

Martha's Vineyard Magazine

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Under one (Hot Tin) Roof

by Chris Burrell

photographs by Peter Simon

The heyday of the Hot Tin Roof was in the late 1970s and early '80s, the first few years of its existence. The club changed hands many times, went bankrupt once, and was resurrected in the mid-1990s. The steel building at the airport now houses a nightclub called Outerland – as well as a lot of memories.

One guy ran a house-painting crew. The other owned a fried-food shack. Just two men who woke up every morning, grabbed hold of a paint brush or a spatula, and set to work.

But like many people whose hands bear the marks of real labor – calluses, scraped knuckles, or burns from a hot griddle – their minds drew maps while their muscles toiled, maps of grander and better things to do. Picture George Brush of West Tisbury at twenty-nine dipping a stick into yet another can of paint and stirring it as an idea turned around in his head. In those creamy swirls of paint, his vision emerged – a nightclub out in the barren lands by the county airport.

In the summer of 1978, Brush was working on Chappaquiddick. One afternoon, he wanted a cheeseburger. He knew Herbert Putnam 3rd, the man at the snack joint on the other side of Edgartown harbor.

"I used to stop in at Herbie's. He was running the Quarterdeck," said Brush. "He cooked me lunch, and I would tell him stories about how we could have a ball." It didn't take too many of these power lunches to convince Putnam to hang up his apron and join forces with Brush. He sold the Quarterdeck that fall.

Less than ten months later, Brush and Putnam had recruited a famous pop singer as a partner and opened a nightclub that held fewer than 300 people and didn't look like much from the outside, but soon became a smash, the kind of place where rank-and-file Islanders could share the dance floor with an astonishing number of head-turning celebrities, from John Belushi and his Saturday Night Live entourage to John Travolta and Jackie Onassis.

They named it the Hot Tin Roof, and the scene that evolved there, especially in its first few years, became the stuff of legend for those who were there and can't forget what they did and saw. It was the times. The waning days of disco. The cocaine. The age of innocence and sexual freedom before AIDS. And an Island teeming with young people. A volatile concoction, yes, but also set up for fun.

The musical palates among Islanders were broad, and folks came in droves to see their friends and listen to a dizzying roster of musicians and comedians who performed there – Peter Tosh, Delbert McClinton, Cyndi Lauper, Ricky Nelson, Martin Mull, and Steven Wright, among others.

In other words, the house painter and the fry cook could not have picked a better time to leave behind their physical labors. Clearly, they were not the only ones dreaming of something bigger by way of entertainment on Martha's Vineyard.

The first linchpin was Carly Simon.

Brush may have come home with paint-splattered pants every day, but he was a smooth talker. He spotted Simon at the No Nukes Concert in the fall of 1978 at Clarissa Allen's farm in Chilmark. "I filled Carly's head full of ideas, and she fell for it like crazy," said Brush. What she fell for wasn't a concept for a nightclub on a high-traffic Vineyard thoroughfare like Circuit Avenue or Main Street, Edgartown, but more like a roadhouse out in the middle of the woods, where the only neighbors were skunks, raccoons, and ticks.

But even with Carly Simon on the ticket, there was still politicking to do. The Vineyard, then as now, put commercial developers through a gauntlet. Indeed, this was the same fall and winter that Islanders took up their pitchforks and fought an application by McDonald's to establish a fast-food outpost on the beachhead at Vineyard Haven harbor.

"All eyes were on that, and frankly it gave us some cover," said Brush. "A whole bunch of good things happened. Edgartown voted out of the Martha's Vineyard Commission [a land-use and planning agency, which the town later rejoined], and Ted Morgan took a sabbatical."

Morgan was a veteran Edgartown selectman and no fan of liquor licenses for a new nightclub, even if it lay on the farthest reaches of town. Vineyard Gazette editor Henry Beetle Hough spoke publicly against the club, arguing that it threatened to erode Island values and traditions. Putnam remembered another resident, Peter Clough, saying, "Undoubtedly, you're going to smell marijuana out there."

But the alcohol license came through, and meeting with the county commissioners to get approval proved to be a cakewalk. "We went to the county and said we'd like to lease two acres of land. 'Just go and stake it out.' Nobody really cared. It was like a foreign country."

They felled the first tree in the woods in March 1979 and opened the club on the first Thursday in June – sixty-seven days, start to finish. "It was a very inspired group, everybody working toward this dream. We just lived and breathed it," said Margot Datz, an Edgartown artist hired to design the interior of the club. She was twenty-seven years old, and the crowning touch on the walls was her mural.

