



_PHOTOS: KIM HUGHES/THE GRID (UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)



MON DEC 17, 2012

PLACES

Queuing for the House of Lords

Decades past its 1970s rock ‘n’ roll heyday, this notorious downtown hair salon is still alive and snipping. We paid a visit to find out how it stays a cut above.

BY: KIM HUGHES

There are countless hairdressing salons around the city. And then there is the House of Lords, which seems to run not only on a different clock but also seems to play—and somehow win—by an entirely unique set of rules.

Take, for instance, this midweek mid-December night. Even by bustling Yonge Street standards, the salon is slammed at 6 p.m. The dozen or so sassy, uniformly attractive male and female stylists on the floor work briskly on clients while a handful of twentysomethings waiting for the next available chair perch themselves on hard benches beneath thick ropes of festive red-and-green balloons.



No complimentary coffee or water is offered—de rigueur almost everywhere else. A cursory glance around the self-described “Hair Design” emporium quickly confirms that it is—how to say this gently—a bit of a dump. The filthy carpet on the stairs in the back of the shop looks ready to stand up and sprint out on its own. Myriad tired-looking framed album covers and posters of The Police, Rod Stewart, The Tubes, Flock of Seagulls, *October*-era U2, Alice Cooper, Ted Nugent, and Eddie Money nail the place firmly to a pre-1990s heyday.

And yet, like the excited codger with the gray ponytail and leather jacket hoisting a two-finger devil-salute at an Aerosmith concert, the House of Lords boldly swaggers on. It acts as a counterpoint to its young constituency who come, year after year, lured by cheap, fast haircuts and dye jobs while upbeat dance music—incongruous with the classic-rock posters on the walls—blares at mind-melting volume.

