reveal a subculture's "forbidden identity," in the words of British cultural historian Dick Hebdige—are

redolent of sex. Mysterious, subterranean, pent-up, provocative, ribald, racy, suggestive, pre-sexual-revolution sex.

Is there anything more phallic than a cigar? Or a tiki, that carved wooden symbol of Lounge, whose presence fairly screams pagan lust? And what of the martini glass itself? A sensuous hermaphrodite, it is Atlas holding up the world, manly beyond all belief; yet with its wide base, narrow midriff, and flared top, it is the buxom broad of Hugh Hefner's fifties fantasies.

Postmodern pap? Perhaps. "This isn't a piece of art," insists Keith. "It's a party."

But cocktail lounges, their neon martini glasses hinting alternately at the convivial and the forbidden, have long symbolized a tenuous harmony in a rotten world. Like postwar film noir, the cinematic genre in which urban dives, hard-boiled dicks, and gin-soaked chanteuses play so prominent a role, Lounge may represent what critic Frank Krutnik calls the restoration of a "phallic order" in a society in which sexual roles have been disrupted by cataclysmal change—world war, feminism, AIDS. Cocktail Culture's bachelor aesthetic—modernist furniture, open bar, with-it records, the absolute latest in hi-fi equipment, and pliant yet self-aware girls—also signifies, if not male dominance, an orderly reconciliation of sex and singlehood. Ask today's Lounge crowd why they like the scene and they're liable to answer in the politically retro fashion of party promoter Luigi "Babe" Scordia.

"Swingin'," says the pencil-mustached, zoot-suited Luigi, "is when dames are dames and men are gentlemen."

Which has drawn no small share of fire. "How much of a kick is the retro atmosphere of busty babes and guys with shiny hair?" sneered the Web 'zine Salon, in a virulent attack on the Lounge scene. Martini Culture, it said, is nothing but the same reactionary movement that Beats and hipsters rebelled against a generation ago. Lounge, said Salon, is just "Republican ambient."

Could be. The fifties and the nineties, after all, share a lot of traits: Republican ascendancy. Outward prosperity. Inner nervousness that it could shatter any second, so why not come up to my place for a drink and a look at my etchings? "Lounge is middle-class white people's roots music," concedes Aaron Oppenheimer, a founding member of Combustible Edison.

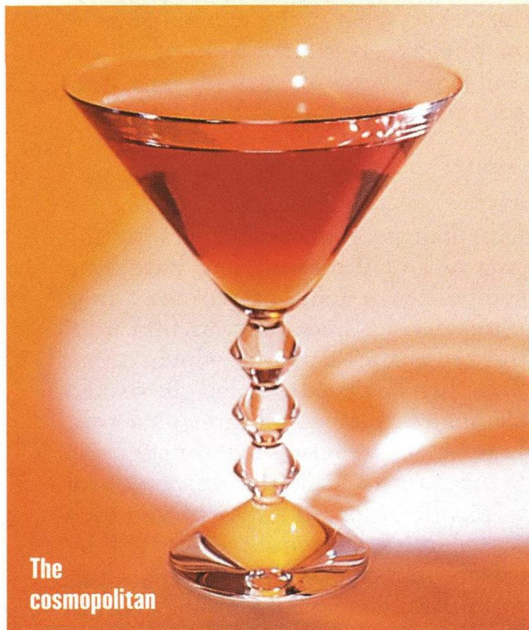
Yet the fantasy it calls up is anything but covert. Film is a conscious model for the Lounge lifestyle, whose music and milieus symbolize that purely American notion of self-creation: In the Lounge, anyone can be a George Raft—or at least act like one. No small reason why film and even television scores by the likes of Lalo Schiffrin and Francis Lai weigh so heavily in the repertoire of the Cocktail Nation. They allow Loungers to dress up and act out fantasies drawn from movies of a simpler—and therefore more daring—time: George Peppard in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Ursula Andress in *The Tenth Victim*, Jean-Louis Trintignant in *A Man and a Woman*. Take your pick.

