

Three Reincarnations of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret:  
Entertainment, Gentrification, and Respectability in  
Vancouver's Downtown Eastside 1952-84

by  
Bruce Dyck

Bachelor of Arts, University of British Columbia, 2014

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

in the  
Department of History  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

© Bruce Dyck 2018  
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Spring 2018

Copyright in this work rests with the author. Please ensure that any reproduction or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.

## Approval

**Name:** **Bruce Dyck**

**Degree:** **Master of Arts**

**Title:** **Three Reincarnations of the Smilin' Buddha  
Cabaret: Entertainment, Gentrification , and  
Respectability in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside  
1952-84**

**Examining Committee:** **Chair:** Paul Garfinkel  
Associate Professor

**Nicolas Kenny**  
Co-Supervisor  
Associate Professor

**Elise Chenier**  
Co-Supervisor  
Associate Professor

**Nicholas Blomley**  
External Examiner  
Associate Professor  
Department of Geography

**Date Defended/Approved:** February 23, 2018

## **Ethics Statement**

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

- c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Simon Fraser University Library  
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Update Spring 2016

## **Abstract**

The Smilin' Buddha Cabaret operated at 109 East Hastings Street in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood from 1952 until the late 1980s. Over its forty year history, this club hosted variety shows, striptease dancers, and musicians from the city's jazz, rhythm and blues, and punk rock music scenes. Today, the building that was home to the Smilin' Buddha sits in the middle of a neighbourhood undergoing a contested transformation as new upscale develops redefine the historically low-income, working-class neighbourhood. At the same time, the club is being creatively reinterpreted as a symbol of the city's postwar prosperity and rich entertainment history where it was once described primarily as a skid row dive bar. This thesis traces the changes through the history of the Smilin' Buddha to understand how the club and its entertainment evolved in relation and in opposition to the development of the neighbourhood's built environment, geography, and identity. Through this, I argue that the development of the Smilin' Buddha and the wider DTES has never been the result of natural market forces; instead, it has always been a site of negotiation and contestation among multiple overlapping interests who do not have equal access to power. At the same time, it has been a site of cultural vitality, even if it has not been a site of economic vitality.

**Keywords:** Vancouver; gentrification; urban development; entertainment; Downtown Eastside

## Acknowledgements

“Such intellectual work as I have ever accomplished has always left me with a sense of having achieved nothing: one looks back through the thing as through an empty shell; but whether this is because of the nature of intellectual work as such, or whether it is because I am no good, I have never been able to decide.”

-Jake Donaghue, *Under the Net*

Thank you first of all to my wonderful wife Marya for surviving my grad school experience without leaving me in the dustbin of history (and making sure I survived as well). She put up with more of my mental anguish than anyone on this list (and only occasionally told me to shut about it). Unlike everyone else below she also has to continue to deal with me after I've crossed the stage.

Thank you to Elise Chenier and Nicolas Kenny, my co-supervisors who helped me get to the finish line with very kind encouragement.

Thank you to Graduate Program Assistant Ruth Anderson who is one of the kindest and most patient people I have ever met.

Thank you to my friends at SFU: Grant Gillies, Andrea Samoil, Lorelei Lester, Arlen Wiesenthal, Robin Bunton, Aali Mirjat, and especially Candice Klein and Liam O'Flaherty for helping to make grad school more enjoyable, if less sober.

Thank you to UBC and Langara professors Linda Hale, Andrea Smith, Wendie Nelson, Tamara Myers and Alejandra Bronfman who encouraged me on through my undergrad, and especially to Courtney Booker who encouraged me to complete this incredible achievement.

## Table of Contents

Approval .....	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vi
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>All the Charms of the Orient: Respectability and Exoticism on Vancouver's Skid Road 1952-62 .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Do It Right or Get Out: Legislating Respectability at The Smilin' Buddha, 1962-1978.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>On Skid Row: Punk at the Smilin' Buddha, 1979-1984.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Conclusion: The End of the Smilin' Buddha and a "Heritage Block Reborn" .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>100</b>

## Introduction

The Smilin' Buddha Cabaret operated at 109 East Hastings Street in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood from 1952 until the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Over its forty year history, this club hosted variety shows, striptease dancers, and musicians from the city's jazz, rhythm and blues, and punk rock music scenes. Today, the building that was home to the Smilin' Buddha sits in the middle of a neighbourhood undergoing a contested transformation as new upscale condos, restaurants, clubs, and boutiques redefine the historically low-income, working-class neighbourhood. At the same time, the club is being creatively reinterpreted as a symbol of the city's postwar prosperity and rich entertainment history where it was once described primarily as a skid row dive bar.<sup>2</sup> This thesis traces the history of the Smilin' Buddha to understand how the club and its entertainment evolved in relation and in opposition to the development of the neighbourhood's built environment, geography, and identity. Through this, I argue that the development of the Smilin' Buddha and the wider DTES has never been the result of natural market forces; instead, it has always been a site of negotiation and contestation among multiple overlapping interests who do not have equal access to power. At the

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the area now known as the DTES was known by other names, such as the Downtown East, Skid Row, and Skid Road before 1972, for the purpose of this introduction I will refer to the area as the DTES. This is a neighbourhood with shifting boundaries according to time and source, but generally includes Chinatown, Gastown, and the Hastings Corridor between Abbott Street and Hawks Avenue.

<sup>2</sup> "Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Sign," The Museum of Vancouver, <http://www.museumofvancouver.ca/collections/object/smilin-buddha-cabaret-sign/>.

same time, it has also been a site of cultural vitality, even if it has not been a site of economic vitality.<sup>3</sup>

My interest in the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret stems from my participation in the Vancouver independent music scene. Over the past fifteen years, I have played hundreds of shows around Vancouver, but the vast majority of these shows have been located in the East End of the city. Much of what I knew about the way a music scene should operate was drawn from my interest in punk rock. I had read enough about the early punk scenes of the mid-1970s to understand that they generally took root in decrepit old bars in slum neighbourhoods, like CBGB's in New York's East Village.<sup>4</sup> In part due to the 2005 reissue of the original 1979 Vancouver punk compilation titled Vancouver Complication, I became aware of Vancouver's equivalent to CBGB's, the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, which hosted Vancouver's punk scene from 1979 to 1983. Despite the fact that the Smilin' Buddha had been closed for over a decade by 2005 and the building sat

---

<sup>3</sup> While economic vitality is often measured by assessing factors like resident incomes, taxes versus expenditures, property values, rents and vacancy rates, cultural vitality does not lend itself to the same quantifiable measurements. What counts as 'culture' changes based on time, place, and perspective. 'Culture' can be defined as specific intellectual and artistic activities, like music, literature, painting and sculpture, or as a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development. Where the former definition allows for a broad range of practices to count as 'culture' (so, for instance, everyone who performs music of any style, with any level of skill is creating culture), the latter definition suggests that these intellectual or artistic practices must contribute to some form of cultural or artistic development. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87-90.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); Mark Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001); Jack Bouleware and Tudor Silke, *Gimme Something Better: The Profound, Progressive, and Occasionally Pointless History of Bay Area Punk* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Anthony H. Wilson, *24 Hour Party People: What the Sleeve Notes Never Tell You* (London: 4 Books, 2002); and Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

vacant, the Buddha became a sort of cultural landmark for me, my bandmates, and many other local music scene participants who were versed in the city's punk history.

Through the 1950s, '60s, and most of the '70s, the Smilin' Buddha was just one of many East End cabarets that followed similar entertainment policies and was rarely on the cutting edge of music or entertainment trends in Vancouver. Yet today, the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) houses the club's neon sign and describes the Buddha as a symbol of Vancouver's rich entertainment history and “post-war prosperity,” and the Vancouver Heritage Foundation (VHF) has designated the building—now home to an indoor skatepark and music venue named the SBC Restaurant—as one of the city's “125 Places That Matter.”<sup>5</sup> I have chosen the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret as the focus for this project because it is a site where multiple overlapping groups, from civic and business leaders, the police, ethnic entrepreneurs, working-class residents, and artists of all types have fought for control; because it is a site where ideas about the past, present, and future of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood merge; and because it is a site that has parallels in countless urban centres.

The redevelopment of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret and the Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood has brought with it questions about the role that arts and artists play in urban change. The concept of gentrification is key to this project because it has become one of the main ways to describe changes occurring in the DTES, among other urban centres. Yet the term is rarely defined precisely. As one of the current SBC

---

<sup>5</sup> Vancouver Heritage Foundation, “Places That Matter Plaque Project,” <http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/special-projects/places-that-matter-plaque-project/>.

Restaurant operators said, “we might be contributing to gentrification, but I don't really know what that means.”<sup>6</sup> The term 'gentrification' was coined in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass who defined it as a process where the middle and upper-classes transformed urban, working-class neighbourhoods, displacing residents and changing “the whole social character of a district.”<sup>7</sup> While Glass's definition is still the starting point for most discussions of gentrification, the term is often used interchangeably with more positive terms for this kind of urban change such as “urban renaissance,” “revitalization,” or “regeneration” which are generally linked to market-based arguments justifying urban “renewal” as a natural result of laws of supply and demand which result in the “highest and best” use of property.<sup>8</sup>

Artists are often assumed to play an important role in the gentrification process. For instance, in his book *The New Middle Class*, urban geographer David Ley outlines his “stage theory” of gentrification where urban artists (along with journalists and intellectuals) function as the “expeditionary force for inner city gentrifiers” making inner cities safe for “more mainstream members of the middle-class,” and ultimately the real-estate industry.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Manhattan in the 1980s, another urban geographer, Neil Smith, states that artists were “deployed” by the real estate industry to create a safer

---

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassing Interview, 19 November 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Neil Smith and Jeff Derksen, “Urban Regeneration: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, Reid Shier, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Derksen, “Urban Regeneration,” 83; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

<sup>9</sup> David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 192-197; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier : Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York : Routledge, 1996), 192, 356.

neighbourhood identity, making the area more attractive to wealthier buyers and renters. According to Smith, the “culture industry” combined with the real estate industry to “tam[e] the neighbourhood, refracting back a mock pretense of exotic but benign danger.” In this way, Smith argues that “art donates a salable neighbourhood identity [that helps package an area] as a real estate commodity and establishe[s] demand.” For Smith, “art and gentrification came hand in hand.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet, at the end of my research, I am less certain than ever about the role that artists play in the gentrification process. Ley and Smith's analyses of gentrification discuss artists in overly generalized terms that focus on artists who were primarily members of the middle-class and only at the specific moment when property values began to rise in urban centres. Ley's study uses Statistics Canada's occupational classifications to map where artists live. As Ley notes, this classification “underestimates the existence of poorer artists” since those artists who primarily earn money through other jobs would not be classified as artists by Statistics Canada.<sup>11</sup> Smith recognizes that some artists avoided the “cultural establishment” that worked with the real estate industry, but like Ley, focuses on artists in the 1980s at the point of peak reinvestment in New York's Lower East Side.<sup>12</sup> By anatomizing the structure of neighbourhoods at the particular moment when gentrification began or reached its peak, Ley and Smith fail to explain how artistic practices have changed over time. What did artists do differently in

---

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *New Urban Frontier*, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> Ley, *The New Middle Class*, 190, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *New Urban Frontier*, 17-18.

Vancouver during the late-1960s or New York in the 1980s to aid the advance of gentrification that they did not do before?

The connection between arts and gentrification has gained strength over the past decade as cities have embraced the idea of the “creative economy.” Using technology centres such as Seattle, Austin, and San Francisco, urban theorist Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* argues that diverse and creative arts scenes attract the kind of creative workers that make cities economically viable.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in her book *The Warhol Economy*, urban theorist Elizabeth Currid argues that artists drive the New York City economy.<sup>14</sup> These narratives help perpetuate the idea that arts and gentrification are inevitably linked because they focus on measuring economic growth without addressing who benefits from these economic conditions, what “vitality” and “viability” mean to different communities, and who is left out when neighbourhoods are “revitalized.”

What Ley, Smith, Florida, and Currid are talking about when they link art with gentrification or art with economic growth and vitality is middle- and upper-class ideas of art, culture, and vitality. Ley's gentrification narrative “follows the hippies,” to use the words of a real estate agent quoted in his book.<sup>15</sup> In Vancouver, the hippies were a largely white, middle-class counter-cultural movement that either moved to, or remained in urban city centres rather than following their parents to the suburbs. Ley's narrative

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (Princeton: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Currid, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Ley, *The New Middle Class*, 18.

explains how the “aesthetic appropriation” of previously devalued neighbourhoods by middle-class artists in the early-1970s helped make these neighbourhoods more attractive to wealthier professionals.<sup>16</sup> Smith and Currid's works focus on the “culture industry” that actively align with wealthy elites. These narratives address the role that artists with greater economic capital play in transforming neighbourhoods rather than the types of artists who performed in clubs like the Smilin’ Buddha from the 1950s to the 1980s. These artists did not necessarily reside in the surrounding neighbourhoods or cater to upper class patrons and did not create positive conditions for reinvestment in the neighbourhood’s built environment, but nevertheless helped define the Smilin’ Buddha and the larger neighbourhood. While the Smilin’ Buddha’s history is being reinterpreted today as part of an effort to rebrand the DTES as a “heritage block reborn,” the stories of the Smilin’ Buddha’s musicians, dancers, managers and patrons invite questions about whether artists lead gentrification, or whether those with economic capital can create conditions in which only the wealthier artists, businesses, and residents remain—conditions which include reimagining the past as a way to claim space in the present by ignoring the struggles of the artists and managers who fought against moral and economic regulation meant to eliminate them.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than dissecting the structure of the DTES neighbourhood at a particular moment or analyzing claims about the economic impact of artists in a neighbourhood, this thesis builds on historian Suleiman Osman's excellent history of the back-to-the-city

---

<sup>16</sup> Ley, *The New Middle Class*, 18; Ley, “Artists, Aestheticisation, and the Field of Gentrification,” *Urban Studies* 40, no. 12 (November 2003), 2540.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Mackie, “A Heritage Block Reborn: The 100 Block West Hastings Goes From Scary to Cool,” *Vancouver Sun*, 17 April 2015.

movement in Brooklyn.<sup>18</sup> Osman traces a longer history of urban change than the gentrification narratives of Ley and Smith. By beginning his narrative in the 1940s prior to the back-to-the-city movement, Osman argues that Brooklyn was always an area in flux rather than a static city that the back-to-the-city movement either preserved or perverted.<sup>19</sup> Osman's study challenges historians to explain how changes termed 'gentrification' differ from other forms of urban transformation. Certainly, Vancouver has transformed many times over its 130 year history and not all movement and transformation within the city can be considered gentrification or displacement. Yet throughout the post-war period, the DTES has been treated by civic officials and business leaders as a both a moral and economic problem to be solved by removing the neighbourhood's poorer occupants and regulating businesses perceived to attract the wrong types of clientele, like the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, or as a site meant to contain the city's vice to prevent it from spreading to more respectable communities. These policies, however, have never fully contained or displaced the poorer communities or the vice associated with the DTES, though today's rising property values in Vancouver have already displaced many within the DTES and the wider city, and threaten to displace more.

Unlike many gentrification narratives, this history of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret is not centrally about property values, ownership, or rent gaps.<sup>20</sup> What is interesting

---

<sup>18</sup> Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, it is unclear who actually owned the property at 109 East Hastings Street for much of the club's existence. What I do know is that in 1983 when a fire gutted the Smilin' Buddha, one

about the Smilin' Buddha story cannot be reduced to the efforts of any one individual or property owner, but instead reflects the work of many different communities with very different stakes in the club all placed within the context of the history of the DTES neighbourhood. Building on the work of urban geographers Matt Hern and Nicholas Blomley, this thesis looks at property not as a relationship between an owner and a thing (a building or patch of earth), but as a bundle of relationships between owners and many other people and groups. As both Hern and Blomley argue, owners rarely have the ability to dispose of their property in any way they like, but have many commitments and restrictions that shape their options.<sup>21</sup> In this way, this thesis challenges essentialist ideas about property ownership that reinforce the idea that gentrification or displacement is the inevitable result of natural market forces, and argues that the Smilin' Buddha has always been a site of contention which can allow for a conception of alternative claims to the property and the space of the DTES.

In the story of the Smilin' Buddha, the interests of the club's owners, patrons, and artists do not always line up with one another or with the interests of the wider neighbourhood or city. The club's dubious place, both morally and geographically, within the city resulted in enforcement and restrictions intended to either make the club

---

of the club's managers, Nancy Jir, told the *Vancouver Sun* that the Jirs did not own the building. The owner is identified in the article was David Vandt. Today the property is owned by the notorious Sahota family who also own a number of run-down DTES hotels like the Balmoral, the Cobalt, and the Astoria, among other Lower Mainland properties. Dave Smith, "Early Morning Fire Guts the Buddha," *Vancouver Sun*, 25 November 1983; Sean Condon, "A City Soft on 'Slumlords,'" *The Tyee*, 10 November 2008, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2008/11/10/Slumlords/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xv; Matt Hern, *What a City is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 76.

fit a middle-class idea of respectability, or to eliminate it altogether. Similarly, some DTES residents and community leaders called for stricter regulation or elimination of clubs like the Smilin' Buddha because they were a moral blight that attracted undesirable people to the neighbourhood. Yet, regulations rarely worked as civic and business leaders intended, and at times helped the Smilin' Buddha's operators attract patrons by allowing the illegal consumption of alcohol in their club, or by allowing entertainment that pushed the boundaries of community standards of respectability. The Smilin' Buddha's ability to survive and even thrive through moral and economic regulation and through disinvestment in the neighbourhood's built environment is evidence that the DTES was never the cultural or economic wasteland that civic and business leaders feared, or that popular histories of the neighbourhood suggest. At the same time, the club's successes did not necessarily represent a victory for the wider neighbourhood.

Although the musicians who performed at the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret rarely fit what city leaders would have considered culture, today the club is celebrated for its place “at the centre of the city's changing entertainment scene.”<sup>22</sup> Much of this commemoration is based around the musicians like Jimi Hendrix and Jefferson Airplane who were rumoured to have performed at the club in the 1960s, and the punk scene who used the club from 1979 to the mid-1980s. While this might suggest that the city is finally acknowledging that an important type of culture or community existed where city leaders only saw moral and economic blight, what is lost in this celebration of Vancouver's cultural history is an understanding of the way that civic regulation, urban development

---

<sup>22</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Sign,” The Museum of Vancouver.

plans, local activism, and technological changes have shaped where different types of artists performed, and what their performances meant to patrons, employers, and the identity of the wider neighbourhood.

This thesis draws on a variety of sources to understand how the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret changed in response to official regulation and popular perceptions of the neighbourhood, and to understand how individuals who worked and played at the Smilin' Buddha perceived the club and neighbourhood. To understand how the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret was regulated, this thesis draws on the City of Vancouver Archives' files on the Cabaret Review Board, liquor licensing, DTES plans, and City Council minutes. These sources offer both specific details on the Smilin' Buddha and context on the city and province's views of East End nightclubs and the wider neighbourhood. These sources are used in conjunction with a survey of Vancouver newspapers' articles on 'skid road', the DTES, and city nightlife to understand how official regulation intersected with the popular image of the neighbourhood as expressed by journalists. Smilin' Buddha advertisements in the *Vancouver Sun*'s entertainment section provide insight into the club's changing entertainment formats and patrons from 1952 to the mid-1970s, while Jack Wasserman's columns on Vancouver's nightlife offers some specific details on the operation of the club and the trends and problems that city nightclubs faced in general during this same period. For the Smilin' Buddha's punk era, this thesis draws on the *Georgia Straight*'s club listings and music columns as well as local punk zines like *Snot Rag* and *Public Enemy* available in Simon Fraser University's Vancouver Punk Archive. Interviews conducted with jazz musicians Gregg Simpson and Gary Taylor, and punk scene participants Tom Harrison and David Matychuk provide insight into musicians'

perceptions of the club and neighbourhood from the 1960s to the 1980s. While many musicians declined to be interviewed for this project, internet message boards like [vancouverjazz.com](http://vancouverjazz.com) and [thepunkmovie.net](http://thepunkmovie.net) provided further insight into musician and patrons' experiences at the Smilin' Buddha and within the city's various overlapping music scenes. During the early to mid-2000s, these message boards served as sorts of “internet neighbourhoods” where musicians and scene participants met to discuss their experiences and the history of different clubs, groups, and genres.<sup>23</sup> These message boards are particularly valuable because, unlike oral interviews, the discussions are shaped by the participants rather than the questions and interests of the researcher.

