



*The Sebel Town House*  
CELEBRATING AN ICON



# The Sebel Town House

## CELEBRATING AN ICON

Published on behalf of Dr Jerry Schwartz



Managed by Mirvac Hotels & Resorts

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Town House  
Cocktail Lounge

Town House  
Cocktail Lounge

# The Sebel Vision

## CHAPTER 1

The Town House opened in Elizabeth Bay Road, Elizabeth Bay, Sydney on 23 December 1963. At that time the world was still reeling from the assassination of President John F Kennedy a mere month earlier. Just as everyone today remembers where they were on that fateful day, most remember vividly their personal Town House experience. ➔

# The Sebel Vision

Australia was a conservative country in the 1960s; relatively under-confident and struggling to find its own social and cultural identity. The 1956 Melbourne Olympics and its overseas promotion had done much to raise the profile of Australia as a country of freedom and opportunity: carefree living under blue skies and a coastline of perfect beaches. That same year television arrived. Successive waves of European migrants built new lives for themselves after the ravages of World War II and introduced such curiosities as garlic, wine and pasta to compete with the meat and three veg diet of most Australians.

On the music scene in 1963, Beatlemania was sweeping the world and London's Carnaby Street became a mecca for the new wave. There were also major cultural shifts on the other side of the Atlantic. Americans had already embraced the rock 'n' roll phenomena and Elvis Presley a decade earlier, but the sixties brought social messages and protest through the pen of Bob Dylan. The times really were a'changing. Conspicuous consumerism was also on the rise and the American Dream was becoming the new reality.

These movements began to impact on young Australians. American popular culture was especially seductive and the US entertainment industry was booming. Hollywood had the studios, the stars and the dollars. Record producers were making singers into instant millionaires and live concerts became a popular medium to showcase these new talents. Promotional tours from the UK, Europe and the US became more and more frequent with the ease of air travel and Australia was suddenly a viable stop on the world circuit. And the stars needed accommodation that offered discretion, pampering and protection from the paparazzi. Not to mention a touch of class. This was the environment that beckoned the Sebel.

**Below:** Harry Sebel (left) with his father David Sebel in 1958.

## The Sebel Family

The patriarch David Sebel was a Russian émigré who arrived in the UK in the early 20th century. Clever and ambitious, he built a successful business as a wheelwright and captured the market in basic metalwork before moving into more ornate wrought iron work. The young Harry Sebel joined the business at 15 and basically learned the ropes from his father. He was a quick learner and had a good eye for design. This talent proved an ongoing strength in all his future business endeavours.

The Sebel company then moved into toy manufacturing and had worldwide success with the Mobo Bronco – the first rocking horse on ratchet-powered wheels. D. Sebel & Co. Pty Ltd became a very profitable operation. After World War II, London was bleak and rationing was strict. It was not the climate for enterprise or optimism. Following their successful foray into the American market (by 1948 they exported to the USA half of the total toy exports of all British toy company competitors), David and his son Harry decided to move to Australia with their families: David and Bessie, Harry and Queenie and Harry's two sisters, Phyllis and Tilli. It was a good decision. They established the toy business in Bankstown and then diversified and invested in new plastic moulding technology which enabled them to manufacture light and durable furniture under the Sebel brand. It was hugely successful, had a virtual market monopoly, and sold millions of chairs.

The close-knit Sebel family were also savvy property investors in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs. One investment property was an old building in Elizabeth Bay, which they bought in 1958 with plans to demolish and replace with studio apartments. Planning restrictions prevented that project proceeding and so the lateral-thinking Harry began to look for other opportunities for the demolished site with spectacular views of Sydney Harbour. A small hotel was one of the options, as it could be classified as a commercial building and come under a different planning formula.









# The Place to Be

## CHAPTER 2

Few could have predicted that such a seemingly modest 105-room hotel would quickly develop a national and international reputation for innovation and sophistication. In a spectacularly short timeframe The Town House became the hotel of choice for all visitors to Sydney; both famous and infamous. ➔

# The Place To Be

The first General Manager, Henry Rose, was certainly integral in setting the tone of the hotel, along with Harry Sebel. Together they courted not only the visiting international personalities, but local well-connected Sydney society and, of course, the media. Politicians, fashion gurus, the racing fraternity, and entrepreneurs such as Dennis Wong of Chequers, Harry M. Miller, Gary van Egmond, Paul Dainty and Michael Chugg. It is said that Harry Sebel would listen to the latest hits on the pop chart and then seek out the promoters and get their business. He believed that notoriety would be an extra drawcard for The Town House, so enticing entertainers became one of the marketing strategies. When Sir Donald Campbell and his Belgian wife Tonia Bern had a fiery argument in the hotel reception in 1964, the incident hit the London tabloids - and so did The Town House - thus vindicating Harry's thesis.

But The Town House had a split personality in many ways. The heady rock 'n' roll image contrasted with the genteel, understated tone when guests such as Sir Ralph Richardson, Peter Ustinov and Deborah Kerr were in town. As the years went by many believed The Town House was to Sydney what the Savoy was to London, the Oriental to Bangkok and the George V to Paris, despite the absence of great architecture. Perhaps that is drawing a long bow, but Sydneysiders were immensely proud of their capacity to attract the big stars via the hotel.