Tikis, cigars, and martini glasses are redolent of pre-sexual- revolution sex.



Set 'em Up, Joe

A cocktail primer. By Joseph Lanza



The cosmopolitan

THE CULT OF THE COCKTAIL IS A successful religious ceremony transformed into a secular rite. The bartender is the high priest, the drink is the sacramental cup, and the cocktail lounge is akin to a temple or cathedral that uses lights, music, and even ceiling fixtures to reinforce

“Some people,” says Lounge-record producer Ashley Warren, who has issued a CD of Robert Mitchum singing calypso songs, “describe this as ‘the soundtrack to the life I’d like to lead.’”

KEITH NEEDS ANOTHER FEZ. The first fez, which he found at a thrift shop several weeks ago, persuaded him to throw this Sunday’s East of Suez night at the 999999s. But his girlfriend, Penelope Tuesdae, promised it to Steve Spain for the night. So Keith must find a second fez for himself.

Keith has expectations he must live up to. On Espionage Night, Penelope painted herself gold and sang the theme from *Goldfinger*; men in suits with briefcases handcuffed to their wrists darted around the long room while spy-jazz and crime-jazz tunes were played. Just a few weeks ago at the 999999s’ Playboy After Dark party (“You’re short on will-power,” the posters proclaimed, “but even shorter on won’t power”), a drag queen was chosen as Playmate of the Year and people danced to several versions of Cy Coleman’s “Playboy’s Theme.”

So Keith, who is known to many by his club name, Fancy, is seeking inspiration and props. Sitting in Penelope’s second-floor walk-up, he leafs through his collection of 1960s magazines. He picks up an Arthur Murray dance-instruction paperback from the kitchen table. He has already hired some belly dancers. (One is featured in a new Calvin Klein ad campaign.) “I’m trying to find someone

moods of comfort and inspiration. Like most religions, the

cocktail creed has its purists and its heretics. Orthodox lovers of the martini, for instance, are repelled by the suggestion of anything other than a thirty-to-one ratio of gin to vermouth (with the olive added only begrudgingly). Less strict constructionists, however, think nothing of pouring a little Cointreau into the mix or even stuffing the olive with an anchovy.

Mixology shares another important feature with Scripture: It can incite ecumenical wars. The greatest blasphemers are those who embrace “girl drinks,” those syrupy concoctions that require the steel blades of a blender and a cast-iron constitution. The term “girl drink” resonates with many meanings, since the Cocktail Culture, as we have come to know it, is distinguished by the inclusion of women in spirit-guzzling rituals that were once strictly fraternal.

Women, particularly sweethearts of the silver screen, also served as cocktail inspirations. The most remembered is that pseudo cocktail, the Shirley Temple, but consider these: **The Mary Pickford:** 1.5 ounces of light Puerto Rican rum, 1.5 ounces of pineapple juice, one teaspoon of

grenadine, and one dash of maraschino liqueur. **The Scarlett O’Hara:** One ounce of Southern Comfort, juice from half a lime, and half an ounce of cranberry juice, shaken with ice and drained into a pilsner glass.

Among the most curious of girl drinks to emerge from the golden age of cocktails is the pink lady. Perhaps this is not an ideal drink to go with a meal, but its outlandish recipe and fey appearance might be a great manhood initiation for those brave enough to be seen holding one in public. There are two basic variations on the cocktail:

Pink lady #1: A simple but gut-boggling combination of one ounce of gin and one of fresh cream, with a dash of grenadine, shaken in an electric mixer and poured with ice into a champagne glass.

Pink lady #2: One ounce of gin, one egg white, one dash apiece of grenadine and sugar syrup, and half an ounce of lemon juice, shaken with ice and poured, then dusted with grated nutmeg.

SOME OF THE SWEETER DRINKS COULD be considered more androgynous than outright girlish, since they still have a potent liquor kick and unisex appearance:

The negroni: Equal parts gin, sweet vermouth, and Campari, shaken with ice, drained into a standard cocktail glass, and garnished with a slice of orange or lemon.

to do the Indian rope trick, but I think I’ll fail,” Keith says.