Chapter one covers the first incarnation of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret from its opening in 1952 by Albert Kwan and Harvey Lowe until 1962 when the club was sold to Lachman and Nancy Jir. This chapter argues that despite the Buddha's location within the area commonly referred to as “skid road,” Kwan and Lowe attempted to connect the club to both Chinatown's tourist trade and the West End's wealthier clientele and more respectable nightclub district. Kwan and Lowe reworked racial and geographic stereotypes to their advantage by tapping into the post-war exotica craze while offering music and entertainment that appealed to heterosocial, white, middle-class patrons. During this period, musicians served as the background for dancing and socializing and were rarely mentioned by individual or group name in Smilin' Buddha advertisements. Instead, the club's musicians were primarily listed generically as the “Smilin' Buddha Orchestra,” which suggests that the musicians were not the club's main draw. Despite

---

<sup>23</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “The Old Internet Neighbourhoods,” *New York Times*, 10 July 2011.

their attempts to run a respectable club that followed city and provincial regulations, the Smilin' Buddha's operators were denied many of the privileges afforded to West End clubs run by white businessmen, including a liquor license, and were subject to close police scrutiny. The regulation of the Smilin' Buddha, as with many other East End clubs, was justified in part by city and provincial authorities based on racist ideas about the club's operators and sexist assumptions about the reputation of women who frequented nightclubs. These racist and sexist ideas about the Smilin' Buddha and the East End combined with a period of disinvestment in the East End as the city's downtown core was pulled west by lower land values to help reinforce the popular image of East Hastings and the wider East End as 'skid road'—an area of both moral and economic blight.

Chapter two covers the reincarnation of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret from a symbol of exotic Chinese culture to a symbol of exotic Indian culture under the ownership of Lachman and Nancy Jir from 1962 to 1978. During the 1960s and '70s, civic and business interests hoped to rehabilitate or develop the 'skid road' area by removing poorer residents, expropriating and redeveloping the built environment or creating a heritage district. While these civic and business interests had some successes in displacing poorer residents and redefining the area north of Hastings Street, the blocks immediately surrounding the Smilin' Buddha remained distinctly defined as 'skid road.' This chapter argues that due to the club's geographic place at the heart of 'skid road' and changing entertainment tastes and technologies, the Jirs did not attempt to appeal to a heterosocial, middle-class clientele that civic leaders wanted to attract to the area. Instead, the Jirs followed a similar entertainment format as several other East End clubs

by focusing increasingly on nude, female dancers and female impersonators marketed to a male, working-class clientele. This combination of vice and working-class masculinity served to reinforce popular stereotypes about both the club and the neighbourhood.

Although the musicians who performed at the club during this time primarily remember the Smilin' Buddha as a sleazy dive bar where they performed rock and jazz standards as the backing bands for dancers, they profited from cabaret license regulations which required clubs to have a minimum three-piece band in attendance who were paid union wages. This requirement allowed a generation of young musicians to gain experience and earn a living before moving on to play in more reputable venues or start clubs of their own. Despite the fact that the Smilin' Buddha did not fit within civic, business, or residential groups' visions for the neighbourhood, the club survived through the 1960s and early-1970s thanks, in part, to the province's arcane liquor laws which prevented beer parlours from hosting live entertainment.

Chapter three covers the second reincarnation of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, beginning in 1979 when the club became the home for Vancouver's young punk scene, until 1985 when the club burnt down and new venues opened for Vancouver's fragmented punk and alternative music scenes. This chapter argues that unlike previous eras, the musicians who performed at the Smilin' Buddha during the punk era embraced the seedy reputation of both the club and the DTES 'skid row' neighbourhood. During this period when disco music dominated the nightclubs, there were few jobs or venues open to young musicians. This was also a period of high unemployment and social conservatism which made the middle-class appear out of reach for many of the young suburbanites who embraced punk. Like those patrons who visited the Smilin' Buddha in the 1950s, punk

scene participants were attracted by the 'exotic' reputation of the DTES. However, rather than coming to the DTES to simply view the exotic 'other' and escape bourgeois life, punk scene participants presented themselves *as* the exotic other and a rejection of bourgeois life. Punk scene participants were not content to provide background music for patrons' evening of dancing or socializing. Instead, bands demonstrated control over the club by playing at loud volumes that were impossible to ignore and placed the artist at the centre of attention. The Jirs were apparently willing to cede control over the club to the punk scene as long as they continued to fill the club and did not demand union wages.<sup>24</sup> Continued police intervention at the Smilin' Buddha and a highly publicized raid that led to numerous arrests lent legitimacy to the punk scene, and for a short while, made the Smilin' Buddha one of the city's hottest nightclubs. At the same time, media coverage of the punk scene at the Smilin' Buddha reinforced the neighbourhood's 'skid row' image that residents' groups and civic leaders were trying to eliminate.

The epilogue looks briefly at the commemoration of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret over the past decade, the third reincarnation of the club as the SBC Restaurant, and debates over the future of the neighbourhood. Here, I argue that the culture and vitality that the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret represents to present-day Vancouver through the MOV's Smilin' Buddha exhibit and the VHF's "125 Places That Matter" campaign are the product of continued struggle and negotiation by many different communities who have lived in and used the DTES. These groups have, at different times, fought against the civic and business interests who tried to define 'vitality' in ways that reinforced white,

---

<sup>24</sup> Joe Keithley, *I, Shithead: A Life in Punk* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003), 49; Tom Harrison Interview, 16 January 2014.

middle-class ideas of respectability, and at other times have sought access to the privileges afforded to the middle-class, or reinforced 'skid row' stereotypes to lend a sense of legitimacy to their music. There is no clear connection between the presence of artists and gentrification or rising property values and rents; however, artists who use the DTES must be aware of the struggles that have allowed the neighbourhood to continue to be a site for artistic experimentation. I conclude by suggesting that rather than using art and culture to help attract middle-class workers and entrepreneurs, both artists and the city need to fight to ensure that affordable access to both living spaces and creative spaces continues to exist. This can allow for the continued creation of cultures that can make the city livable in a way that is meaningful beyond its immediate economic impact and that does not result in an exclusive playground for the rich.

## **All the Charms of the Orient: Respectability and Exoticism on Vancouver's Skid Road 1952-62**

On October 16, 1952, a large advertisement in the *Vancouver Sun* announced the grand opening of “Vancouver's newest and smartest night club,” the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret at 109 East Hastings Street between Main Street and Columbia. The advertisement promised that “no expense has been spared to make this one of the loveliest and most novel clubs on the Pacific Coast.”<sup>1</sup> An accompanying article, written by *Sun* nightlife columnist Jack Wasserman described the Smilin' Buddha as “the last word in supper clubs embodying all the charm of the Orient.”<sup>2</sup> Today, the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) states that during the 1950s, the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret “was a symbol of Vancouver's post-war prosperity and bustle.”<sup>3</sup> While the club can be described as a product of its time, when disposable incomes increased, along with demands for liberalized liquor laws, and expanded leisure and entertainment options, it is unclear to what degree the club's operators, Albert Kwan and Harvey Lowe, benefitted during this period of prosperity. Despite their attempt to run a respectable club that followed city and provincial regulations, Kwan and Lowe were denied the privileges afforded to clubs run by white businessmen in the wealthier West End of the city due, in part, to racist assumptions about Chinese business owners. Rather than a symbol of post-war prosperity, the first incarnation of the Smilin' Buddha, from 1952 until its sale in 1962,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 October 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Wasserman, “After Dark,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 October 1952.

<sup>3</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Sign,” The Museum of Vancouver, <http://www.museumofvancouver.ca/collections/object/smilin-buddha-cabaret-sign/>.

represents an attempt to market racial stereotypes about Chinese culture as a form of benign exoticism marketed to the white middle-class, and an attempt to connect the 100-block of East Hastings with Chinatown's tourist trade and the West End's wealthier nightclub district.

The Smilin' Buddha was owned and operated by two Canadian-born sons of Chinese immigrants who were both well-known within Vancouver's Chinatown business community. Kwan's father was a prominent businessman in Victoria's Chinatown while Lowe was a well-known entertainer who spent part of his youth as a professional yo-yo player before working as a radio personality on CJOR's *Call of China*. According to Faye Leung, a friend of Kwan and Lowe, both men were educated in China to avoid the systemic racism present in Vancouver but returned to Vancouver in the late 1940s to escape the chaos of the Chinese Civil War. Once returned, the pair began to plan the Smilin' Buddha based on their experiences of the Shanghai nightlife.<sup>4</sup>

By 1952, the 100-block of East Hastings was increasingly characterized as a part of Vancouver's "skid road" centred around the intersection of Carrall and Cordova one block northwest of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret. While the term "skid road" once referred to the log roads that were used to skid trees to the mill and the bars, hotels, and bordellos that sprang up around logging camps, by the early-1950s the term was increasingly used

---

<sup>4</sup> John Mackie, "Harvey Lowe, a Chinatown Legend; Former Yo-Yo Champ Taught Julie Christie How to Smoke Opium For *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 March 2009; *The Late Shoe*, "Episode 7 – Harvey Lowe," Directed by Yvonne Gall, CBC Radio, 9 August 2010; Hastings Crossing Living History, "Chapter 2 – Origins of the Buddha," YouTube video, 23 September 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMRDiCiOWgQ>; Faye Leung, "Yo-Yo Champion Harvey Lowe," <http://fayeleung.com/harveylowe/>.

synonymously with the term “slum.”<sup>5</sup> Through the early-1950s, Vancouver journalists wrote dozens of articles describing the seedy elements of both the built environment of the East End “skid road” and its inhabitants. For example, a *Picture Magazine* article written in December 1951 by Cy Young described “skid road” as the place “where Vancouver fades into shabby, shadowy sordidness. It is where derelicts of a great city dwell in filthy jungles, only a few blocks from main streets.”<sup>6</sup> Another article titled “Vancouver's Shame,” by *Province* journalist Bill Ryan described skid road as “pathetic . . . flanked by grimy buildings frequented by men and women who have sunk so low they know no shame.”<sup>7</sup> Suggesting that the heyday for the 100-block of East Hastings had ended long before the Buddha opened, a 1953 *Vancouver Sun* article titled “Right Hotel Lady, But You're Generations Late,” told an anecdote about an elderly tourist asking a cab driver to take her to a “skid road hotel,” the Balmoral at 159 East Hastings, that she saw listed in a forty year old guide book described as the “best in town.” Upon seeing the hotel, according to the article, she told the driver to return to the airport and stated she would never come back to Vancouver.<sup>8</sup>

Since the early-1900s, the 100-block of East Hastings has stood at the intersection of many overlapping personal and community geographies on unceded Coast Salish

---

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley, “The Worst Block in Vancouver,” in *Stan Douglas, Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, ed. Reid Shier (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 30-33.

<sup>6</sup> Cy Young, “Skidroad,” *Picture Magazine*, 1 December 1951.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Ryan, “Vancouver's Shame 'Skid Road—Street of Lost Souls,” *The Province*, 8 November 1952.

<sup>8</sup> Whether or not this anecdote was based in fact, its publication in the *Province* suggests that the Balmoral's reputation as a “skid road hotel” was common knowledge. Doug Glasgow, “Right Hotel, Lady, But You're Generations Late,” *The Province*, 11 December 1953.

territory. The City of Vancouver grew around a small, multi-ethnic lumbering settlement called Gastown, settled in 1867, situated on the western edge of the Hastings Mills property at the foot of Dunlevy Street just a few blocks northeast of Hastings and Main. By the time Vancouver was incorporated as a city in 1886 the entire area had been claimed by white settlers and land speculators and had changed hands several times.<sup>9</sup> The 100-block of East Hastings was part of the city's original downtown district, wedged between the industrial False Creek waterfront and the Canadian Pacific Railway's terminus at the Burrard Inlet. From 1910 to about 1940, the area from 100 West Hastings to 300 East Hastings was Vancouver's first theatre row.<sup>10</sup> Here, movie and vaudeville theatres shared space with restaurants, stores, hotels, and rooming houses. This area served as the home base for transient and seasonal resource workers, the city's main shopping, entertainment, and drinking district. It was also an area that bordered on the city's Chinatown, centred around present-day Pender Street between Main and Carrall, and Japantown, centred around Alexander Street between Main and Jackson. The commercial downtown served as the dividing line between the affluent West End, settled by CPR executives and city leaders, and the East End, which was home to the city's working-class.

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, Coast Salish people continued to live in Stanley Park and throughout the city. For more on Vancouver's early development, see Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006); Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History*, 39; "Hastings Was First Theatre Row," *Vancouver Courier*, 28 November 2008, [http://www.canada.com/story\\_print.html?id=1c62e4b0-3645-4773-b99e-9bee72945c20&sponsor=](http://www.canada.com/story_print.html?id=1c62e4b0-3645-4773-b99e-9bee72945c20&sponsor=).

By the 1950s, however, Vancouver's central business district had shifted west towards Granville Street leading to a period of disinvestment in the Downtown East. As part of the deal that made the Burrard Inlet the western terminus for the CPR, the company was granted 6000 acres of land that included much of the West End.<sup>11</sup> The CPR encouraged the West End's development and the westward shift of Vancouver's downtown business district by selling some of its land at cheap prices which helped contribute to a prolonged period of disinvestment in the East End. Downtown East businesses faced further challenges from the growth of suburban shopping centres and Granville's theatre row; unionization in lumber industry that made resource work more reliable and less transient; and changes to the region's transportation networks.<sup>12</sup> By 1958, the Interurban line that carried passengers from Chilliwack to Vancouver and the local street service that both shared a central station at Hastings and Carrall was discontinued. Around the same time, the North Shore Ferry and Union Steamship Service that brought passengers to the foot of Columbia Street just two block north of Hastings were discontinued.<sup>13</sup> These changes brought challenges to business and property owners who relied on foot traffic to drive business and sustain rents. Ensuing questions about the health and vitality of this area have been central to the definition of both the Smilin' Buddha and the larger East End neighbourhood since the 1950s.

---

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, *Historical Atlas of Vancouver*, 51-54.

<sup>12</sup> Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History*, 52; Rolf Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line: Reminiscences of the Vancouver Waterfront* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1980), 28, 49.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent analysis of how these transportation networks shaped Vancouver's East End, see Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line*.

Although Vancouver's central business district had shifted west and changes to the city's transportation networks threatened to reduce foot traffic around the Smilin' Buddha, the area remained a business and shopping hub, even if it catered to a less affluent clientele than the West End shopping district. One of the city's main shopping destinations, the Woodward's Department store, stood just two blocks west of the Smilin' Buddha, and Hastings street continued to host a variety of theatres, beer parlours, stores and services. Following the Second World War, many white tourists were also drawn into the vicinity of the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret by a romantic vision of Chinatown as an authentic piece of the "Little Orient." As geographer Kay J. Anderson explains, Chinatown tourism was an "important source of revenue for Chinese businesses," particularly those along Pender Street between Carrall and Main, one block south of the Smilin' Buddha.<sup>14</sup> In order to capitalize on this view of Chinatown, Anderson argues that merchants "adapted Chinatown's streetscape in conformity with the neighbourhood image that Europeans sought to discover," including the wide use of neon lights despite the fact that neon was not part of traditional Chinese architecture.<sup>15</sup> This "purposeful Orientalizing" led to a blossoming Chinatown restaurant industry and expanded demand for Chinese grocery and curio stores.<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps the success of the Chinatown tourism and Chinatown's businesses that can account for the Smilin' Buddha's location on Hastings Street, beyond the confines of the area defined as Chinatown. With rents and land values enhanced by a

---

<sup>14</sup> Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 176.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 176, 224-25.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 176.

strong tourist trade within a very limited area, Kwan and Lowe may have been forced to look beyond the Chinatown neighbourhood to find a home for their club. Drawing on the prevalent Chinatown aesthetic of the time, Kwan and Lowe “purposefully Orientalized” their club with a large neon sign depicting the Buddha whose chins and belly flickered along with the steam rising from his bowl.

The Smilin' Buddha's Oriental aesthetic also fit in with a larger post-World War II exotica fad among the North American white middle-class. While the exotica craze is most commonly associated with tiki bars and their faux-Polynesian aesthetic based on a white stereotype of Polynesian culture, the 'exotic' refers to something “excitingly different or unusual” and the exotica craze was rarely bound to a (mis)representation of any one particular culture.<sup>17</sup> As Francisco Adinolfi explains in *Mondo Exotica*, the music of exotica, perhaps most associated with Les Baxter's album *Ritual of the Savage*, drew on the sounds and rhythms of many different real and imagined cultures from around the world, all while making the “absolute, totalizing stereotype its founding assumption.”<sup>18</sup> For the white middle-class during this post-war period, Adinolfi concludes that the 'exotic' came “to symbolize the mysterious side of the human psyche, the part most inclined to lose itself in the unknown desperately wishing to give up the mundane nature of bourgeois life.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Karen Pinkus, “Introduction,” in Francesco Adinolfi, *Mondo Exotica: Sounds, Visions, Obsessions of the Cocktail Generation*, Karen Pinkus, ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008): VIII.

<sup>18</sup> Francesco Adinolfi, *Mondo Exotica: Sounds, Visions, Obsessions of the Cocktail Generation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Adinolfi, *Mondo Exotica*, 40.

At the time that the Smilin' Buddha opened, there were few cabarets in the city to appeal to this exotic, white middle-class dream of escape to somewhere distant and exciting. The most prominent Chinatown cabaret of the pre-war period, the Mandarin Gardens at 98 East Pender, closed in 1952 leaving the Mayling at the corner of Pender and Main as the only other cabaret in the neighbourhood. The Mayling Cabaret's location on the eastern edge of Chinatown may indicate that it drew its patrons from the working-class East End of the city.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, by opening their club on the western edge of Chinatown, Kwan and Lowe may have been attempting to draw their audiences from the more affluent West End. While historians Mark Miller and Becki Ross have shown how clubs and artists in Vancouver exploited racial stereotypes and ideas of the exotic “other” throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the cultural context of the post- World War II period gave Kwan and Lowe the opportunity to turn racial and geographic stereotypes of Chinatown to their advantage while catering to a respectable middle-class audience.<sup>21</sup>

The perception of respectability may have been especially important for a Chinese-run nightclub operating in the East End in the 1950s where ideas about the “Chinese” racial category intersected with the developing “skid road” narrative. In

---

<sup>20</sup> Other incarnations of the Mandarin Gardens existed at 164 East Hastings Street and the corner of Main and Keefer in the late-1950s and 1960s. I have found little information on the Mayling Cabaret in my searches. An advertisement in the Nov.-Dec. 1952 *U.B.C. Alumni Chronicle* lists the club's entertainment as what is likely a jazz combo called the “Dixie Band Orchestra,” and a 25 November 1957 edition of the *Prince George Citizen* details a shooting during a stag party at the club. See “One Wounded: Chief Lake Farmer Charged in Shooting.”

<sup>21</sup> See, Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1999); Becki Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

*Vancouver's Chinatown*, Anderson argues that from the “late 1880s, 'Chinatown' accrued a field of meaning that became the context and justification for recurring rounds of government practice in the ongoing construction of both the place and the racial category 'Chinese.’”<sup>22</sup> This means that bureaucratic and disciplinary forces selectively regulated and policed Chinatown in ways that reinforced white European stereotypes of Chinese people and Chinese culture, which then encouraged further perpetuation of these bureaucratic and disciplinary practices. For example, Anderson discusses how the perception that the Chinese people were amoral gamblers and opium smokers meant that from the 1890s to the 1940s, Vancouver police consistently and disproportionately targeted these vices in Chinatown. One account of these police raids from the *Chinese Times*, cited by Anderson, stated that gambling for amusement or small amounts of money was common among the Chinese, but that if the police raided a card game happening in the “common room of [a] boarding house [then everyone in the room was] arrested for gambling and looking on.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, the stereotype that the Chinese were habitual gamblers was reinforced by police raids that indiscriminately arrested gamblers, card players, and any onlookers or people in the vicinity.

As a cabaret, the Smilin' Buddha did not have a liquor license when it opened in 1952. For much of the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, cabarets existed in a sort of legal grey area, operating as “bottle clubs” where patrons illegally brought in their own

---

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Kay J. Anderson, “The Idea of Chinatown: The Power and Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category,” in *Immigration in Canada: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1994), 240.

liquor to be mixed with ice and soft drinks purchased at the cabaret.<sup>24</sup> Until 1953 in law, and the late 1960s for most in practice, cabarets were not permitted to serve liquor in their establishments. While prohibition in British Columbia only lasted from 1917 to 1921, the sale and consumption of alcohol in the province has been strictly regulated since this time. It was not until 1924 that Vancouver voters narrowly approved a plebiscite to allow the sale of beer by the glass in the city. Through what historian Robert Campbell refers to as a “gentlemen's agreement,” the British Columbia Liquor Control Board (LCB) restricted beer parlour licenses to British Columbia Hotel Association (BCHA) members. These hotel beer parlours were strictly regulated: patrons had to be seated and served at tables, no advertisements for beer were permitted, and no food or entertainment was to be provided. Although women were initially allowed into beer parlours in 1925, with the encouragement of the LCB, the BCHA unanimously voted to ban women from their establishments in 1926 before settling on separate rooms for single men and women in 1927, a policy that was retained until 1963.<sup>25</sup>

The city and province's regulation of alcohol was deeply tied to moral concerns that were most forcefully articulated by the B.C. Temperance League, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the Vancouver Council of Churches. These groups often found support from groups with a strong economic interest in restricting the sale of

---

<sup>24</sup> In 1960, the City License Inspector noted that the practice of bringing liquor into dry clubs was an “almost universal practice in all cabarets.” License Inspector to City Council, 9 March 1960, Vancouver City Archives (hereafter vca), 72-E-5 folder 8.

