

SHOPKEEPER

Rare volume

How the bookstore Sellers & Newel became College Street’s best place to see music

STORY BY MICHAEL BARCLAY PHOTOS BY JANICE REID

THE BOOKSTORE OWNER HATES book events. “I find them massively boring,” he says, sitting in a chair in the middle of his tiny retail space, while customers mill around him. Still, his store does a lot more than just sell books. It’s one of the best – and certainly the most intimate – music venues in town.

Peter Sellers is not the deceased British acting legend, but a former creative director who worked in advertising from 1980 until he opened his shop, Sellers & Newel, on the north side of College Street at Beatrice in November 2011. He started hosting live music there a few months later, on the recommendation of trumpet player Tim Hamel, a regular customer. This was during one of those recurring moments when Toronto was losing several live venues. Sellers then reached out to one of his favourite local singer/songwriters, Kevin Quain, and booked him to play the store.

Eight years later, Sellers is gearing up for an October where he’ll host 15 shows in 31 days. One of them, the 200th show at the store, will be played by Kevin Quain.

The centre stacks in the shop are on wheels; Sellers moves them to the side so he can set up chairs for his shows. Capacity is 35 people; the average ticket price is \$20. Most shows sell out well in advance. Some people attend every single show. Overhead is non-existent: Sellers doesn’t hire any extra staff. After renting a small PA for years, he bought one right before COVID hit. All door proceeds go to the artist, as do merch sales.

Sellers doesn’t normally host summer shows, because he doesn’t have air conditioning. He made a recent exception during a sweltering August long weekend because Toronto expat bassist David Pilch (k.d. lang, Bill Frisell) was in town to play with

Kevin Breit (Norah Jones) and Don Rooke (Mary Margaret O’Hara). “It was impossible to say no,” says Sellers. The trio did two hot nights.

Says the bookseller-turned-promoter, “I’ve had more than one musician say to me, ‘Peter, this was the scariest gig we’ve ever had. Everyone is just sitting there staring at us, and the front row is three feet away! But we also realized we can do whatever we want. We can play quietly.’”

“Sellers & Newel is an unsung gem, without question the best intimate venue I’ve ever been to,” says veteran Toronto promoter Richard Flohil, who is 89 years old and goes to see more live music than most people a quarter his age, usually a couple dozen shows a month. “All sorts of music works in that venue. It’s a great place to start, and a grand gig for better-known people who need the rent paid by Friday, because an artist can easily walk away with \$600 to \$800.”

Last fall, Sellers got a call from Gary Topp, a giant of a promoter in Toronto music history, who was central to the punk, new wave, reggae and avant-garde scenes in the 1970s, ’80s and beyond. Sellers, like most cool Torontonians of his vintage, grew up going to Topp’s shows.

When Topp’s number showed up on Sellers’ call display, the bookseller tried to play it cool. “Hey Gary,” he responded, as if they’d known each other for decades.

Topp wanted to book a Mancunian poet for a performance at Sellers & Newel. It was Mike Garry, of “God is a Manc” fame. “With my usual swift business acumen, I said, ‘Gary, I don’t book poets.’ He said, ‘Well, listen to this guy, I’ll send you some stuff.’ It was fabulous. We sold out two shows and had another on a Sunday afternoon.”

So to recap: A bookstore that hosted live shows to avoid literary

events hooked up for the first time with one of the city’s major music promoters to put on a poetry show? “That’s right,” Topp then brought in Cynthia Ross of Toronto punk pioneers the B-Girls for a sold-out show, Ivan Julian from CBGBs regulars the Voidoids, and ’80s Queen West staple Dave Howard.

