On Campus

Taps for the Beats?

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For a town that enjoys its liquor as much as New York does, the list of iconic bars is a short one. Longstanding establishments that are widely loved and even more widely known include McSorley's, the "wonderful saloon" on East Seventh Street immortalized by Joseph Mitchell in the pages of The New Yorker, and the White Horse Tavern, the West Village gin mill favored by the poet Dylan Thomas, however much to his detriment.

One could make a strong case, too, for including on such a roster the West End — "that dim waystation," in Diana Trilling's words, "of undergraduate debauchery on Morningside Heights."

On the latter count, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are surely the first among equals where the West End is concerned. The 90-plus-year-old café is invariably mentioned in any discussion of the Beats at Columbia, and it has displayed their photographs on its walls in recent years. Kerouac's debut novel, *The Town and the City*, drew heavily upon its habitués, and his Vanity of Duluoz specifically mentioned its "smell of beers and smoke." In 2001, when Christie's auctioned the manuscript for *On the Road* for $2.43 million, it hosted a party the evening before at the West End; students and alumni have celebrated Ginsberg's *Howl* with readings there during each of the last two Homecoming weekends. In large part because of its association with the Beats, the bar even has its own entry in Wikipedia — a distinction that neither McSorley's nor the White Horse can claim.

For all its particular history, it was for a different reason that the West End made the papers most recently, in early April. As the *Spectator* and then *The New York Times* reported, the bar was sold to the owners of a pair of Cuban restaurants downtown; it is scheduled to close for renovations on July 1 and to reopen several weeks later as

Havana Central at the West End.

The news occasioned a rhetorical rending of garments in the Spec, and even the Times pieces hinted at the end of an era. But whether the sale in fact represents the end of “the ’Stend” any more so than previous changes remains to be seen. Indeed, the new owners (one of whom is a graduate of the business school) have pledged to preserve much of the décor and some of the menu; they seem to be taking pains to alienate the clientele as little as possible.

Change could be a good thing. By most accounts, the quality of the food at the West End has been, shall we say, uneven, and few visits were necessary to conclude that the tap lines could stand a good flushing.

Of course, the West End was never intended to be terribly upscale. What it aimed for, and in this it succeeded through the years, was to be inexpensive and friendly. As alumni of somewhat recent vintage report, Thursdays and Fridays are still big nights at the bar, and even if it was not one’s primary destination for an evening, the West End remained a good place to convene for a nightcap and check in with friends on the way home. One might also note in passing that, despite exhortations from the University and more muscular efforts by New York’s Finest, patrons under the age of 21 managed to enjoy a beverage there from time to time, and were presumably grateful for the opportunity.

Even so, it has been a long time since the West End was considered the place to go by the student body at large. But as other neighborhood watering holes came and went — thanks to the University’s benevolent influence, more the latter and less the former — the West End hung on.

But not without alterations. Over the years, the bar’s footprint has expanded, and the kitchen has been relocated from the basement to the ground floor. Somewhere along the way, the original bar was removed. Heck, in 1988 it even closed for more than a year before being revived by the departing owners.

All that time, it endured, along with the ghosts of Kerouac and Ginsberg and thousands of others who ate and drank and talked away their Columbia days and nights. If the spirit of that time is gone, well … it was probably gone a long time before April. But if the spirit is still there, it can certainly survive this.

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