His regulars are already looking forward to East of Suez. Unlike the crosstown crowd at Bar d’O, which goes mostly for the conversation and wants Bacharach in the background, the 999999s’ habitués anticipate a real performance. Yet they’re different from the cinch-waisted swingers who descend on the Derby in L. A. or on Luigi Scorcias’ semilegal Swing-Chill Lounge in New York. The 999999s’ flock is more intellectual, composed of large dollops of New York University students and Europeans. Still, they like to party.

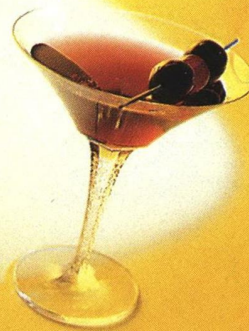
“I was thrilled to find the 999999s, because I’ve wanted to go dancing for ages. And I can’t stand the music in rock clubs,” says Liz Baum. A Dallas native and graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Liz came to New York, took a design job at Casual Corner, and discovered through mutual friends that Keith, whom she’d met during his brief stint as a New England rock musician, was promoting parties in the city. She went to the 999999s originally because she found him so wonderfully engaging. That the music at Keith’s soirees derived from her parents’—even grandparents’—record collections did not distress her at all. “Who doesn’t like having a few drinks and dancing?” Liz asks.

To aficionados, Lounge’s appeal is that simple. God knows, it’s otherwise hard to reconcile this variety of sounds that hold together in such ephemeral ways. In addition to Hawaiian-influenced exotica, Latin standards, croon songs, and rhythmically volatile Space-Age Bachelor-Pad Music, there are the cascading sixties strings that are usually catego-

The negroni



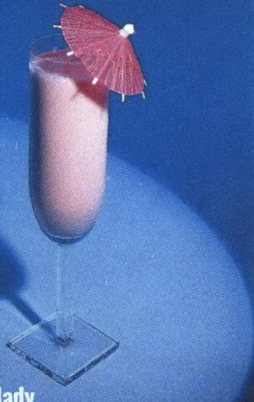
The purple martini



The sidecar



The pink lady



The sidecar: One ounce each of brandy and triple sec with the juice of a quarter to half a lemon, shaken or stirred with ice, drained into a cocktail glass, and crowned with a lemon twist.

The cosmopolitan: Mix one ounce of vodka and two-thirds of an ounce of triple sec in a shaker, with cranberry juice to taste. Serve in a chilled martini glass, straight up.

EVEN THE RELATIVELY STOIC MARTINI has been dandified, or at least genetically redesigned, through the years. In one of the great ironies, among the most notable martini deviants was that purveyor of macho restraint James Bond, who, in Ian Fleming's novel *Casino Royale*, proposes an egregious variation, which he names after his doomed girl-

friend, double agent Vesper Lynd. Here, in the midst of the cold war, was Bond, with the nerve to pollute a gin-based cocktail with Russian vodka:

The Vesper: Three measures of Gordon's gin with one of vodka and a half measure of Kina Lillet, shaken (not stirred) with ice and adorned with a lemon peel.

Today, the most remarkable examples of cocktail revisionism come out of restaurants and bars plying the right sales gimmick. In Denver, an establishment called the Purple Martini serves just that: gin or vodka with "purple magic" served straight up. Morton's of Chicago makes bold attempts at cultivating what it calls "a new twist on a cocktail classic." Its Martini

Club's membership is open, but the sole rule is to "sip, savor, and enjoy in contented moderation." Among the offerings of Morton's Martini Club: **The Cajun martini:** Absolut Peppar Vodka with a hint of jalapeño.

The dark crystal: A blend of Stoli Cristall, a Remy Martin VSOP splash, and a lemon twist.

