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The Remix

The Inn Crowd

It is a chilly Thursday evening in Toronto, and the habitués of the city's Parkdale neighborhood are, as usual, spoiled for choice. A former manufacturing district west of downtown, Parkdale is the city's prime destination for the young, the bohemian, the studiously shaggy — the epicenter of an art and indie-music boom that has prompted locals to nickname their town Torontopia.

Tonight, Parkdale is a hive of artsy industry. In a basement club, a man who calls himself Alphabot is alternately crooning, strumming a guitar and layering violin ostinatos over an electronic beat. Nearby, there is an art opening in a storefront gallery while next door a gay karaoke party is in full swing with a muscle-bound man in a platinum blond wig belting out a version of "Like a Virgin."

Similar scenes play out nightly in other bastions of hipness like Williamsburg in Brooklyn and Silver Lake in Los Angeles, but in Toronto there's a catch: all of this activity is taking place under two roofs, at the Drake and the Gladstone, two former flophouses turned boutique hotels, separated by a couple of blocks on Queen Street West, Parkdale's main drag.

The resident D.J. and the art concierge may have become standard conceptual gambits at boutique operations from here to South Beach, but the Drake and the Gladstone are onto something a bit different. They have established themselves as clubhouses for Toronto's creatives — abuzz at all hours with locals attending readings and opining in discussions on topics like "Is There a Toronto Aesthetic?" To take a room at either hotel is, essentially, to go native. Carl Wilson, a critic whose blog *Zoilus* is a hub of the Toronto

arts community, explains, “The Drake and the Gladstone solidified the idea that this is the cultural zone of the city.”

The transformation began back in 2001, when Jeff Stober, a former dot-com executive, bought the dilapidated Drake. “We wanted to create a place that could feel like a community center on one night and a fancy house party with waiters on the next,” Stober says.

When the Drake officially opened for business in 2004, its multimillion-dollar renovation gave off a high-end gleam — a rooftop bar, rooms stocked with flat-screen televisions and designer bath products. But the hotel’s arts programming emphasized the quirky and outré. Wilson curated a “live genre-mashup” series at the hotel, throwing together such disparate types as rappers freestyling over atonal music and a folk-jazz group covering [Dr. Seuss](#) songs. More provocative still was the agitprop performance art commissioned by the Drake, which sometimes took aim at the hotel itself and its role as a neighborhood gentrifier. In one piece, the artist Maria Legault lampooned deluxe hotel service, infiltrating the rooftop bar with assistants who massaged patrons while feeding them pink pudding.

“The Drake is the nerve center of the Toronto arts world,” says the award-winning filmmaker Guy Maddin, who projected a series of shorts from the Drake’s windows during last fall’s [Toronto Film Festival](#).