"I was painting away when John Belushi walked in," she said. "I was in this crazy outfit with a bow tie and a little boy's plaid shirt, very Annie Hall, little man trousers, and he says, 'I love the way you paint but I hate the way you dress.'"

After the one-liner, Belushi took Datz out for a quick spin on the dance floor, then went around the rest of the club, cajoling the others who were working to get the place open. He had brought along a case of beer as added encouragement.

On an Island where inhabitants pride themselves on a studied indifference toward the celebrities in their midst, it's tempting to downplay the influence of an impromptu visit by Belushi or Carly Simon's name on the letterhead. But the celebrity element helped launch the Hot Tin Roof.

Brush and Putnam were caught flat-footed on opening night when the media showed up – and there was more of it than the two Island newspapers.

"Every magazine and newspaper in New England and beyond is there at the door and like, 'We're with the press,'" said Putnam. "What press? The Gazette and The Grapevine – they're already here."

People magazine, The New Yorker, The Washington Post, and Newsweek all worked in some mention of the hot new nightclub co-owned by Carly Simon. "There was a buzz about it in New York. The coverage was tremendous," said Putnam. Still, there was some trepidation. It was June, a month when the number of tourists is low, and Islanders are all caught up in moving into their tents and working long hours. On night two, the sound system began to fail during a performance by Tom Rush.

"We screwed up pretty badly in the beginning," said Brush.

"Tom Rush? I don't think he ever came back," added Putnam.

On night ten or eleven, they got their first taste of how hot the Hot Tin Roof could get.

"It wasn't really clear at that point that we were on top of a rocket ship," said Brush, "but then Belushi and Danny Ackroyd's brother showed up and said they wanted to do a gig." They were only a garage band, the show was free – and totally unadvertised. By 8:30, hundreds were queued up outside.

"There were cars parked all up and down Airport Road," said Brush. "We had a line out the door for three years after that, every night, whether we were spinning records or there was a band. . . . The first two years, we never had a sign."

The scene would repeat itself time and again.

Tim Mathiesen, who installed the lighting at the club and was stage manager for the first year, said the image burned into his mind was the night he lifted his head from his work and gazed out over the stage to the outdoors and noticed something unusual in the trees: The branches were filled with people. "There were nearly as many people in the trees and in the parking lot as there were in the club," said Mathiesen. "People had climbed the trees so they could see through the screen porch and onto the stage." The man on stage was Peter Tosh, and the Hot Tin Roof – the nightclub built in the scrub out at the airport – had been open less than three months.

"It was the first time that a major player in the world of reggae had come to the Vineyard," said Mathiesen.

Fans who couldn't squeeze inside nailed pieces of two-by-fours on the tree trunks. Putnam said of the Tosh concert, "It kind of made your mouth drop. It was just astounding. And two weeks later, Cyndi Lauper came in and nobody knew her [in those days]."

It's reasonable to ask how a little nightclub managed to rack up this caliber of musicians and bands. Brush credits a woman named Patti Rix, a former roadie who brought in musical acts in the first summer. "If it weren't for her, we would have been in trouble," he said. The Carly Simon connection enhanced the club's standing, but the

Vineyard itself was a drawing card.

"It was the perfect midpoint between New York and Boston. There was all this talent working New England. Okay, so you gotta take a boat, but the blues guys loved to play here where they could go fishing. And the Hot Tin Roof had a band house," said Bob Lee of West Tisbury, a regular at the Roof and a former tour director for Kate Taylor's band, Skin Tight. "Word spread fast. The place got a great rep."

Brush and Putnam also noted that the late '70s and early '80s were the pre-MTV era, when record companies relied on road trips and concert tours, not music videos, to promote and market their musicians.

"The Vineyard kids were a good audience. It was constantly reinforced," said Brush.

An aura grew around the Hot Tin Roof. It embodied something cool and hip, but it was also laid back, embracing the mix of the Island.

"You didn't have to worry about anything there. There were no fights, even with people banging into each other. It reflected the era – progressive people and freedom," said Toby Codding, a deejay in the early years. "It was automatically full no matter who was playing."

The deejays in those days knew each other, shared insights about up-and-coming bands, and took pride in exposing the crowds to new tunes and mixes.

"People were a lot more open to different types of music," said Marc Chandler, a deejay who commuted from Nantucket. "Back then you could put in punk, new age, Bob Marley, and everything in between. People were there to have fun, and it was kind of contagious. People were there from the West Coast, from New York. You got a good melting pot from around the world. It was a feast for the eyes."