These examples alone are enough to spawn great cocktail conversations, whether they be cordial recipe exchanges or tippler-theology battles. But behind all of the surface beauty and urbane panache of these sacred elixirs lurks the desire for meaning, a haven for the soul, with some drops of sweet-natured sin for good measure.

rized as easy listening, which is not to be confused with "sleazy listening," the term for the jazz-laden scores of sixties soft-core European horror movies. This, in turn, edges fairly close to crime jazz and spy jazz, as exemplified by the theme from *Peter Gunn* and Vikki Carr's rendition of the title song to the Dean Martin film *The Silencers*. Another category, known as Loungecore, consists of orchestral covers of rock songs from the late sixties and early seventies.

This vast, unwieldy collection of musical subgenres hangs together best as a reference to a postwar prosperity edged with enough nuclear anxiety that it introduced the libertine notion of living for the day to a people accustomed to sacrificing for the future. The music's unifying motif seems best described by Steve Sando, the editor of the San Francisco Lounge 'zine *MisterLUCKY*: "Do we feel like drinking and having a swell time while listening?"

Swell times require swell garb, naturally, and although it's not required, Keith likes people to dress for the 999999s. He cuts two dollars from the five-dollar admission fee for men in jackets and women in dresses. For those who really do it up—who go beyond the little black cocktail dress and the three-piece suit into bloodred, spread-collar Rat Pack shirts or curvy postwar Dior ensembles—he'll buy a sidecar or a Rob Roy. "Our theory is lead by example," he says.

Many take his cue. At Playboy After Dark, a young woman who calls herself Murray Hill came outfitted as Hef, complete with pipe and smoking jacket. "What's the point of progress," asks *Lounge* magazine, a movement

gazetteer out of L. A., "if we don't do it with style?"

Right now, the demands of style are weighing on Keith himself. He's gotten from Steve Spain a tape of cuts from a fifties LP called *How to Belly Dance for Your Husband*. He has photocopied the instructional booklet that came with the album to distribute to his regulars on Sunday night. He's asked Lucien Samaha—who is not only known internationally as Lucien the Loungecore DJ but is also a Lebanese native—to bring his own personal fez to this Sunday's East of Suez party.

