

# BlackBook

## Industry Insiders: Rob McKinley, Good as Gold

By Anam Mansuri, | April 2, 2009



Rob McKinley -- part of the team responsible for hotspots **GoldBar**, **Cain Luxe**, and **Surf Lodge** -- began his design-oriented career behind the scenes at fashion house heavy-hitters Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karan, and Giorgio Armani. After a shift into nightlife, the GoldBar concept stemmed from McKinley's fictional idea of a European count obsessed with anything and everything gold. The golden boy met with us to discuss keeping his bar alive, the fall of the Meatpacking District, and **those guys across the street at Southside**.

**How did GoldBar come about?** My partner told me about the space, and I told him that I had a concept which would work really well. For me, creatively, the idea was to create a bar inspired by some of the grand hotels in Europe -- Paris and Rome -- but without the hotel. I wanted it to have the old-fashioned, traditional style of service and the formality of those bars and then almost poke fun at it and make it overly decadent. It came into being when we picked the space and we had gold leaf everything as soon as you walked through the door. The skulls were inspired by the catacombs in Paris. Little by little, it came together while working with all the different artisans, fellow workers, and artists.

**Do you worry that GoldBar will lose its coolness factor?** Luckily, we have a pretty cool crowd which has been mostly consistent. It has to do with the style of our service. Bottle service isn't required. It's all about the cocktails and the unique design. Even though the bar is over the top, it's not just a trend, and I think it can stand on its own two feet. It's also about the music. All the music we play has deep roots.

**What do you think in terms of longevity?** Even though this is a nightclub, if people ask me what I do, I say I'm a designer, and I have a bar and a hotel. We pride ourselves on our cocktails. Those bartenders behind there are serious business. We want to be here for 10 years, for 15 years. We want it to become a good, solid place where people will always be able to have a drink and listen to good music.

**How do you keep it innovative?** We change the drinks every season, and we have great bartenders. They really know their game. Quality is a big part of what we do. My partners and I are all on the same page when it comes to that, and there's a lot of attention to quality and detail. We have all fresh-squeezed juices, and the ice is all hand-cracked everyday. And yes, I oversee all the music. That's something that we have to constantly question ourselves, but luckily all of our DJs are really brilliant, and a lot of them are musicians.

**What are your busiest nights?** Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. On Sunday, there is a younger, sort of rock hip-hop vibe.

**What's your relationship like with your partners Jamie Mullholland and Jayma Cardoso?** I think we're all a little bit nuts in the best way possible. We all get a kick out of each other, and we respect each other within the realm of our business. I think that's the most important thing. We're all very good at what we do.

**Who does what?** I handle all of the creative stuff, which consists of the musical direction, any invitations we need to do, and obviously the decor and lighting. Sometimes even the garnishes for the drinks. I go nuts for the small details: olives, incense. I'm a freak about the specific French incense that needs to be here all the time. I do the graphic design and the uniform design for **GoldBar**, **Cain Luxe**, and **Surf Lodge**. Jamie does the operational stuff, and Jayma is great at getting people here, being front of house and the host.

**Any quibbles during the process?** Always. If we didn't, then something would be wrong. I probably get nagged about money the most. Jamie is always telling me to watch the money, but I'm the designer, and I like things a particular way. They'll ask me, "How much is the incense again?" We always manage to figure it out in the end.

**Do you have any formal training in design?** No, not at all. It's just something that I love to do. I always ask my assistant (a graduate of Parson's school of design) questions about how you're really supposed to present and format things. Let's just say I always find my own way to do things.

**Besides your own places, where do you hang out?** I've been going to **Café Select** a lot recently. I like the food, and I love the coffee. The **little bar at the back** is really great as well and kind of a little getaway. The music is really great. **Sant Ambroeus** in the West Village is one of my haunts. It's a great café for breakfast, lunch, and dinner with excellent food, great coffee, and great desserts. There are really interesting people there all the time from all walks of life. **Do the Meatpacking clubs, including Cain Luxe, have any hope of redemption from the bridge and tunnel crowds?** Bridge and tunnel isn't so bad. I'm bridge and tunnel deep down inside and always will be. When I was 16 and 17 years old, I was going to clubs in the city. It was just a different attitude then. We were going where the music was great and where the people were fun. And then it became a lot more velvet rope, and there were different requirements to get in. It still can be very good, and a lot of people will go. If it's a good party, it's a good party. **Best GoldBar night?** I remember one night we had nine different DJs in the DJ booth. We had two DJs on that night, and the rest came as guests. We all knew each other, and we were just going song for song. It was myself, DJ Kiss, Chris Liggio, DJ Cassidy, DJ Nice, DJ Ruckus, Tony Touch, MOS, and **Damon DeGraff**. The rule was: only one song. So, it was really tough because one song is your bridge to the next song, but we just had to keep it in that same vein all night. We also did an amazing masquerade party here with free-flowing Dom Perignon. The invites were these really beautiful boxes with hand-painted Venetian masks. **How does Southside fare as competition?** It's cool. I was at Southside the other night. I think it's like anything else. I had a good time. Music was good. We're two different things.

**Favorite celebs to step foot in GoldBar?** A bunch of them, but we won't talk about them. It was a great honor for them to be here, but what's even more of an honor is when they come back. Ian Schrager was here a bunch of times, and that was a big deal for me -- being a designer and him being the Studio 54 guy -- and all. Lenny Kravitz comes a lot, and the only reason I can say this is because he wrote a song about GoldBar for his last album called "Dancin' Til Dawn." Giorgio Armani came one night, and that was big for me because I used to work for him.

**What's your dream venue?** I want to do a resort similar to **Surf Lodge** but in the mountains. Snow Lodge, if you will. I would love to do a spa someday. A super-duper spa inspired by some of the natural springs and baths of Italy and Scandinavia.

**Who's your dream guest?** I'd love to have any one of the Rolling Stones here. Or have Stevie Wonder put a piano smack dab in the middle of the room and play all night long.