



# The Godfather of Nightlife

Interview by Seth Sendel  
Story by Christina Substempel  
Photography by Tadjana Shnan  
IAN BOSTRAGER IS PROVIDING ONCE AGAIN WHY  
HE WILL ALWAYS BE A RELEVANT FORCE TO  
FECKON WITH, NO MATTER THE GEEK.



SITTING ROOM

**I**t was way back in 2006, in the good old days of prosperity and flashy displays of wealth, when we first sat down with the man we dubbed “the king of cool,” Ian Schrager. At that time, he had recently cashed out of Morgans Hotel Group and was just starting to build up the portfolio for his newly created Ian Schrager Company, most famously with the Gramercy Park Hotel, a legendary property in New York City’s oldest residential neighborhood.

Flash forward almost four years later, and the success of Schrager’s Gramercy Park projects on Lexington Avenue (the hotel and the annex building housing luxury residences) serve as a testament to his dynamic staying power in a fickle world of instant gratification, as well as his ability to lead the culture of modern-day America. Influential people around the world are constantly commenting on his undeniable impact, with the biggest entrepreneurial names in art, architecture, design, and nightlife calling him everything from a true design hero, to an inventor, to a major source of inspiration.

Schrager’s story—from when he burst onto the nightclub scene in 1977 with Studio 54, to his near-single-handed influence in defining the boutique hotel genre—has not only been told a thousand times over, it is so well known that the career of this innovator will forever be a part of the fabric that weaves together various decades of the country’s pop culture. When tales are told of New York’s greatest modern heydays, his name will be one of the first mentioned in the conversation. And while many up-and-coming trendsetters may have fizzled out after their first attempt (or even after making a comeback), Schrager continually bounces back against insurmountable odds, always refreshed and always invigorating our own understanding of avant-garde aesthetics.

With Studio 54 and Palladium, he dictated the irreverent New York nightclub of the 70s and mid-80s. In the late 80s and 90s, he arguably invented a new kind of luxury hotel with properties like The Royalton; The Hudson; The Delano and The Shore Club in Miami; Sanderson Hotel and St. Martin’s Lane in London; Clift Hotel in San Francisco; and Mondrian in Los Angeles. His creations have been so cutting edge that his model has often been imitated, continuously popping up again and again, even today in the 21st century, which is precisely why he explains that with the Gramercy, he set out to shock our senses all over again.

“The original inspiration for the idea [of the Gramercy Park Hotel] was to try and do something that had never been done before; to break new ground and startle people. I wanted to come up with something that was completely unlike anything I have ever conceived of before,” he explains.

**S**o how does a creative genius who has done it and seen it all before go about creating something fresh after three decades of upsetting the status quo of trends and design? Quite simply by never relenting on the quest for inspiration. Schrager describes himself as a student of culture and explains that he generates new ideas from scenes on the streets and what he senses in the air. “Replicating what someone has done before doesn’t really do anything for me. What interests me is sort of tapping into that zeitgeist,” he explains as he likens the process to a sailboat tapping into a wind and riding out the wave of air. “I like to be out there on the edge. There are signposts for ideas all around. The question is how to put them all together. It’s a matter of focusing them and trying to figure out how they fit together to create a real energy, a real explosion, like a flash-point. That’s always interested me.”

ROSE BAR AT GRAMERCY  
PARK HOTEL



JADE BAR AT  
GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL

In terms of the Gramercy Park Hotel, the signposts pointed in the direction of an intellectual artist's loft in Manhattan. "We were very much inspired by art, as we have always been in all of our projects, and we took note that the loft, which has become the desired way of living for people in an urban environment, was really invented by artists," he says. "Why not extend that into the hotel room as well and try and capture that kind of original, quirky idea?"


Words like eccentric and eclectic were thrown around liberally when the hotel first swung open its redesigned doors back in the winter of 2006, and Schrager's physical manifestation of that quirky idea is demonstrated in the form of 185 rooms set in jewel tones of jade, sapphire, and ruby, with thick velvet upholstery covering the furnishings and heavy drapes curtaining the windows. Black-and-white photography from the well-known Magnum agency archives decorates the walls, with peculiar metal light fixtures throughout the property.

If his earlier partnerships with Philippe Starck conjured up images of Marie Antoinette letting them eat cake, in this partnership with longtime friend and creative master in his own right, Julian Schnabel, Schrager chose to depict an entirely different time period, reminiscent of 19th-century French bordello. Schnabel's touch is prevalent throughout the space, as he designed a majority of the furniture and lighting, with additions from Maarten Baas and Anda Andrei. The lobby, with its checkerboard-tiled floors and 20-foot ceiling, opens up to the Rose Bar, which to some is more reminiscent of an irreverent art gallery than lounge, as works by Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Cy Twombly, and Schnabel's own *Suddenly Last Summer (Picasso Painting No. 2)* are on display.

Schrager has spent the better part of the past two decades demonstrating to the world that a luxurious hotel with its own identity is in fact possible while simultaneously characterizing himself as one of the most creative comeback kids of our times. Yet when we sat down with him in mid-January, evidence of the former nightlife king's roots sprouted up throughout the conversation. But how could they not? Rose Bar, housed in his Gramercy Park Hotel, was an instant success upon opening its first bar tab in 2006, and has shown no signs of withering. Considering that the lifespan of a New York nightclub is about as long as the city's proverbial minute, we set out to discover what Schrager defines as the secrets to success in the nightlife industry.