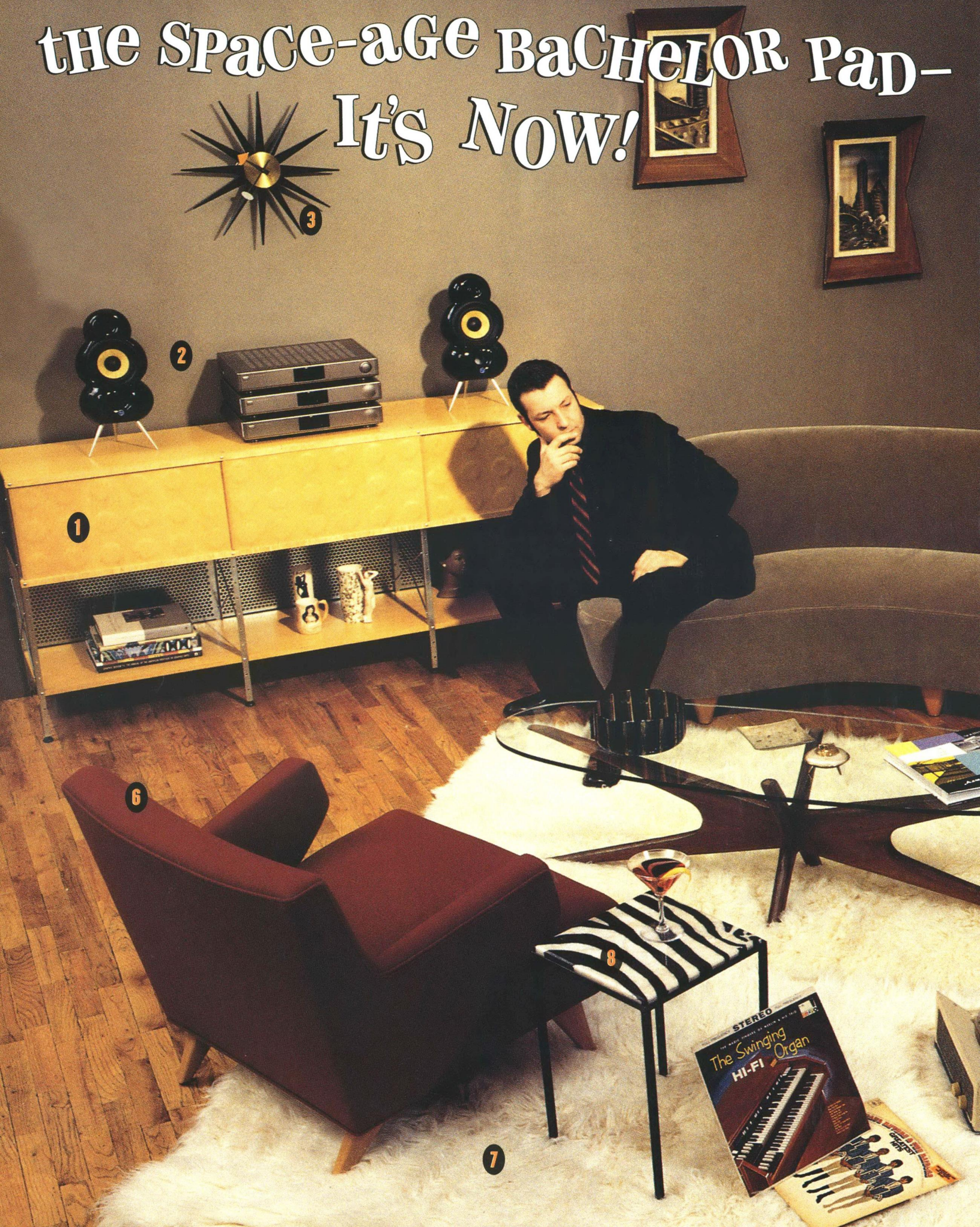
"But the hardest thing to find is a giant wicker basket for the lady-snake-charmer routine," he says. "Penny's going to be the snake."

DRESSING UP AND PLAYACTING AMONG ADULTS HAS A name, of course: camp. Even Lounge lizards admit to high degrees of irony; their favorite word is *swank*, which *Lounge* magazine cofounder Sam Wick defines simply as "ostentatiously stylish." In *Cocktail Culture* is found the same fin de siècle excess that marked the camp mode as far back as Oscar Wilde's day. The kitschy enthusiasm of Esquivel's *zoo-zoo-pows*, the Wonderbra-ed women lining up for Mr. Phat's Royal Martini Club: Both point to the ironic exaltation of the banal that Susan Sontag found at the core of camp—although in Lounge, high-style heterosexuality reigns over camp's more familiar gay aesthetic.

Loungers also affect the "disengaged, depoliticized" attitude Sontag saw at camp's



THE SPACE-AGE BACHELOR PAD— It's NOW!



1

2

3

6

7

8



AS JULIE LONDON USED TO SING, nice girls don't stay for breakfast. But that's no reason they can't step inside for a nightcap. So a dull den just won't do. Here's how to fashion a lair with flair. An Eames storage cabinet (1) is the perfect resting place for a Marantz stereo system and a curvy pair of B&W pod speakers (2). When the George Nelson wall clock (3) tells you the witching hour is near, dim the lights of the sputnik hanging fixture (4) and beckon her to the moss-green mohair sofa (5) or the cranberry lounge chair (6). Don't worry about spilling her negroni on the white flokati area rug (7), either; it will rest easy on the zebra side table (8). If she'd like another, the vintage 1950s Italian lacquered bar (9) is well stocked (it even has the requisite tiki glass), and the leopard barstool (10) will bring out all your feral instincts. The glass coffee table (11) is ideal for showing off those old vinyl albums (12), if you're not already playing them on the record player (13)—which is probably still in your parents' closet.