<sup>25</sup> Women were also barred from serving alcohol. Robert Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money: Government Control of Liquor in British Columbia From Prohibition to Privatization* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), 55-58, 92, 124-129.

alcohol. In 1935, for instance, the BCHA allied with temperance groups to campaign against beer and wine sales in restaurants on the grounds that this could force women to serve alcohol and be in the presence of drinkers.<sup>26</sup> In 1952, while the BCHA supported a plebiscite to allow the sale of liquor by the glass, they lobbied to have this privilege restricted to hotel cocktail bars which, they suggested, were more suited to prevent excess drinking than nightclubs.<sup>27</sup>

Despite not having a liquor license when the club opened in 1952, the Smilin' Buddha's operators may have had reason to believe that relaxed liquor laws would favour their new nightclub. A 1952 provincial plebiscite on the sale of liquor by-the-glass was approved by seventy percent of voters, signalling a shift in attitudes towards the public consumption of liquor. As Campbell states, by this time Vancouverites were "tired of dingy, crowded beer parlours. In greatest demand were cocktail lounges and cocktail with meals in restaurants."<sup>28</sup> These cocktail lounges, Campbell suggests, were "meant to provide a congenial, respectable environment in which men and women could drink [together]." By emphasizing "decor and expensive drinks," he continues, "cocktail lounges were designed to appeal to the middle class."<sup>29</sup> By creating "one of the loveliest and most novel night clubs on the Pacific Coast," as their grand opening advertisement

---

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 81-83.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 92-93.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 120.

claimed, the Smilin' Buddha was well-positioned to capitalize on the province's new liquor laws.<sup>30</sup>

Even without a liquor license, cabarets like the Smilin' Buddha had an advantage over the beer parlours and hotel lounges.<sup>31</sup> These cabarets “sold a seat,” as Oil Can Harry's cabaret owner Danny Baceda put it, where unlike beer parlours and licensed hotel restaurants, patrons could be entertained while drinking from their own bottles.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the liquor restrictions on cabarets, according to *Province* journalist, Tom Hazlitt, they were “unofficially well-wetted by gallons of under-the-table liquor [and] beer.”<sup>33</sup> Cabarets, then, could be heterosocial environments where men and women danced and drank together with fewer restrictions than in the hotel beer parlours and restaurants. With the city's closure of the State Burlesque Theatre at 142 East Hastings for “presenting an indecent performance,” the Smilin' Buddha was further positioned to take advantage of what Ross describes as the end of large-scale vaudeville theatre in the East End which signalled a shift towards smaller scale nightclub entertainment offered by clubs like the Buddha.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 October 1952.

<sup>31</sup> Few lounge licenses were granted outside of hotel restaurants, meaning that legally, entertainment and liquor remained largely segregated in Vancouver. The first cabaret to receive a liquor license was The Cave at 626 Hornby Street in 1954. No East End cabarets received liquor licenses before 1965.

<sup>32</sup> Scott MacCrae, “Oil Can's Takes a Double Gamble,” *Vancouver Sun*, 24 October 1975.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Hazlitt, “It's Not All Liquor in Cabarets But Bottles Stand Under Table,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 February 1960.

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Burlesque West*, 12; “5 Convicted of Indecent Stage Show: State Theatre to be Denied '52 License,” *Vancouver Sun*, 18 January 1952.

While Kwan and Lowe marketed the Smilin' Buddha using exotic Oriental motifs, there is little evidence to indicate that they booked entertainers who matched the club's aesthetic. Prior to their grand opening, Harvey Lowe suggested the Smilin' Buddha would feature local music acts.<sup>35</sup> When the club advertised through the 1950s, however, their entertainment was almost exclusively listed as the "Smilin' Buddha Orchestra," or "our versatile orchestra." These relatively anonymous band names and descriptions likely indicate that the club did not book well-known or out-of-town musical acts during the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> For cabarets during this period, the term 'orchestra' often referred to three-piece pop and jazz bands, the smallest combo allowed by city's cabaret license which required clubs to have musical entertainment. Faye Leung, who frequented the Smilin' Buddha in the 1950s, describes the club at the time as a "dine and dance" with good Chinese food and music that was "elegant." She describes the music as "the old songs, you know, beautiful songs," which included "waltzes, foxtrots [and] rumba."<sup>37</sup> Leung's description indicates that the Smilin' Buddha was not a place for musicians to perform original compositions; instead, they performed well-established dance standards. The fact that the Smilin' Buddha had higher admission prices for its events and advertised Sunday "family dinners" supports the assertion that during the 1950s, the club was aiming for higher class patrons.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Jack Wasserman, "After Dark," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 October 1952.

<sup>36</sup> The Smilin' Buddha did not advertise often in local newspapers during the mid-1950s outside of large events like the British Empire Games in 1953 and New Year's Eve celebrations. See, Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Advertisement, *Vancouver Sun*, 23 October 1952; 5 August 1954.

<sup>37</sup> Hastings Crossing Living History, "Chapter 2 – Origins of the Buddha."

<sup>38</sup> The Smilin' Buddha advertised their Sunday "special family dinner" from 1952 to 1954. For an example, see "Smilin' Buddha Advertisement," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 October 1952. Their

Long before the Smilin' Buddha opened, the perception that cabarets were sites of illegal drinking and vice meant that they received close attention from city police, and license inspectors.<sup>39</sup> While it is unclear how tolerant the Buddha's operators were towards illegal activities in their establishment it is notable that the club is not mentioned in any of the numerous reports on license or liquor act violations during the 1950s, nor was it negatively mentioned in the press. Yet the Smilin' Buddha was not granted a liquor license through the mid-1950s, and in 1956 the city turned down a request made by the Buddha and four other Chinatown cabarets to extend their dance and entertainment curfew from two to three a.m to match the extended curfew granted to some West End clubs. After an inspection of eleven downtown cabarets, the *Vancouver Sun* reported that city license inspector Milton Harrell warned cabaret operators that “any further violations of the 2 a.m. Deadline [would] result in 'severe consequences.'” Mayor Fred Hume weighed in on the decision, saying that “it was high time night spots were made to comply with [city by-laws].” Suggesting that the mayor's position was influenced by considerations about acceptable female behaviour, Hume was quoted saying, “who wants his daughter downtown some place until 3 o'clock in the morning[?] I don't think it's decent and I don't think it's right.”<sup>40</sup>

The Smilin' Buddha's petition for a later closing time was likely influenced by increasing competition from several new East End cabarets that often flaunted city

---

admission prices were most commonly listed for their New Year's Eve celebrations. See “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 December 1954.

<sup>39</sup> There are numerous files within the City of Vancouver Archives dealing with cabarets created by police, and license and health inspectors.

<sup>40</sup> “To Council: Cabarets To Appeal 2 a.m. Edict,” *Vancouver Sun*, 3 August 1956.

curfews, among other restrictions. By the mid-1950s, the Smilin' Buddha shared space with more than a dozen cabarets in the East End. As a way to differentiate from one another and sell a seat, many of these new clubs, marketed themselves with exotic, racialized motif, much like the Smilin' Buddha. These clubs included places like the New Delhi, the Mandarin Gardens, the Harlem Nocturne, and the Waldorf Hotel's Polynesian Room.<sup>41</sup> In his 1960 University of British Columbia sociology thesis researched at an East End club pseudonymously named the Malabar, Lawrence Douglas observed that the club's management permitted or engaged in several “illegitimate practices” including allowing after hours dancing.<sup>42</sup> These practices, Douglas suggests, were necessary due to the “pressure of competition from neighbouring rival nightclubs of the area where such practices are routine.” Douglas notes that before these activities were permitted, “customers stayed away or patronised establishments where they could both drink and dance until closing time.”<sup>43</sup>

With the East End nightclub scene's expansion came new forms of entertainment. Through the mid to late-1950s, many clubs began to specialize in guitar-based forms of popular music while the pop orchestras that characterized vaudeville and cabaret entertainment for much of the previous two decades fell out of vogue. East End cabarets like the New Delhi, the New Orleans Club, among others, began booking rock, jazz, and

---

<sup>41</sup> See “The Waldorf Hotel Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 December 1955.

<sup>42</sup> This pseudonymous name, referring to a region of India, along with a fairly specific description of the club's appearance and location suggests that Douglas conducted his observational research at the New Delhi Cabaret, 544 Main Street. Lawrence Douglas, “Social System of a Vancouver Nightclub: An Illustration of a Method of Analysis of an Organization,” (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1960), 17.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas, “Social System of a Vancouver Nightclub,” 17.

rhythm and blues acts that performed a mix of dance hits and original material. Warren Gill, a geographer and member of 1960s Vancouver rock band The Spectres, argues that these new forms of music were popular in small clubs during the late 1950s and 1960s because recording and home playback technology could not yet capture the volume and energy of live bands.<sup>44</sup> While jazz had already been part of Vancouver's entertainment scene since the early 1920s, during the 1950s Vancouver's jazz scene expanded rapidly as the genre was increasingly viewed as “serious music.”<sup>45</sup> By the latter half of the decade, jazz aficionados could visit musician-run clubs like the Cellar and the Harlem Nocturne to hear a wide variety of local and touring musicians.<sup>46</sup> More erotic forms of entertainment also proliferated during this time. In the West End, the Palomar offered daring performances like the “Jewel Box Revue,” which was billed as “America's foremost female impersonators,” while the Harlem Nocturne jazz music with burlesque dancing by the Brownskin Models as part of a nostalgic “Roaring 20's Review.”<sup>47</sup>

The Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, for its part, continued to book small orchestras, though their advertisements from 1959 and 1960 reveal that they also often offered a vaudeville-esque variety show format that was popular earlier in the decade featuring a

---

<sup>44</sup> Warren Gill, “Region, Agency, and Popular Music: The Northwest Sound 1958-1966,” *Canadian Geographer* 37 no. 2 (June 1993), 124.

<sup>45</sup> Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007). For a comprehensive history of jazz in Vancouver to 1949, see Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket*.

<sup>46</sup> “Harlem Nocturne Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 April 1958; “Cellar Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 30 December 1958.

<sup>47</sup> “Palomar Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 6 August 1954; “Harlem Nocturne Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 April 1958; “New Orleans Club Advertisement,” 5 July 1959; “New Delhi Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 30 December 1960.

host, a musical act, and one other singer or performer. These acts rarely appear to have been on the cutting edge of nightclub entertainment. Between December 1959 and May 1960, the Buddha's entertainment consisted of the very respectable Vancouver *Theatre Under the Stars* singer, Van Luven, the Larry Whitely Trio, with one other act that varied from week to week.<sup>48</sup> Suggesting the growing popularity of television variety shows, the Smilin' Buddha's listed its headliner for one May 1960 weekend as Jerry Johnson, "the dancing waiter with the spinning tray . . . featured on the *Ed Sullivan Show*."<sup>49</sup>

By 1959, it was not just changing trends in entertainment that threatened the Smilin' Buddha and other cabarets, it was also changing trends in civic regulation and enforcement. Through 1959 police intensified checks on nightclubs. Though there is little evidence about how these raids affected the Smilin' Buddha, Douglas' observations at the Malabar in 1959 provides an idea of the practices and pressures at one East End cabaret. On the subject of police raids, Douglas notes that

the police are frequent visitors to the Malabar. In fact, it is considered unusual when a night passes and neither uniformed policemen, women police officers, nor plainclothesmen of the Anti-Vice Squad fail to make their appearance. It is not unusual for the establishment to be visited by all three branches of the city police within a short period of time on the same night.<sup>50</sup>

The pervasive practice of illegal liquor consumption in Vancouver cabarets and the expense of policing these nightclubs led Vancouver City Council to pass a motion

---

<sup>48</sup> Vancouver *Theatre Under the Stars* was a theatre company that performed summer musicals at the Malkin Bowl in Stanley Park. See, "Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Advertisement," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 December 1959; 13 May 1960.

<sup>49</sup> "Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Advertisement," *Vancouver Sun*, 27 May 1960.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas, "Social System of a Vancouver Nightclub," 16.

that called for all cabaret operators “with more than one charge laid against the patrons for illegal possession of liquor [to be forced to] show cause why their licence should not be suspended.”<sup>51</sup> While a December 1959 *Sun* article suggested that the city's crackdown on “illegal drinking and after hours dancing in cabarets” that followed this motion “largely eliminated these practices,” letters from police and the City Liquor Licence inspector suggest that increased enforcement led to different problems for city officials. In place of cabarets, “bootleg 'drink-in' establishments” began to flourish, with an estimated 120 “booze dens” existing around Vancouver.<sup>52</sup> Unlike cabarets, these “speakeasies” operated wholly outside the law: they did not seek a business or cabaret license and were unconcerned with civic or provincial liquor regulations, meaning that regulations about entertainment, food, and business hours were less of a concern than simply remaining unchecked by police. While cabarets “languish[ed]” during this crackdown on illegal liquor consumption, Wasserman reported that the cabaret operators' former patrons “enjoy[ed] a few drinks served in comfortable . . . surroundings . . . at reasonable prices” at one of the many bootleg establishments.<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately for these speakeasies and their patrons, the police were apparently *Vancouver Sun* subscribers and were sufficiently embarrassed by Wasserman's claims about illegal liquor consumption in the city to switch their focus from cabarets to the speakeasies. From December 1959 to February 1960, the *Sun* reported on frequent raids

---

<sup>51</sup> Jack Wasserman, “Lush for Life,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 December 1959.

<sup>52</sup> Wasserman, “Lush for Life.”

<sup>53</sup> Wasserman, “Lush for Life.”

and arrests at illegal clubs around the city.<sup>54</sup> It was, perhaps, this focus on city speakeasies which encouraged the Vancouver Police Department and City Liquor Inspector to encourage City Council and the LCB to amend cabaret and liquor licensing rules. City and provincial licenses, they suggested, provided an easier way to regulate the actions of both cabaret operators and their patrons. By relaxing liquor consumption laws in cabarets, the City Liquor Inspector and police suggested that “some East End clubs would be cleaner operations,” allowing officials to focus their resources on more important policing concerns.<sup>55</sup> With this, city officials began to shift their focus away from moral regulation of liquor and nightclubs and towards economic regulation.

The battle over illegal liquor consumption in Vancouver was not just a fight between the police and cabaret owners; beginning in 1959 and continuing through much of the 1960s, this was also a fight that saw police and cabaret operators cooperate, to an extent, to force changes in liquor policy at the provincial level. With the support of the British Columbia Cabaret Operators Association (BCCOA), the Vancouver Police Department and City Council sent recommendations to the LCB Attorney-General, Robert Bonner, about the way that liquor licensing decisions were made. These recommendations included the creation of a four-person LCB committee, consisting of two representatives from City Council and two from the provincial government, to

---

<sup>54</sup> “Five City Spots Raided By Police Dry Squad: 8 Suspects Arrested,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 December 1959; Jack Wasserman, “Seven League Booze,” *Vancouver Sun*, 30 December 1959; Mac Reynolds, “Blind Pig Glares: Vice Squads Snare 43 in Two Raids” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 December 1959.

<sup>55</sup> Wasserman, “Lush For Life.”

provide a local perspective on liquor applications.<sup>56</sup> While these recommendations do not appear to have been taken seriously by Bonner, he did address the issue of liquor licenses for East End cabarets, saying that “applications would be considered but none have been forthcoming.”<sup>57</sup>

While it is true that some cabaret operators did not want the right to sell liquor because of the high costs and additional responsibilities and restrictions that came with a liquor license, this was not true for the Smilin' Buddha.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps because the Buddha's desired middle-class audiences could both afford and would prefer cocktails to their own bottles hidden under the table, in 1959 Kwan applied for a liquor license, but was rejected. Despite Wasserman's assertion that the Smilin' Buddha was “generally well run” and the fact that dining lounges in operation for a year with a door cover charge and full entertainment such as orchestras and floorshows were eligible for liquor licenses, the LCB informed the Smilin' Buddha that the club “[did] not meet the Board's standards.” When Kwan responded that they were “willing to comply with any reasonable request” to bring the club up to the LCB's standards, the LCB replied that “the Board has never considered premises of this nature for licensing.”<sup>59</sup> Although the LCB did not clarify what was meant by “premises of this nature,” their refusal can perhaps be explained by an

---

<sup>56</sup> City Council to Robert Bonner, 7 September 1959, vca, 72-E-5, folder 8.

<sup>57</sup> Wasserman, “Seven League Booze.”

<sup>58</sup> East End cabaret operators feared that the high cost of liquor mandated by the LCB would encourage their customers to find other clubs or speakeasies where they could drink from their own bottle more affordably. In addition, liquor licensed establishments could not be rented out for private events and parties. Jack Wasserman, “Walkie Talkie,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 December 1964.

<sup>59</sup> Wasserman, “Seven League Booze.”

incident from 1952, soon after Colonel Donald McGugan became the LCB's chairman. When asked about the possibility of a “Canadian born Chinese holding the license of a beer parlour,” Vancouver's Chief Liquor Inspector replied that “an application from a Chinese is not favourably looked upon by the Board as it has been found . . . that Chinese are not able to handle this type of business.”<sup>60</sup> While race was never explicitly mentioned in the LCB’s rejection of the Smilin’ Buddha’s liquor license, with McGugan still at the helm in 1959, the board's position does not appear to have changed.

Perhaps due to changing perceptions of neighbourhood surrounding the Smilin' Buddha, frustration with police interventions at their club, their inability to secure a liquor license, or due to their inability or unwillingness to adapt to new forms of entertainment, in 1962 Kwan sold the club to Indian businessman Lachman Dass Jir.<sup>61</sup> By 1962, articles like John Kirkwood's “I Live With Skid Road Sorrows” helped to solidify the definition of the Downtown East End as Vancouver's skid road. According to Kirkwood, the 100-block of East Hastings had become “the block of flashy, garish neon” which was “the centre of activity” for the “addicts, the prostitutes, the pimps, the lesbians, the homosexuals, the alcoholics, [and] the just plain bums” of Vancouver.<sup>62</sup> Kirkwood's perception of the Downtown East as a moral and criminal problem was apparently shared by the city's police force. Suggesting that the police had begun a more

---

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Robert Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 86.

<sup>61</sup> “Living History Series – Chapter 3 – Hendrix at the Buddha??” YouTube video, 7:45, “Hastings Crossing TV,” 23 September 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi8ZjyyRbMQ>.

<sup>62</sup> John Kirkwood, “I Live With Skid Road Sorrow,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 January 1962.

active approach to inspections in cabarets by the early 1960s, in 1962 the owner of the Montreal Supper Club at 165 East Hastings Street, John Nagle, wrote an open letter to the *Vancouver Sun* complaining that “on Friday and Saturday nights small cabarets are visited by the police as many as seven or eight times by policemen who travel in pairs.”<sup>63</sup> Unlike the police visits that Douglas observed at the Malabar in 1959 where police stood at the back of the club without closely inspecting patrons or underneath tables, Nagle complained that the police visits embarrassed patrons because they “are asked to stand up at their tables and searched as though they were committing some crime by being there.”<sup>64</sup>

By the time that Lachman Jir purchased the Smilin' Buddha, the club had earned a reputation for bad entertainment. *Ubysey* columnist Lorene Gordon, for instance, noted that during a trans-Atlantic cruise she “had the opportunity to dance to one of the worst dance bands [she] had ever heard, worse even than those you might find from time to time in 'The Smiling Buddha.’”<sup>65</sup> Where the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret began as a club that attempted to balance respectability with exoticism by reworking racial and geographic stereotypes, by 1962 there is little evidence to suggest that it was considered either respectable or exotic. The perception of the 100-block of East Hastings as the heart of skid road combined with LCB stereotypes about Chinese-run liquor establishments meant

---

<sup>63</sup> The Montreal Cabaret may have been a target of the police force because, as one police report from 1963 states, the Montreal Cabaret was a “hangout for queers [and] appears unsuitable for a license.” Quoted in Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer*, 149; John Nagle to the *Vancouver Sun*, 13 June 1962, vca 72-E-5, folder 8.

<sup>64</sup> Douglas, “Social System of a Vancouver Nightclub,” 77; Nagle to the *Vancouver Sun*.

<sup>65</sup> Lorene Gordon, “Passage to England—Courtesy of Cunard,” *The Ubysey* 45, no. 16, 19 October 1962.

that Kwan and Lowe could not access the privileges afforded to West End clubs. At the same time, competition from numerous clubs that marketed both exotic decor and entertainment made the Buddha less distinctive within the city's nightclub entertainment scene. By 1962, many East End cabarets offered increasingly popular rock, jazz, and rhythm and blues acts, often on the same bill as striptease dancers, while licensed cocktail bars like the Waldorf Hotel's Polynesian Room and Trader Vic's tiki bar in the West End catered to higher-class patrons who wanted to drink in an exotic but respectable atmosphere outside of city's skid road neighbourhood.

