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New memoir shares story of Ballinger brothers taking nightlife scene by storm

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Four brothers from humble beginnings in small-town Ontario change the nightlife scene of Toronto and New York City and eventually create one of the most successful nightclubs in North America.

It sounds like the synopsis of a Hollywood film, but it's the true story of brothers ? Lon, Steve, Peter and Douglas ? told in Lon Ballinger's 2024 memoir Party Boys.

The Ballinger family's story begins at a small farmhouse on a dirt sideroad between Shelburne and Dundalk. The brothers, along with their sister Gail, grew up in the community during the 1960s where they attended a one-room schoolhouse and later Centre Dufferin District High School (CDDHS) in Shelburne.

?We got a terrific work ethic from being raised up in that neck of the woods, and I think that work ethic is what helped carry us through,? recalled Lon Ballinger.

The hard work ethic developed from growing up on a farm led the brothers not initially to the nightclub scene, but rather owning a Pizzeria in Orangeville and a laundry mat and variety store in Dundalk.

It wasn't until three of the brothers ? Lon, Steve and Douglas ? went on a planned trip in 1976 to experience their first disco.

?We walked in and the music was playing, the lights were flashing and we'd never seen anything like it before,? said Ballinger. ?I remember looking at my brother and saying ?we can do this' and that's what we did, because there was no one saying we couldn't.?

In 1979, the Ballinger brothers opened their first club, located at 614 Coronation Blvd., in Cambridge, Ont. The club was called ?Ballingers Danceteria and Videotheque? or more commonly shortened to ?Ballingers.?

After five years of success, the brothers sold the Cambridge club and made the move to Toronto for their next business venture. While working on another business venture, the brothers discovered a building on the corner of Queen West and Bathurst, known as the Holiday Tavern. It was here that the brothers opened the Big Bop in 1986.

It was a much different time in the area of downtown Toronto, with very little nightlife on Queen Street west of Spadina.

The multi-floored Big Bop, with its wonky layout, decor and range of music, very quickly became a hit in the then quiet nightlife of Toronto as crowds lined up around the block to get in.

The success of Big Bop led to the brothers opening more clubs in Toronto including the Boom Boom Room, Rockit, Go-Go, and The World.

Coming off the successes of Cambridge and Toronto, the brothers set their eyes on the Big Apple, a place they'd once, as young boys, only dreamed of seeing by watching episodes of ?I Love Lucy? on the television screen. In 1992 the Ballinger brothers purchased Webster Hall, located in the East Village of Manhattan.

?It really was the idea of being on the world stage. New York is the world stage. That's where all the attention is,? said Ballinger. ?We thought that if we could go down to New York City and we could do a great job, that we then would be the best nightclub guys in the world.?

Built in 1886, Webster Hall is one of the oldest and most famous music venues in New York City and with it comes its storied

history. In the early 1900s, the space served as a meeting space for the suffrage movement and an integral part of the early LGBT scene.

During the 1950s, the building became a recording studio for RCA Victor Records and welcomed artists like Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Tony Bennett, Julie Andrews, Harry Belafonte and Liza Minnelli.

Under the ownership of the Ballingers, some of music's greatest artists graced the stage including Prince, Madonna, Metallica, Paul Simon, John Mayer, Ed Sheeran, Lady Gaga, and Whitney Houston.

?They all wanted to play there. They could have played anywhere, but they wanted to play Webster Hall because of its history.?

Ballinger began writing his family's memoir in early 2022 and officially published Party Boys in April 2024.

He said he began writing the book as a way to document his life for his four grandchildren.

?I was sitting on the Hudson River and thinking about my life and how lucky I had been. I thought this was such an unusual story and I wanted to write it for my grandkids. I thought I should tell them where they came from, how we got here, and how we became these different kinds of guys.?

While Party Boys at its core is a memoir of the Ballinger family's legacy in the nightclub industry, the book explores the ideas on how to create a successful business, the importance of family, and the reminder of the usefulness of simple kindness.

After nearly 40 years in the nightclub industry, of which 25 were spent in the New York scene, the Ballinger brothers decided to sell Webster Hall in 2017 to AEG Presents and Brooklyn Sports and Entertainment (BSE).

Ballinger and his wife Lois purchased the historic hotel ?The Stewart House,? located along the Hudson River in Athens, New York, in late 2017. As we concluded our interview, Ballinger reflected back on the process of writing his family's history and sharing their journey from humble beginnings on a country farm, to eventually running one of the most successful music venues in the nightlife scene.

?It made me appreciate my life. It made me appreciate the people I met as I went through it,? said Ballinger. ?I found it really therapeutic and it helped me look back and appreciate all the little thing that I might have found difficult at the time, but I realised how essential they were to make the journey complete.?

Party Boys is available to purchase in paperback and audiobook through Amazon.