The other aspect of success was the safety net that was created for the celebrities. After all the hype of promotional tours, media conferences and spin doctor control it must have been wonderful to check in to The Town House and feel able to relax with a few glasses of wine and some good food knowing that one's every move was not being recorded by a staffer who might run to the media. The Town House prided itself on the discretion of all its employees and that trust was never betrayed.



**Opposite:** General Manager Henry Rose (left) pictured with Harry and Queenie Sebel.

**Below left:** One of the many newspaper accolades for The Town House.

**Below right:** Peter Ustinov, was a loyal Town House patron.



With so much cash being splashed around in those early days there were also many quirky requests made of the staff. But 'thank you' tipping for meeting those requests could also be extravagant. It is said that one staffer received a round-the-world ticket for his trouble. Licencing laws, too, were draconian and were not really liberalised until the 70s. Many an anonymous brown paper bag-covered flask of gin would arrive seamlessly from the Hotel Rex bottle shop to the guest's room. All delivered with an inscrutable air as part of the service.

**Below:** Media magnate Sir Frank Packer (left) and a former NSW Premier Sir Robert Askin who were among the many who frequented The Town House and its famous 'Card Parties'.

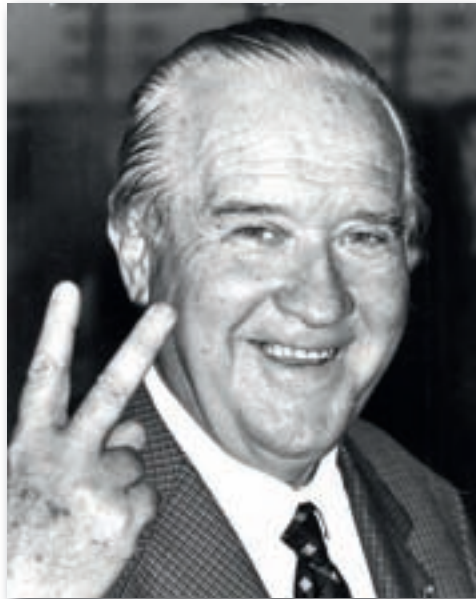
**Below right:** Columnist Phillip Adams.

**Opposite:** Fashion Parades and launches were frequently held at The Town House and fashionable models of the day strode along makeshift catwalks.

As Phillip Adams observed: 'There was enough going on at The Town House to fill a dozen gossip columns. But not much gossip escaped from The Town House, which is why it was so popular with the nomads of the entertainment industry'.

From all accounts it was also a popular place for politicians and corporate executives. There were the famous 'Card Parties' in the Library Room with Sir Frank Packer, Sir Robert Askin and Bill Stack.

*The Town House was literally a character-filled establishment.*









John Haylen, Chief Barman

# Characters with Character

## CHAPTER 4

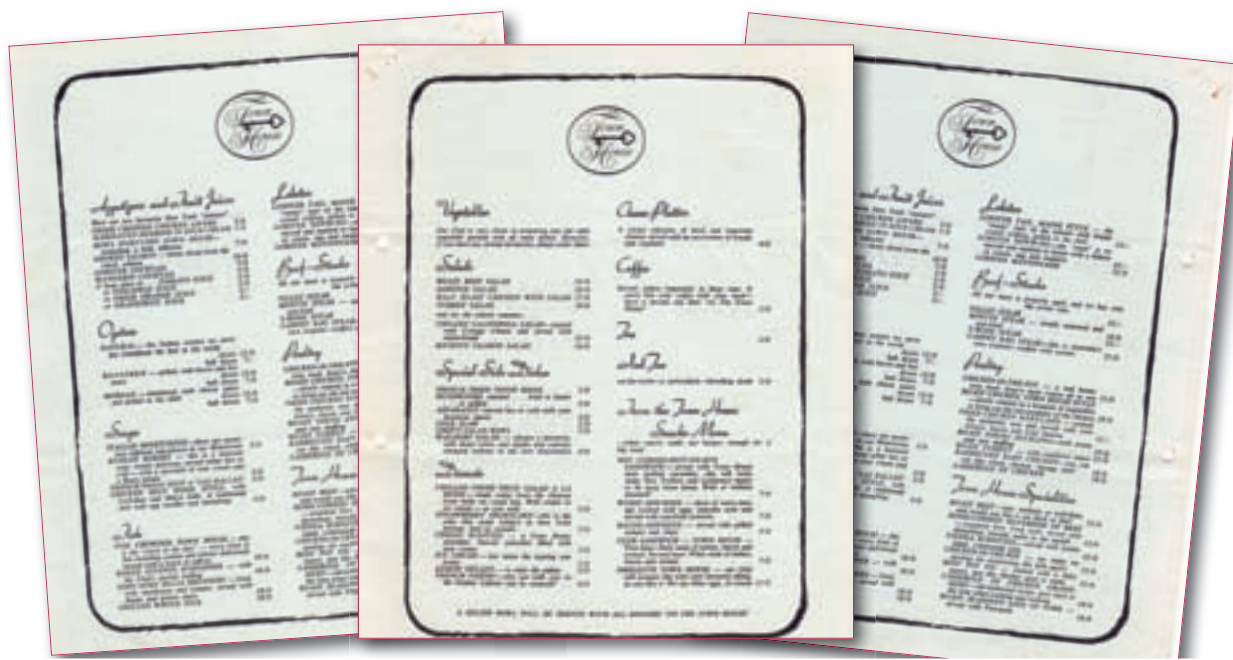
Decimal currency was still a way off in 1963, and the Sydney palate was just waking up. A few months before opening Harry and Queenie Sebel realised that a good chef was going to make or break their venture. ➔



