

## Big Man on the Boulevard

Written by By Terence Cantarella, Photos by Silvia Ros  
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### Eric Silverman has plans for his Vagabond Motel, AND THEY ARE — YES — VERY BIG



No one seems to know when exactly Frank Sinatra stayed at the historic Vagabond Motel at 7301 Biscayne Blvd. But everyone over a certain age is required to have at least one Sinatra tale to tell, and Eric Silverman, the Vagabond's 55-year-old owner, is no exception. "This place was a retreat for guys like Sinatra, away from the spotlight of Miami Beach," he says. "It's not like there was an announcement that he was here. He'd come to hang out at the bar and maybe get up and do a number. It was more of a private thing — you understand?"

Like a kid who grabs you by the wrist and pulls you over to show off a beefy comic-book collection or a stack of baseball cards, Silverman leads you into his office at the once seedy motel and begins rifling through binders, books, and stacks of paper, pointing at pictures and breathlessly describing the Vagabond's glory days in the 1950s and 1960s, before hookers and drug dealers set up shop in later decades.

"Look!" he exclaims. "Here's a picture of Jackie Gleason and Arthur Godfrey performing together on the old stage. And check *this* out." He beams as he points to a clipping, purportedly from the *New York Times*, in which a member of the Rat Pack refers to the motel as "a high-class joint."

"Eric loves the Rat Pack," Ellen Wedner chimes in. A petit Pittsburgh transplant, Wedner sits at a round table in the middle of Silverman's whitewashed office and looks on as he continues his fast-paced show-and-tell. A marketing and special events manager, she's helping Silverman realize his grand plan for the motel — a plan some people call bold and visionary, while others

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says it's just a harebrained fantasy.



But Silverman is in high gear, unstoppable, as fired up as a 21-year-old starting a rock band. A large man with a full head of signature gray hair that falls around his face and neck, he comes off as a kind of cross between Robert Plant and Steve Irwin — the retired rocker's coolness and the late Aussie adventurer's energy. His office is lined with poster boards and renderings that depict the Vagabond — Biscayne Boulevard's premiere historic property — as he envisions it.

"I see up to 20 vendors setting up here," he predicts. "There'll be an outdoor market on the weekends. I want to bring in wholesalers, not guys who just buy a few boxes of tomatoes. We want to have 20 kinds of mushrooms. We want to be able to supply the restaurants. We want a fish market — fresh fish, live lobster tanks, a you-buy, we-fry place. We've got more parking here than anywhere on the Boulevard. We have about 60 spots, and the city's talking about putting in another 100. This'll be a place for foodies, an alternative to Epicure on the Beach, at more affordable prices. For Art Basel, we'll do 'Art Basil.' You'll be able to have a mojito at the pool bar and pick a mint leaf right off a plant from our organic garden and toss it in your glass. You can use the pool on your lunch break. At night I imagine a kind of movable feast — ceviche, ice cream, drinks, an appetizer here, an entrée there, a dessert over there. We'll have a conference room, art galleries for local emerging artists, art shows, a bookstore, a coffee shop, a hair salon. I want a mixing of the ages. Something for everyone."

The slogan: "Meet me at the Vagabond."

Wedner sums up the enterprise. "We're trying to create a destination," she explains. "We want people to slow down and begin to actually live in this environment, rather than just driving through. It'll have a strong neighborhood feel. Very casual."

Although "casual" may be the goal, the journey to this point has been anything but. Since acquiring the Vagabond in October 2005, Silverman has wrangled endlessly with the City of Miami. A battle over a zoning error, made by the city's planning department in the 1960s, took seven months and a high-priced law firm to straighten out. The lengthy and complicated process of acquiring the necessary permits to adapt a historic property for new uses further

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delayed progress on the Vagabond.

Silverman's Swedish-born wife, Margaretha, finally opened the Transit Shop, a stylish clothing store, in the north wing of the building in early 2007, but for a long while nothing else seemed to be happening. The perpetual "For Lease" sign out front had many people wondering if he'd run out of money. And then, just when it looked like all progress had stalled, Silverman surprised everyone on July 29 by unveiling his ambitious plan for a Vagabond market at a meeting of the MiMo Biscayne Association.



MiMo, short for Miami Modern, refers to a glamorous, quirky, yet functional architectural style popular in Miami and elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s. In recognition of the many MiMo buildings in Miami's Upper Eastside, the city commission in 2006 created the MiMo/Biscayne Boulevard Historic District, which runs along the Boulevard from 50th Street to 77th Street. The MiMo Biscayne Association, a nonprofit group, was established soon afterward to help protect and promote the MiMo landmarks and businesses in the district.