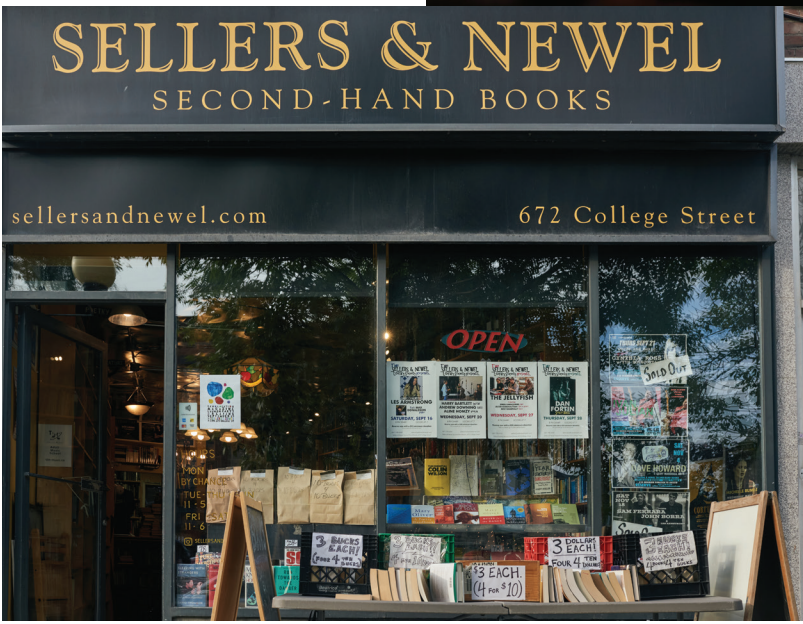
Sellers might sell a book or three before or after a show. But if he’s donating all door money to the artists, what does he get out of it?

“This is a bonus for me. I’m not doing this to make money: I already have a business that makes money. I’m doing this so the performers can make money. I get to hear a lot of great music, at a time that suits me,” he says. “It’s a tremendous amount of fun. It’s a big ego boost. I never imagined someone from Australia or Nashville or the U.K. or the West Coast or the Yukon would play here. I’ve met a lot of extraordinarily talented musicians who are also really lovely people.

“What’s it done for me? It’s made my life better.”



Sellers & Newel owner Peter Sellers (top) has been hosting musical acts in his bookshop since it opened, in 2011. Left: Max Donaldson playing a set in mid-September. Concert attendees can browse the stacks before and after a show.



A rendering of the intersection where Dupont, Dundas and Annette meet, reimagined by architect James Brown of Brown + Storey, that features a roundabout and public space.

1 The intersection at Dupont, Dundas and Annette
Plans are afoot to untangle the long-reviled spaghetti junction

The intersection where Dupont, Dundas West and Annette meet is often cited as one of the most confusing in the city. It includes an abrupt change in grade along Dupont as it passes below the railway bridge to the east, multiple bike lanes and six pedestrian crossings at different angles.

But that could soon be changing. City staff have been developing solutions to the intersection’s safety issues for a number of years, according to local councillor Gord Perks. His office has been working with stakeholder groups to address the issue after it was

first brought to his attention by the West Bend Community Association.

The city is preparing to launch a public consultation on the proposed changes to the intersection later this year. Plans have not yet been made public, but Perks says the redesign includes eliminating the slip lane from Dundas to Dupont, closing the Old Weston Road connection, and connecting the bike lanes on the west and east sides of the train tracks.

“The basic idea is to take an intersection that’s basically a bunch of spaghetti thrown on the ground and is really dangerous for pedestrians, cyclists and people driving, and to square it up, so you don’t have those dangerous blind spots and vehicles moving really fast. To

make it a good, safe urban intersection where cyclists and pedestrians can easily cross and know what they’re doing,” Perks says.

Architect James Brown of Brown + Storey Architects hasn’t yet seen the city’s plans, but he has developed his own vision for what a reimagined intersection could look like. It includes a roundabout that would be surrounded by six new city blocks forming a triangle with a new public space. Brown sees possibility in the chaos of the intersection beyond simply re-engineering traffic.

“This is maximum devastation of an urban site that can be transformed into the opposite: maximum devastation could become maximum quality,” Brown says. — *Cassandra Drudi*

2 Mimico Creek
More than a month after a chemical-plant fire released pollutants into the creek, the community is still waiting to hear whether the area is safe for use

Andrea Thompson first learned of the pollutant spill in Mimico Creek on Facebook. On August 11, a building fire at Brenntag Canada, a chemical distribution company, had caused chemical waste to pour into the creek.