# Characters with Character

In a somewhat unconventional move two chefs were invited to the Bellevue Hill residence of Harry and Queenie Sebel and asked to prepare a banquet for friends and colleagues in their domestic kitchen. It was a clever move. The first chef was a dismal failure but the second came through with flying colours; he had prepared an excellent meal and had left the kitchen spotless afterwards. Chef Gunther Hirsch was hired and his European training and Jewish sensibilities would stamp the style of food served at The Town House. The first menu contained Fresh Chopped Chicken Livers (5/6); Hot Corned-Beef-on-Rye Sandwich served with pickled cucumbers New York style (7/6); Chicken Soup with Lockshen and Matzo Balls (3/6); and Vienna Schnitzel (15/6).

Gunther was a thorough professional and remained the driving force behind the restaurant's success until he retired in 1980 after 17 years service. He also prepared many memorable feasts when he headed up the Function Centre.







**Opposite:** The Town House menu brought a touch of Europe to the Sydney dining scene in the early sixties.

**Above:** The Town House banquets and functions were legendary and chefs would offer every possible delicacy of the day.

## The Bar

The famous (or infamous) Town House Bar was added in 1967. Tales abound of the many escapades spawned in the bar in the wee small hours. From the time it opened, guests and visitors gravitated towards the intimate, dimly-lit space. Capacity was 25 seated and 15 standing but they were the official figures. Columnist Phillip Adams described The Sebel Town House as a 'Watering Hole for Eccentrics'. 'It was always my favourite, principally because of the clientele – that extraordinary cavalcade of actors, musicians, writers and rock stars. And the staff were as eccentric as the guests.'



**Below::** Ricky May was a regular visitor to The Sebel Town House pictured with Daryl Somers (right) so it was only fitting that a piano bar was named in his honour.

Over the years there were only five main barmen, but all were able to amaze with their capacity to remember the likes and dislikes of their bar patrons. However it was Ted Curtis and John Haylen (pictured on page 28) who are perhaps better known – simply because they were there in the early days and set the mood. Many of the ‘bar stories’, too, seem to revolve around them.

When a young Ricky May came to Australia with his unusual vocalisations and larger than life presence, he enjoyed almost instant fame. He was a regular on the popular television program *Hey Hey It's Saturday* and as The Sebel Town House was a second home for that troupe it was fitting that a new Piano Bar space near the Bar be named the Ricky May Lounge. Ricky died in 1988 aged 44, but the Lounge and the piano were a great legacy and the scene of many an impromptu late night jam session. For example, Dudley Moore, Dave Brubeck, Glen Campbell and Ralph McTell all around the piano on the same night would be hard to beat.



# A Few Facelifts

## CHAPTER 5

Only two years after opening Harry Sebel realised that the hotel was not large enough and that ‘a good case could be made not only for extra accommodation but also for function facilities’. ➔



# A few Facelifts

The Sebel family agreed that it would be prudent to undertake such substantial building works in two stages. At this time The Town House was sold into the listed furniture company Sebel Ltd as that vehicle would be more likely to attract finance. The 14-storey new wing was completed in 1971 and the Function Centre followed in 1973.

The merger also resulted in The Town House changing its name to The Sebel Town House and then over the years it became known with much affection as simply The Sebel.

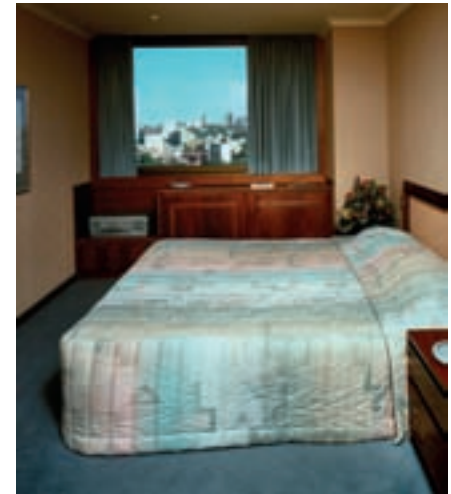
## Suites

All great hotels need to provide a set of Suites for those with a taste for luxury. By 1977 following one major refurbishment, there were some 23 special Suites available at The Sebel Town House. The Presidential Suite was the most spacious and the Sir Robert Helpmann Suite perhaps the most artistic. The Hardy Amies Suite, was also popular as the man himself personally chose all the furnishings and had them shipped from England to Australia; even the carpets came by sea. Similarly, both the Elton John Suite, and the Michael Parkinson Suite were also firm favourites.





