



NO VACANCY

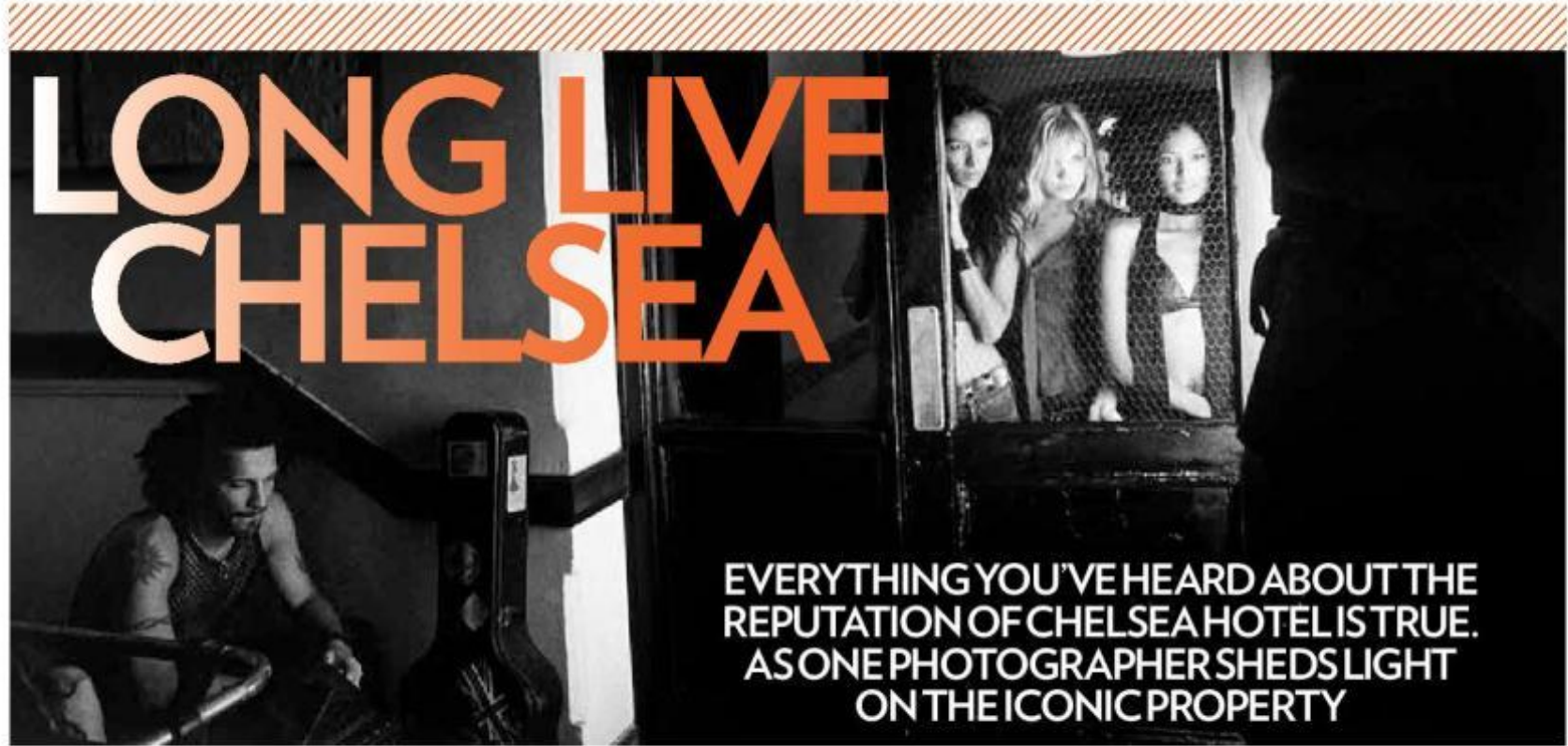
When it comes to wild stories, New York's infamous Hotel Chelsea is fully booked **2**

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EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THE REPUTATION OF CHELSEA HOTEL IS TRUE. AS ONE PHOTOGRAPHER SHEDS LIGHT ON THE ICONIC PROPERTY

Photoshoot in the Chelsea Hotel from Inside The Chelsea Hotel exhibition by Julia Calfee. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ART PLURAL GALLERY. COPYRIGHT OF JULIA CALFEE.

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There are hotels and there are hotels. The ones steeped in legend and lore, where rock stars and actors stayed and unleashed well-documented shenanigans. Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles was where Jim Morrison dangled from a drain pipe and Helmut Newton passed away after a car crash in the driveway; the presidential suite of Hilton Amsterdam was the site of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's bed-in for peace campaign in 1969; at London's Por-

tobello Hotel, Kate Moss bathed in a bathtub filled with champagne while Alice Cooper shacked up with a constrictor boa.

But none of these hotels come close to the now shuttered Chelsea Hotel in New York. Before it was finally sold last year to real estate developer Joseph Chetrit for more than US\$80 million (S\$100 million), the hotel was a creative hotbed and a haven for artists.

