

Work/life

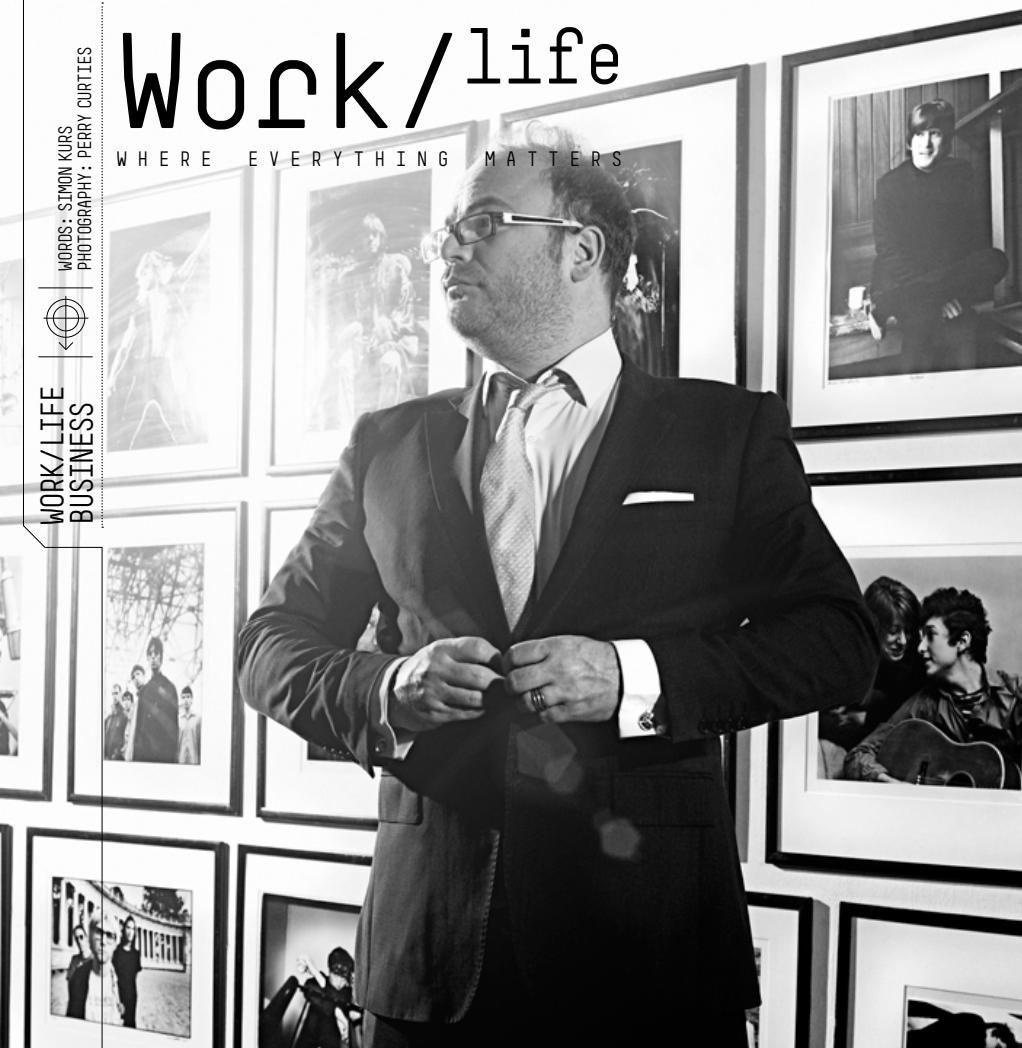
WHERE EVERYTHING MATTERS

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WORK/LIFE
BUSINESS

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Where did it all go right?

Hard-learned business advice from Alex Proud, bar, gallery and nightclub owner



one-time Japanese art dealer and erstwhile seller of Rolls-Royces to Russian mafiosos, Alex Proud founded his first London gallery in 1994. It soon won a reputation for its rock 'n' roll exhibitions and extravagant





parties – not to mention the patronage of the Libertines and Amy Winehouse. Now expanding into fine dining, Proud has battled bankruptcy, seen ventures fail and learned the value of proper financial management along the way.