The Town House suites offered guests the space to entertain friends or to dine in-house from the extensive room service menu. Many a star was able to enjoy complete privacy, safe in the knowledge that hotel staff were discreet and reliable.







# The Sebel Guest Book

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## CHAPTER 6

In these times of high security, aggressive photographers, dogged reporters and determined fans, it is hard to imagine how much freedom was provided by The Town House. ➔



# *The Sebel Guest Book*

*A*ll staff were tutored to be understated, courteous and oblivious to any eccentricities. No mean feat given some of the guests! But such was the balance achieved that wave after wave of celebrities checked in to the modest hotel in the heart of bohemian Kings Cross. Fans may have gathered in throngs outside but the stars always felt safe once they entered The Town House. No prying paparazzi got a look in.

What was particularly unusual in those days was the number of stars who would be in-house at the same time and with unrelated schedules. One week in particular the roll-call included: Bette Davis, Sir Michael Redgrave, Glenda Jackson, Rolf Harris, Charlie Pride, Keith Michell, Don Maclean, Gina Lollabridgida, David Frost and Rudolf Nureyev.



**Left:** The Russian ballet superstar Rudolf Nureyev (left) and Australian entertainer Rolf Harris were guests at The Sebel Town House at the same time.

**Bette Davis – All About....Eggs!**

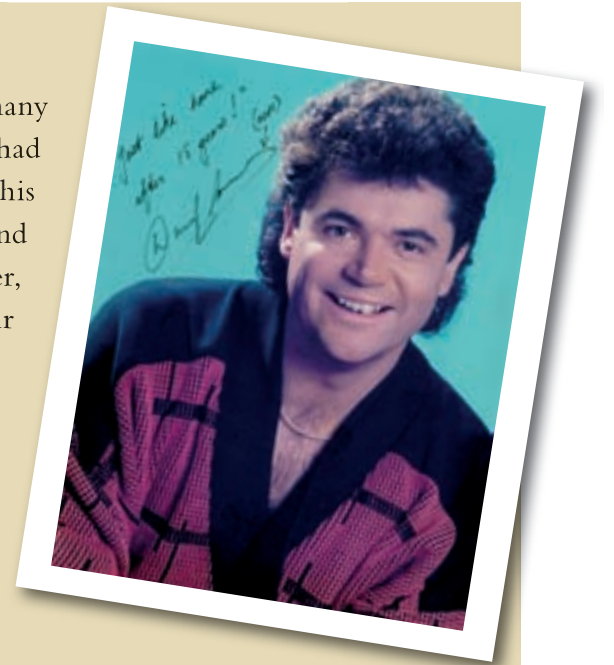
With her reputation preceding her, Bette Davis came to The Sebel Town House with a lot of (metaphoric) baggage. As is the case with most true professionals she was apparently charming and not at all demanding. One of the vignettes from that time was her personal visit to the kitchen to talk to the apprentice chef about her scrambled eggs – which she adored. She is reported as telling the young woman that she should concentrate on what she does well – the secret she claimed to her longevity at the top of her profession. As could only happen at The Sebel Town House, British actress Glenda Jackson was staying there at the same time and they literally bumped into each other in the restaurant. Both were dining alone and, surprisingly, had never met. After introducing herself Glenda Jackson joined the screen legend and a long chat ensued. Now that would have been a fascinating exchange. And if that was not enough of a star combination, Dame Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev were also in residence. The staff recalls that all day there were continuous flower deliveries.

*Liza Minnelli**Danny Kaye**Shirley MacLaine*

## Daryl Somers

Daryl called The Town House home for over two decades, as did many of the crew and stars of *Hey Hey It's Saturday*. But it was Daryl who had the most personal connection with the place as it is where he met his future wife. The story goes that he was dining alone in the restaurant and so was ballet dancer Julie da Costa. A glass of champagne is sent to her, Daryl joins her table and the rest, as they say, is history. They held their wedding reception there some seven years later.

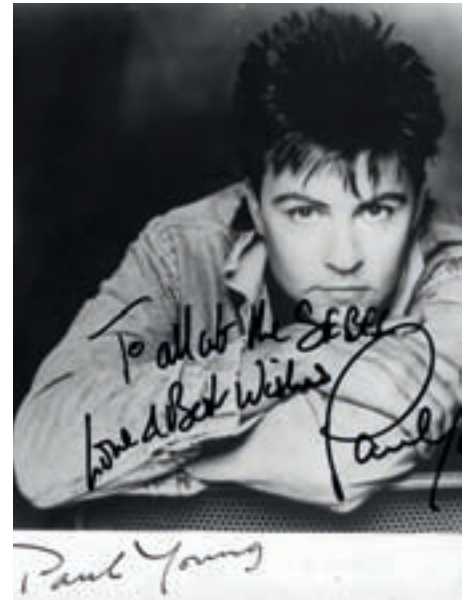
Being such a regular guest Daryl Somers was universally liked by all the staff who watched with great amusement his futile attempts to land his room key in the slot at reception. A bottle of Dom Perignon was the agreed prize of the challenge. To further consolidate the Somers' connection with the old place, a stray dog was lingering around the limo one day and was so endearing Daryl and Julie adopted it and of course renamed it Sebel.