The group had gathered at Uva 69, the popular Boulevard bistro, for a presentation by the Miami Parking Authority. That presentation, which suggested there was room for additional metered parking along the western border of Belle Meade, didn't go over well with many residents, and by the time Silverman took the floor, many locals were already in a foul mood. Those who simply stumbled in to eavesdrop and take advantage of the free coffee wholeheartedly embraced the idea of an outdoor market and gourmet store at the Vagabond, and even swarmed the gregarious Silverman after his presentation to learn more about it. Association leaders and local activists weren't so sure.

"The presentation was mind-boggling," says Margaret Tynan, president of the Belle Meade Homeowners Association. "My concern is the feasibility, but also the traffic and sanitation. Anything with meat, fish, and produce brings a lot of problems, especially if your plan is to supply restaurants. Just imagine, there will be deliveries, storage, trucks coming and going, refrigeration, garbage. I don't know if the Vagabond is the place for that."

Tynan's concerns don't stop there. NE 6th Court, a residential street running north-south behind the Vagabond, butts up against the western barricades of the gated Belle Meade community. "Residents behind the Vagabond don't have enough parking as it is," she complains. "And now the Miami Parking Authority wants to install 100 meters? I mean, c'mon. We appreciate that Eric took over the place and is trying to do something there, but you can't go overboard."

She takes a breath: "Eric speaks very well but you kind of get hypnotized by his talk and end up

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not thinking things through. He basically overwhelms everyone with all of his ideas. Ideas are fine. But my question is, are they practical?"

One unidentified young woman at the meeting thought so. Amid the questioning and the tense debate that erupted over parking and feasibility, she stood up, declared her approval of Silverman's project, and then went on to chastise some of the attendees for their harsh tone.

Unexpectedly, Silverman then put it to a vote. He asked for a show of hands to gauge support of his idea. *BT* intern Elizabeth Joyce, who attended the meeting, confirms that, with the exception of Rosemary Ference, secretary-treasurer of the Belle Meade Homeowners Association, and Fran Rollason, president of the MiMo Association, nearly all hands in the room went up. Things got a little awkward, she says, when Silverman turned to Rollason and asked for a formal letter of support from her association, in view of the crowd's favorable response.



A letter of support from the MiMo Association would help buttress Silverman when he makes another presentation, this one on September 17 before the city's Planning Advisory Board. It would be a preliminary step toward his goal of having the city create a special "Market District" along Biscayne Boulevard, roughly from 66th Street north to the Vagabond. Such a special district would, among other things, allow qualifying businesses within its boundaries the freedom to operate outdoor markets without having to reapply each week for a temporary special-events permit. And who would qualify? According to an early draft of the proposed ordinance, a business owner would need at least 15,000 square feet of lot space. With the exception of the Vagabond, however, that requirement would exclude nearly all Boulevard motels — a fact some locals are quick to point out. (At press time, the proposed ordinance was still working its way through the city attorney's office.)

Rollason, clearly uncomfortable at being put on the spot, declined Silverman's request for an official letter, saying she couldn't support something she didn't fully understand and without first seeing the proposal and passing it by her association's board of directors.

The outdoor market, which would be hosted in the Vagabond's spacious parking lot every Saturday and Sunday, is a matter of contention for some people, who fear it could be detrimental to the Upper Eastside Green Market, which made its debut just nine months ago at Legion Park. "It took us a long, long time to get that market going," says Rosemary Ference. "I just don't think there's room for two outdoor markets within seven blocks of one another."

Claire Tomlin, principal of The Market Company Inc., operates the Legion Park market as well as others, including the Lincoln Road Farmer's Market. Although initially involved with Silverman in developing the Vagabond venture, she has since decided it makes no sense for her to actively support two outdoor weekend markets in such close proximity. She supports the concept of a seven-day, indoor gourmet market at the Vagabond, but backed out when it became clear the plan would involve an outdoor, weekend farmers' market.



Ellen Wedner, who will operate a vintage store at the Vagabond, remains enthusiastic despite Tomlin's decision to pull out. She believes wholeheartedly in Silverman's vision for the property.

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“Eric is very passionate about the whole thing,” she says, “and I have complete faith in him.” She’s not the first person to believe in Eric Silverman. Business people have been putting their faith in him for a good part of the past two decades. Born in Brooklyn in 1953 to a Cuban mother and American father, Silverman and his parents moved to Havana when he was just two weeks old. His grandfather, he says, was a senator on the island and owned two major cigar companies, La Gloria Cubana and El Credito, along with a tobacco plantation in the fertile province of Pinar Del Rio. Six years later, when Fidel Castro wrestled the reins of power from Fulgencio Batista, the family packed up and headed for Miami, along with tens of thousands of other Cuban refugees. They eventually made their way up to Amherst, New York, where Silverman’s father worked in the furniture business.