Availability (in New York City): 1, 5, 6: Modernica (212-219-1303); 7, 10: ABC Carpet & Home (212-473-3000); 3, 9: Art & Industrial Design Shop (212-477-0116); 2: Stereo Exchange (212-505-1111); 4: City Barn Antiques (212-941-5757); 8: Guéridon (212-677-7740); 11: Phooof (212-807-1332).



center. "A lot of modern alternative rock is very negative—'Things suck and I'm unhappy about it,'" says Combustible Edison's Oppenheimer. "I can only take so much of that. We don't mix politics with our music."

Which is, in a noncamp way, truly ironic. For Lounge was actually the product of a conscious conspiracy that had as its goal perhaps the most political, even noble, objective imaginable: to overthrow the baby boom's iron grip on American culture.

IT WAS BYRON WERNER—A PIONEER OF THE LOUNGE movement and Keith Grady's spiritual godfather—who started it, in a pure act of revenge. For Byron Werner had loved rock 'n' roll: roots rock, psychedelic rock, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin. Then, just at the moment he'd become old enough to go to concerts and trip out, the rock establishment declared the sixties over and replaced the black-light poster with Carole King.

"I got kind of upset," says Werner, a large, shaggy forty-three-year-old, "at rock 'n' roll fascism."

One day, rummaging through his parents' record collection, he came across a dusty album by Yma Sumac, a Peruvian songstress with a five-octave range who'd been major among mambo aficionados two decades before. She provided Werner his means of redress. He decided to collect, play, and distribute her style of music, construed broadly, in a one-man rebellion against the tyrants of the sanctioned counterculture.

Werner wasn't alone in his disdain for the deadening hand of an official avant-garde. By the late seventies, punks, too, were decrying the totalitarian influence of "rockism." Haunting thrift stores for fashion, some found their way to the twenty-five-cent used-record bins, where, drawn by cover photographs of cocktail-clutching temptresses, they began listening to Jackie Gleason's *Music, Martinis, and Memories* and Les Baxter's *The Passions*.

But Byron began spreading his finds (they included, for three cents at a thrift shop, Esquivel's *Other Worlds, Other Sounds*) to friends and colleagues. Like another revolutionary of the period, the Ayatollah Khomeini, his medium was audiotape.

At first, his beneficiaries were graphic designers and underground cartoonists like him. Later, he began distributing the tapes through the Church of the SubGenius, a loose national organization of satiric outsiders that was founded in 1980 in Texas. For his first compilation made especially for the group, Byron invented the term "Space-Age Bachelor-Pad Music."

The tapes found an audience. SubGenius Mark Mothersbaugh guided his new-wave band Devo into a 1987 CD entitled *E-Z Listening Disc*. SubGenius Matt Groening toyed with Esquivel tunes on *The Simpsons*. SubGenius Irwin Chusid not only played the tapes on his show on WFMU, a free-form station in northern New Jersey, he persuaded Bar None Records, in Hoboken, to let him produce an Esquivel album. In licensing the tracks from Bertelsmann, the tiny company nervously guaranteed the multinational giant that it would sell five thousand discs within two years.

Then a funny thing happened: *Esquivel! Space-Age Bachelor Pad Music* and a follow-up, *Esquivel: Music from a Sparkling Planet*, sold a hundred thousand albums in total.

An even funnier thing happened: Byron Werner realized his attraction to Lounge was no longer ironic. "There came a point where I said, 'Wait a minute. I really love this stuff now. I'm not making fun of it anymore.' I think it

had to do with finally coming to terms with my parents."

In other words, Lounge is a way to feel grown-up in a world so long dominated by a generation whose first name is Baby that any natural instinct of what it means to be an adult has evaporated. All that's left is cinematic facsimiles of the real thing, which today's Loungers grasp at with a fervor that most oblivious boomers save for Nick at Nite reruns. "Think about the fifties," says twenty-five-year-old Sam Wick of *Lounge* magazine. "That's the last time you wanted to be an adult."