*Bryan Ferry*



*Rod Stewart*



*Paul Young*





## Michael Parkinson

Sir Michael Parkinson was one of the many celebrities who chose The Sebel Town House in the very early days of his career. As his star status increased he returned again and again and then eventually the whole Parkinson family would stay over summer to enjoy the cricket and, for his sons, lazy days at the beach and on the golf course.

Sir Michael is quoted as saying: 'To look at this unprepossessing corner of a small hotel tucked away in the backwater of Sydney you would never believe the goings on that have occurred here'. In fact it was such a second home that he held his 50th birthday bash there in the Ballroom in 1985.



*Peter Allen*



*Joe Cocker*



*Ringo Starr*



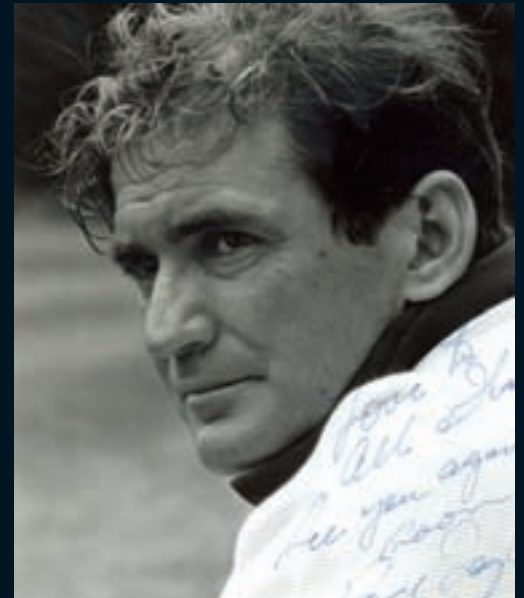
*Joan Collins*



*Roxette*



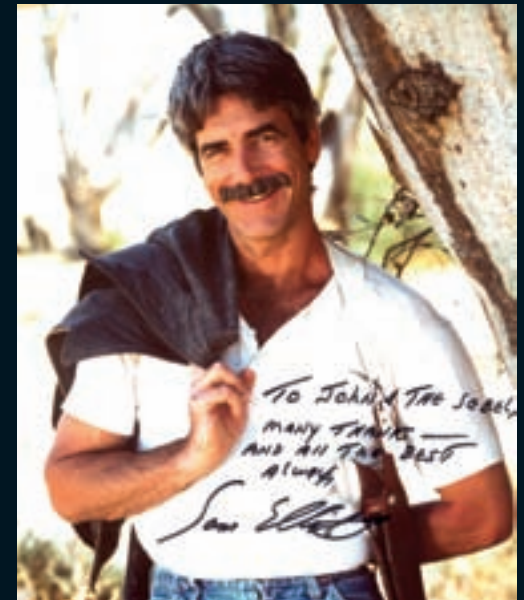
*Rob Taylor*



*John Phaul*



*Julian Clary*



