

Steve Lopez

Prohibition All Over Again

In California, smokers lose a once sacrosanct haven—bars

THE BEAUTY OF LOS ANGELES IS THAT YOU CAN GET AWAY with almost anything. You can make bad movies and live in the hills, buy a pair of breasts and take lots of pills. You can eat all night and drive all day; you can even kill your wife and get clean away.

But in the city that celebrates sin, as of the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve you can't walk into a bar and light a smoke. In the entire state of California, a fragile plate cracked head-to-toe by the sheer force of political extremes, you can no longer enjoy the leaf in the gin mill of your choice.

And so on Jan. 1 you get into a car—because *that's* still legal in Los Angeles, despite a midday sky that spreads like an underarm stain from Burbank to Buena Park—and you go to the places you know will defy the smoking ban that went into effect a few hours earlier.

First stop, the King's Head in Santa Monica. It's a British pub, a place where the smoke used to be as thick as kidney pie. Now there's scarcely a trace of it; in fact, the King's Head looks as if the patrons are waiting for the Queen to show up for tea and crumpets. "It's a bit ridiculous, if you ask me," says bartender Jane Myers, a Brit who wonders why Americans can't just let themselves go. "They'll come in here and order fish and chips and a diet Coke. Now, what's that about?"

Indeed. You're back in the car headed east to Talpa, a favorite Mexican joint in West Los Angeles where on warm summer nights you have sat with a cold beer and a Cuban (cigar, not companion) and watched the Dodgers on Spanish-language television. But you walk in now and, sure enough, owner Andres Martinez has posted no-smoking signs. The law is the law, he says dolefully, and it's the bar owner, not the customer, who will pay the fines—starting at \$100 and going as high as \$7,000—if the butt police appear.

Same story at the trendy Bar Marmont on Sunset, and at nearby Dublin's. An Irish pub without smoke? Stand on a corner in Los Angeles for two hours, and you've got black lung. But having cleared tobacco smoke from every other public space in California, reformers have entered the last refuge. They'll ban alcohol next, and pretty soon California will be a string of juice bars, from Mexico to Oregon.

You press on farther east into the faded glory of Hollywood, which started everyone smoking in the first place. The

Frolic Room, where the walls have emphysema, is smokeless. Traci Michaelz, a drummer with the Peppermint Creeps, goes outside to smoke and says, "This is all about control, dude." You notice that his green fingernail polish matches neither his feather boa nor his skirt, and you know things change only for the worse.

"Try the Studio Lounge at Hollywood and Cherokee," says Eugene Wilson, a golf caddy. O.K. One last chance. You walk in, and here it is. At last. You have entered a world in which the clocks stopped in the last minute of 1997. Or perhaps 1957. Of the 12 customers, 10 are smoking, and they can't believe any self-respecting bar patron would observe this kind of government meddling in their lives. Marlon Tolbert, a travel agent, is smoking a hot dog-size Honduran stogie. "My wife won't allow it at home, so where else can I go?"

Look, says leather-goods manufacturer Dennis Lutz, it's a good thing to educate people on the dangers of smoking and protect employees from secondhand smoke. "But why not let bars decide for themselves? They can put up signs, and the employees and customers can decide if it's a bar for them."

If that doesn't happen, Lutz has another idea: they just ought to cut a hole in the ceiling of the Studio Lounge and call it a patio, where smoking is okay.

Talk of cutting a hole in his ceiling makes Studio owner Eric Liu a little nervous, especially with a visitor from TIME on the premises, so he gets on the phone to try to find other places for the reporter to visit. Try Boardner's down the street, he suggests. They're lit up too.

And not just the patrons. Bar manager Brad McAllen has a Marlboro going. "You with the smoking police?" Matilda the bartender asks. No, just a man who enjoys a good cigar. "Come right on in, honey," Matilda says, explaining that Broadner's was once a hangout of Jimmy Stewart and Robert Mitchum, "and that fat actor. I always forget his name." W.C. Fields?

"There you go! I told you this ain't no dive bar, honey." McAllen says, deadpan, that he's done what the law requires. He told the customers they were not allowed to smoke. Is it his fault they all nodded—and then lit up?

We're living on the edge, as always, here in Hollywood. Come and get us, coppers. ■



NEW YEAR'S DAY: David Hillyer takes his cigarette outside in L.A.

“This is all about control, dude.”

—TRACI MICHAELZ, DRUMMER, SMOKING OUTSIDE A BAR