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Celebrating 90 Years of Legendary Parties at the Waldorf Astoria

Including that time a circus elephant crashed the April in Paris
Ball.

By Leena Kim

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There is a story that about perfectly sums up just how legendary the parties used to be at the Waldorf Astoria. The year was 1952. Elsa Maxwell, as famous for her parties as she was for her gossip column, had been tapped to mastermind the April in Paris Ball, an annual event conceived the year before by the hotel's banquet manager Claude Philippe as a way to fill the social calendar while improving Franco-American relations. This also happened to be the same year the Ringling brothers' circus was in town, and so Maxwell had an idea. She would dress up as a maharajah and ride into the Grand Ballroom on an elephant. It wasn't the first time, and certainly wouldn't be the last, that elephants—and circus animals—would crash a party at the Waldorf. A few years later Marlene Dietrich came to the April in Paris Ball dressed as a ringmaster, with a Shetland pony in tow.



Ringmaster Marlene Dietrich at the Parisian Circus-themed April in Paris Ball at the Waldorf Astoria in 1959. BETTMANNGETTY IMAGES

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"I used to say, rather than call it a fundraising dinner, let's take away the 'd' and we'll make it a *fun*-raising night," says Hughie Weir, who joined the Waldorf Astoria as a trainee in 1958, and worked his way up to director of events, a position he held until 1994. Born in 1932, Weir is only six months younger than the hotel, which celebrated its 90th anniversary this October. (The Waldorf is currently closed until 2023, undergoing an extensive renovation and restoration that will, among other things, create 375 private residences starting at \$1.8 million).



The Waldorf Astoria, 1941. GEORGE KARGERGETTY IMAGES

When its Park Avenue location opened in 1931, the Waldorf Astoria was the largest, tallest, and most expensive hotel in the world, having been built in record speed (a year), and during the Great Depression no less. While there were older, more established grande dames in town to contend with—the St. Regis, established in 1904,

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and the Plaza, which came three years later—the Waldorf, technically speaking, predated them.



The original Peacock Alley—which connected the Waldorf and Astoria hotels—was given its name thanks to the well-heeled ladies who coopted the corridor into Manhattan society's most fashionable runway.
FPGGETTY IMAGES

The first iteration of the Waldorf-Astoria, built in the 1890s as two neighboring Fifth Avenue hotels, was the result of a feud between members of the Astor family. Soon their investments would pay off and the place turned into an ornate retreat for the era's Social Register fixtures, playing host to galas and banquets attended by Vanderbilts, Carnegies, and visiting Grand Duchesses. (We also have it—or more specifically, longtime maître d' Oscar Tschirky—to thank for the inventions of Waldorf salads and eggs Benedict.) By the late 1920s, the smart set had moved farther uptown and the Astors sold their property to the developers of the Empire State Building.



Andy Warhol and Peggy Lee at the Waldorf Astoria, 1973. BETTMANNGETTY IMAGES

Of course it didn't take long for the new Waldorf Astoria (sans hyphen) to endear itself to future generations of glitterati by throwing the most extravagant parties (the sheer immensity of the grand ballroom was quite conducive to this)—and by providing a gilded refuge where presidents, royalty, movie stars, and rock stars could simply just be. "The Waldorf in those days was like Hollywood," says Weir, who knew Cole Porter and the Reagans, had drinks with Shirley MacLaine, and became friends with Dina Merrill. "One thing I learned was that these celebrities didn't want to be oohed and aahed and all that, they had that already. I just treated them like regular people and they really appreciated that."

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Prince Rainier of Monaco and Grace Kelly, at a ball thrown in their honor at the Waldorf Astoria the day after their engagement was announced, January 1956.

And as for those famous parties, the list is endless. There was that time Grace Kelly and Prince Rainier of Monaco made their first public appearance at a gala thrown in their honor, a day after their engagement was announced. Or the time Marilyn Monroe upstaged Wallis Simpson at the 1957 April in Paris Ball: when the actress showed up, the dozens of photographers who had been swarming the Duchess of Windsor promptly abandoned her. This was also the night when Monroe allegedly met JFK for the first time.

There, in 1932, was a 17-year-old David Rockefeller in the stag line at the Victory Ball, and, in 1964, Tricia Nixon coming out at the International Debutante Ball with her escort, and future husband, Edward Cox. There was that time Yul Brynner, dressed in full costume from *The King and I*, asked C.Z. Guest to dance. There were the performances Peggy Lee used to give twice a year in the Empire Room. And ten years of Guy Lombardo's New Year's Eve ragers.

"That was the world back then," Weir says. And with that, a toast to this Art Deco palace on its 90th birthday and, below, a look through the history books on nearly a century's worth of star-studded revelry.

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90 Years of Glitz, Glamour & Star Power at the Waldorf



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Farrah Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal, 1982.

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