## **Do It Right or Get Out: Legislating Respectability at The Smilin' Buddha, 1962-1978**

During the 1950s, the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret's managers Albert Kwan and Harvey Lowe attempted to connect the 100-block of East Hastings to the Chinatown tourist trade and the West End's wealthier nightclub district. Their efforts to access the same benefits as West End clubs were denied by the provincial Liquor Control Board (LCB), in part, due to the board's racist assumptions about Kwan and Lowe's Chinese heritage. By 1962 when Lachman and Nancy Jir took over the club, the 100-block of East Hastings was viewed not only as a moral problem where drug addiction and vice had taken root, but increasingly as an economic problem that civic and business interests were looking to solve by enticing the middle-class to return to the neighbourhood. As part of this effort, a Mayor's Commission on Cabarets was formed to address the problem of illegal liquor consumption by requiring all establishments licensed as cabarets to have a liquor license and follow newly created LCB regulations. The Smilin' Buddha received its first liquor license in 1967, but the ability to sell liquor did little to benefit the club; instead, the license represented an attempt by the city to eliminate the illegal East End “bottle clubs” that appealed to working-class drinkers. Under the new regulations, cabarets were expected to follow strict guidelines on decor, entertainment, cover charges, and liquor prices meant to appeal to middle-class clientele. These regulations did little to alter the reputation of the Smilin' Buddha or Downtown East “skid road,” however. In fact, despite city efforts to make the Downtown East more appealing to middle-class women by legislating respectability and redeveloping the area to eliminate “blight,” articles on the “skid row” problems helped create the perception that the area was

specifically unsuited for respectable women. As a result, the Jirs did not attempt to appeal to a heterosocial, middle-class clientele that civic leaders wanted to attract to the area. Instead, the Jirs followed a similar entertainment format as several other East End clubs and focused on nude, female dancers and female impersonators marketed to a male, working-class clientele.

Throughout the 1960s, Vancouver's "skid road," or "skid row" as it was increasingly called, was at the centre of civic and media attention. In 1964, two Non-Partisan Association Aldermen, Tom Alsbury and Marianne Linnell, ran for mayor on platforms centred around plans to clean up skid road.<sup>1</sup> While neither candidate was successful in their mayoral bids, in the same year, the Vancouver Planning Department began working on a scheme to redevelop the Downtown East as part of a larger federal initiative to eliminate blighted housing and neighbourhoods spearheaded by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation.<sup>2</sup> Although some journalists, business owners and community members questioned how schemes that aimed to "redevelop and eliminate" substandard buildings would address the human problems in the area, editorials in the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* through 1965 and 1966 largely advocated for this expropriation and renovation of skid road, or the creation of a waterfront heritage district.<sup>3</sup> During this time, the *Sun* and *Province* portrayed skid road as both a "spawning

---

<sup>1</sup> "Alsbury Campaigns on Skid Road," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 November 1964; "Ald. Linnell Plans Skid Road Plaza," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 November 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation, "To Build A Better City – a 1964 City Of Vancouver/CMHC Film," YouTube video ,14:20, Posted by "BC History," 25 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY5I8h1IJs>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, "Pump Life Into Water Street Students Urge Merchants," *Vancouver Sun*, 1 May 1965; John Taylor, "City Study Suggests Ways 'Let's Clean Up Skid Road,'" *Vancouver*

ground for crime” and a tax sinkhole that cost the city \$4-5 million in “policing, welfare and other costs,” while generating only \$200,000 in taxes.<sup>4</sup>

Stories about the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret today often refer to the “incredible array” of acts that the club hosted during the 1960s “psychedelic era.”<sup>5</sup> Local legends that suggest artists like Jimi Hendrix, Ike and Tina Turner, and Jefferson Airplane performed at the Smilin' Buddha lend credibility to the claim made by the Museum of Vancouver that the Smilin' Buddha was the “centre of Vancouver's changing entertainment scene.”<sup>6</sup> However, there is little evidence that links these artists to the club: no posters or newspaper advertisements refer to their performances at Smilin' Buddha. The legend of Jimi Hendrix's time at the club is one of the Smilin' Buddha's most referenced stories. As it is commonly told, Hendrix, then still named Jimmy James, was fired by Lachman Jir for playing too loud and annoying both Jir and the club's patrons.<sup>7</sup> The story—if it is

---

*Sun*, 10 July 1965; Allan Dixon, “Challenge: Let's Buy Skid Road,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 May 1965; Thomas Cocking, “Challenge: Bring Back Gassy Jack's,” *Vancouver Sun*, 2 July 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Ardies, “Can Bulldozers and Wrecking Balls Really Destroy Our Skid Row,” *Province*, 16 May 1964; Bob Porter, “Drug City Probe Ordered: It's Still the Same Old Sin Strip,” *Vancouver Sun*, 27 June 1964; Ian Todd, “Trouble Waits on Skid Road,” *Province*, 20 November 1964; Stan Shillington, “Spawning Ground For Crime: Hoodlums Prey on Drunks in Skid Road Taverns,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1965; Bud Elsie, “Skidroad: A Black Picture,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 July 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Keith McKellar, *Neon Eulogy: Vancouver Café and Street* (Victoria: Ekstasis Editions, 2001), 25.

<sup>6</sup> McKellar, *Neon Eulogy*, 25; The Museum of Vancouver, “Smilin' Buddha Cabaret Sign,” <http://museumofvancouver.ca/collections/objects/smilin-buddha-cabaret-sign/>.

<sup>7</sup> While there is no record of Hendrix's performance at the Smilin' Buddha, a 1984 *Vancouver Sun* article quotes Nancy Jir saying that her husband fired Hendrix in the early '60s because “he was too loud.” See Neal Hall, “Sad Day For Smilin' Buddha,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 January 1984.

indeed true—of Hendrix's brief tenure at the Buddha does not indicate that the club was on the forefront of music or entertainment trends in the city, however.

According to Henry Young, a musician who performed at the Smilin' Buddha during the 1960s, the Jirs spent twenty thousand dollars renovating the club after purchasing it in 1962 in an effort to get a liquor license.<sup>8</sup> Despite this effort, the Jirs were denied a liquor license for another five years by the provincial liquor control board (LCB) still headed by Colonel Donald McGugan. The Smilin' Buddha was not the only cabaret denied a liquor license during the early-1960s. Prior to 1965, just three cabarets outside of hotels had received liquor licenses—none in the East End.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps acknowledging the fact that the Smilin' Buddha was not going to receive the same privileges as West End cabarets or pry away their wealthier clientele, under Jir's management the Buddha did not compete with the West End clubs for the most popular entertainers or well-heeled clients. Instead, the Smilin' Buddha booked lesser known and presumably less expensive artists to perform alongside headlining floorshows by striptease artists. As Becki Ross argues in *Burlesque West*, East End cabarets were considered 'B' or 'C-list' venues for dancers when compared to the 'A-list' West End cabarets like the Cave or Isy's which offered higher pay and better working conditions, such as full dressing rooms. These West End cabarets were reserved for the most talented and marketable white dancers, however. In an effort

---

<sup>8</sup> “Living History Series – Chapter 3 – Hendrix at the Buddha??,” YouTube video, 7:45, “Hastings Crossing TV,” 23 September 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi8ZjyyRbMQ>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money: Government Control of Liquor in British Columbia From Prohibition to Privatization* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), 127.

to offer unique entertainment, East End cabarets like the Smilin' Buddha booked non-white dancers and musicians to offer patrons something “exotic” and “foreign.”<sup>10</sup>

Local lore suggests that the first band to play the Jir-era Smilin' Buddha was The Shades led by Tommy Chong, best known today as half of the comedy duo Cheech & Chong.<sup>11</sup> While this might be true, since The Shades had been performing around Vancouver since at least 1959, the Buddha's first *Vancouver Sun* advertisement of this era listed a bill featuring the “daring & exotic stripper from Los Angeles,” Scarlett, “song stylist and emcee,” Ronnie Small, and music by The Answers.<sup>12</sup> While the musicians the Smilin' Buddha booked to fulfill the city's licensing requirement appear to have been predominantly male, these musicians rarely received top-billing in the club's advertisements. Suggesting that these musicians were not the main draw at the club, beyond 1963 few musical groups are even named in the Smilin' Buddha's ads.<sup>13</sup> Instead, with a few exceptions, female dancers and singers headlined the club's advertisements.

Through the 1960s, the Smilin' Buddha booked a mix of local and out-of-town entertainers. While many of these acts performed under generic names that obscure their identities, those acts that do turn up in searches of trade publications and newspaper

---

<sup>10</sup> Becki Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>11</sup> McKellar, *Neon Eulogy*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 April 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Through 1963, the Smilin' Buddha's advertisement list musical groups The Answers, The Playboys, and the Fabulous 2 Tones, but beyond 1963, only the 4 Quests and the Kingsmen (though not the “Louie, Louie” Kingsmen, but a Vancouver group who more commonly went by the name the King's Men) are listed by name. The club's host was also often listed as the leader of a music “combo.” For example, long-time Buddha emcee, Ronnie Small, was occasionally booked as the Ronnie Small Combo

advertisements appear to have been well-traveled veterans of the nightclub circuit. For example, Katina LaDoll, part of a 1964 Smilin' Buddha "battle of the strippers" could be found performing in places like Detroit, Indianapolis and Butte, Montana from 1959 to 1961 before apparently becoming "the dancing doll of Seattle World's Fair," as the Buddha's advertisement billed her.<sup>14</sup> La Wanda, an exotic dancer and fire-eater billed as the "daringly different buxom bombshell," and "The Bronze Goddess of Fire," who had extended runs at the Smilin' Buddha between 1964 and 1966 remembered the venues on the nightclub circuit that included the Smilin' Buddha as the kind of places where "if you ain't home by 9 o'clock you can be declared legally dead."<sup>15</sup>

The touring musicians who performed at the Smilin' Buddha were similarly obscure. Singers like Joni Carrol, billed as "the queen of rock 'n' roll," who performed at the club in 1963 and 1966, and "the lovely songstress from Los A.," Ruby Rowe, who performed in 1968, each left a recorded output that consists of one single on little-known records labels.<sup>16</sup> Another singer, Anita Tucker, who performed at the Buddha in 1966 billed as "the voice of Sheba," was best known for her r&b single "Slow, Smooth and Easy," recorded for Capitol Records more than a decade earlier, while Gracie Dee, a

---

<sup>14</sup> Seattle's World's Fair was held in 1962. "Calla Shea's Advertisement," *The Montana Standard*, 9 May 1959; "Advertisement," *Detroit Free Press*, 12 June 1959; "Count Demon and His Jazz Demons Open Monday at George's Bar," *Indianapolis Recorder*, 13 May 1961; "Smilin' Buddha Advertisement," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 Mar 1964.

<sup>15</sup> LaWanda Page went on to become a successful television actor and comedian, starring in the 1970s comedy *Sanford and Son* and releasing several albums on Laff Records, the home of other notable comedians like Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, and George Carlin. Quoted in "LaWanda Page, 81, Actress and Comedienne, Is Dead," *New York Times*, 18 September 2002. "Smilin' Buddha Advertisement," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 August 1964; 18 March 1966.

<sup>16</sup> See "Smilin' Buddha Advertisements" *Vancouver Sun*, 1 November 1963; 18 March 1966; 20 December 1968.

Canadian country singer who played the Smilin' Buddha in 1965, released one album in the late-1960s produced by former Buddha emcee, Mike Harris.<sup>17</sup> Among the few out-of-town male musicians that received top-billing at the Smilin' Buddha, the most notable is likely blues singer and guitarist, Guitar Shorty, who had extended bookings at the club through 1965 and 1966.<sup>18</sup> While Guitar Shorty had just a few obscure recordings at the time he performed at the Buddha, he is perhaps best known today as Jimi Hendrix's brother-in-law and one of his main musical influences.<sup>19</sup>

Although striptease dancing was a staple of the Smilin' Buddha's entertainment through the 1960s, dancers at the club never fully disrobed because nudity was not permitted in cabarets. Instead, dancers performed what musician Gregg Simpson refers to as “shake and jiggle” routines.<sup>20</sup> For example, Miss Wiggles, a dancer billed as “the marvel in motion” who “dances on her head,” performed an upside down contortionist act, swinging and twisting body parts while remaining at least partially clothed.<sup>21</sup> While the Smilin' Buddha never appears to have been on the leading edge of erotic entertainment that pushed legal boundaries, the club followed the trail blazed by other

---

<sup>17</sup> Tucker recorded four singles for Capitol Records between 1955 and 1956. Perhaps in part because of their rarity, the singles by Carrol, Rowe, and Tucker are highly sought after by collectors of 1950s and 1960s soul, r&b, and girl groups. See “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 March 1965; 18 November 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Four years before playing at the Smilin' Buddha, Guitar Shorty performed in Vancouver at the New Delhi. See, “New Delhi Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 20 March 1961; “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 November 1965; 29 July 1966.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Russell and Chris Smith, *The Penguin Guide to Blues on CD* (London: Penguin, 2006), 231.

<sup>20</sup> Gregg Simpson Interview, 29 October 2014.

<sup>21</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 17 September 1965.

city nightclubs by marketing sexuality and performers who defied gender norms. Through the 1960s, the Smilin' Buddha regularly included “female impersonators” among the club's list of “exotics.” Next to long-time Smilin' Buddha hosts like Ronnie Small, Marty Gillian, and Teddy Felton, the most frequent performer at the club in the 1960s was likely Zsa Zsa, a female impersonator commonly billed simply as “the notorious.”<sup>22</sup> Zsa Zsa performed on numerous bills at the Buddha between 1963 and 1966, including a stint as the club's “host and emcee.”<sup>23</sup> Other female impersonators listed in the club's advertisements include Lily St. Clair, who performed in 1966, and Daiquiri St. John, billed as “the million dollar hoax,” who like Zsa Zsa, was a Smilin' Buddha regular between 1965 and 1969.<sup>24</sup> Notably, female impersonators do not appear in advertisements after 1970 when topless dancing and nudity became more common at the Smilin' Buddha.

By 1967 the Buddha was advertising erotic entertainment marketed to men, like Tina—the Body Beautiful and Her Nude Models.<sup>25</sup> While full nudity remained illegal in Vancouver nightclubs until 1972, the Smilin' Buddha, like many other Vancouver nightclubs, found ways to circumvent these regulations. One method pioneered by club manager Gary Taylor was referred to as the “businessmen's lunch” which involved a buffet set up in front of a female model wearing a sheer top who remained stationary on a divan and perhaps chatted with the men who filed by. Because the models remained

---

<sup>22</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 6 November 1964.

<sup>23</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 August 1963; 18 November 1966.

<sup>24</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 September 1965; 22 July 1966; 7 March 1969.

<sup>25</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 June 1967.

stationary and wore a top, however revealing, the manager could sidestep regulations on nude entertainment since the model was not performing in any legally recognized way. Providing an example of the way that club managers used female bodies to attract male customers to their establishments, Taylor states that he used to get “three, four hundred people” for his lunches. “That’s as simple as it was . . . in the old days,” he claims, “show a tit, BOOM, people come out.”<sup>26</sup> Following in this Vancouver nightclub industry trend that helped define many nightclubs as masculine spaces, by 1968 the Smillin' Buddha began marketing nudity more explicitly by advertising bills featuring topless go-go dancers, though it is likely that at this point these topless dancers still wore pasties to cover their nipples.

Simpson and Taylor have different perceptions of the dancers at the club in the 1960s. Where Simpson describes the dancers as “lovely,” Taylor states that the club’s dancers were “low and tough.” Both musicians, however, agree that the Buddha was a “dive” patronized by a lower-class crowd. Echoing the idea that the Smilin' Buddha offered patrons an exotic experience, Taylor describes the atmosphere of the club as “deep and dark in the way that you’d expect walking into a fantasy land.” Because the Buddha “was in *that* part of town,” referring to its East End, skid road location, Taylor states that the “clientele was a bit sleazy.”<sup>27</sup> Simpson similarly describes the crowd at the Smilin' Buddha as “rounders:” low-class men who had “been around and done everything.” Although he states that the Buddha was “pretty sleazy to say the least,”

---

<sup>26</sup> Gary Taylor Interview, 15 November 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Taylor Interview, 15 November 2014

Simpson also states that the neighbourhood surrounding it was “cooler” than it is today because it was “funky and . . . dirty and nobody cared.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite being in “economic and aesthetic” decline through the 1960s, as one *Vancouver Sun* editorial put it, the Downtown East skid road was a central concern for civic and business interests. As part of the city's plan to make the Downtown East economically viable, a Mayor's Commission on Cabarets was formed in 1965 to address the problem of illegal liquor consumption. The Commission recommended liberalized liquor licensing policies as a way to increase tourism and maximize the economic return in the Downtown East. The Commission's plan to license all eligible cabarets was endorsed by Police Commissioner Lorne Ryan who argued that despite “the expenditure of many thousands of dollars and many hours of time by the Police Department,” they had not eliminated “the illegal consumption of alcohol.”<sup>29</sup> Recognizing cabaret owners' dilemma that a liquor license could result in fewer patrons due to the high cost of liquor mandated by the LCB and the prevalence of unlicensed speakeasies and banquet halls where patrons could bring their own liquor or buy it cheaper, Ryan recommended that the LCB “licence cabarets in such a way that the price of liquor by the glass will be lowered to approach the cost to patrons where they now bring their own bottle 'illegally.’”<sup>30</sup> While the Mayor's Commission final report suggested that all cabarets should receive a liquor license if they met newly created requirements, the Commission did not recommend lower liquor prices. Instead, the report called for cabarets to meet distinctly middle-class

---

<sup>28</sup> Gregg Simpson Interview, 29 October 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Lorne E. Ryan to Mayor W.G. Rathie, “Re: Cabarets – Liquor Licenses,” 10 February 1965, vca, 072-E-5, folder 8.

<sup>30</sup> Lorne E. Ryan to Mayor W.G. Rathie, “Re: Cabarets – Liquor Licenses,” 10 February 1965.

standards of respectability by requiring “table cloths, chinaware, table service, meals, menus, a dance floor, paid entertainment, and a \$1 minimum cover charge.” This effort to licence cabarets, according to Attorney-General Bonner, would “encourage people to get into the night club business properly or get out of it,” and would be both “good for tourism and . . . welcomed by residents.”<sup>31</sup>

Between 1966 and 1968, several East End cabarets received liquor licenses, including the Smilin' Buddha in 1967. Although those newly licensed clubs may have avoided some police scrutiny, as Police Commissioner Ryan predicted, many also saw a drop in business. *Province* journalist Lorne Parton noted that “where once . . . happy revellers were jammed against the walls [in the unlicensed cabarets] silent chairs stare reproachfully at the wholly legitimate and legal—and almost vacant—place.” Parton continues, “meanwhile down the street . . . yet another new club has opened its doors. It has no license, it has no history, but somehow the jungle telegraph passes the word . . . another bottle club.”<sup>32</sup> Police Chief R.M. Booth confirmed this problem, noting that cabarets recently granted liquor licenses “are experiencing a drop in patronage while . . . other illegal operations continue to flourish.” Through January and February 1967, Booth reported that 107 police visits at twenty-three establishments led to 229 bottle seizures and twenty charges.<sup>33</sup> Continuing with Parton's jungle metaphor, Booth

---

<sup>31</sup> “New Liquor Regulations to Curb Bottle Clubs,” *The Province*, 3 December 1966.

<sup>32</sup> Lorne Parton, “A Smashing Thought . . .,” *The Province*, 18 February 1966.

<sup>33</sup> Bud Elsie, “McGugan Upsets Council,” *The Province*, 15 March 1967.

complained that “we are continuing to send out safaris to keep these places under control, but we aren't making any progress.”

The decline in business at cabarets in the late-1960s was not just the result of new liquor licenses that increased costs for patrons, however. Vancouver deejay, Red Robinson suggests that by this time, nightclubs had largely fallen out of vogue.<sup>34</sup> Where patrons once travelled to nightclubs to hear dance bands play the top hits, by the late 1960s televisions were more affordable, allowing viewers to see world class entertainers for free from the comfort of their homes. At the same time, numerous articles on the “skid road” and “slum” problems in the area surrounding the Smilin' Buddha helped create the perception that the neighbourhood was a breeding ground for hoodlums, drunks, and addicts and specifically unsafe or unsuited for women.<sup>35</sup> The idea that many East End cabarets were specifically masculine spaces was even unconsciously endorsed by the British Columbia Cabaret Owners' Association (BCCOA). In an appeal against the apparent class bias in the Cabaret Review Board's regulations on decor, a BCCOA lawyer wrote that

it would be illogical . . . to expect a Cabaret that caters primarily to the working man and encourages him to enter the Cabaret in casual clothes or even working clothes to bring in furniture, rugs and general decor that would likely appeal only to a more affluent type of patron who would be unlikely to frequent that Cabaret because of its location and the type of patron it attracts.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> “Living History Series – Chapter 3 – Hendrix at the Buddha??,” YouTube video, 7:45, “Hastings Crossing TV,” 23 September 2015.

<sup>35</sup> See note 4, page 42; Barry Band, “At this Skid Road Cafe: Heroin the House Specialty,” *Vancouver Sun*, 13 December 1968.

