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The Club Everyone Wanted to Be In

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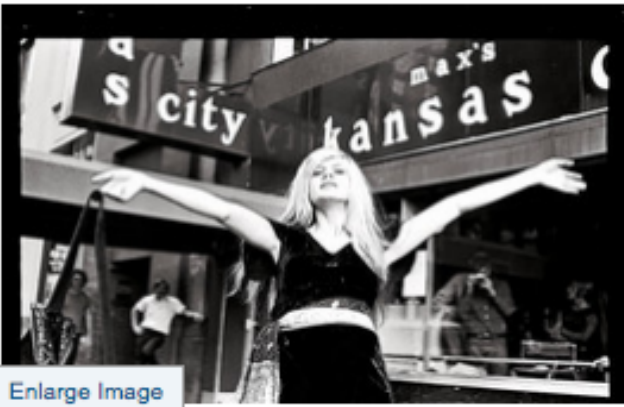
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By STEVE DOLLAR

Updated Sept. 15, 2010 12:01 a.m. ET

On a recent afternoon, the Steven Kasher Gallery was nearly empty save for its staff and a trim, silver-haired man gazing intently at a wall of framed images. Everyone in these offhanded portraits looked fabulous, in a debauched and groovy way, and even the characters who weren't familiar looked as they though should be, somewhere under the smeared mascara and opiated grins.

"My first impression was, all the guys look like girls and all the girls look like boys. I had to pick up a camera," said Anton Perich, recalling how he came to document the now-fabled scene at Max's Kansas City. Mr. Perich is one of several photographers whose work is featured in the Kasher Gallery's exhibit "Max's Kansas City." The show, which opens Wednesday, takes a glamorously indulgent look back at the fabled bar and restaurant that once resided at 213 Park Avenue South.



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Anton Perich's 'Andrea Feldman, Max's Kansas City, 1972' is among the works on view at the Kasher Gallery. *Anton Perich and Steven Kasher Gallery, NYC.*

Between 1965, when impresario Mickey Ruskin opened it, until it closed in 1981, Max's was a clubhouse for two generations of artists, musicians, filmmakers and scene-makers. It began as a harbor for such artists as Larry Rivers, John Chamberlain, Richard Serra and countless others, but by the mid-1970s it had become a punk and glam-rock magnet under new ownership.

Mr. Perich, a native Croatian newly arrived from Paris in 1970, fell in easily

with the Max's crowd, which then included a crew of Andy Warhol's superstars who became his favorite subjects.

"I went there every night," said Mr. Perich, a painter and video artist who sometimes worked at Max's as a bus boy while shooting nightlife for Warhol's magazine *Interview*. "I had the two most glamorous jobs on the New York punk scene."

So why all this interest in Max's—now? It's not entirely a bout of cultural nostalgia, perhaps brought on by the 2006 closing of CBGB, the Bowery rock 'n' roll dive that shared credit with Max's as a punk spawning ground in the late 1970s. There's a marketing plan.

"The effort we're making is not to sell out the brand, but reignite it," said Elliott Azrak, who heads the Max's Kansas City Company. The group has launched a website (maxskansascity.com) and commissioned a documentary to be released later this year. But Mr. Azrak's plans are bigger than that. He wants to take the Max's name into the hospitality industry. "New York's restaurant and lounges no longer cultivate a playground for the creative class," he said. He hopes to sell investors on the idea of boutique hotels with a similar overlap between the art, music and fashion scenes, which preserves "the DNA of the original place."

That could be an impossible task. As Mr. Perich recalled, merely walking into Max's back room with a camera was, in 1970, a novelty. "And everyone was so narcissistic you could cut it with a knife," he said. The subjects of his snapshots were, to paraphrase a Max's regular, the underground filmmaker Jack Smith, "flaming creatures." Mr. Perich laughed. "God was confused," he said. "He couldn't finish his work."