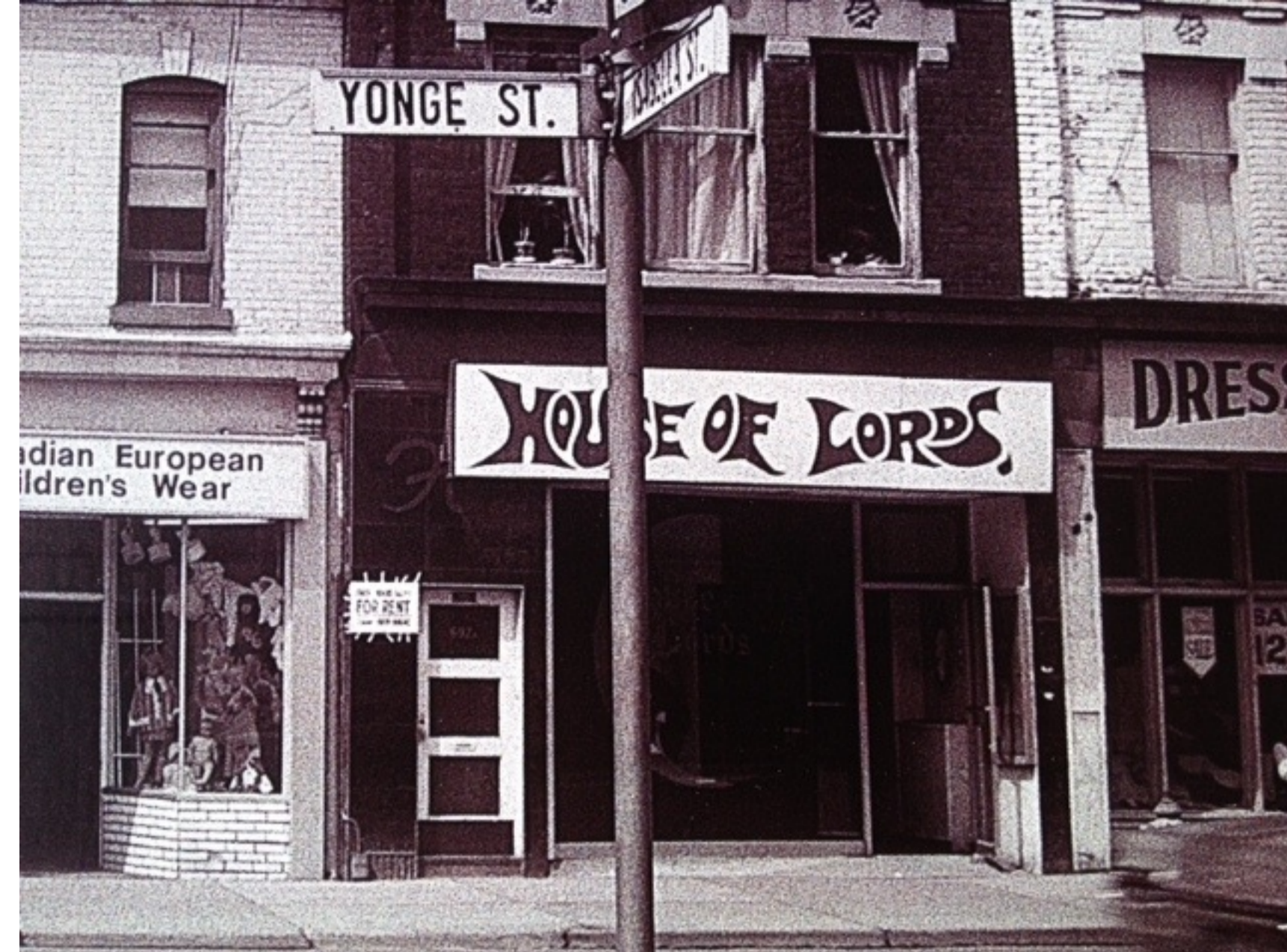


Everybody in Toronto knows House of Lords but today, in 2012, does anybody know anyone who actually goes there? How the heck does it stay in business, especially in an industry that's notorious for slim margins and that lives or dies by trends? Who is this hip clientele visiting a 45-year-old shop? And who was the last legit rock star of the many listed on its website to go under the scissors?

To the first question: It appears they walk among us. "I've been getting my hair cut there for a year," reveals *Toronto Sun* film writer Jim Slotek, who tried the place after his 22-year-old son Michael started coming home with "pretty decent haircuts—sort of Noel Gallagher-esque, though he had no idea who I was talking about.

"I do get kidded about it when I tell people," Slotek adds. "But there's no waiting unless you want someone specific. They give you exactly what you want, and after a while the loud techno music just becomes white noise."

On a recent Wednesday in December, Cale Fair was in Lindsay Martin's chair; both are from Elora, Ontario and they resumed their client-stylist relationship here. That's a frequent occurrence in the salon biz, but plenty of new heads need to be poking through the front door to keep the lights switched on decade after decade. The House of Lords may be Toronto's most unlikely ongoing-success story.



The original House of Lords. Photo: courtesy of Paul Burford.

Launched at 692 Yonge at Isabella in 1967 (!) and moved across the street to 639 Yonge in 1972 (where it has remained ever since), the salon with the unmistakable stretched “O” logo is also a city landmark. Moreover, it is—or at least *was*—a bona fide rite of passage for small-town exiles to the city.

Facebook and Twitter queries for anecdotes about the place netted dozens—*dozens*—of recollections from friends and acquaintances beginning with “When I first moved to Toronto...”

“When I moved here from Prince Edward County, I was determined to go there,” says Damien Nelson, publicity manager with FLIP, echoing the recollections of others from Windsor to Winnipeg.

Yet when pressed for specific answers about his salon’s enviable/mystifying longevity—and by pressed, I mean enduring a stream of semi-cranky “shut ups” and “I wish you’d stop taking notes” and “you wanted the interview, let me talk” over drinks at the Artful Dodger pub next door before finally getting on point—owner/operator Paul Burford allows that success isn’t magic. It all comes down to the basics.

“Everybody likes a show,” the 70-year-old British-born hairdresser says. “That’s what I give in there,” a point driven home later while watching comely female stylists float above male clients reclined at the shampoo sink.

“Also advertising,” Burford adds. “I bought radio ads when no one else was doing it.” The advertising continues today—brightly illuminated subway posters are planned for Bloor-Yonge station in January, building on ads currently running on subway-platform CCTVs.

Of course, there is also the old-fashioned sandwich board—listing the shop’s rock-bottom prices—tripping pedestrians on the sidewalk out front.



Photo: Courtesy of Paul Burford.

But success also rests with Burford's acumen both as an entrepreneur able to run a lean, high-volume business and as a showman able to parlay the salon's glory days into something still kind of cool and coveted. And despite his bluster, his zeal shows.

Softened by two pints and aware I am not trying to sell him anything, the larger-than-life Burford later—and proudly—walks me through his salon, offering flattering anecdotes about his staff, who seem to admire the man even as they dismiss his (sometimes breathtakingly) objectionable cracks with a bored roll of their eyes.

(Burford's own life story, animatedly recounted, cries out for telling. Nifty tidbits: He came to Canada on a whim originally headed for Winnipeg, worshipped rockabilly singer Gene Vincent, is chummy with David Lee Roth, and started out doing hair at Butlins Ballroom Dancing in Yorkshire in the early 1960s. He and wife Susan, who helped build the business, have been married 30 years and have two adult kids.)

As for the House of Lords' intrinsic rock 'n' roll identity—reinforced by the above-mentioned mounted posters, many autographed—Burford says its genesis is two-fold: In the early days, he would offer free haircuts to tour-bus drivers shepherding bands to nearby venues like Maple Leaf Gardens. They'd return next time in town, sometimes with artists in tow, to revisit those alluring young stylists. And Burford cranked music outside his shop to draw attention in the early days.

A notorious visit by a pre-Rolling Stones Ron Wood in 1972—and the ensuing media coverage—sealed the deal. Gene Simmons, Alice Cooper, and several notable others followed over the years; Cooper was back in the shop this past summer, according to Burford. Another stylist offers that actor Kiefer Sutherland, in town for family Thanksgiving last year, also paid a visit.