<sup>36</sup> John Drysdale to Mayor and Cabaret Review Board, “Re: Cabaret Review Board,” 5 October 1967, vca, 072-E-5, folder 8.

It is perhaps the combination of the Downtown East's skid road reputation, the club's new liquor license, and dwindling demand for live dance bands that pushed the Smilin' Buddha to market female nudity more aggressively beginning in 1967. If the club's location attracted fewer females than males, and fewer couples went out together to dance and listen to live music at nightclubs, then the club needed to adjust its entertainment format. Following in the footsteps of cabarets like New Delhi that promoted “stripperamas,” and the Shanghai Junk, which offered “continuous burlesque,” the Smilin' Buddha began promoting full bills consisting of nude models, topless go-go dancers and marketing their shows as “the sexiest in the west,” full of “Girls! Girls Girls!” or suggestively stating that it is “no wonder the Buddha's Smilin.”<sup>37</sup>

There is some indication that the Smilin' Buddha tried to appeal to a new youthful demographic that began to appear more frequently in the Downtown East in the mid to late-1960s. Through this period, articles in the *Vancouver Sun* lamented that “youngsters from more respectable areas of the city [were] being pulled into Skid Road.” As the head of the Central City Mission put it in a 1964 *Sun* article, the youth “come down [to the Skid Road area] for kicks but it's just not possible for them to stay in this area and not get into trouble.” A Salvation Army officer similarly noted that while “teen-agers don't become alcoholics as soon as they reach Skid Road, . . . they will eventually if they come down often enough.”<sup>38</sup> By 1968, articles fretted that skid road was “being invaded by

---

<sup>37</sup> Shanghai Junk Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 December 1967; “New Delhi Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 2 August 1968; “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 June 1967; 2 August 1968; 22 May 1969; 17 October 1969; 19 December 1969.

<sup>38</sup> “Youths on Skid Road Kicks Heading Toward Alcoholism,” *Vancouver Sun*, 18 November 1964.

beatniks.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps in an attempt to appeal to this younger demographic, the Smilin' Buddha remodelled the club's decor in 1967 to include what *Vancouver Magazine* journalist, Les Wiseman described as “barebreasted East Indian ladies that assault the eyes with blacklit color,” and began to advertise in the University of British Columbia's *Ubyyssey* newspaper as part of a discount “West Coast Night Clubbers Club.”<sup>40</sup>

The youth who used and inhabited the East End were not just a concern for the managers and directors of the neighbourhood's soup kitchens and religious missions: local business and property owners also often viewed these youth—often referred to as 'hippies'—with concern.<sup>41</sup> While Vancouver's main hippie neighbourhood in the 1960s was in the West End's Kitsilano neighbourhood, in part due to pressure from the police and the Kitsilano Residents' Association (KRA), many hippies began to take up residence in the Downtown East. This development sparked uneven reactions from business and property owners who were fighting to prevent the city from expropriating much of the Downtown East for its highway and waterfront revitalization plan. For some, like the group of businessmen who formed the Improvement of Downtown East Society

---

<sup>39</sup> Jim Stott, “Honest Bum's Last Bastion Being Invaded by Beatniks,” *Vancouver Sun*, 24 December 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Les Wiseman, “Night of the Living Music,” *Vancouver Magazine*, October 1979; “West Coast Night Clubbers Club Advertisement,” *Ubyyssey* vol. 51, no. 4, 19 September 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Civic and provincial officials also viewed the hippies as a problem. British Columbia premier W.A.C. Bennett claimed that “cocktail-hippie society” was “tearing down Canada's moral fibre, and Vancouver Mayor Tom Campbell famously threatened to use the suspension of civil liberties during Pierre Trudeau's invocation of the War Measures Act in 1970 to run hippies out of the city. See “Cocktail-Hippie Society! Our Downfall, Says Bennett,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 December 1967; Gerry Deagle, “Welfare Officials Alarmed: Young Drifters Increase,” *Vancouver Sun*, 27 December 1967; “Homes Talks to a Group That is Saving City's Soul,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 June 1971.

(IDEAS), the hippies represented an additional drug and crime-ridden blight on the neighbourhood, while others viewed the hippies as a hip new market that could help increase rents and property values in the neighbourhood.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps as a way to assert control over the neighbourhood and defend their business interests, IDEAS portrayed themselves as the neighbourhood's "vital centre of commerce—a community of merchants, wholesalers, manufacturers and other businessmen who pay \$1.25 million in taxes to city hall each year" in the midst of the "dim, sad land of alcoholism, vice and misery" that was skid road.<sup>43</sup> IDEAS spokesperson David Lesser blamed politicians for inaction that led to the conditions in the area, and advocated for the city to "approach the Skid Road problem from a businessman's point of view." Lesser's goal was to transform skid road "into a tourist attraction that will be visited with interest rather than with scorn and dismay."<sup>44</sup> For Lesser, this transformation was best directed by IDEAS members. The city's role would be to disperse those individuals that IDEAS felt were responsible for blight. According to Lesser, this could be achieved by eliminating public spaces where undesirable individuals congregated. To prove that IDEAS had the best interests of the neighbourhood in mind, in contrast to local politicians, in 1968 Lesser bragged that IDEAS members had successfully cleared "hippies from rooms and suites in the area."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> "Skid Roaders Priced Out of Flop Houses: No Room at the Inn As Gastown Goes Mod," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 August 1970.

<sup>43</sup> Tony Eberts, "Ideas . . . For a Better City," *Vancouver Sun*, 20 July 1968.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Knox, "IDEAS Man Slams Politics For Stalling on Skid Road," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 August 1968.

<sup>45</sup> Knox, "IDEAS Man Slams Politics."

However, in contrast to Lesser's position on hippies in the waterfront area, Larry Killam, one of the neighbourhood's largest developers and leaders of the opposition to the city's waterfront redevelopment project, targeted "the younger, more 'mod' tenant." Killam suggested these "mod" tenants would be "a good source of colour" for the neighbourhood," in comparison to "the old alcoholic or the old-age pensioner" that previously inhabited the area's hotels and apartments.<sup>46</sup>

In 1969, IDEAS collaborated with City Council and a number of other East End business groups to produce a report to redesign the Downtown East. Among other things, this report aimed to improve shopping conditions in the neighbourhood "by minimizing the physical contact between the shopper and the destitute," and preventing "undesirable elements" from congregating in Pigeon Park at Hastings and Carrall.<sup>47</sup> The plan also called for the "removal of all signs and other protrusions overhanging the sidewalks."<sup>48</sup> This connected with a larger campaign started by the Vancouver Arts Council to remove the "visual pollution" of large neon signs from several neighbourhoods in Vancouver, but also had the aim of removing sidewalk awnings that provided shelter for homeless individuals.<sup>49</sup> From 1969 to 1973, redevelopment plans carried out by groups like IDEAS

---

<sup>46</sup> "Skid Roaders Priced Out of Flop Houses: No Room at the Inn As Gastown Goes Mod," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 August 1970.

<sup>47</sup> "Facelift Planned For Hastings: They Say She'll Be A Proper Beauty," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 July 1969.

<sup>48</sup> This plan was not universally supported by East End merchants, many of whom continued to ask for the city to chase the "derelicts" out of the area. "Facelift Planned For Hastings: They Say She'll Be A Proper Beauty."

<sup>49</sup> Katherine Hill, "Our Neon Nightmare: The Role of the Civic Arts Community in Dismantling Vancouver's Neon Sign Jungle, 1957-1974," in *British Columbia History* 46, no.3 (2013), 5-14.

combined with a crackdown on skid road hotels and bars to push many older and poorer residents out of the DTES.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike Kitsilano, the Downtown East did not have an entrenched residents' association in the 1960s. It was not until 1970 that the Downtown Tenants Association, and later, the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) formed to fight evictions by developers, fight for rent controls to protect long-term hotel residents, and to fight nightclubs and bars over noise issues. Through the first half of the 1970s, DERA president Bruce Eriksen campaigned to redefine Vancouver's "skid road" district as the Downtown Eastside (DTES)—a residential neighbourhood inhabited by long-term residents who deserved the same privileges and protections as residents of other neighbourhoods. The act of redefining the DTES as a residential community was meant to protect residents the neighbourhood's numerous hotels and lodging houses. Under the city's Landlord and Tenant Act, hotel and lodging houses were considered "transient" housing, leaving long-term residents of these accommodations exempt from protections against evictions or rent increases.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Articles in 1973 and 1974 stated that crackdowns on skid road hotels had closed 400 and 800 rooms, respectively. Many of the residents displaced moved into rooms along Granville Street. However, in 1974 a crackdown on Granville Street hotels pushed many of these residents back to the Downtown East. For articles on the subject, see Keith Bradbury, "Small But Good Things For People on Skid Road: What's the CYC Done For You Lately," *Vancouver Sun*, 23 October 1969; "In Social Work: Liaison Urged For Skid Road," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 July 1970; "Brief Urges Rent Controls: 'Older People Evicted From Gastown,'" *Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1970; Michael Finlay, "Sleazy Elements Rooted in Quality Area: Worried Davie Street Looks For Cure," *Vancouver Sun*, 10 October 1972; "Area Depletion to be Halted," *Vancouver Sun*, 4 December 1973; Jack Wasserman, "The Street 'N Narrow," *Vancouver Sun*, 21 March 1974; "Clean-up Reversed," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1974.

<sup>51</sup> Jean Swanson and Libby Davies, "Thousands Excluded From Protection of Landlord and Tenant Act," *DERA Newspaper*, no. 11 (June 1975).

Through the mid-1970s, Eriksen and DERA campaigned against East End liquor establishments which, they believed, preyed on local residents while attracting trouble-makers from across the Lower Mainland. It was these non-residents that Eriksen blamed for much of the crime in the area. To combat crime and alcohol related problems in the neighbourhood, DERA fought for restrictions on hard liquor sales, low-alcohol beer in DTES parlours, and regulations on nudity in bars and cabarets.<sup>52</sup> Although Eriksen was not successful in fully banning hard liquor or nude dancing, and his proposal for 2% beer was not implemented, many of his suggestions were adopted in part by City Council and the City of Vancouver's Neighbourhood Improvement Project, including a proposal to reject any new beer parlour or liquor outlets in the DTES.<sup>53</sup>

Eriksen's campaign against beer parlours and nightclubs was, in part, a reaction to the city and province's continued liberalization of liquor and entertainment policy through the 1970s. Despite receiving the right to serve draft beer in 1970, most of the changes to the LCB's regulations adversely affected the city's cabarets. Perhaps as a way to appease the British Columbia Hotel Association (BCHA), who had previously monopolized draft beer sales, the LCB introduced new regulations for cabarets which included a ban on topless waitresses, the abolishment of happy hour drink specials and free passes, and required a three-piece orchestra in attendance. The reaffirmation and clarification of this rule requiring a minimum three-piece band was important because it prevented cabarets from hiring solo folk singers who had become increasingly popular entertainment choice in Vancouver. This requirement may have been an attempt to regulate clubs appealing to

---

<sup>52</sup> "DERA Wins Ban on Hard Liquor," *DERA Newspaper* no. 30 (January 1977).

<sup>53</sup> Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Improvement Project, 1976, vca 101-D-1, folder 9.

the city's growing “hippie” population out of business. Another regulation initially proposed, but not ultimately implemented, stated that two musicians and a singer did not qualify as a three-piece band. Jack Wasserman joked that this rule “threatened to create the largest number of tambourine players in history,” and argued that the new regulations on cabarets were “so blatantly favourable to the hotels that [they] might have been written in the BC Hotels Association office.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1971, further changes to liquor policy damaged the cabaret nightclub trade when the LCB decided to allow hotel beer parlours to remain open until 1 a.m. Prior to this change, nightclubs received much of their business for their second show which usually began after the beer parlours' 11:30 p.m. closing time. This change, according to Wasserman, “effectively killed the old style nightclub trade,” as customers were no longer “forced into the nightclubs if they wished to continue [their] parties.”<sup>55</sup> Although cabarets may have benefitted from 1972 ruling that fully deregulated nudity in nightclubs, by 1974 cabarets lost much of their competitive advantage when beer parlours were granted the right serve wine and offer live entertainment.<sup>56</sup> Reversing the assumptions that kept beer parlours gender segregated until the early 1960s, the province hoped that by allowing wine sales and entertainment, women would be more likely to patronize the beer parlours and help “curb [the] excesses of male camaraderie.”<sup>57</sup> By

---

<sup>54</sup> Jack Wasserman, “BC Cabarets Trying to Tap LCB For Draft Beer Sales,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 September 1970.

<sup>55</sup> “Spotlight,” *The Province*, 3 July 1971; Jack Wasserman, “Town Talkie,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1971; “Spotlight,” *The Province*, 22 October 1971.

<sup>56</sup> Ross, *Burlesque West*, 71; Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 150.

<sup>57</sup> Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 152.

1976, there was little left to distinguish cabarets from beer parlours when, against DERA's wishes, the latter was granted to right to sell hard liquor.<sup>58</sup>

For musicians, the 1974 decision to allow entertainment in beer parlours created many new job opportunities. However, these jobs were largely eliminated in 1976 when dancers were allowed to perform to recorded music. During the period from the early 1970s to 1975, musician John Doheny recalls that “all kinds of players were making a (reasonably) decent living . . . The standard gig was 6 nights a week, Monday through Saturday and paid anywhere from \$75 to \$125 a week [at a time] when draft beer was 25 cents a glass and my rent was \$40 a month.”<sup>59</sup> For cabaret owners, however, these changes meant both increased competition for patrons and increased cost for entertainers as beer parlours cut into their business. While dancers remained in high demand through the 1970s, Doheny notes that musicians' gigs in parlours and cabarets “disappeared almost literally overnight” when the LCB removed the requirement for liquor establishments to employ a three-piece band, paving the way for dancers and managers to use cheaper recorded music.<sup>60</sup> Where in the 1950s and early-1960s, recording and playback technology could not capture the volume and energy of live bands, by 1976 this was no longer true.<sup>61</sup> The small orchestra performing the day's popular songs had become

---

<sup>58</sup> Campbell states that the decision to allow hard liquor in beer parlours was an attempt to “take the edge off the bargaining power of brewery unions” who were on strike at the time. *Demon Rum or Easy Money*, 157.

<sup>59</sup> John Doheny, “Strip Joints,” *Vancouver Jazz Forum*, [Online Forum Comment], <http://vancouverjazz.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2978>.

<sup>60</sup> John Doheny, “Strip Joints,” *Vancouver Jazz Forum*, [Online Forum Comment], <http://vancouverjazz.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2978>.

<sup>61</sup> Warren Gill, “Region, Agency, and Popular Music: The Northwest Sound 1958-1966,” *Canadian Geographer* 37 no. 2 (June, 1993), 124.

an anachronism maintained only by outdated liquor licensing regulations. These regulations were meant to prevent clubs from exclusively offering nude entertainment or appealing to the young “hippie” demographic while adding an additional financial burden for East End “skid row” clubs.

Despite changes to liquor regulations that favoured the beer parlours, Doheny recalls that through the early to mid-1970s, business at the Smilin' Buddha picked up after the beer parlours closed at 1 a.m. when “absolutely ridiculous amounts of people crush[ed] in there for an hour of 'power drinking.’” He adds, “it was a real hellhole and there were a lot of fights.” Suggesting that, by this time, the entertainment at the club was not a priority for Jir or potential patrons, Doheny notes that the \$75 per week pay at the Smilin' Buddha did not increase from the time he played his first gig at the club in 1971 to 1976 when the cabaret gigs disappeared. In comparison, Doheny states that the average pay at other clubs was around \$100.<sup>62</sup> The Smilin' Buddha's struggles were noted in a 1972 *Vancouver Life* article which stated that there were just fourteen people present for the first show at the club during a weeknight visit. The article did suggest, however, that business picked up for Friday and Saturday shows when the club could “get rough.”<sup>63</sup>

Where through the 1950s and early-1960s, the Smilin' Buddha appealed to a heterosocial audience, by 1970 the club's entertainment was geared more specifically towards a male audience. From 1970 to 1972, when the Buddha stopped advertising in

---

<sup>62</sup> John Doheny, “Strip Joints,” *Vancouver Jazz Forum*, [Online Forum Comment], <http://vancouverjazz.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2978>.

<sup>63</sup> Maxwell Smith, “Nite-Life,” *Vancouver Life*, 17 August 1972.

the *Vancouver Sun*, female performers appear almost exclusively as exotic dancers with an emphasis on increasing levels of nudity. During this period, the Buddha's bills include acts like the “sensational topless” Tiny Bubbles, the “sexsational” Baby Jane, who Doheny remembers as an “ex-biker chick” with the ability to twirl her breasts in opposite directions, alongside a number of other acts with generic names like Miss Turner, Miss Lynn, and Miss Gail.<sup>64</sup> With nudity fully deregulated in 1972, the Smilin' Buddha's advertisements began to feature a list of exotics alongside a photograph of the headliner covered only by a carefully placed “censored” bar.<sup>65</sup> In his 1972 Master's thesis titled “Clientele Variations and Urban Nightclub Locations,” Warren Gill further supports the idea that the Smilin' Buddha was primarily a masculine space, noting that the club catered to an older “straight” male clientele. Like other clubs in the area that Gill describes as “skid row,” Gill found that few women patronized the Smilin' Buddha, with just eight females noted at the club over two nights of observation.<sup>66</sup> Suggesting that the same space meant different things based on a person's gender, for male patrons Gill categorized the Smilin' Buddha as a “pop” club, based on the “tame and commercial” rock music offered alongside striptease dancers, while for female patrons, Gill placed the club in a “skid row” category based on its geographic location.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 June 1970; 4 September 1970; 31 December 1971; John Doheny, *Vancouver Jazz Forum*, [Online Forum Comment], <http://vancouverjazz.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2978>.

<sup>65</sup> “Smilin' Buddha Advertisement,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 September 1972.

<sup>66</sup> “Straight” refers to office job style attire as compared to “casual” (jeans) or “freak” (weird, unusual). Warren George Gill, “Clientele Variations and Urban Nightclub Locations: A Case Study of Vancouver,” MA Thesis, 1972, 48.

<sup>67</sup> Because the Smilin' Buddha was placed in a category with several other clubs for male clientele it is not possible to calculate how many male patrons were at the club over the two nights. For

Although liberalized liquor laws meant that the Smilin' Buddha could serve both beer and liquor, and legally host all types of entertainment from music to nude dancers, it did not mean that the club avoided police interventions through the 1970s. In part due to requests from Eriksen and DERA, the Vancouver Police Department increased patrols of DTES clubs and beer parlours through the mid-1970s. A 1977 police report described the Smilin' Buddha as “the worst of all cabarets in the Downtown Eastside for drunkenness and other infractions.”<sup>68</sup> As a result, Lachman Jir was summoned to appear before City Council “to show cause why his licenses should not be revoked.” This action was supported by Eriksen, who called for City Council to close the Buddha and for police constables to be given authority to impose twenty-four hour business closures where liquor infractions occur.<sup>69</sup> A decision in the show cause hearing was continually delayed until 1978 when Staff Sgt. G. MacDonald of the Vice Squad reported to City Council that over four nights of visits to the Smilin' Buddha, there was only one night when four of the eight patrons on the premises “were obviously intoxicated.”<sup>70</sup> Suggesting that the club had fallen on hard times, City Council agreed to approve the Smilin' Buddha's licenses in 1978 after the police department reported that there had been few incidents of fights or drunks at the club over the preceding months since “the current beer strike has curtailed the amount of business being conducted at this location.”<sup>71</sup>

---

female clientele, the Smilin' Buddha is the only club within the “Skid Row 2” category, which is distinguished from “Skid Row 1” by the older average age and “straight” style of the Buddha's clientele. Gill, “Clientele Variations,” 102, 114.

<sup>68</sup> City Council Minutes, 8 November 1977, 507.

<sup>69</sup> City Council Minutes, 8 November 1977, 507.

<sup>70</sup> City Council Minutes, 17 January 1978, 75.

<sup>71</sup> City Council Minutes, 15 August 1978, 733.

Despite attempts by the DERA to eliminate East End liquor establishments, and by the city, LCB, and business groups to transform the DTES into a respectable and economically viable space during the 1960s and 1970s, the history of the Smilin' Buddha during this period shows that new regulations and revitalization plans did little to alter the neighbourhood's "skid road" reputation. While the moral reasoning and racist policies that prevented the Buddha from receiving a liquor license until 1967 gave way to new liberalized liquor regulations in the late-1960s and 1970s, these new regulations rarely benefitted the Smilin' Buddha. Instead, the regulations simply recast older moral arguments about respectability in economic terms. Rather than denying the club a liquor license based on ideas about Jir's race, the city and LCB justified regulations on the Smilin' Buddha and other Downtown East clubs based on a larger goal of attracting middle-class shoppers and patrons into the neighbourhood. Perhaps by design, many regulations, like those on decor, entertainment, cover charge, and liquor prices damaged the Smilin' Buddha's business. As Attorney-General Bonner put it, the regulations were meant to "encourage people to get into the night club business properly or get out of it," and a club that appealed to lower-class patrons presumably was not one that was "proper."<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to the Smilin' Buddha of the 1950s, which aimed for a respectable, heterosocial middle-class clientele, and contrary to the goals of civic and business interests, by 1970, the club was a primarily homosocial, working-class environment where women appeared most commonly as nude, exotic dancers. While the club was a

---

<sup>72</sup> "New Liquor Regulations to Curb Bottle Clubs," *The Province*, 3 December 1966.

place where young musicians could develop their skills while earning a living, there is little indication that the club was a site of musical innovation. By the early-1970s, changes in recording and amplification technology meant that the sessional jobs in cabarets likely only existed thanks to the LCB's liquor licensing regulations. Once dancers could legally perform to recorded music, these jobs were virtually eliminated.