Others were going through similar transformations. Michael "the Millionaire" Cudahy had his epiphany in Las Vegas, where he'd moved mainly to continue a desultory life as a moderately successful rock musician. But there, somewhere between a Wayne Newton show at the Hilton and Don Arden's Jubilee (the sinking of the *Titanic* and Samson bringing down the temple, all with bare breasts and set to music), he had his "conversion experience."

"I finally snapped out of my denial," says the thirty-five-year-old Cudahy, nipping at a calvados sidecar as he tells the tale, "and embraced my real culture." Out of his old alternative-rock band, Christmas, he convened Combustible Edison, whose repertoire includes spy jazz, exotica, and a torcher named Miss Lily Banquette singing "Cry Me a River."

Original Lounge artists (most of whom despise the identification, because, as crooner Jack Jones says, "the Lounge is where you work when you're not up to playing the main room") began to see a change in their audiences. For almost two decades, Vic Damone says, his audiences consisted of men and women in his own cohort—"and I'll be sixty-nine in April." Earlier this year, in the dead of winter, he did a concert in Cheyenne, Wyoming. When he got to the hall, all seventeen hundred seats were filled. At one point, somewhere between "Embraceable You," "Night and Day," and other tunes from *Greatest Love Songs of the Century*, his first album in nearly a decade, Damone decided to ask whether anyone in the place was under forty. The room burst into applause.

In New York, Lounge lizards began slithering out from their closets. Chris Brick, a longtime vinyl archaeologist, started selling Lounge-compilation tapes featuring Esquivel, Martin Denny, and Enoch Light out of Smylonylon, the clothing shop he owned in New York's SoHo. When his tally reached 250 cassettes a week, he and some partners decided to throw a party, which they called Tynynyny. One of his doormen was Keith Grady, freshly arrived from Boston.

Like Byron Werner, Keith was a self-styled outcast. He still recalls the terrible day in fifth grade when he was ridiculed for being the only kid who didn't know the John Cougar song "Jack & Diane." Lounge gave him a chance to be with-it without forcing him, or anyone else, to do the work to be up on it. "No one's fooling anyone," he says. "No one's trying to be an artist." Lounge was inviting to anyone and everyone who simply wanted to kick back, have a good time, and unleash their inner square.

"Everyone knows, deep down, that they are square," says Liz Baum. "Now, finally, everything is telling people it's okay. I was that way with Burt Bacharach for a while. I kept it hidden in my closet. The first step to loving something is when you can pull it out of the closet and admit to everyone that you love it. And not feel you have to laugh at it."

Which is why Keith started the 999999s. "I wanted a nice place to drink, like a party at someone's house, without the intimidation of door policies, nine-dollar drinks, or the need to get into the mosh pit if all you want to do is dance."

SULTRY SOUNDS with a twist

Music for listenin', sippin', dancin', and lovin'. By Joseph Lanza

JUST AS THE PROPER TINKLING tune piped from a ceiling speaker may help workers at the office, cocktail music supplies sprightly variations on familiar songs, never swaying too far into artiness yet always remaining entertaining enough to be its own art form. As a result, the people in the lounge become stars of their own movies; their conversations and motions synchronize, almost mystically, as the melodies haunt their reveries.

Spanning many categories and eras, cocktail music combines the best of classical, jazz, country, and pop; from Martin Denny's exotic rhapsodies to Mantovani's cascading strings to Lawrence Welk's bubbly champagne music.

Here are some albums and compact discs of the cocktail persuasion to help you take life nice and easy:

Jackie Gleason and His Orchestra: Ralph Kramden's alter ego was a mood-music maven who had no formal training as a conductor and got his aesthetic vision across to his musicians (most notably, Bobby Hackett) through visceral, and sometimes obscene, instructions. Judging by the millions of albums he sold, Gleason made a savvy move with this second career. Among his best (available on vinyl only) are:

Music, Martinis, and Memories (Capitol).