*Sam Elliott*

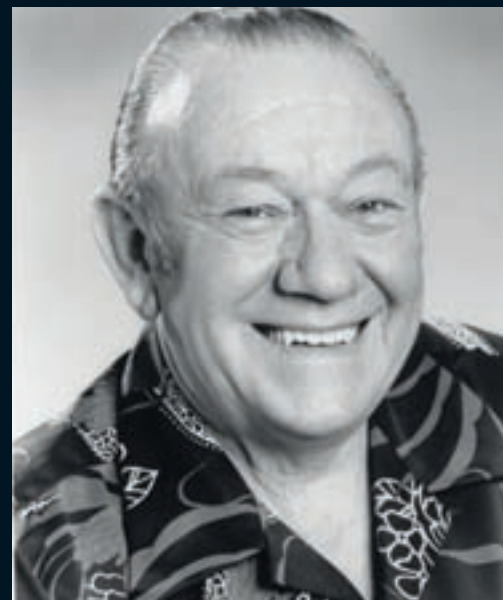
*Kabmal*



*Mike Walsh*



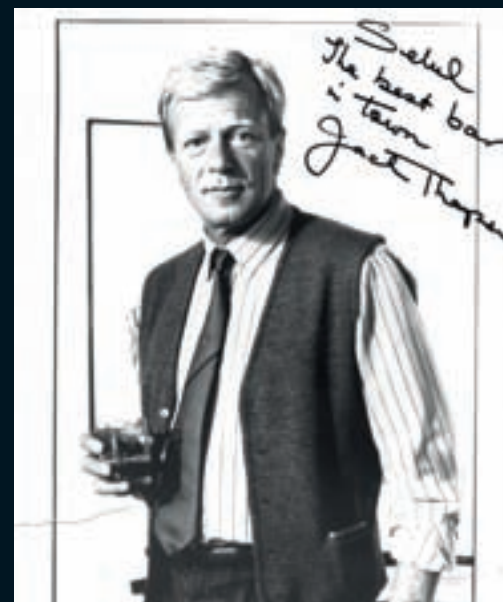
*Maurie Fields*



*Graham Kennedy*



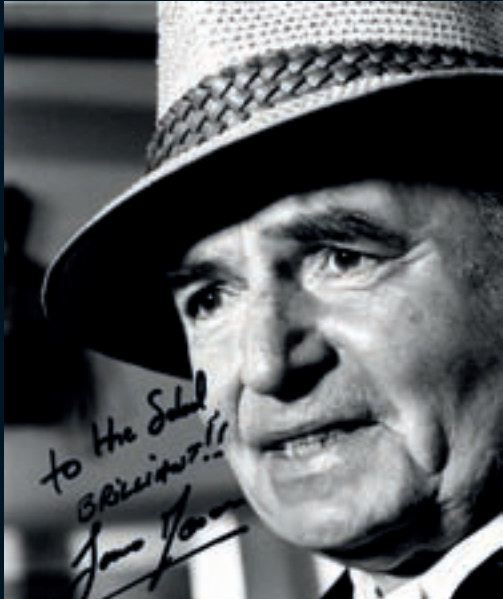
*Derryn Hinch*



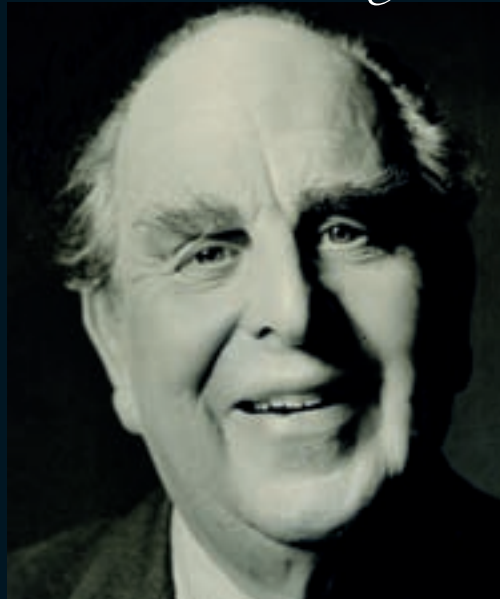
*Jack Thompson*



*James Mason*



*Robert Morley*



*Zsa Zsa Gabor*



*Carol Drinkwater*



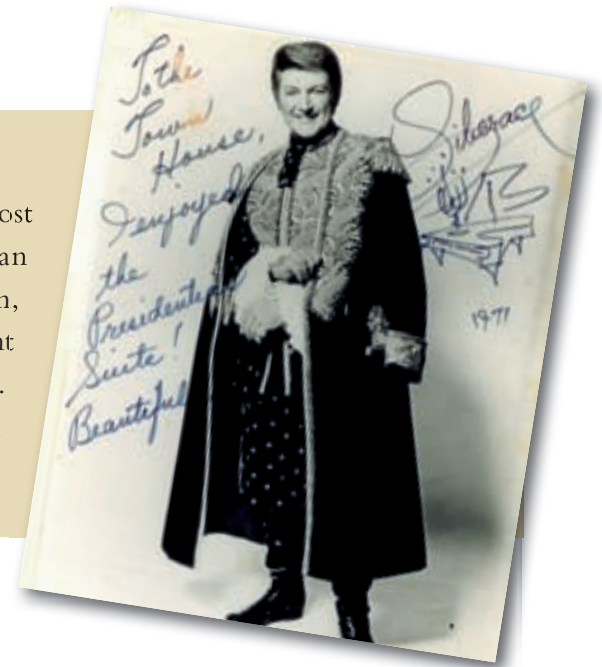
*John Inman*



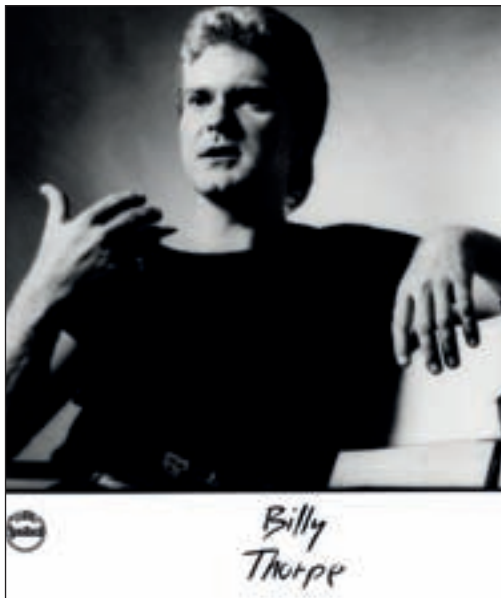
*Patrick Macnee*

## Liberace

Perhaps unsurprisingly Liberace holds the record for the most expensive dry cleaning bills in the hotel's history. When he met an extremely casually dressed Henry Rose on a hot Saturday afternoon, he remarked in a rather sarcastic tone: 'You must be a very important person', to which Henry Rose replied: 'Yes, I am the General Manager'. Liberace was considered a perfect guest, but apparently his Personal Valet left a lot to be desired!