## On Skid Row: Punk at the Smilin' Buddha, 1979-1984

On 24 March 1979, the K-Tels became the first Vancouver punk band to play the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret. While the Smilin' Buddha quickly became the epicentre of Vancouver's young punk scene, Lachman Jir was apparently not too receptive to the K-Tels inaugural performance. According to Chris Arnett of the Shades, Jir cut the K-Tels performance short, just as he had supposedly done years prior with Jimi Hendrix.<sup>1</sup> In *I, Shithead*, DOA frontman Joe Keithley writes that while attending the second night of punk at the club, the band Victorian Pork “started ridiculing the tiny railing that circled the stage.” After one of the band members “ripped off a piece [of the railing],” Keithley says, “several of us in the audience ran up to help him finish the job [and] the Buddha's owners, Nancy and Lachman Jir didn't seem to mind.”<sup>2</sup> By the end of the second weekend of punk at the Buddha, K-Tels singer Art Bergmann says, “the place [was] crowded with the bands and owners eagerly squeezing over 200 people in a room meant for less than 100.”<sup>3</sup> From March 1979 to mid-1983, the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret provided a home for Vancouver's punk music scene.

---

<sup>1</sup> It is unclear why Jir kicked the K-Tels out of the club. While, like Hendrix, the band's volume may have been an issue, in an interview with the K-Tels published just days after their first show at the Smilin' Buddha, Art Bergmann perhaps suggests another reason, stating that there weren't many people at their show despite the fact that it was “only a buck to get in.” “Shades: Made in the City,” *Public Enemy* 6, May 1979, 27; “K-Tels Interview,” *Snot Rag* 16, 29 March 1979, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Keithley, *I, Shithead: A Life in Punk* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Sam Sutherland, *Perfect Youth: The Birth of Canadian Punk* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2012), 62.

The punk era is a brief but important part of the Smilin' Buddha story. This period represents the first time that musicians claimed the club as both a physical and symbolic space and is primarily remembered today as the home of Vancouver's first-wave punk scene. While punk scene participants initially embraced the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret as one of the few venues that would book their bands, it soon came to represent the scene symbolically because of its identity as a sleazy and dangerous dive bar in the heart of the East End's "skid row." The club and neighbourhood lent a sense of toughness and legitimacy to the young suburbanites who presented themselves as an alternative to the mainstream bourgeois culture represented by the West End's upscale discos and nightclubs that initially ignored the punk movement. This chapter argues that the punk scene's claim to the Smilin' Buddha was reinforced by police interventions at the club that brought both the club and the young punk scene increased media attention and connected the punk scene with a longer history of moral regulation in Vancouver's East End. While punk bands played at other clubs around the city, performing at the Smilin' Buddha quickly became a requirement for inclusion within the punk scene as scene participants sought to differentiate punk from the city's more popular disco and top 40 rock music scenes. Unlike the largely homosocial clientele at the Smilin' Buddha during the early-1970s, women played an important role in the Smilin' Buddha's punk era, both as musicians and audience members; nevertheless, as several female scene participants attest, sexism was a common part of the Smilin' Buddha punk scene.

By the time punk emerged in Vancouver in the late-1970s, the city's cultural and political landscape had shifted. Revue-style cabaret entertainment had largely disappeared, in part due to changing liquor regulations that granted hotels the right to

host live entertainment and dancers to perform to recorded music. While the hotels controlled the striptease trade, improved amplification and recording technologies meant that recorded music could be played at the same volume and intensity as live music. In this context, discos playing pre-recorded dance music dominated the city's entertainment scene, and the few clubs that maintained a rock format were controlled by a few large promoters who maintained restrictive booking policies.<sup>4</sup> This meant that a new generation of rock musicians were left with few places to perform in Vancouver. This was also a period marked by high unemployment, social conservatism, and the end of what Christopher Dummitt refers to a modernism's "culture of control," when modernizers began to question their belief in "the inherent value of progress and the general means of achieving it [through] efficiency and planning."<sup>5</sup> During this period, the City of Vancouver abandoned centrally planned revitalization schemes in the DTES like Project 200 which was aimed at eliminating urban blight through massive redevelopment, and focused on public/private sector partnerships.<sup>6</sup> These partnerships would "encourage the well-educated middle class to return to the central city" by encouraging entrepreneurs to "creat[e] a profit" while maintaining control over their properties and businesses.<sup>7</sup> Through these partnerships, the city aimed to improve the built environment of the DTES

---

<sup>4</sup> Ellie O'Day, "Music Editorial," *Vancouver Free Press*, 23-30 May 1980; Tom Harrison Interview, 16 January 2014; David Matychuk Interview, 6 February 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Out of Work," *Georgia Straight*, 7-14 April 1978; Donald Gutstein, "Vancouver," in *City Politics in Canada*, eds., Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 189-221; Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 3-14.

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation, "To Build A Better City – a 1964 City Of Vancouver/CMHC Film," YouTube video ,14:20, Posted by "BC History," 25 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY5I8h1IJjs>.

<sup>7</sup> City of Vancouver, Council Meeting Minutes, 23 November 1979.

while removing the homeless and lower-income individuals who were thought to cause blight. Thus, the city viewed problems in the DTES in primarily economic terms: by facilitating private profit, the city could encourage a higher class of people to live and work in the DTES.

From the mid to late 1970s, punk was the “New Wave” of rock and roll.<sup>8</sup> Music critic Simon Reynolds describes punk as “an attempt to overthrow rock's status quo [by] reject[ing] all those compound genres (jazz rock, country rock, folk rock, classical rock, etc) that proliferated in the early seventies.” For Reynolds, as for many cultural critics, sociologists, and historians, punk music was an attempt to return to a purer form of rock and roll.<sup>9</sup> Music historian and journalist Sam Sutherland describes punk as a “decidedly urban mutation of '50s rock and roll;” sociologist Dick Hebdige calls punk a “somewhat unstable” combination of glitter-rock (David Bowie), American proto-punk (the Ramones, Heartbreakers, Iggy Pop, Richard Hell), London pub-rock (the 101-ers, the Gorillas), mod, northern soul, and reggae; and legendary music critic Lester Bangs describes punk as the “ten million little groups all over the world who came storming in, mashing up residents with their guitars and yammering discontented non sequiturs about

---

<sup>8</sup> For examples of punk discussed as the “New Wave,” see Lester Bangs, “Richard Hell: Death Means Never Having to Say You're Incomplete (1978),” and “The White Noise Supremacists (1979),” in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, ed. Greil Marcus (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 260-268, 272-281; Tom Harrison, “Blood Sweat and Razor Blades,” *Georgia Straight*, 4-11 August 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 3.

how bored and fed up they were everything and [who] embodied the who-gives-a-damn-let's-just-slam-it-at-'em spirit of great rock 'n' roll.<sup>10</sup>

While Vancouver's punk scene participants viewed themselves as a rebellious alternative to mainstream culture, there was no clearly articulated idea about what punk meant. Historian Eryk Martin has shown that Vancouver anarchists engaged with punk during the late-1970s and early-1980s because they saw the movement as “politically congruent with [their] ideas of revolutionary struggle.” These anarchists believed that punk could help bridge different generations of culture and politics and blur the lines between politics and play by channeling the punk scene's energy and rebellion towards political causes and connecting the punk scene with larger political networks.<sup>11</sup>

Anarchists David Spaner and Ken Lester managed two of the city's most popular punk bands, DOA and the Subhumans, however even within these groups members were ambivalent about the connection between punk and politics. For instance, in a *Public Enemy* interview, Subhumans members Dimwit and Gerry Useless suggested the punk movement did not have any direct goals except a “return to simpl[e] . . . danceable, accessible music . . . and to get away from the bullshit like dry ice and fire and all this shit” associated with stadium rock bands.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Nick Jones suggested that punk was “just mindless fun” and that he didn't “think any of of the Vancouver bands are

---

<sup>10</sup> Sam Sutherland, *Perfect Youth*, 14; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: New Accents, 1979), 25; Lester Bangs, “The Clash (1977),” in *Psychotic Reactions*, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Eryk Martin, “The Blurred Boundaries of Anarchism and Punk in Vancouver, 1970-1983,” *Labour/Le Travail* 75 no.1 (2015), 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> David Spaner, “Subhumans,” *Public Enemy* 7, Summer 1979: 8-9.

motivated by politics.”<sup>13</sup> Within the larger punk scene, participants appear to have spent more time discussing the merits of different forms of popular music than discussing political issues. For example, a *Public Enemy* editorial suggested that punk was a reaction to the state of commercial music which had “become bloated with the redundant muzak of industry-oriented monoliths like Boston, Billy Joel, and the Bee Gee's [sic].”<sup>14</sup> In this way, the punk scene was more consistent in their opposition to stadium rock and disco music, deemed inaccessible and inauthentic, than they were to any specific political message or activism.

Although punk musicians played at many other venues throughout the city during the late-1970s and early-1980s, the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret came to represent the punk scene symbolically.<sup>15</sup> This was, in part, the result of continued police intervention at the club that resulted in a highly publicized raid that led to numerous arrests and increased media coverage of the punk scene. Unlike during the Smilin' Buddha's previous eras, the musicians who performed at the club during its punk era embraced the seedy reputation of both the club and the neighbourhood. Rather than simply coming to the Smilin' Buddha to view the exotic 'other' and escape bourgeois life, like previous eras of Smilin' Buddha patrons, the punk scene presented themselves *as* the exotic other and a rejection

---

<sup>13</sup> Grant McDonagh and Don Betts, “Sticks' Shift,” *Snot Rag* 17, 10 May 1979: 8.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Von Shlippen, “State of the Art!” *Public Enemy* 4, March 1979, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Although Vancouver's punk scene did not have a permanent venue, punk shows spread across Vancouver through 1978 and 1979. Venues listed in the *Georgia Straight* and *Snot Rag* include the Royal Canadian Legion on West 4th Avenue, and the Indian Centre at 1855 Vine Street in Kitsilano, the Cambrian Hall at 215 East 17th Street in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, the Helen Pitt Gallery at 163 West Pender on the edge of Chinatown, and the Viking Hall at 828 East Hastings in the DTES.

of bourgeois life. The Jirs allowed punk scene participants to control the club's booking policies as long as they continued to fill the club and did not demand union wages.<sup>16</sup> While the Jirs were likely pleased to see the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret routinely filled to, or beyond, its legal capacity, both the police and residents opposed the presence of the punks and the concentration of noisy clubs in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). Although liberalized liquor and entertainment policies prevented police and city officials from explicitly discriminating against club owners and managers based on moral concerns or the race of the club's operators or patrons, new noise regulations allowed officers to justify interventions at clubs like the Smilin' Buddha that did not fit the city's vision for the DTES neighbourhood.

Music journalist Tom Harrison recalls that by 1979, the Smilin' Buddha was “run down” and “a hole” that was “perfectly suited [for] what [punk] represented.”<sup>17</sup> City Council records from 1978 indicate that the Smilin' Buddha had fallen on hard times due to a Brewery Workers Union strike and changing liquor regulations prior the punk scene's arrival.<sup>18</sup> A global recession during the late 1970s and early 1980s hit Vancouver, a port city, particularly hard. This precarious economic situation meant that club owners needed whatever business they could find and likely contributed to Lachman Jir's willingness to give the K-Tels a second chance the next weekend after their apparently

---

<sup>16</sup> While the American Federation of Musicians was a powerful union through the 1940s and '50s, the union did not actively recruit rock and roll musicians. By the late-1970s, the union had lost much of its relevance. See, Michael Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Joe Keithley, *I, Shithead*, 49; Tom Harrison Interview, 16 January 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Harrison interview, 16 January 2014.

<sup>18</sup> City Council Minutes, 15 August 1978, 733.

unsuccessful first night. In the early days of the Smilin' Buddha's punk era, both Jir and the punk scene needed each other.

It did not take long for the Vancouver punk scene to draw upon the Smilin' Buddha's history and geographic location in marketing shows. An advertisement for DOA's first weekend of shows at the Buddha in early May 1979 referred to the club as the city's "oldest nightspot," with the location given simply as "on skid row."<sup>19</sup> The Smilin' Buddha certainly was not the oldest nightclub in the city: West End spots like the Penthouse, the Cave, and the Quadra Club all predated the Buddha. By 1979, however, the Smilin' Buddha was one of the East End's oldest nightclubs, and punk scene participants embraced the stories and the signs of the club's past. Both Keithley and Armstrong draw on the legend of Hendrix's time at the club in the 1960s as evidence of their claims that the Smilin' Buddha was a place where musical innovators developed their skills—even if their genius went unrecognized by the club's management.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in a May 1979 interview with the Pointed Sticks, two *Snot Rag* contributors discussed what they liked about the Buddha, namely "the sleaze of it" exemplified by photos of the "naked women" and "that drag queen" on the venue walls.<sup>21</sup> The Pointed Sticks' fascination with the Buddha's exotic past speaks to the punk scene participants' desire to present themselves as subversive while also signalling the entrenched chauvinism within the scene where queer and female sexuality was labelled as "sleazy."

---

<sup>19</sup> "DOA Advertisement," *Georgia Straight*, 27 April-2 May 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Keithley, *I, Shithead*, 75; John Armstrong, *Guilty of Everything* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2003), 43.

<sup>21</sup> McDonagh and Betts, "Sticks' Shift."

Shows by the K-Tels, Subhumans, and DOA between March and May 1979 put the Smilin' Buddha on the punk scene's map, but it was a police raid on 11 May 1979 that helped raise the scene and club's profile within the larger city and entertainment industry. According to a *Georgia Straight* article written by Ken Lester, who would become DOA's manager soon after the Buddha raid, “upwards of a dozen city police burst into the Smiling Buddha Cabaret, arresting and manhandling fans, and shutting down a concert . . . by the Subhumans and Rabid.” By several accounts provided by performers and audience members, the Buddha was relatively quiet on the night of the police raid. One Smilin' Buddha patron quoted in the *Straight* article, for instance, stated that the venue was only about half full with “nothing happening” when the police stormed in.<sup>22</sup> While sixteen people were arrested at the Smilin' Buddha, and five more were arrested after a number of punk scene participants held a “spontaneous protest” at the police station, all twenty-one were released the next morning without charges.<sup>23</sup> The raid, arrests, and claims of police brutality led to a B.C. Civil Liberties Association investigation into the incident and lots of press coverage that lent credibility to the punk scene and helped make the Smilin' Buddha, for a brief period, one of the city's most infamous nightclubs.

It is unclear precisely why the police raided the Smilin' Buddha on 11 May 1979. In a *Public Enemy* interview, Subhumans members Gerry and Dimwit suggest that the

---

<sup>22</sup> The Smilin' Buddha may have been particularly quiet that night because the Pointed Sticks, a popular band associated with the punk scene, were playing a high-profile show at the Cave nightclub in the West End.

<sup>23</sup> Ken Lester, “Punk Protest: 'Suddenly I Saw the Police Swarm In', *Georgia Straight*, 17-23 May 1979; “Punk Rock Up Meant Punk Lock Up,” *Vancouver Express*, 16 May 1979.

police department may have been targeting their band because the police had also shut down their practice space and one of their shows at the West Fourth Avenue Royal Canadian Legion.<sup>24</sup> Joe Keithley suggests that the police may have targeted him in response to DOA's song "Royal Police" which includes a line about physically beating the police.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the case, the subsequent media coverage of the the punk scene and the Smilin' Buddha helped root the punk scene in a larger skid road history that had shaped the Buddha since the 1950s. Both the *Vancouver Express* and Regina, Saskatchewan's *Leader-Post* offered similar accounts of the raid drawn from a Vancouver Police Department statement, noting that "officers who checked the dimly-lit, skid road Smilin' Buddha night club [at] about 1 a.m. . . . said they saw a large crowd of noisy, drunken patrons, some of whom were fighting and throwing furniture." The report continues, saying that after the police arrested and brought "punk bands leader Joey Keithley and 20 fans" to the police station "15 punk devotees, some dressed in the finery of their cult, including safety-pinned noses, arrived to demand the release of their friends."<sup>26</sup> Connecting with a larger East End history, the Vancouver Police Department justified their raid on the Buddha and the accompanying arrests in part by referencing the dangerous location, the dark lighting, and the alien performers and patrons. With increased media attention on this scene in the months following the raid, the Smilin'

---

<sup>24</sup> David Spaner, "Subhumans," *Public Enemy* 7, Summer 1979.

<sup>25</sup> Keithley, I, *Shithead*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Lester, "Punk Protest;" "Civil Liberties Group Probing Two British Columbia Incidents," *The Leader-Post*, 17 May 1979.

Buddha continued to book punk bands who routinely filled the club beyond its legal capacity.<sup>27</sup>

The police continued to target the Smilin' Buddha in the weeks following the 11 May 1979 raid. The *Georgia Straight* reported that the police returned to the Buddha in the days after the 11 May raid “to complain about the loudness of the music.”<sup>28</sup> In a September 1979 *Snot Rag* article, Smilin' Buddha booker Clayton MacKay wrote that where the police “initially . . . employed pure terror tactics to try to dispose of the ungodly punks[,] nowadays they have turned to a more technical (and legal) harrasment [sic]” by checking patrons' identification and enforcing curfew and capacity restrictions.<sup>29</sup> By many accounts, the club was often over legal capacity and served minors. Keithley recounts opening the back doors of the club for fans when it was already at legal capacity; Harrison notes that the Buddha was an easy target for the police because there was frequently underage kids at the club; and MacKay admits to overcrowding and underage patrons in his *Snot Rag* article, but suggests that “most other clubs get as crowded as the Buddha and have the same ratio of underage people.”<sup>30</sup> By November 1979, numerous media, including the *Vancouver Free Press* and *Georgia Straight*

---

<sup>27</sup> In addition to articles in the *Vancouver Express*, which was a temporary replacement for the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* newspapers that were on strike at the time, (“Punk Rock Up Meant Punk Lock Up,”), the Regina Leader-Post (“Civil Liberties Group Probing Two British Columbia Incidents,”), *Georgia Straight* (Lester, “Punk Protest”), *Snot Rag* (Lynn McDonagh, “Police Oppression,” *Snot Rag* 7, 10 May 1979), and *Public Enemy* (John Walker, “Cops & Crops: Buddha Invasion...” *Public Enemy* 7, Summer 1979), Joe Keithley was invited to speak about punk and the police raid on the local television program *The Vancouver Show*.

<sup>28</sup> Ken Lester, “Heavy Manners: Assault Charges Follow Bhudda Raid,” *Georgia Straight*, 17-23 May 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Clayton MacKay, “Pig-O-Rama Nightly at the Buddha,” *Snot Rag* 19, 19 September 1979.

<sup>30</sup> Keithley, *I, Shithead*, 49; Tom Harrison interview; MacKay, “Pig-O-Rama.”

reported that the city might shut down the Smilin' Buddha after the Liquor Board and City Council held a hearing about “police reports of overcrowding, drunkenness, the serving of juveniles and disorderly conduct” at the club.<sup>31</sup>

In August 1979, City Manager K.F. Dobell sent a memorandum to several city departments addressing concerns with the difficulty that the city was having enforcing the noise by-laws. The memo requested an amendment to the city's noise by-law to create a more flexible ticketing system to address situations involving loud music. In response, City Council passed by-law #5330 to Control Special Noise Situations on March 25, 1980. This by-law created new fines that enforcement officers could issue without prior complaints or petitions from residents or business owners, and which did not require officers to measure sound levels to test compliance with by-law #4984. Instead, the by-law stated that any noise from music or dogs barking that “is objectionable and is liable to disturb the quiet, rest, enjoyment, comfort or convenience of such individuals or members of the public who are not on the same premises from which such sound is emanating” was liable to a fine or penalty of \$50 to \$2000.<sup>32</sup> This law allowed officers to subjectively determine what sounds were “objectionable” and “liable to disturb” members of the public, and more strictly required clubs to contain noise within their premises.

---

<sup>31</sup> “Faces,” *Vancouver Free Press*, 16-22 November 1979; “Council Notes,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 November 1979.

<sup>32</sup> By-law no. 5330, vca, 32-G-5, folder 11.