Cycling down the creekside trail soon after, Thompson found two women capturing a mallard duck coated in what looked like oil. Over the following weeks Thompson and others formed a makeshift patrol of the affected waterway. While they remained on the lookout for other injured animals, they also saw first-hand how staff from Ontario’s Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks and their chosen remediation contractor, GFL Environmental Inc., were handling the cleanup.

“It was negligent and disorganized,” Thompson told the *West End Phoenix*. She found rakes and shovels and garbage bags strewn about the site when workers weren’t present. Booms left in the creek to gather surface pollutants were bursting. Thompson saw ducks and other wildlife swimming and eating within the contaminated booms. In late August, heavy rains washed the collected pollutants downstream into Lake Ontario. “It was clear that no one was coming to empty the containers,” she said.

Neither Brenntag Canada nor GFL Environmental Inc. responded to requests for comment.

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks spokesperson Gary Wheeler told WEP that “significant cleanup has already been completed.” After testing water, sediment, soil and vegetation samples from the affected site, Wheeler

confirmed that “petroleum-based oil” was the “main contributor” to the ecological damage.

Dozens of individual animals – mallard ducks, Cooper’s hawks, herons – were found coated in oil and rushed to the Toronto Wildlife Centre for treatment. While most animals were cleaned and released at a sanctuary near London, many were badly injured and died in TWC’s care.

The early view from Mimico Creek was bleak. “In the field there were wild animals simply dying,” Toronto Wildlife Centre executive director Nathalie Karvonen told WEP. “Our rescue team saw thousands of dead fish, a dead beaver and dead ducks.”

Thompson and others in South Etobicoke were also alarmed at the lack of signage informing local residents about the spill. “We were flagging people with young kids, people with dogs that were playing [in the water] and didn’t know [about it],” she said. Calls to local councillors, members of provincial parliament and city departments for signage or updates on water quality often went nowhere. It felt to Thompson like everyone in authority was content to blame someone else.

While the community waits for answers about when the area will be safe for residents, let alone wildlife, Thompson has found a silver lining. While the private citizens shouldn’t have to put this level of energy into preserving Mimico Creek, she said, it’s good to know that “when we do, we can get things done on behalf of our community.” — *Andrew Reeves*

3 Queen and Dufferin.
A group is raising questions about the suitability of the Parkdale Amphitheatre

One of the first things you see when you step off the streetcar at Queen and Dufferin is a concrete and brick

semicircular structure with three concentric rings for seating. This structure is surrounded by an ill-kept green space and adorned with graffiti on the top ring. A portable toilet sits off to the side.

The site, called the Parkdale Amphitheatre, is “not a welcoming place,” according to Ric Amis, the chair of the Parkdale Residents’ Association.

The amphitheatre and the underpass, which allows travel on Dufferin Street under the railway tracks and eliminates the need to detour on Gladstone, were completed in 2010. The amphitheatre serves as a retaining wall for the soil next to the bridge. Originally, a wall was supposed to come all the way up to the sidewalk, according to the city.

“We felt very strongly that there needed to be a big public-realm element to the project,” said Councillor Gord Perks, referring to the results of community meetings. He said that festivals, performances and events take place there.

“It’s just a chunk of concrete. It needs some trees in the front on the south end of it close to the sidewalk so that there’s a bit of a shade canopy,” said Amis.

There are, in fact, some trees in that area, but they’re small and don’t provide adequate protection from the sun on hot days. The green space surrounding the amphitheatre also has trees, but they appear not to provide shade to the amphitheatre.

Before the feature was built, Perks said that “it was an ugly retaining wall, a fence, a bunch of scrub and garbage. It was just awful.” He thinks the project was successful.

“A lot of public spaces aren’t getting as much attention as they should, because of the years of austerity under Mayors Ford and Tory,” he said. “But I hope that we see more investment in public spaces in the years to come.” — *Luciano Cesta*