

# SPEAKEASY IS A HIDDEN GEM

FERRIS BUELLER once said: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

Remember these words while walking down Dean Street, Soho, and you might just be lucky enough to bump into The Black Gardenia.

Waiting to usher you down the stairs of this new hole in the wall jazz and blues bar is one of the three owners, Ronnie King.

The 1940s style suit, bowler hat and colourful tattoos creeping out from underneath his collar set the scene for what awaits below.

As we reach the bottom of the stairs he pulls back the curtain of dangling beads, saying: "There are no speakeasy type bars left in Soho."

"That's the kind of place where we used to drink, so we thought it was about time we brought one back."

The vision unfolds. Ahead of us groups of people huddle around tables in the red-tinted half-light.

To the left, corseted women and suited men clutter around the old wooden bar. A thick, tribal funk music oozes from the room next door. The atmosphere is intimate and mildly intimidating.

Co-owner Zimon Drake slithers over to introduce himself. His darting eyes, greased hair, pinstripes and matching spats paint the perfect picture of the paranoid gangster.

It feels like the cops could turn up any second and put an end to all this underground

## CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN IS LURED TO THE DIMLY-LIT BLACK GARDENIA TO UNEARTH A LAND OF TATTOOS, CABARET GIRLS AND SUPERBLY ELEGANT DRINKS



fun. "Nice of you to come down," he says, "But we really don't need any publicity."

This is their secret hideaway, along with third owner, Jake Vegas, who stands across from us, spitting Beat Generation style lyrics into a 1950s ribbon microphone.

I don't take the disinterest personally. This is the kind of venue that wants to establish itself through word of mouth, rather than impersonal PR campaigns. Zimon says: "We're very pleased with how it's going. The bar has only been up and running two months, but already there's a nice crowd."

The tiny room next door is where the performances happen.

"It's all live music here, every night of the week," Zimon continues. "Some nights it's cabaret; others it's burlesque."

"Tuesdays Lee Gordon runs a folk-blues night called Down at The Red Bricks and Fridays we put on Monkey's Uncle, a side show night where anything can happen. And every Sunday The Brandon Allen Trio play live jazz."

My visit happens to be on a Thursday and

Jake's centrestage. His sets are broken up by brief Super 8 film projections on to vinyl sleeves stuck to one of the mirrored walls.

A massive suited monkey dances with a lady on a mural which covers another one of the walls. The signs on the toilet doors read, 'snakes' and 'fishtails,' above little drawings. The care and attention to detail is astounding, but it could almost go unnoticed, the place is so understated. For all that cabaret, burlesque and themed nights have become fashionable, the vibe here is far from snotty.

Just make sure you obey the door policy of not wearing jeans and, whatever your walk of life, nobody seems to care too much. You get the impression this is Ronnie's, Zimon's and Jake's life, 24/7, and if you happen to catch a glimpse of it, all the better for you. Open seven days a week, day and night, there's plenty of opportunity to sample The Black Gardenia.

If you're yearning to slow down in the busy and bustling city then keep your eyes peeled for this little gem – you could all too easily miss it.



MAKE MINE A GIN SLING: Ronnie King behind the bar of The Black Gardenia with the lovely Eva.

'NICE OF YOU TO COME DOWN,' HE SAYS, 'BUT WE REALLY DON'T NEED ANY PUBLICITY'

## OFF THE SHELF: CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN CHECKS THE FACTS

# Anyone lost a stuffed eagle?

FAMOUS cross dressers; classic murders; long lost London coffee-houses; most unconvincing cockney accents in movies – *The Book of Lists London* has them all.

Heroes, enemies, facts and fictions, no one is spared a mention in this whirlwind of quirky, unexpected and, more often than not, superfluous information.

Using 180 lists, Nick Rennison pays tribute to all colours of antics our capital has enjoyed over the last 1,000 years.

Lists, however, can often be frustrating for their lack of detail, but thankfully the best part of Rennison's entries are accompanied by a paragraph or two explaining their history and context. The format of the book means it would probably fail to make anyone's desert island list. But *The Book of Lists London* is educational and entertaining, easy to pick up and even easier to put down, making it a great candidate for reception rooms and toilets all over the Big Smoke.

### PERSONAL FAVOURITE:

'14 of the strangest things found in Transport for London lost property offices:'

1. Jar of bull's sperm
2. Lawn mower
3. Breast implant
4. Theatrical coffin
5. Stuffed eagle
6. 14-foot long boat
7. Divan bed
8. Park bench
9. Garden slide
10. Two-and-a-half hundredweight of sultanas
11. Urn of ashes
12. Dead bats in container
13. Vasectomy kit
14. Two human skulls in a bag

NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL AN ACCENT: Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*



THE BOOK OF LISTS LONDON: £9.99 hardback, published by Canongate

informer review