At the same time that City Council was drafting the noise control by-law #5330, a city task force was conducting research in Europe as part of a city plan to “encourage the well-educated middle class to return to the central city.”<sup>33</sup> The city's shift from centrally planned revitalization schemes is evident in the task force's goal of finding ways to achieve “revitalization” through public/private sector cooperation. While the manager's report to City Council noted that cities in Germany enticed the middle class back to the central city through “the modernization of older housing, rather than high density low rise developments,” and by reducing “noise and hazards,” the report expressed disappointment that representatives from the European cities were more concerned with achieving social goals than with “creating a profit.”<sup>34</sup> Despite the new noise control by-law, there are few examples of fines or hearings for DTES clubs over noise violations compared to other parts of the city. This suggests that while the police cited noise as justification for interventions at the Smilin' Buddha, controlling noise levels in the East End was less of a concern for city officials than it was in the more affluent neighbourhoods.

Despite the police reports, council hearing, and revised noise control bylaw, the Smilin' Buddha did not close and several local bands (including DOA and the Subhumans) and touring acts (the Dils and Dead Kennedys from California) sold out multiple consecutive nights at the club. By this time, the Smilin' Buddha had earned a reputation as the centre of Vancouver's punk scene and the city's own equivalent of New

---

<sup>33</sup> City of Vancouver, Council Meeting Minutes, 23 November 1979.

<sup>34</sup> City of Vancouver, Council Meeting Minutes, 23 November 1979.

York's original punk club, CBGB's.<sup>35</sup> The comparison between the Smilin' Buddha and CBGB's referred not only to the fact that the Buddha, like CBGB's, was the place to see the most exciting up-and-coming punk bands, but more importantly, the comparison referred to the perception that the Buddha, like CBGB's existed in the centre of a notorious slum district. A show review in a June 1979 *Snot Rag* contains the first published instance of what has become a standard Smilin' Buddha joke, stating that a “cop picks up [an] old Hasings [sic] drunk by his shirt collar, opens the Buddha door, throws him in.” In case the reader missed the point, the reviewer continues, saying “rumour has it that the Buddha will be the new drunk tank—saves carting the punks up the hill to city jail, and after one Saturday of the scene, the skid row types would be off booze forever.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, punk scene participants reproduced stereotypes about Downtown Eastside denizens while suggesting that the punk scene belonged in the area because they were even more depraved than the “skid row types.”<sup>37</sup>

Although Vancouver's punk scene had a small but active and dedicated following prior to the Smilin' Buddha era, the image of the the punks as a marginalized group eking out an existence and changing the future of music in the middle of “skid row” resonated with a larger audience. *Vancouver Free Press* journalist Alex Varty wrote that the Smilin' Buddha was “a sorry little fourth-rate Hastings Street joint,” adding that “if the city had just one other regular outlet for new wave the Buddha would be a place to avoid, but as it seems . . . to be in the front lines of modern music involves both physical

---

<sup>35</sup> Les Wiseman, “Night of the Living Music,” *Vancouver Magazine*, October 1979.

<sup>36</sup> N. Smith, “ModernetteShadesReview,” *Snot Rag* 18, 23 June 1979: 14.

<sup>37</sup> N. Smith, “ModernetteShadesReview.”

dangers and police scrutiny.”<sup>38</sup> Neither physical danger nor police scrutiny appears to have deterred audiences from attending the Smilin' Buddha. In fact, according to MacKay, the club started to attract new audiences. In the *Ubysey*, MacKay noted that “the Smilin' Buddha is quickly becoming one of the most prestigious clubs in town,” and was “starting to get the disco crowd” as well as “people from [the downtown nightclub district on] Hornby Street.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, an October 1979 *Vancouver Magazine* article noted that “generally one can't get [into the Smilin' Buddha] past 11 o'clock” because it is at capacity.<sup>40</sup> Rather than the traditional form of slumming in Vancouver where wealthy white West Enders traveled to the multiethnic East End to view foreign and forbidden cultures, in 1979 Vancouver's predominantly white punk scene at the Smilin' Buddha became the exotic and dangerous East End culture that West Enders came to see.

Unlike previous eras at the Smilin' Buddha, during the punk era music was the focus at the club. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, music served as the background to dancing, socializing, and drinking, in part as a result of the city's liquor and cabaret licensing laws. Through the the 1960s and early-1970s, musicians provided the backing music for the Buddha's dancers and entertainers who were the club's main draw. While drinking and socializing was certainly an important part of the scene during the Smilin' Buddha's punk era, as in previous eras, punk bands played at loud volumes, making it nearly impossible to ignore the performers while on stage. Loud volumes emphasized the

---

<sup>38</sup> Alex Varty, “Vancouver's Rock Night Clubs,” *Vancouver Free Press*, 31 August-6 September 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Moon, “Buddha Smiles Down on Punks' Haven,” *The Ubysey* 62, no.12, 5 October 1979.

<sup>40</sup> Wiseman, “Night of the Living Music.”

fact that the bands were not just the background to other activities, but that music was the focus of the space. Where Jimi Hendrix was supposedly fired for playing too loud, annoying customers and making it difficult for Jir to hear orders, Jir was apparently willing to tolerate the loud volumes of punk bands as long as they continued to fill his nightclub. The fact that the musicians at the club during the punk era were not guaranteed any hourly or nightly wage, but instead took a cut of the door fee while Jir kept all the profits from the sale of food and drinks may have made the noise easier for Jir to tolerate. Perhaps for this reason, Jir allowed the punk scene to take control over the entertainment at the Smilin' Buddha since he did not have to rely on the patronage of East End residents or passers-by who would have been discouraged from dropping in to drink or socialize by the loud volumes and bizarre appearances of the Smilin' Buddha punk subculture. Through the first years of punk at the Buddha, scene participants like Clayton MacKay and Joe Keithley took charge of booking the entertainment at the club, controlling who was could perform at the club and, to some degree, controlling who was included or excluded from the larger punk scene.

Through 1979, a wide variety of independent bands who generally fit under the “punk” label performed at the Smilin' Buddha. However, increasing press coverage following the 11 May 1979 raid and the increasing popularity of bands within the punk scene meant that the Smilin' Buddha could not contain the punk scene for long. With a maximum capacity of just over 100 patrons and a limited number of nights and slots for bands to perform, the once relatively united punk scene began to split as groups excluded from the Smilin' Buddha scene searched for new places to perform and new groups formed, embracing punk's independent, do-it-yourself ethic. Perhaps the highest-profile

group associated with the punk scene to avoid, or be excluded, from the Smilin' Buddha was the Pointed Sticks. In a *Snot Rag* interview, Pointed Sticks bassist, Tony Bardach stated that his band would not play the Buddha because the club did not have an adequate stage or sound system and was “too small and depressing.”<sup>41</sup> By this time, however, certain punk scene participants had turned against the Pointed Sticks for their decision to play West End clubs like the Cave and the Gary Taylor's Rock Room, both part of the Hornby Street nightclub district derisively known as “disco row.”<sup>42</sup> As a result of this backlash and the new opportunities that the Pointed Sticks had earned, the band further distanced themselves from the Buddha and the “punk” label by insisting they be billed as a “new wave” band.<sup>43</sup>

The distinction between 'punk' and 'new wave'—two terms that were used synonymously through much of the late-1970s—became an increasingly important concern within the punk scene through late 1979 and the early 1980s. By 1980, clubs and promoters had taken notice of the new wave phenomenon that was filling clubs like the Smilin' Buddha. At the same time, the disco craze was beginning to diminish as the “Disco Demolition” campaign started by Chicago rock deejay Steve Dahl spread across North America.<sup>44</sup> New wave's new mainstream popularity challenged the legitimacy of

---

<sup>41</sup> McDonagh and Betts, “Sticks' Shift.”

<sup>42</sup> “Update,” *Snot Rag* 19, 18 September 1979.

<sup>43</sup> “Nick Jones Reveals the Secret Meaning of the Pointed Sticks,” *Public Enemy* 7, Summer 1979.

<sup>44</sup> Disco Demolition started as an antidisco promotion during a Chicago White Sox game where deejay Steve Dahl blew up a bin full of disco records. The event culminated in a riot and the antidisco movement quickly spread across North America. For more, see Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no.2 (2007).

the style as part of a larger independent or alternative culture. Where performing in an independent band in Vancouver had been a struggle and an act of rebellion, by 1980 it had become almost quotidian. Discussing Vancouver's music scene in a December 1980 *Vancouver Free Press*, Subhumans member Brian Goble complained that “there's almost too many shows in Vancouver.”<sup>45</sup> When two Vancouver new wave groups, the Pointed Sticks and the Payolas signed high-profile record contracts with Stiff Records in England and major label A&M Records, respectively, some scene participants began to question who was authentically 'punk' or 'new wave'. Asked why they thought the “punk scene has gone downhill” in a 1980 *Dolt* interview, the members of DOA replied that “the Pointed Sticks came on the scene.” “With bands like [the Pointed Sticks] coming . . . and making money . . . they continued, “all these wimpy bands springing up everywhere that call themselves punk or new wave [have] ruined it.”<sup>46</sup> Reflecting Greil Marcus' observation that new wave was “a code word not for punk without shock, but punk without meaning,” for DOA, as with many other local groups, authentic punk meant challenging the mainstream music industry rather than joining it.<sup>47</sup>

The division within the punk scene is evident from the list of bands who performed at the Smilin' Buddha in 1980. Where in 1979 the Buddha hosted groups that could be classified as punk, new wave, or art-punk groups,<sup>48</sup> in 1980, the club was

---

<sup>45</sup> Varty, “Our Best Rock Band,” *Vancouver Free Press*, 5-12 December 1980.

<sup>46</sup> “DOA Interview,” *Dolt* 1, April 1980: 10,11.

<sup>47</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 77.

<sup>48</sup> The art-punk or “art school” label was given to some of Vancouver's more experimental independent bands like Exxotone, the Generators, 'e', and UJ3RK5.

dominated by the faster, louder, and more aggressive hardcore punk bands to the exclusion of other styles. This development may have partly been the result of the fact that many clubs still did not want to book the more aggressive punk bands, leaving them fewer places to perform while the poppier new wave groups found a more mainstream audience. Through 1980, DOA played eleven shows at the Smilin' Buddha over three separate weekends, while Los Angeles punk band, Black Flag were similarly booked for three full weekends. Much of the rest of the year at the Buddha was filled by the more extreme Vancouver punk bands like Rabid, Bludgeoned Pigs, Insex, No Exit, and the Butchers.

The claim that by 1980 the Smilin' Buddha was a venue for the more aggressive punk bands who defined themselves as punk, as opposed to new wave, by 1980 is supported by the Dayglo Abortions' account of their first show at the club in August 1980 as the Sikphuxz. According to Dayglo Abortions' guitarist Murray Acton the Smilin' Buddha had a reputation as a “frightening place” and a “pit.” Bassist Trevor Hagen recalls that the show was with the Bludgeoned Pigs, a group he describes as “*thee* punkest-assed band on earth,” fronted by a singer who “had a habit of getting completely trashed and picking fights with anyone handy.” In order to fit in at the club, Acton “wore his dirtiest, smelliest clothes,” and the band performed “as obnoxious[ly] as they could . . . for the crowd of drunken punks.” As the story is told, a member of the Bludgeoned Pigs

harassed the Sikphuxz's female singer, Ann Archy, “who responded by jumping off of the stage and beating the hell out of [him].”<sup>49</sup>

The Sikphuxz's recollection of their first show at the Smilin' Buddha provides some evidence of the way that punk scene participants shaped their appearance, music, and demeanour based on their perceptions of the larger subculture and the Smilin' Buddha itself. The anecdote also shows that women were a part of this punk scene, even if they faced harassment and hostility from some male members of the scene. Smilin' Buddha show listings from 1979 and 1980 include several bands that were either exclusively comprised of women, like the Dishrags and the Zellots, or had female members, like the Modernettes, U-J3RK5, the 45's, and the Sikphuxz. Bev Davies' photos of the early-Vancouver punk scene also show that many women not affiliated with any bands attended punk shows at the Smilin' Buddha and venues around the city.<sup>50</sup> However, as historian Connie Kuhns has argued, “punk was still a boys' club” at this time.<sup>51</sup> Many of Davies' photos from the Smilin' Buddha show large crowds of men moshing at the front of the stage without any females in view, suggesting that women kept, or were pushed, to the sides of the club and the larger scene.<sup>52</sup> Sexism is clearly evident in the Sikphuxz' anecdote as well as its epilogue where Ann Archy was kicked out of the group based on accusations that she wanted to be like commercial rock singer

---

<sup>49</sup> Chris Walters, *Argh Fuck Kill: The Story of the Dayglo Abortions* (Vancouver: Gofuckyourself Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>50</sup> See “Bev Davies Photo Essay Part 4,” Bloodied But Unbowed, <http://www.thepunkmovie.com/category/article-categories/bev-davies>.

<sup>51</sup> Connie Kuhns, “Strange Women,” *Geist* 27 (95), Winter 2014: 38.

<sup>52</sup> “Bev Davies Photo Essay Part 4.”

Pat Benatar, suggesting that she was not authentically punk.<sup>53</sup> In the documentary, *Bloodied But Unbowed*, Modernettes bassist Mary Jo Kopechne talks about harassment at shows where she was pulled from the stage by men in the audience. Similarly, Jade Blade of the Dishrags states that people did not take her band seriously and would “hurl . . . verbal abuse” at them.<sup>54</sup> Although both Kopechne and Blade state that members of the punk scene protected and defended them from both verbal and physical abuse, Blade qualifies this defence of male punk scene participants saying, “the punk scene in Vancouver was pretty good to us, given the attitudes of the time.”<sup>55</sup>

The number of women in Vancouver punk, new wave and independent rock bands increased through the early 1980s as new performance spaces opened up to independent acts, and as new wave continued to gain popularity in the mainstream. At the same time, while the Smilin' Buddha remained an important place within the punk scene, it became less essential as a performance space. In 1979, *Snot Rag* mocked the Pointed Sticks for playing on “disco row;” in 1980, the *Vancouver Free Press* reported that Toronto punk band the Diodes' two nights at Gary Taylor's were sparsely attended because “the real punks . . . were avoiding the rock room,” and because the band was “a far cry from Buddha punk.”<sup>56</sup> But by the end of 1980, however, even harder punk bands like DOA and Black Flag performed at Gary Taylor's. Punk shows continued at the Smilin Buddha through the 1981 and 1982, but after 1980 media outlets like the

---

<sup>53</sup> Walters, *Argh Fuck Kill*, 28-29.

<sup>54</sup> “Dishrags I Don't Love You Live 1979,” *Bloodied But Unbowed*, <http://www.thepunkmovie.com/category/article-categories/dishrags>.

<sup>55</sup> Connie Kuhns, “Strange Women,” 38

<sup>56</sup> Sorelle Saidman, “Toronto Groups Invade City,” *Vancouver Free Press* 18-25 April 1980.

*Vancouver Free Press* and *Georgia Straight* paid little attention to these shows or to the venue. A review of a Husker Dü show at the Buddha from a 1982 issue of punk zine *Splinterviews* suggests that the police continued to pay attention to the club, saying “as usual, the city police had to make an appearance, stride through, stand on the dance floor looking at one another, and finally shake down and remove one of our number. Why don't they just go bust a few jaywalkers.”<sup>57</sup> Yet like jaywalking infractions, these police interventions at the Smilin' Buddha had become pedestrian and did not sustain the interest of journalists or their readers. The Smilin' Buddha became a regular, but unremarkable, part of Vancouver's growing live music scene.

The end of the Smilin' Buddha's punk era in 1983 passed almost without note in the *Georgia Straight*. The first indication that the club was no longer hosting punk bands comes in the *Straight's* June “Clubs” section, which lists the Buddha's weekend entertainment as “The Starrs appearing with the Incredible Wild Man (house band).”<sup>58</sup> Punk bands often played multiple consecutive nights at the Buddha between 1979 and 1983, but none of these groups were ever listed as the Buddha's house band—a designation that was more common in Vancouver's country, blues, and top 40 rock clubs than in punk clubs.<sup>59</sup> The Smilin' Buddha disappeared from the *Straight's* concert and club listings altogether in the months following the Incredible Wild Man's stint as house band. The fact that a fire that gutted the Buddha on 25 November 1983 was not

---

<sup>57</sup> “Husker Dü,” *Splinterviews* 1, 1 July 1982.

<sup>58</sup> “Clubs,” *Georgia Straight*, 10-17 June 1983.

<sup>59</sup> The Starrs and the Incredible Wild Man also do not appear on any bills with any of Vancouver's independent bands in the *Georgia Straight's* club and concert listings, or in the Simon Fraser University's Vancouver Punk Collection.

mentioned in the *Straight* until almost a month later suggests that the club had become an afterthought for the press and independent music community.<sup>60</sup>

While Lachman and Nancy Jir told *Sun* reporter Neal Hall that they hoped to reopen the Smilin' Buddha in a January 1984 article, Nancy stated that the club would return to its roots and become “a supper club with revue-style exotic dancers,” because “there are other places for [punk bands] to play now.”<sup>61</sup> There is little indication that the Buddha did return to the revue format, however. When the Buddha finally reopened on 30 March 1984, the *Georgia Straight* reported that “a long line of people waiting to get into the newly renovated Smilin' Buddha . . . were eventually greeted with clean surroundings and music by Seattle's Fastbacks and Go Four 3.” punk had returned.<sup>62</sup> Despite the strong turnout for the Buddha's grand reopening and multiple performances by DOA at the club in July and August 1984, the Smilin' Buddha once again stopped booking punk bands by the end of 1984. And once again, the end of punk at the Buddha was only announced by its absence in the club listings section of the *Georgia Straight*.<sup>63</sup>

Prior to 1979, the Smilin' Buddha was “failing and forgotten” according to Tom Harrison. Although the K-Tels were initially fired by Lachman Jir, the punk scene quickly came to claim the Smilin' Buddha, a development that Jir was willing to allow as long as they continued to fill the venue. The punk scene became the first group to

---

<sup>60</sup> The *Vancouver Sun* did report on the fire. See, Dave Smith, “Early Morning Fire Guts the Buddha,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 November 1983; “Faces,” *Georgia Straight*, 23 December-6 January 1984.

<sup>61</sup> Neal Hall, “Sad Day for Smilin' Buddha,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 January 1984.

<sup>62</sup> “The Buddha Smiles Again,” *Georgia Straight*, 6-13 April 1984.

<sup>63</sup> The last Smilin' Buddha show listed in the *Georgia Straight* was Icons, Industrial Waste Banned, and Ministry of Ambiguity on 5 October 1984.

embrace the identity and the space of both the club and the wider neighbourhood. The Smilin' Buddha served as both an important symbol and a space for the punk scene in a city whose nightclub scene was dominated by discos and a few large rock promoters. The punk scene used the seedy and dangerous reputation of the club and neighbourhood to lend legitimacy to their countercultural image, presenting themselves as more dangerous and depraved than even the “skid row types.”<sup>64</sup> The Smilin' Buddha quickly became one of the city's most popular nightclubs, thanks in part to a police raid that received lots of media attention that raised the profile of the club and the punk scene. However, as the city's independent music scene grew through the early-1980s, new venues opened to performers and the Smilin' Buddha began to lose its symbolic value. By the time of the Smilin' Buddha fire in 1984, the club had returned to its pre-punk entertainment format, hiring house blues bands rather than loud punk bands. The Buddha was just another Hastings Street bar.

---

<sup>64</sup> N. Smith, “ModernetteShadesReview.”

## **Conclusion: The End of the Smilin' Buddha and a "Heritage Block Reborn"<sup>1</sup>**

The Smilin' Buddha continued to operate in the years following the 1983 fire, though it never appears to have regained its place as the centre of Vancouver's punk scene or a notable part of the city's entertainment scene more generally. After Lachman Jir's death in 1988, his son Robert Jir managed the club for a short period of time. It is not clear precisely when the Jirs sold the club, but a 1996 Vancouver Police Department (VPD) report noted that the Smilin' Buddha's liquor license was revoked in 1995 and the business was sold a few months later to Siraj Ahmed and reopened as the Smilin' Sports Cafe. The VPD report stated that "if there was a rating for the worst overall problem premises in the 100 East Hastings block, the Sports Cafe would be ranked first." Suggesting that the business or its location either attracts or creates criminal activity, the report's conclusion stated that "it seems that no matter who this business is licensed to, it continued to be a cesspool of criminal activity. . . . It is businesses such as this that compounds the problems in the Downtown Eastside community" because they "cater to the criminal element, . . . offer refuge from inclement weather [and] allow people to conduct illegal activities in an acceptable environment."<sup>2</sup> On 26 February 1997, City

---

<sup>1</sup> Bob Mackie, "A Heritage Block Reborn: The 100 Block West Hastings Goes From Scary to Cool," *Vancouver Sun*, 17 April 2015

<sup>2</sup> Sargent Jeanne Yee to Inspector Greer, 30 September 1996, vca 759-C-2 folder 5.