Guests who went through its doors read like a who's who of pop culture: Jimi Hendrix, Arthur C Clarke and Jack Kerouac (who wrote 2001: A Space Odyssey and On The Road there, respectively), Bob Dylan, Edie Sedgwick, Leonard Cohen (Chelsea Hotel #2 was composed for Janis Jop-

lin). It became notorious when Welsh writer Dylan Thomas died at the property from alcohol poisoning and the girlfriend of the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious was found stabbed to death.

FREE-WHEELING SPIRIT

The free-wheeling bohemian spirit of Chelsea Hotel can be traced back to owner-manager Stanley Bard's idiosyncrasies. "He chose who could stay, which room and what floor they stayed in and how they can pay, perhaps through their paintings," photographer Julia Calfee told TODAY.

Calfee, whose photography exhibition Inside The Chelsea Hotel opens next Wednesday at Art Plural, add-



“I've never encountered another hotel like Chelsea Hotel.
Julia Calfee

ed that it was very difficult to get into Chelsea Hotel as Bard, who was ousted by the hotel's board of director in 2007, didn't care about money. "He turned down quite a few people with money who wanted to stay. He has some sort of a third eye — as in he can recognise the artist that will be, the potential in people. When Bob Dylan came to the hotel, he wasn't famous. He was a penniless artist."

It was a four-year stay during the waning days of the iconic hotel that gave the American-born Calfee the material for her exhibition. A New York University journalism graduate, she returned to the city in 2003 from Europe, where she was based,

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LONG LIVE CHELSEA

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to promote her book *Spirits and Ghosts: Journeys Through Mongolia*.

"I had a sort of inkling (about the hotel's reputation) but I went there not knowing its true history. It was a real discovery for me. I began to understand the hotel and I was able to work with the residents and speak to them. I saw them when they were happy and not so happy; nothing was posed. I took their intimate portraits," she said.

Calfee accumulated over 9,000 photographs on negatives, eschewing digital photography as she didn't want to "just click and delete". "The exhibition isn't a documentary; it's really showing what goes on under the skin of a person, when he is living with you or next to you. Why did they come, why did they stay, what was within them."

CHELSEA GIRL

For the exhibition, Calfee did not label the subjects in her photographs and instead chose to have a short narrative or background of the picture. Although she declined to reveal who her famous "neighbours" were (she promised discretion in exchange for letting her into their lives), the residents during the ho-

tel's last years remained a glamorous and artistic lot: Painter and film-maker Lola Schnabel, the daughter of the artist Julian Schnabel; Scottish actor Jeff Stewart; and Ed Hamilton, author of *Legends Of The Chelsea Hotel: Living With Artists and Outlaws In New York's Rebel Mecca*.

When asked about Chelsea Hotel's magnetic appeal for artists and broken souls, Calfee pondered for a moment.

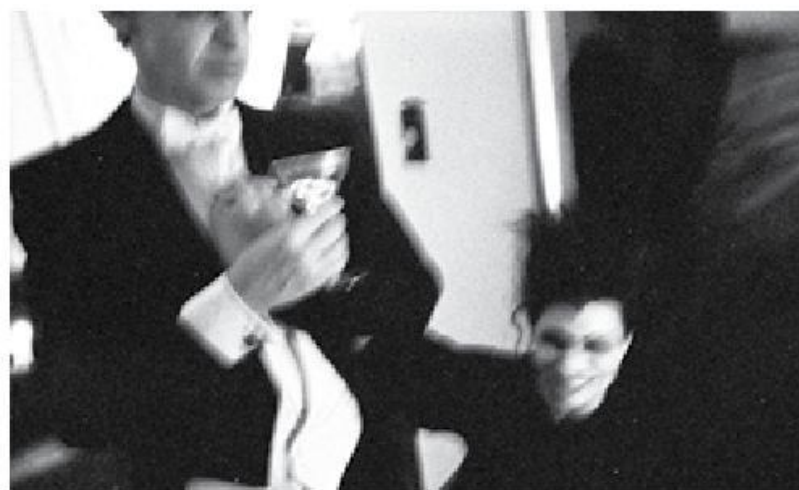
"There's a legend around it. Whenever someone has a problem in their lives — for example if their marriage breaks up, they stop writing or stop painting or lose all their money — they can come to Chelsea Hotel where they can be recreated and reborn," she ventured. "This was a firm belief for almost 100 years. It was why Marilyn Monroe came to stay in the hotel a few times; Arthur Clarke did *A Space Odyssey* at the hotel. So many artists lived there and went back in times of trouble and found themselves again."

While it's been reported that Chelsea Hotel will reopen again as a hotel, Calfee is doubtful that it will ever regain its old bohemian spirit. Neither does she feel that any hotel would ever fill its shoes. "There, there were well-known people, rich people, and those who live only on their dreams. Everyone was equal within those walls. I don't think there are hotels like Chelsea today, or even yesterday. I've travelled all over the world. I love hotels but I've never encountered another hotel like Chelsea Hotel."

➤ Inside The Chelsea Hotel runs from Sept 12 to Oct 12, 11am to 7pm, Art Plural Gallery, 38 Armenian Street. Closed on Sundays. Free admission.



Behind The Door.



Tender Is The Night.