Apart from its luxurious album art, which promotes the cocktail lifestyle, the music is a decidedly low-key

accompaniment to gracious living. Its slow orchestral arrangements counterpointed with trumpet are effective precisely because they are so *underarranged*.

The Now Sound . . . for Today's Lovers (Capitol).

By the late sixties, Gleason's orchestra was also toying with psychedelia, in this case, the addition of sitar to the mix in order to make these covers of songs like "Goin' Out of My Head" linger in the head even longer than their originals.

Ronnie Aldrich: Twin Piano Magic (Rebound).

This double-length CD contains twenty-four hypnotic Aldrich covers of moody romantic standards, ideal for audiophiles. Recorded on the Decca Phase 4 label, with the London Festival Orchestra, this compilation includes standards such as "I'll Be Seeing You," "Ebb Tide," and "Long Ago and Far Away."

Hugo Winterhalter: The Eyes of Love (Good Music). A forty-song double CD that captures the Tootsie Roll center of this great conductor-arranger's output. It includes his immortal hit "Canadian Sunset" and a swell cover of Miklos Rozsa's theme from Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.

SOME MAY WANT FOREGROUND VOCALS to go with their tunes. There are several crooners and chanteuses with distinctive but not-too-obtrusive styles as refined as a dry martini. Here are a few of my personal favorites:

EAST OF SUEZ SUNDAY ARRIVES.

Lucien the Loungecore DJ forgets his fez. But Keith, resplendent in a white suit and shirt, black vest, and red bow tie, merely borrows his own back from Steve Spain. And no one notices the painted cardboard box that substitutes for the giant wicker basket. The throng, already captivated by the belly dancers' sword dance, cheers lustily when Penelope, a Louise Brooks look-alike in green silk, emerges from the box to the strains of an Eddie "the Sheik" Kochak record that Spain somehow unearthed. When she is done, the room explodes in enthusiasm to "Harper Valley P. T. A."—not the Jeannie C. Riley original but an easy-listening version by the James Last Orchestra. The party is yet another success.

Too much so. The 999999s is more crowded than it has ever been—so packed that it is hard to dance. And with the increased audience has come a marked diminution in style;



Vic Damone: I'm Glad There Is You (Sony Music Special Products). Damone is among Sinatra's favorite singers, and this particular CD, put out by Sony Music Special Products, is also special for including arrangements by such easy-listening greats as Percy Faith and Frank De Vol.

Julie London: Julie Is Her Name, Volumes I and II

(EMI). A double-length CD celebrating the simple nightclub-combo sound of guitar and bass reminiscent of London's early days of playing in Los Angeles's 881 Club. Includes eerie echoes on "Cry Me a River" and "Laura," along with wordless "doo-doo"s on "Hot Toddy." **Love on the Rocks** (Liberty). Here London treats the listener to her devil-may-care delivery on such famous torch songs as "The Man That Got Away." The album's title track provides a bartender's recipe for heartache: "A jigger of lying / garnished with fights / some bitters for crying / long unhappy nights / a dash of lost dreams / then stir with regret / shake well and pour / then drink and forget."

the cocktail dresses and rayon jackets are overwhelmed by Gap ensembles and—heaven forbid!—blue jeans.

Liz Baum has noticed a fair number of undesirables wandering into the 999999s—frat boys, the bridge-and-tunnel crowd, "guys who heard that girls with pasties go." Chris Brick, who started New York's first Lounge party two years ago, has since moved on. Currently, he's selling tapes featuring Czechoslovakian, Italian, and Japanese covers of late-seventies disco music. "Two years from now," he says with confidence, "they'll all be playing this disco thing."

Keith Grady knows that his tastes will evolve, too. But he'll never abandon his dirty Bombay martini. "And I'll never stop listening to my Dean Martin records," he says. "What would I substitute?" ■



THE SWANK LIFE

ESQUIRE | APRIL 1997



Reprinted from the Esquire Archive

<https://classic.esquire.com/article/19970401067/print>