

4.16.00 Style

House Of Mirth

When Benjamin Sonnenberg lived here, it was party central.

By William Norwich

Park Avenue princes and princesses, the latest darlings of the media, are wearing python-skin Gucci jeans during the cocktail hour and worrying about where to put the second nanny when the trendy feng shui expert finally files his report. Vintage Norman Bel Geddes cocktail sets are selling for upwards of several thousand dollars online. One million new millionaires were minted in the United States in the past decade, and almost all of them seem to be in the market for lofts in festive TriBeCa.

People are actually drinking Ecuadorean ceviche martinis. (I want names!)

Is it some kind of social indicator that there are two theatrical productions this spring of "The Wild Party," inspired by Joseph Moncure March's 1928 poem about a lush night of Prohibition-era debauchery? "Leave your inhibitions at the door . . . and step inside the Virginia Theater for an evening of gin, skin, sin and fun!" reads one production's ad. Later this spring comes "Groove," a divertingly cool independent film about some San Francisco kids who put on a Dionysian "rave" under outlaw conditions not unlike the 1920's wild parties, except the props have changed: yesterday's bathtub gin is today's stove-top Ecstasy.

Parties are inevitable. To revel is human, and to dress in party fashions, sometimes divine. "Parties are always tribal, to do with membership of a group; they are also to do with the warding off of tribal terrors and the conjuring up of tribal pride and joy," explains the British social observer John Wells. "The Solomon Islanders bunch up and dance to frighten away the *dodore* or Giant

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Richard Tyler's house at 19 Gramercy Park South once belonged to Benjamin Sonnenberg, the consummate P.R. man.

PRE-EMINENT PARTY PROPERTIES (HURRY WHILE SUPPLY LASTS)

- 171 West 57th Street: Earl Blackwell's former penthouse with ballroom, \$6.7 million.
- The Parc Vendome, 340 West 57th Street: Stunning nine-room prewar condo, with 1,250 square feet of terraces, \$3.75 million.
- 740 Park Avenue: 34 rooms owned by Saul Steinberg, \$35 million plus. SOLD.

Continued from Page 79 Wandering Penis they will come to destroy their livelihood: execution in London and New York do the same to away the specter of unemployment."

Finance paid for the gilt of the 80's, the end of materialism and money, money everywhere have people practically dancing in the streets — all acquisitive frivolity, all this trying to have again. Parties used to be fun, I'm told. Alas, some time now business interests have replaced society's engine during all three courses, starter, the entree and dessert. Many of the ones remembered most since World War II have been retained with a decided business slant, some changing their motives better than others: Malcolm Forbes, Andy Warhol, the real estate agent Alice Friedman and, before them, Benjamin Sonnenberg, almost ducal public relations executive whose spirit might still be alive in Midtown. At least Richard Tyler suspects so.

One night, after a small dinner party at home, he couldn't sleep. At 3 a.m., he left his bedroom to ramble through his grand house at 19 Gramercy Park South. Insomniac's delight: Tyler counted 37 rooms to get lost in. "I was fiddling around, still discovering things in the house, getting the feeling for the place when, behind some door in one of the living rooms, I found an old radio. I turned it on, but there wasn't any power. I fiddled away, and suddenly I heard music. Big-band music. It was like a scene in 'The Shining.'" Tyler returned to the radio, and, still no power, there was this music playing. "I didn't tell

Memoirs and Confessions of a Bad Boy." "Our home, my home, was a stage for his work."

The house on Gramercy Park was built in 1845 for the Whig politician William Samuel Johnson. In 1887, it was redesigned for the Stuyvesant Fish family. According to the architectural historian David Garrard Lowe, Mrs. Fish wanted "a fittingly magnificent stairway upon which [she] could perch to proclaim her defiance of Caroline Webster Schermerhorn Astor," the Mrs. Astor of the day. Benjamin Sonnenberg bought the house from the Fish family in 1945. Soon after he died, an Austrian baron bought the property, followed by Richard Tyler and his wife, Lisa Trafficante, who acquired the house in 1995 for \$3.5 million. It is now for sale for \$18 million. (Sonnenberg paid \$89,000.)