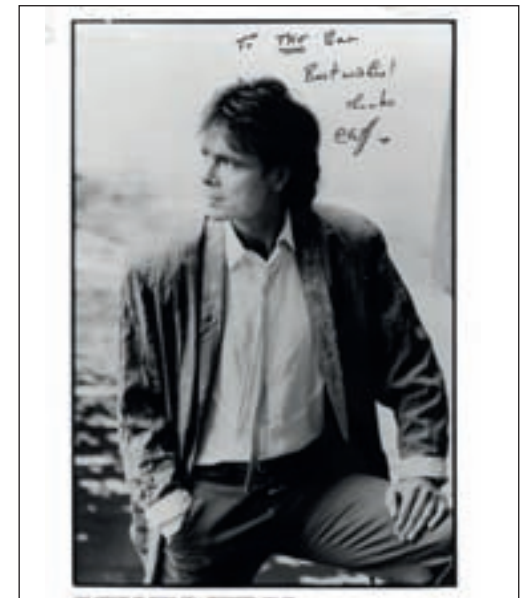
*Billy Thorpe*



*Little River Band*



*Cliff Richards*





### Henry Ford II (cameo)

The heir to the Ford Motor Company was in town and staying in the Presidential Suite. Security for the visiting American was tight and his every move strictly observed. Apparently this was starting to drive him crazy. Engaging the room service waiter in conversation he asked him if he could borrow his uniform jacket 'for a joke'. Given the status of the guest it was difficult to refuse so he dutifully handed over the garment.

In true Fawlty Towers fashion Henry Ford II donned the jacket and wheeled the food trolley out of the room incognito. With that he apparently went AWOL in Sydney for 36 hours, setting the security guards into a spin. On return he asked that the employee not be reprimanded for his participation, gave him a tip, and offered him a job as his butler in the US. The loyal staffer declined.