“Miami was always my home, though. We would come down on vacation all the time,” Silverman recalls. “When I was a teenager, I’d get a job for the holidays as a cabana boy at the Carriage House on Miami Beach. I had my first kiss at a teen dance by the Swiss-cheese wall at the Fontainebleau. In my 20s, I’d spend a lot of time at the Palm Bay Club. My friends and I would walk in there in our velvet jackets and piano-key scarves like something out of *Saturday Night Fever*.”

One day, by the pool at the Mutiny Hotel in Coconut Grove, Silverman befriended some fashion insiders who worked for Yves Saint Laurent. They suggested that he get into the menswear business because of his flair for fashion. Years later, he did just that. After earning a business and marketing degree from the University of Miami, and spending a period of time selling wholesale art in South Florida and Puerto Rico, he moved to Toronto to open a distributorship for the furniture company he was working for at the time.



A co-worker alerted him to a “help wanted” ad in the newspaper for a sales position at Yves Saint Laurent. Silverman applied and, because of the rapport he’d established back at the pool in Coconut Grove, easily landed the job. He eventually moved over to Hugo Boss Canada in 1984, where his marketing skills propelled him to the position of company president. The nation’s leading fashion-trade journal for the men’s clothing business, *DNR*, credits him with increasing sales from \$2 million to \$25 million during his ten-year tenure.

He spent the second half of the 1990s in New York, heading up the American division of Hugo Boss, and later took a job with Dolce & Gabbana as president of its North and South American operations. “But I never loved New York,” Silverman admits. “I love Miami. I like the sun. I like to see the sky.”

The September 11 attacks convinced him that it was time to leave the Big Apple. “I remember driving down Park Avenue and seeing the smoke from the Twin Towers, and people were covered in dust and bandages,” he recalls. “I’ve always driven Cadillac convertibles, and people



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I knew were jumping into my car just to get out of Manhattan. That was *it* for me.”

Silverman bid the rag trade farewell in November 2001, headed south with his 13-year-old son and wife, and jumped into the real-estate business, applying his sales and marketing experience to high-end properties throughout Miami. “I had a client looking for a large space,” he recounts, “so I was spending a lot of time in Wynwood. I would see the Vagabond whenever I’d drive by, and I always loved it. The building is beautiful, but the U shape is what’s *really* wonderful. I always thought there was a lot you could do with it commercially.”

In late 2005, he bought the place with his cousin Octavio Hidalgo for \$4 million. Silverman estimates that, since then, an additional \$2 million has been spent on costs associated with legal fees, architectural plans, easements, insurance, taxes, and renovation work that has included a new roof, new plumbing, new wiring, and restoration of the swimming pool, which had been concreted over. More than 100 dumpsters of debris have been hauled away, and the building now stands as a skeleton of concrete and wood, awaiting development.



“My dream,” Silverman says, “was to have a hotel in Havana and a horse ranch in Pinar Del Rio, where my grandfather had his tobacco plantation. But you know what? I have two horses that my wife and I ride every weekend near our home in Davie, and when I’m here at the Vagabond, with the architecture and the Cuban workers, I *feel* like I’m in Havana.”

That open, tropical architectural feel was created by Romanian-born architect Robert Swartburg, one of the top designers of his time in the Miami area. His creations include several landmarks in Sunny Isles, Miami, and the Beach, the most famous being the Delano Hotel on Collins Avenue.

The Vagabond went up in 1953, at a time when Biscayne Boulevard was Miami’s main north-south thoroughfare. Several other motels opened around the same time, all striving to lure out-of-town motorists with showy, eye-grabbing motifs and space-age architectural elements that have since come to define the Miami Modern era. The Vagabond’s carport and large parking lot catered to a rapidly growing automobile culture. The raised pool deck (visible from the road), the air-conditioning, and the proximity to Miami Beach would have been all the persuading that a vacationing family on a budget needed.

Some reports have attributed the motel’s construction to a popular comedic music group of the period, the Vagabonds. But vintage pictures of the band’s Vagabond Club depict an entirely different building located farther south at 732 Biscayne Blvd. It’s not entirely clear whether the Vagabond Motel and Vagabond Club were related. And so the stories of Sinatra, Gleason, and Dean Martin cavorting with showgirls around the pool may or may not be accurate.

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