Bob Lee said the Hot Tin Roof earned its stripes by drawing a cross section of talent: reggae, blues, jazz, and the old Motown acts. "You had Willie Dixon, the man who wrote all the blues standards. You had Jimmy Cliff, how important that was, and how well it vibrated, this universal island music," he said. "And Dizzy Gillespie. Talk about a cultural treasure. There were so many moments that were really transcendental. We were just really fortunate."

The Roof, Brush and Putnam pointed out, was a place where plumbers and carpenters and the lady from the emergency-room reception desk could stand next to Bill Styron or Dan Ackroyd and Bill Murray. "Walter Cronkite showed up just for giggles because it was a hot place to go," said Putnam. "The Saturday Night Live crew came to the Vineyard quite a bit because of John Belushi. It was just sort of celebrity special." Year-rounders felt part of an intimate scene. "What was so great about this place was that it had the celebrity panache of the larger urban clubs, only it was little. You really did bump into John Travolta or Jackie O. And the acts you were seeing, you could tie their shoelaces," said Margot Datz. "The Hot Tin Roof in the early days was unbelievably cool."

The Hot Tin Roof was like a last wave. "Lots of cocaine. Dance possibilities. It was a free-loving atmosphere. It was wild. We were trying to prolong the '60s," said Bob Lee.

Herbie Putnam recalled the afternoon during sound checks when two women were roller-skating around the dance floor topless. Datz remembered it as "a fearless time. AIDS hadn't hit. I don't think people even knew what herpes was. It was the last time we could still all be free. We really could be that playful," she said.

Lester Baptiste Jr. was a dockworker at the Steamship Authority, the same age as Datz, and a devoted disco dancer who came to see the Roof as his own movie set. "We used to go to the Hot Tin Roof and pretend we were in Saturday Night Fever," said Baptiste. But he was no pretender on the dance floor. Putnam remembered Baptiste not only as the guy with more long-collared shirts than any other patron but as the one who could make all the other dancers step back and watch.

"I went up to the Hot Tin Roof like I always did and was doing all the moves. All of a sudden I heard this screaming. Up in the booth was Carly and John Travolta," said Baptiste. "It's the spotlight dance, September, by Earth, Wind and Fire. Next thing I knew they were clearing the floor. It was the highlight." Baptiste met his wife on the dance floor, a young woman in white hot pants and long blonde hair.

Long before American Idol captivated television viewers, the Roof offered the chance to realize the same kind of dream, at least Island-wide. Baptiste asked Putnam if they'd let his father's American Legion band perform for a night. Putnam said sure, and Snookie, Ciggie, Gary, and the rest of the old-timers were told they got a gig at the Roof.

"Naw, they'd never hire us," Lester remembered them saying. "To them, you'd just asked them to play the Ed Sullivan Show. They all went out and bought new white shirts, and they rehearsed, which they never did – always played off the cuff."

When Brush and Putnam were first lobbying for a liquor license, they often explained that their goal wasn't to build a discotheque or a club that catered only to the burgeoning population of well-heeled and well-known summer people.

Somehow, they set up a place that leveled the field, or softened the boundaries, between the people here for July and August and the ones who had muddled through another February on the Island. Or maybe the club simply reflected a time when that divide wasn't as wide as it can feel today. It's been said that Vineyard culture turned a corner when the wealthy summer people stopped wanting to be like the Islanders, stopped driving old pickup trucks and wood-paneled station wagons, and Islanders began emulating and striving for all the things they saw in August.

If that's true, then the Hot Tin Roof was doing more than just putting on a great show of musical talent. It filled a need for different facets of the community to come together.

The Roof offered a stage not just for the stars but also for Islanders who were raising money for good causes or wanting to share their own talents. Theatrical shows became part of the repertoire, and a springtime production of Guys and Dolls is engraved in many people's memories as a Roof high point.

"It was all Islanders, and it was the most outstanding thing," said Brush. Ralph Friedman recruited Toni Cohen of West Tisbury and others to choreograph the musical and teach the non-dancers how to dance. Cohen and her husband were running the youth hostel back in those days. "We sold out. We were a smash," said Cohen.

George Brush's idea had come full circle. The fun he promised Putnam when they sat at the Quarterdeck hashing out their big idea was spreading around. Toni Cohen understands why. "When all the famous people showed up, it was fun, it was okay. But it wasn't really the best part of it," she said. "We all got to live out our fantasies. We just had a ball."

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