"My original nightclubs were quite large and the dance floor formed the heart of them, sort of in a tribal kind of way. It was an over-the-top, anything-goes type of mayhem," he says. "While it was appropriate for those times, things are different now. Today it's more cerebral and more conversational. Today there is less of the 'packing them in' mentality, with more refinement and sophistication...So we try to capture that [refinement] at the Rose Bar. We are not interested in the pseudo-celebrities that have sort of dominated the gossip columns. We never really wanted to be a part of that scene."

Wait, I'm sorry, did we hear that correctly? In this day and age, when bad behavior from famous faces out late at night practically guarantees instant success, did we just hear a voice of reason speak out against the status quo of pop culture? Indeed. But perhaps even more shocking is the fact that this particular voice of reason could possibly be credited as the original instigator of celebrities behaving outrageously at New York nightclubs. (Remember the now-infamous night when Bianca Jagger rode her white horse into Studio 54?)

A man with short grey hair, wearing a black sweater, a white scarf, and grey trousers, stands in a doorway. Behind him is a large, brightly lit Christmas tree. The floor is checkered, and the walls are white brick. Large windows are visible on either side of the doorway.

"The nightclub  
is a completely  
different business  
than what it was.  
The costs of doing  
a nightclub have  
escalated so much  
that young people  
can't do it, even  
though it can be  
a young person's  
industry."

JAY McMAHON

When asked about the evening that he refused to let Paris Hilton into Rose Bar, Schragger does not dodge the question or avoid ownership. "It was not a public relations kind of thing, and it wasn't something I was just doing just for the sake of it," he explains. "I think the kind of bar that we [have] here is perhaps not the kind of venue that she would enjoy." His personal thoughts on such a shift in attitude have been well documented, and he has taken ownership publically many times for creating the monster that he is now disowning. "We just want to do something different at Rose Bar, something more sophisticated. It wasn't so much of a rejection of her, as it was that I was trying to create a space that I would enjoy walking into."

We won't classify this transformation of attitude as growing up, but more as an evolution of the king of cool; what we all thought was scandalously hip in the age of disco today seems quite passé. So listen up club kids, paparazzi magnets, and nightlife impresarios: the age of sophistication is reigning supreme and taking over as the new cool.

Another nightlife trend that Schragger is choosing to buck is overpriced bottle service. "I think that when you have bottle service, although you may make more money in the short run, you sort of eliminate a lot of really great people that may not be able to afford that, or merely don't want to spend their money that way," he says. "We just thought that a better way to make a really great party would be to include a wide variety of people. We didn't want everyone to be all the same—not all rich, not all young, not all old. And that mix really brings the energy. We thought that bottle service would make it very uniform. And honestly, I believe that it has sort of been the undoing of the nightclub business." That's quite a bold statement coming from the man who can be credited as one of the inventors of the modern-day industry. But Schragger has always been a bold man.

"The nightclub is a completely different business than what it was. You know, when I did a nightclub, it sort of culminated in owning the nightclub. It's completely opposite now. Now nobody owns anything. From club to club, now somebody owns it, someone else does promotions, with a different entity in charge of the door. It's not so spontaneous, not so innocent anymore." He credits this downgrade to the plethora of regulations that are the result of development. "Some of it is, of course, necessary, but I think the costs of doing a nightclub have escalated so much that young people can't do it, even though it can be a young person's industry."

While Rose Bar is still one of the hottest spots of Gramercy Park Hotel, we would be remiss not to mention the hotel's venue that has been stealing all of the headlines so far in 2010. Maialino, Danny Meyer's new Italian restaurant, which is advertised as a Roman trattoria, officially opened back in November to all the expected hoopla that one would expect from an Ian Schragger venue—restaurant, hotel, nightclub, or otherwise—with the likes of Anna Wintour and Alain Ducasse seated at some of the best tables in the house. Chef Nick Anderer did not earn immediate rave reviews, but is clearly finding his groove as the dust settles and the crowds keep the reservation list booked.

It is while discussing Maialino that Schragger confirms some rumors that have been floating around the NYC scene. "We have a lot of exciting things planned this year for both the hotel and Rose Bar," he says. "I

think it is great to be involved with Danny Meyer. I actually think he is the best restaurateur in the country. I'm planning a new restaurant up here on the roof that Danny will be doing. Basically the idea is to provide an alternative to what he is offering downstairs, creating a reason for people who need something different to come up here. It will be superb, high quality food served over a charcoal grill, but much less expensive. So this idea of providing access to really great food but at a less expensive price is very exciting to me."

There you have it: rumor of a rooftop restaurant confirmed.

As for what we can expect from this king of all club kings at Rose Bar, he starts to name names about who might be popping up in 2010. "We are planning some midnight sessions where some really great entertainment will come in unannounced, quite by surprise." Some of the past surprise guest artists that have performed at the Rose Bar Sessions include Velvet Revolver, The Cult, Jane's Addiction and The Black Keys, to name a few. "So it will be like you are at the bar having a drink, then you turn around, and there is some big name entertainer like Slash performing some acoustic set. We want it to be like they sneak in, do the set, and then mysteriously disappear, just to sort of keep everything interesting, dynamic, and ever changing," he says.

"These new ideas will be crossed with continuing to update the hotel, making various improvements as we go along. It's very much a work in progress. I don't think we are ever complete to a level of 'done' that we can just walk away. We are always evolving things." ■