Sonnenberg's parties perfected the idea of the New York social "mix" — the many classes of people who met in World War II and returned to take Manhattan. "I hate being a guest," he told The New Yorker. "I don't have to drink the wine — I just like to hear it gurgle. I like to mix people up," he said. "I think a really good dinner party should consist of an archbishop, an authoress, a lady of easy virtue, a tycoon and a Powers model." His mix was never arbitrary. "There are some people who are really only meant to come to cocktail parties, and some people who are really only meant to come to dinner parties, and you have to exercise certain selective qualities as a host."

The interior decorator Dorothy Draper helped Sonnenberg decorate his house with imported

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one, but my sisters, who were visiting from Australia, heard the music and commented on it the next morning."

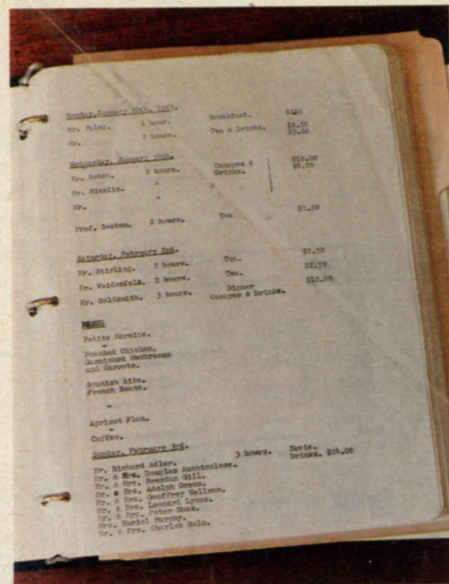
Tyler likes to think the music he heard was a coming serenade from the spirit of Benjamin Sonnenberg, who owned the Gramercy Park house from 1945 until his death in 1978. Sonnenberg came to the United States from Brest-Litovsk when he was 9 and "resolved to become a cross between Condé Nast and Otto Kahn," he told The New Yorker in 1950. In 1926, he became a publicity man and eventually included among his clients Philip Morris, CBS, Lever Brothers and the Federated Department stores. Sonnenberg didn't deal in "items." He was not a sort of P.R. man portrayed in "The Sweet Hell of Success." Benjamin Sonnenberg got his front covers of Fortune and Time.

An impressive man, he was certainly that: in the mode of the late 19th century; a 'new' man among the dons and peers he loved to entertain, an aristocrat to the company heads he was hired to write his son, Ben, the founder of the literary journal Grand Street, in "Lost Property:

English paneling, antiques and art, including a Sargent portrait. "I may gross five or six hundred thousand dollars a year," Sonnenberg said, "but to the public, the business I'm in still seems a flimflam, fly-by-night business. I want my house and my office to convey an impression of stability and to give myself a dimension, a background and tradition that go back to the Nile."

By contrast to the five-star décor, the cuisine at 19 Gramercy Park South was fine but uneventful. Sonnenberg often served lamb chops and a compote of fruit. "My father's food was simple," recalled his daughter, Helen Tucker. "Never mounds of caviar." For instance, for a reception for friends like Hedda Hopper, Sonnenberg might serve Champagne and roast beef on white bread from Pepperidge Farm, one of his clients.

And thus we have today's pride of arbiters disguising business as conviviality: our city's publicists, the keepers of the party lists. Sonnenberg didn't invent this, however. He just advanced the cause of networking in his time. I think you might find the tradition dates back to Caesar, who always entertained with a salad of mixed agendas. ■



As documented by Sonnenberg's grandson Steven Tucker, the house the way it looked in Sonnenberg's time, clockwise from above: His party accounts from 1961; one of several dining rooms; the grand staircase modified in 1887; signed memorabilia on the landing; a boarded-up pantry that the house's current owners, Richard Tyler and Lisa Trafficante, uncovered; one of several parlors, with Grinling Gibbons's wood carvings over the fireplace.