*Slim Dusty*



*The Highwaymen*

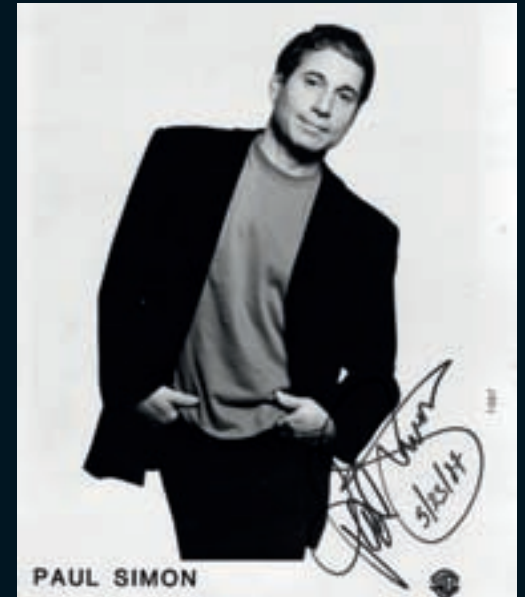
*Cheap Trick*



*Elton John*



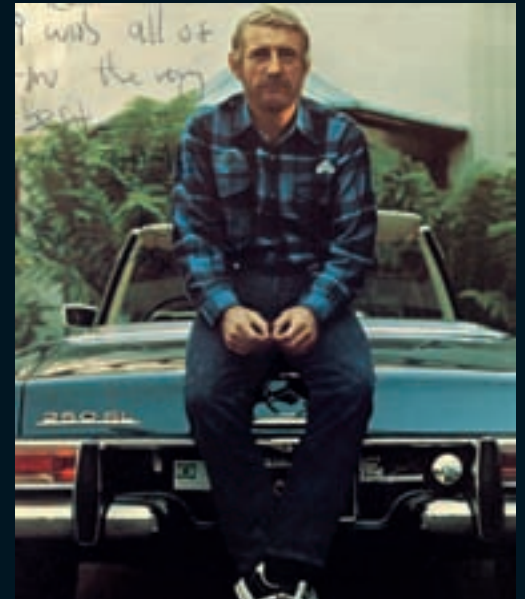
*Paul Simon*



*The Beach Boys*



*Boy George*



*Rod McKuen*



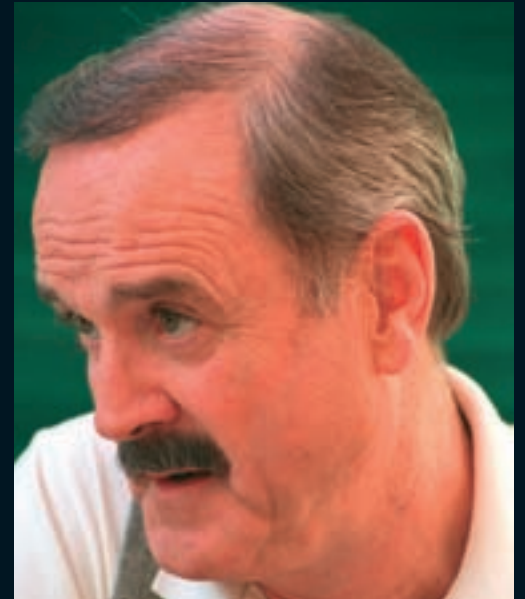
*Phyllis Diller*



*Stanley Holloway*



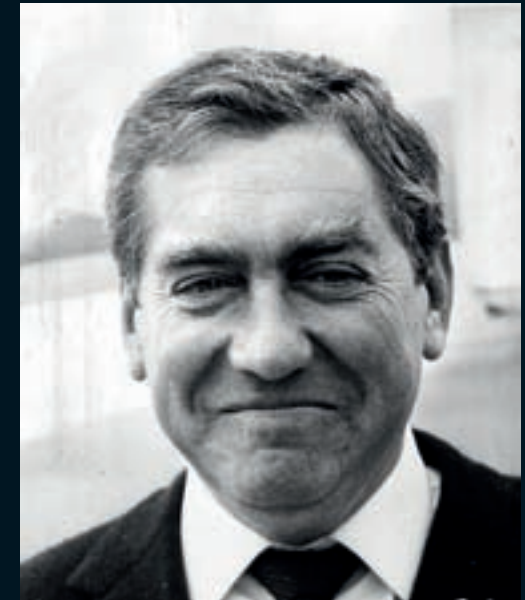
*John Cleese*



*Les Patterson*



*Peter Cook*



*Tony Hancock*



*The Sebel Town House*  
FUNCTION CENTRE





# A Society Mecca

## CHAPTER 7

As The Town House grew in repute Harry Sebel was convinced that more public space and facilities were needed for special events. Flushed with his success in building the Bar in 1967, he began conceptualising a Function Centre and acquiring extra land for his expansion plans. The resultant design was, in those days, considered an engineering marvel. ➔

# *A Society Mecca*

*T*he Town House Function Centre opened in 1973 and quickly became the venue for all sectors of Sydney society: Entertainment, Sport, Fashion, Product Launches, Wedding Receptions and Media Conferences.

The Centre was quite an amazing place and thousands of major events were staged there over the years. It was the first purpose-built venue in Australia to incorporate moveable walls which sank into the floor. It spread over two levels and was decorated in themes reminiscent of the nearby historic Elizabeth Bay House, including the famous staircase and Library. The Butterfly, Portico and Orangerie rooms could all be separated by massive concrete walls operated by a simple push button mechanism. One area, The Vintage Room, had a reinforced floor and level access for motor vehicle and heavy machinery launches. The mechanisms were still in perfect working order when demolition took place in 2000, and a similar venue in Sydney has never been replicated to this day.



# The Sebel Town House is Reborn

## CHAPTER 8

The culture and management style at the original Sebel Town House were attributes that made the hotel especially attractive to guests and the reason for so much return custom over the years. Dr Jerry Schwartz determined he would create that same sense of style and ambience in his new venture in Surry Hills. ➔

# *The Town House is Reborn*

## **Dr Jerry Schwartz**

Since The Schwartz Family Company Pty Ltd was formed in 1977 it has established itself as one of Australia's major property and hotel developers. In fact it now ranks as Australia's sixth largest hotel owner and largest private hotel owner with over 2,500 rooms – half of which are 4 and 5 star rated rooms. The original owners, the late Bela and Eve Schwartz, built up an impressive property portfolio after arriving in Australia as post World War II Hungarian immigrants. They also believed in giving back to the community through philanthropic endeavours and so created The Schwartz Family Foundation. Some of the Foundation's major projects include ongoing research and a new dental school lecture theatre at the University of Sydney Dental Hospital at Westmead Hospital, and the Anatomy and Pathology Museum at the University of Notre Dame Medical School in Sydney.

Today their vision is continued through their son, Dr Jerry Schwartz. A renaissance man with a complete lack of pretension, he has taken up his legacy with passion and drive. Both the company and the Foundation have not only become more dynamic and pro-active under his leadership, but he has also made a deep commitment to environmental responsibility. Among the hotels owned by the Schwartz Family Company are: Mercure Sydney, Ibis World Square, Rydges World Square, Holiday Inn at Sydney Airport, Macquarie Hotel in Surry Hills, Olims in Canberra, Crowne Plaza Newcastle and the historic Victoria Hotel in Melbourne. One of the latest additions to this impressive list is The Sebel Surry Hills Sydney.





**Below:** Leo Sayer, Dr Jerry Schwartz (right) and his fiancée Debbie Feyn (centre).

**Opposite:** The extensive glassed reception area with its under-floor aquarium with Japanese Koi fish and modern red leather couches offers a tranquil space for guests and visitors.



**Below:** The new porte-cochere entry at  
The Sebel Surry Hills Sydney.









**Left:** The outside bar and dining area at The Sebel Surry Hills Sydney complements the café culture of the district and the charm of the tree-lined streets.

**Below & opposite:** Dr Schwartz commissioned individual works from artist Brad Munro to add a distinctive touch to the walls of The Sebel Surry Hills Sydney.







# Acknowledgements

*T*he author and publisher would like to thank Dr Jerry Schwartz for commissioning this book and to Michael Hall, Nick Truswell and Andrew Turner, who is the face of Mirvac Hotels in Australia, for sharing their collective memories and stories.

*'In memory of Eve and Bela Schwartz, the founders of Schwartz Family Co.,  
the hotel company which owns The Sebel Surry Hill Sydney.'*