Potential star-gazing aside, House of Lords' ongoing success is largely built on prosaic stuff: men's haircuts are just \$14, women's start at \$20. The shop is open very long hours seven days a week. It requires no appointment, offers blazing-fast service, and is easily accessible from anywhere in the downtown core.

Plus, there is a palpable, infectious energy to the space, even though several Facebook respondents (to say nothing of brimming-over message boards) were quick to note that not all experiences at the salon have been top shelf, quality-wise—hardly shocking for a longtime business with a high staff turnover rate operating throughout the sex-and-drugs-and-rock-'n'-roll era.

"I corrected a few haircuts that were done in that shop when I worked at Coupe Bizarre," laughs Jennifer Hughes (no relation), now a medical lab technician who insists she remains a big fan of the House of Lords. "I got my hair cut there once in 1983 by a guy who, many years later, became my boyfriend" (and who gave her a Mohawk).

“I used to go there when my hair short and platinum—it was the cheapest place to get a really good bleach job,” recalls former music publicist Kelly Mulvey, now a diesel mechanic with CN. “The stylists were always characters, and you always felt a little bit rock ‘n’ roll when you were there, even when they played Journey.”



Gaby Quinn (left) and a fellow House of Lords stylist get into the Halloween spirit.

Photo courtesy of Gaby Quinn.

Today, the House of Lords is to Toronto haircuts what the Tulip is to carnivores and the Linsmore Tavern is to imbibers: wonky, imperfect, an implausible but undeniable survivor. Like the uncle who insists, three rye-and-Cokes in, that you pull his finger, it is at once cherished and ridiculed—and yeah, kind of loved.

“Paul keeps the people in here—a customer in the shop is worth two on the street,” howls heavily inked stylist Stella Oram, alluding to Burford’s omnipresence at the shop, a point wife Susan confirms when she calls her husband on his mobile during our interview and he insists I ask her what makes a good marriage. (“It’s like a garden,” she says pleasantly. “You’ve got to work at it every single day.”)

Adds Oram’s equally stunning House of Lords colleague Gaby Quinn: “I’ve been here just about two years and I love it. I’m very passionate about my career. And this is just a very fun, high-energy place to work.”

Luckily for Burford, it shows.





TAGS *Alice Cooper, Damien Nelson, David Lee Roth, FLIP, Gene Simmons, House of Lords, Jim Slotek, Kiefer Sutherland, Paul Burford, Ron Wood*

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Latest 

Lynne Clarke

I am happy to travel all the way from northeastern B.C. to get my hair done by Mike H. at the House of Lords. I've been going there for years and will continue to do so as long as Mike is there.

 0  0

5:10 pm on February 20, 2014 [Reply](#) [Report](#)

Bad Lid

I have a great story... Back about 1989 or 1990, I like many other misguided Caucasian youth at the time, desired dreadlocks. They still weren't quite everywhere yet... and no black salon would really entertain me. They'd shoo me off with cryptic directions "use beeswax" / "it just happens naturally".

So, my friend and I headed to House Of Lords to see what they could do. Someone said "sure! right, beeswax!" and proceeded to use blue/green beeswax to set my hair. I was assured that the wax would fall out in a few days and I'd be left with natty dreads. Great.

Well, night after night I'd go to sleep and wake up with the same amount of blue wax in my hair and my pillow stuck to the back of my head. I perservered for about three weeks (through hats, taunts, etc) before finally having to shave my head. Amazingly and intentionally, no photos exist.

 3  0

2:57 pm on December 18, 2012

 Reply  Report

C2daP

I went to House of Lords as my regular hair place for almost 15 years. the reason i just can't go back anymore? the blaring music.. Every time I'd leave i, i felt like i needed some kind of sedative. the other reason? all the hairstylists i really liked and were talented left cause they couldn't stand the blaring music either. Don't really have their health and safety rules in order. Ah, theres fashion for you.

 1  1

4:29 pm on December 17, 2012

 Reply  Report

Greenie

Been going off and on since I was 17... I'm 30 now.

The stylists change, and as a woman with short hair I'm not ALWAYS 100% comfortable with the cut — however they're always open when I need them and while reception and management isn't always nice, they're stylists are... I can take a few snaggly hairs in my eyes as long as I get treated fairly for a \$20 cut! 😊

Hope the trend continues...

 1  0

3:56 pm on December 17, 2012

 Reply  Report

anon222

the loud obnoxious music you hear from this place as you pass by is ridiculous. i cannot stand that kind of blatant noise pollution. another one of the many reasons that yonge street is so tacky.

 9  12

2:03 pm on December 17, 2012

 Reply  Report

anon223

You're not really adding value to the article, are you Anon222?
If that is even your real name.

 4  0

3:45 pm on December 17, 2012

 Report