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City Room
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OFFBEAT

Before Word Can Spread, Party's Over at a Brooklyn Speakeasy

By Reid Singer January 28, 2013 4:02 pm

The room at the corner of Greenpoint Avenue and Franklin Street in Brooklyn fell silent on Saturday night as several loud bangs were heard at the door. A latecomer to the party unfolding inside, Stephanie Han-yu, was on the phone and reported that three squad cars were on the street.

The police had apparently been alerted that the public gathering was dangerously over capacity. And it was also illegal – the room was home to Rotgut, a speakeasy that did not have a liquor license.

“Open the door!” someone, presumably an officer, shouted. “We can wait all night.” When a patron leaned toward a window to look out, a man behind the bar in a black fedora and a leopard-print sports jacket told him not to touch the drapes. A few more bangs were followed by an interminable period of tense near-silence. Finally, when guests walked out into the lobby and saw no police officers on the street, the music was turned back on and the party revived itself.

The man in the leopard-print jacket was Duke Riley. The work of Mr. Riley, a tattooist and installation artist by profession, has a prankish streak, so much that many people believed the drama outside the door had been staged as an elaborate tribute to what was Rotgut’s closing night. In 2006, after reading about illegal drinking establishments that had operated during the turn of the century in the Rockaways, Mr. Riley and his friends set up an outdoor saloon for one night under

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Drinks were priced at a nickel each, and bartenders did not make change. In the early morning, visitors watched a full-gear boxing match between two female guests, in a kind of homage to the unsanctioned prize fights that had taken place on the same beaches a hundred years earlier. Mr. Riley staged another ode to the New York Harbor a year later, when he built an 18th-century-style submarine and drove it through the bay toward Manhattan, seeking to re-enact an obscure naval battle from the Revolutionary War.

That endeavor, like the Rockaway project, was interrupted by vexed members of the police, who in the case of the submarine suspected an act of terrorism was in progress. Mr. Riley continued to pursue his interest in history and subversive performance in 2009 with still another project — this one mostly legal — involving a mock naval battle by flooding a pool at the World's Fair grounds in Flushing Meadows. Describing the fully decorated battleships and costumed combatants in an article in *New York* magazine, the critic Jerry Saltz called it “one of the finest performance events in recent memory.”

At least since then, Mr. Riley has not had an exposure problem, though he is still occasionally startled by the degree to which his group projects can turn into hip places-to-be. Rotgut is one such example. A year ago, when he first envisioned converting his tattoo parlor on Franklin Street into a speakeasy, collaborators, including an assistant in the parlor, who insisted on being identified as “Sully” Sullivan, and Annie Evelyn, a furniture maker he met while living in Providence, R.I., pictured something assiduously low-key.

“I was just looking for a cool place to hang out, drink, have bands play, and occasionally do some art,” Mr. Riley said, explaining that the speakeasy was advertised on a strictly word-of-mouth basis. On an otherwise quiet street, bartenders at the nearby Lulu's and Pencil Factory who heard what was going on were undisturbed, happy for the collateral business the speakeasy would bring. Musicians invited themselves, and timed their sets based on lulls in guests' conversations. Anyone who wrote about the place was to be banned.

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open for suggestions on ways to commemorate the end of Rotgut's run. Jessica Delfino, a musician and comedian, played songs on her acoustic guitar while feigning the sighs and muted sobs of an emotionally demonstrative singer-songwriter. The bar was again used as a stage by a cymbalist for the Hungry Marching Band, who muscled their way into the 180-square-foot room on Saturday about an hour before the visit by the authorities, dressed in full game-day regalia.

Later, Sully, who was serving as a bartender, projected a 1980 Sonny Chiba film, "Shogun's Ninja," on a screen opposite the bar. Sully had been toting an archaic Walkman cassette player for music, and played mix tapes he had prepared especially for the evening. The alternative, he said, would have been flipping records over a turntable. But there was simply no room.

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