Council refused to grant the Sports Cafe a 1997 business license and gave Ahmed seven days “to terminate staff and close the premises.”<sup>3</sup>

The building at 109 East Hastings remained vacant until 2013. Through much of the late 1990s and 2000s, the Smilin' Buddha building served as part of the background for news stories and documentaries that depicted the DTES as a spectacle of decay, homelessness and drug addiction. Films like the National Film Board's *Through a Blue Lens* (1999), Stan Feingold's *Heroines* (2001), Corey Olgivie's *Streets of Plenty* (2010) and Josh Laner's *Wastings and Pain* (2010) run the spectrum from challenging to shamefully exploitive in their effort to provide cautionary tales about the dangers of the DTES, find answers to the problems in the area, or simply document the “reality” of life in the neighbourhood. Despite these films and stories that depict the DTES as a cultural and economic wasteland, musicians and artists continued to live and work in the DTES playing at nearby clubs, bars, and art galleries.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the legend of the Smilin' Buddha continued to grow. In 1993, the club's neon sign was purchased by 54-40, a popular Vancouver rock band who played their first show at the Buddha in 1981. The band named their 1994 album after the club and used the sign as the backdrop on tour. Perhaps more importantly for the legacy of the club, in the mid-2000s, 54-40 donated the sign to the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) where it is on permanent display. Thanks to the preservation of the Smilin' Buddha's sign and the 2005 reissue of the *Vancouver Complication* album, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Chief License Inspector Paul Teichroeb to Siraj Ahmed, 26 February 1997, vca 759-C-2 folder 5.

Smilin' Buddha became a symbol of the city's post-war prosperity and entertainment history. The commemoration of the club only increased when the building reopened in 2013 as the SBC Restaurant, a skatepark and music venue, and was named one of Vancouver "125 Places That Matter." At the same time, the 100-block of East Hastings was at the centre of debates about gentrification in the city following the opening of the Woodward's building just two blocks west of the Smilin' Buddha. This development, opened in 2009, helped transform the 100 West Hastings block from one described as "the worst block in Vancouver" by *Sun* journalist Frances Bula in 1998 to one more recently described a "heritage block reborn," and a place where lower-income residents are being displaced in the "revitalizing" neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the building at 109 East Hastings is owned by the infamous Sahota family who have been labelled as "slumlords" by housing activists and journalists for their "dilapidated buildings" and poor treatment of tenants.<sup>5</sup> While the SBC Restaurant's operators, Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin recognize that "people might say that [they're] gentrifying" the neighbourhood, they question whether they are displacing anyone, or whether anyone is able to stop the changes that are happening in the DTES.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Frances Bula, "A Look at the Worst Block in Vancouver: 100 Block West Hastings," *Vancouver Sun*, 7 August 1998; Brian Hutchinson, "The Woodward's Project: From High Above to Down Below," *National Post*, 5 June 2010; David P. Ball, "Inside Woodward's, A Still Contentious Social Housing Experiment," *The Tyee*, 15 February 2015; Mackie, "A Heritage Block Reborn"; Bob Mackie, "Junk Market Mayhem: Locals Livid By Vancouver Plans to Push Vendors East," *Vancouver Sun*, 6 May 2015; Margo Pfeiff, "Hip Meets Heritage in Vancouver, Canada's Revitalizing Gastown, Railtown and Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Sean Condon, "A City Soft on 'Slumlords,'" *The Tyee*, 10 November 2008; Allen Garr, "Balmoral Landlords Have History of Neglect, So Does City's Strategy on Curbing Such Behaviour," *Vancouver Courier*, 6 June 2017; Ian Mulgrew, "Tenants Frustrated By Lack of Help Over Slum Conditions," *Vancouver Sun*, 28 March 2017.

While on one hand Turner acknowledges that businesses in the area need to be “socially-minded” and inclusive of the local community, on the other hand he suggests that much of the local community does not have a claim to the neighbourhood since it is a “transient” population and that the “market will dictate the way the area will develop.”<sup>6</sup>

Like the punk scene of the late-1970s, Turner and Hassin legitimize their claims to the space of the SBC Restaurant in part by references to the past. Just as the punk scene embraced the history of the Smilin' Buddha and the DTES, Turner and Hassin see their work as a continuation of the do-it-yourself attitude that helped the punk scene flourish four decades ago. But within Turner and Hassin's discussion of gentrification and changes in the DTES there is also a recognition of a problem that many artists face within Vancouver: the need for cheap rent. For this reason, Turner says that it was “a blessing” that the Smilin' Buddha building “was just sitting there, rotting away [because they] thought maybe we can work out a deal and get some cheap rent and do something cool.”<sup>7</sup> The SBC Restaurant's deal with the Sahotas is not unique among the city's arts community. The Sahota family's hotel bars, like the Cobalt at 917 Main and the Astoria at 769 East Hastings, have been among the most consistent venues for Vancouver's independent musicians over the past fifteen years.<sup>8</sup> Like the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret in the late-1970s, part of the appeal of these bars is their seediness. In the same way that Joey Keithley describes the Smilin' Buddha as a place that was permissive of the strange

---

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin Interview, November 19, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin Interview, November 19, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The Balmoral has also been used periodically by Vancouver's independent music scene. For a list of the Sahota's properties, see John Colebourn, “DTES Tenant's Court Case Shines Light on Practices of Sahota Landlords,” *The Province*, 10 July 2016.

and sometimes destructive behaviours of the punk scene as long as people were buying drinks, the Sahotas' bars have been a haven for musicians who do not want to, or cannot get gigs at the more mainstream and upscale bars and clubs around the city.<sup>9</sup>

The question remains, however, whether artists are the “expeditionary force for inner city gentrifiers,” as David Ley claims, or whether the “culture industry . . . donates a salable neighbourhood identity [that helps package an area] as a real estate commodity and establishe[s] demand.”<sup>10</sup> Musicians have performed in the DTES continuously throughout periods of economic stability and economic decline. However, unlike previous eras when musicians like Gregg Simpson and Gary Taylor could establish their own clubs in other parts of town, today there are few places remaining in the city that independent musicians can afford.<sup>11</sup> Even though there is little evidence that artists drive demand for rents and real estate, artists must be careful not to perpetuate standard property narratives that suggest that displacement is the inevitable result of natural market forces. This means that artists must understand how different groups have struggled to define their neighbourhoods and the spaces within them and understand how definitions of cultural or economic “vitality” exclude certain groups for the benefit of those people with money and power.

---

<sup>9</sup> Joe Keithley, *I, Shithead: A Life in Punk* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>10</sup> David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 192, 356.

<sup>11</sup> Gregg Simpson was part of a group that operated the Sound Gallery on Davie Street and later Motion Studios on Seymour Street during the late 1960s and 1970s. Gary Taylor ran a number of different clubs around Downtown and Yaletown from the 1960s to the 1980s, including the King of Clubs and Gary Taylor's Rock Room.

The first incarnation of the Smilin' Buddha was opened by Albert Kwan and Harvey Lowe in 1952 during a period of disinvestment in the downtown east as the city's core shifted west to land owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway. Because Chinatown was a popular tourist attraction, Kwan and Lowe opened their club just beyond the western edge of the neighbourhood at 109 East Hastings Street. Yet despite their attempt to run a club that catered to a middle-class clientele, Albert Kwan and Harvey Lowe did not receive the advantages afforded to West End clubs run by white proprietors because their Chinese heritage was not considered "respectable". The provincial Liquor Control Board denied Kwan and Lowe's application for a liquor license in part based on the racist assumption that "Chinese are not able to handle this type of business."<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the Smilin' Buddha held some advantages over the hotel beer parlours that maintained most of the city's liquor licenses. The Buddha was able to provide entertainment and a heterosocial environment while the beer parlours were segregated by gender and were restricted from hiring musicians or entertainers. By 1960, however, the Smilin' Buddha's entertainment format appeared stale as clubs specializing in jazz, rhythm and blues and exotic dancing emerged in the city's nightclub entertainment scene. At the same time the club's business was hurt by a crackdown on cabarets and the Downtown East's reputation as a place for criminals that was specifically unsuited for respectable women. In 1962, Kwan and Lowe sold the club to Lachman and Nancy Jir.

Under the Jir's management did not attempt to appeal to the respectable, heterosocial, white middle-class. While the Smilin' Buddha received a liquor license in

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Robert Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 86.

1967 as part of an effort to eliminate the bottle clubs that dotted the city, the city's new liquor regulations were an attempt to force cabarets to meet distinctly middle-class standards of respectability, regulating everything from liquor prices to table cloths. Attorney-General Bonner stated that the new licenses would “encourage people to get into the night club business properly or get out of it,” and would be both “good for tourism and . . . welcomed by residents.”<sup>13</sup> The new regulations did not have the intended effect, however. Instead, the Smilin' Buddha began booking nude dancers that appealed to a lower-class male audience. Despite continued attempts to regulate cabarets into respectability, the Smilin' Buddha hosted nude dancers until at least 1974 when hotel beer parlours were granted the right to host live entertainment, removing any competitive advantage that cabaret owners once had. The Smilin' Buddha barely survived the 1970s and was described in a 1977 police report as “the worst of all cabarets in the Downtown Eastside for drunkenness and other infractions.”<sup>14</sup>

The Smilin' Buddha's place in Vancouver's popular history today can largely be traced back to the efforts of Vancouver's punk scene. This period represents the first time that musicians embraced the club and identified with the larger neighbourhood surrounding it. The punk scene claimed the Smilin' Buddha because of its identity as a sleazy and dangerous dive bar in the heart of “skid row.” The club and the neighbourhood lent a sense of toughness and authenticity to scene participants who presented themselves as the exotic alternative to mainstream, bourgeois culture, and the club's location as an alternative to the West End's “disco row.” The Smilin' Buddha

---

<sup>13</sup> “New Liquor Regulations to Curb Bottle Clubs,” *The Province*, 3 December 1966.

<sup>14</sup> City Council Minutes, 8 November 1977, 507.

quickly became one of the city's most notorious nightclubs, thanks in part to a police raid that received lots of media attention that raised the profile of the club and the punk scene. While the city amended their noise by-laws in 1979 to allow officers more flexibility when dealing with loud music, noise complaints at DTES clubs do not appear to have been as strictly enforced as other areas with more affluent residents despite the fact that the club did not fit civic or business leaders' vision for the neighbourhood. However, as new venues opened to independent musicians in the early-1980s, the Smilin' Buddha began to lose its symbolic value and by 1984 the club was just another Hastings street bar.

Today, SBC Restaurant operator, Andrew Turner describes the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret as a “place of lore” and “an important part of the neighbourhood's history,” because

everyone that comes in here to see a show or have a coffee . . . kind of knows that they are in this room where all these awesome people got to cut their teeth in kind of the most [informal] and unstructured kind of way.<sup>15</sup>

Although the preservation of the Smilin' Buddha building, sign, and story suggests that Vancouver is acknowledging the value of the history of the DTES, there remains an uneasy peace between preservation, commemoration, and gentrification. In the 1970s, Gastown business and property owners fought for the preservation of Gastown as a historic district in the 1970s as part of a larger project of attracting the middle-class back to the central city, raising rents and property values. Similarly, the area of Hastings Street surrounding the Smilin' Buddha has been slowly redefined and subsumed into the

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin Interview, 19 November 2014.

Gastown neighbourhood, an historic area in need of preservation after years of blight and neglect. A romantic idea of the Smilin' Buddha's history is used as part of an effort to redefine the DTES neighbourhood and return to it to its imagined former glory. For instance, a Vancouver Police Department blog titled “Eastside Stories: Diary of a Vancouver Beat Cop” juxtaposes a photo of the 100-block of East Hastings from 1959 with one from 2012, lamenting the fact that “those gorgeous neon signs have been replaced by empty storefronts and tattered awning [and that] the live music venues and pool halls [have been] replaced by the drug injection site, a sex shop and a marijuana dispensary.”<sup>16</sup> This narrative suggests that live music and pool halls have replaced in by drugs and drug addicts, ignoring the fact the bands continue to play in the area and that the businesses like the Smilin' Buddha that the officer used to contrast Hastings then and now were subjected to arcane liquor laws and heavy police scrutiny because they were considered a social and moral problem. The tattered awnings themselves are not just a product of neglect, but a deliberate choice to eliminate places where people could seek shelter and congregate.

The MOV's choice to describe the Smilin' Buddha Cabaret in the late 1970s as “ground zero” for the Vancouver punk scene suggests an image of the club as both the centre of the punk movement and as a disaster area—an idea that the punk scene also cultivated at the time. Similarly, Turner refers to the SBC Restaurant building as a “blank canvas” when he first signed the lease with the Sahotas and as a place that has

---

<sup>16</sup> Steve Addison, “Hastings and Columbia – Then and Now,” *Eastside Stories: Diary of a Vancouver Beat Cop* (blog), 14 January 2012, <http://www.beatcopdiary.vpd.ca/2012/01/14/hastings-and-columbia-then-and-now-2/>.

always been defined by the artists who have performed there.<sup>17</sup> However, the history of the Smilin' Buddha shows that the club and the larger DTES neighbourhood have never been an empty space that is devoid of life or culture; instead, these spaces have been defined by a complex process of negotiation and contestation between multiple overlapping groups who have very different visions for the neighbourhood. Some of these groups have laid claim to the DTES by redefining the area to connect it to Chinatown and the West End, or as part of the larger Gastown neighbourhood. Other groups have fought for control of these spaces through their claims of residency, or by exploiting the area's 'skid road' identity.

Artists have always lived and worked in the DTES. Through the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, city and business interests sought to transform the DTES into a respectable, middle-class neighbourhood without a concerted effort to include artists. Throughout most of this period, the Smilin' Buddha was targeted as one of the problems preventing revitalization, but the club survived thanks to the work of Harvey Lowe, Albert Kwan, the Jirs, the artists and patrons who performed at and attended the club, and the work of residents and activists who fought against plans to remake the neighbourhood for the benefit of developers and land speculators. In an increasingly unaffordable city, the DTES remains one of the few places where musicians can reliably find gigs. The “creative economy” thesis, popularized by Richard Florida, suggests that diverse and creative arts scenes make cities economically viable, but rather than using art and culture to help attract middle-class workers and entrepreneurs, artists need to fight to ensure that

---

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin Interview, 19 November 2014.

affordable access to both living spaces and creative spaces continues to exist. This can allow for the continued creation of cultures that can make the city liveable in a way that is meaningful beyond its immediate economic impact and that does not result in an exclusive playground for the rich.

# **Bibliography**

## **Collections**

Bloodied But Unbowed, <http://www.thepunkmovie.net>

City of Vancouver Archives

City of Vancouver, City Council Minutes

Vancouver Punk Collection, Simon Fraser University

Vancouver Jazz Forum, <http://www.vancouverjazz.com/forums>

## **Interviews**

Tom Harrison, 16 January 2014

David Matychuk, 25 February 2014

Gregg Simpson, 29 October 2014

Gary Taylor, 15 November 2014

Andrew Turner and Malcolm Eric Hassin, 19 November 2014

## **Newspapers and Magazines**

*DERA Newspaper* (Vancouver, BC)

*Georgia Straight* (Vancouver, BC)

*Picture Magazine* (Vancouver, BC)

*Prince George Citizen* (Prince George, BC)

*The Province* (Vancouver, BC)

*Public Enemy* (Vancouver, BC)

*Snot Rag* (Vancouver, BC)

*Splinterviews* (Vancouver, BC)

*The UBC Alumni Chronicle* (Vancouver, BC)

*The Ubyyssey* (Vancouver, BC)

*Vancouver Express* (Vancouver, BC)

*Vancouver Free Press* (Vancouver, BC)

*Vancouver Life* (Vancouver, BC)

*Vancouver Magazine* (Vancouver, BC)

*Vancouver Sun* (Vancouver, BC)

### **Secondary Sources**

Addison, Steve. "Hastings and Columbia – Then and Now." *Eastside Stories: Diary of a Vancouver Beat Cop* (blog). 14 January 2012.  
<http://www.beatcopdiary.vpd.ca/2012/01/14/hastings-and-columbia-then-and-now-2/>.

Adinolfi, Francesco. *Mondo Exotica: Sounds, Visions, Obsessions of the Cocktail Generation*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008.

- Anderson, Kay J. "The Idea of Chinatown: The Power and Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category," in *Immigration in Canada: Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Gerald Tulchinsky. Toronto: Copp Clark, 1994: 223-248.
- Anderson, Kay J. *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- Armstrong, John. *Guilty of Everything*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 2003.
- Bangs, Lester. *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*. Edited by Greil Marcus. New York: Anchor Books, 1987.
- Blomley, Nicholas. *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Bouleware, Jack and Tudor Silke. *Gimme Something Better: The Profound, Progressive, and Occasionally Pointless History of Bay Area Punk*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Campbell, Robert. *Demon Rum or Easy Money: Government Control of Liquor in British Columbia From Prohibition to Privatization*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991.
- . *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Condon, Sean. "A City Soft on 'Slumlords.'" *The Tyee*. 10 November 2008. <http://thetyee.ca/News/2008/11/10/Slumlords/>.
- Currid, Elizabeth. *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Douglas, Lawrence. "Social System of a Vancouver Nightclub: An Illustration of a Method of Analysis of an Organization." Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1960.
- Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Princeton: Basic Books, 2002.
- Frank, Gillian. "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no.2 (2007): 276-307.
- Gill, Warren. "Clientele Variations and Urban Nightclub Locations: A Case Study of Vancouver," Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1970.

- . "Region, Agency, and Popular Music: The Northwest Sound 1958-1966." *Canadian Geographer* 37, no. 2 (June 1993): 120-131.
- Gutstein, Donald. "Vancouver," in *City Politics in Canada*. Edited by Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983: 189-221.
- Hayes, Derek. *The Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006.
- "Hastings Was First Theatre Row." *Vancouver Courier*. 28 November 2008.  
[http://www.canada.com/story\\_print.html?id=1c62e4b0-3645-4773-b99e-9bee72945c20&sponsor=](http://www.canada.com/story_print.html?id=1c62e4b0-3645-4773-b99e-9bee72945c20&sponsor=).
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: New Accents, 1979.
- Heffernan, Virginia. "The Old Internet Neighbourhoods." *New York Times*, 10 July 2011.
- Hern, Matt. *What a City is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- Hill, Katherine. "Our Neon Nightmare: The Role of the Civic Arts Community in Dismantling Vancouver's Neon Sign Jungle, 1957-1974," in *British Columbia History* 46, no.3 (2013), 5-14.
- Keithley, Joe. *I, Shithead: A Life in Punk*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003.
- Knight, Rolf. *Along the No. 20 Line: Reminiscences of the Vancouver Waterfront*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1980.
- Kuhns, Connie. "Strange Women," *Geist* 27, no.95 (Winter 2014): 38-52.
- Ley, David. "Artists, Aestheticisation, and the Field of Gentrification." *Urban Studies* 40, no. 12 (November 2003): 2525-2542.
- Ley, David. *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Macdonald, Bruce. *Vancouver: A Visual History*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Martin, Eryk. "The Blurred Boundaries of Anarchism and Punk in Vancouver, 1970-1983." *Labour/Le Travail* 75, no.1 (2015): 9-41.

- McKellar, Keith. *Neon Eulogy: Vancouver Café and Street*. Victoria: Ekstasis Editions, 2001.
- McNeil, Legs and Gillian McCain. *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
- Miller, Mark. *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada, 1914-1949*. Toronto: Mercury Press, 1999.
- Osman, Suleiman. *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- “LaWanda Page, 81, Actress and Comedienne, Is Dead.” *New York Times*. 18 September 2002.
- Pinkus, Karen. “Introduction,” in *Mondo Exotica: Sounds, Visions, Obsessions of the Cocktail Generation*. Edited by Karen Pinkus. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008: VII-X.
- “Places That Matter Plaque Project.” Vancouver Heritage Foundation.  
<http://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/special-projects/places-that-matter-plaque-project/>.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Roberts, Michael. *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942–1968*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Ross, Alex. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Picador, 2007.
- Ross, Becki. *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Russell, Tony and Chris Smith. *The Penguin Guide to Blues on CD*. London: Penguin, 2006.
- “Smilin’ Buddha Cabaret Sign.” The Museum of Vancouver.  
<http://www.museumofvancouver.ca/collections/object/smilin-buddha-cabaret-sign/>.
- Smith, Neil, *The New Urban Frontier : Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York : Routledge, 1996)

- Smith, Neil and Jeff Derksen. "Urban Regeneration: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Edited by Reid Shier. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002: 62-95.
- Sommers, Jeff and Nick Blomley. "The Worst Block in Vancouver," in *Stan Douglas, Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Edited by Reid Shier. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002:
- Spitz, Mark and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.
- Sutherland, Sam. *Perfect Youth: The Birth of Canadian Punk*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2012.
- "To Build A Better City – a 1964 City of Vancouver/CMHC Film." Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation. YouTube video, 14:20. Posted by "BC History." 25 February 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY5I8h1IJjs>.
- Walters, Chris. *Argh Fuck Kill: The Story of the Dayglo Abortions*. Vancouver: Gofuckyourself Press, 2010.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Wilson, Anthony H. *24 Hour Party People: What the Sleeve Notes Never Tell You*. London: 4 Books, 2002.