▲ Proud Camden's Grade II-listed building has hosted some of London's finest hellraisers on and off stage.

I paid for my first gallery with Mafia money. A girlfriend had some friends in Moscow with some cash to spend. They wanted cars and I said I could help. They were real gangster types. They came over with the money – £200,000 per

car – in a suitcase, and I arranged it all – taking a cut. It was above board, at my end, at least.

I was borderline bankrupt. We didn't make a penny for the first 10 years when we were only running galleries. I was working 110 hours a week, and really did have to get myself out of bed every morning. I forced myself to keep going and kept believing.

My father is my inspiration. It's boring, but it's true. He's 85 and still hasn't retired. He left school at 14, had all manner of jobs, and went on to buy Stanley Gibbons, which is the country's biggest stamp specialist. He did it all himself. I've had everything in terms of schooling and education, so, really, a sense of shame has motivated me to match his achievements.



Listen to criticism.

Fortunately, I'm surrounded by enough people who know me well enough to tell me if I'm being an idiot. My wife will happily do so, as will the people I trust who I've employed for over a decade.

It's all about luck. No matter how good your idea is, to make a business successful there's always an element of being in the right place at the right time. With the bar at Proud Camden we happened to know the right people: Pete Doherty and the Libertines would come down, while we had Nick Grimshaw dj-ing there. It all just made the place cool and won us a reputation very quickly.





I don't watch my competitors. I want to do something different. I take inspiration, instead, from the best examples of businesses in different industries – the Apple Store in New York, for instance, or what service is like in the first class lounge at the airport.

Publishing is incredibly difficult. In 1999, I started an art publishing company, called Vision On, with Rankin, the photographer. We printed more than a million books, but the business model is a real nightmare and the galleries suffered badly because we were so overstretched – we had to finish that.

The customer is king. So many nightclubs don't seem to care about

the customer experience. It takes six hours to get served at the bar and costs three times as much. You won't find that with us.

I'm driven by bad reviews.

I remember one critic, who was a fan of Proud Camden, came down to Proud Cabaret when it opened last year. Although they said they liked the food and enjoyed the show, they wrote that it just wasn't their kind of place in terms of atmosphere. Of course, the sub-editors made that the headline – so everyone saw it. It really



▲ From selling cars to the Russian Mafia to art to Simon Cowell, Alex Proud trusts his gut instincts

spurred me on to make the place a success.

Look after your finances properly. As a proper business would. You'd be surprised how many so-called "creative" companies don't do that.

Trust your instincts. Nine times out of ten, my gut instincts are right, but you have to be able to apologise if it's wrong. When Proud Cabaret launched it was wrong – it was too risqué, and too much like a real Berlin cabaret. We went back to the drawing board, made it more about a dining experience, and now it's a success.

Relax. You need to step out of your life once in a while. Every year I go to the Cannonball rally in the States to drive cars at silly speeds.



I don't do expensive suits. Or fancy holidays. My one vice is cars. I currently have a Jaguar XK6 in the driveway. It's an incredible car – you can pootle along in it, but put your foot down and it's like a Ferrari.

Matter is my life right now. We've just taken over the nightclub in the 02. It's our biggest project yet, with a capacity of 3,000 people. If we do that right, we'll become a serious player, but it's incredibly scary.

Celebrity customers are a buzz. But they're only the cherry on the cake and I'm old enough to realise they're not my pals. We've had Mick Jagger come in – which is fun when you get that text on your phone – and our beautiful gallery in Chelsea is very A-list. Simon Cowell recently bought some prints. I can say that he has exceptional taste.

TAP
CIRCLES FOR
INFO ON THE
VENUES



Proud highlights

THE NEWEST OUTPOSTS OF THE EMPIRE

THE RESTAURANT

Formerly the South Gallery of Proud Camden, this New York-style canteen serves a variety of dishes created by Michelin-trained chef Finlay Logan. Take your pick from soy honey porridge, pancake stacks and a chowder of mussels, cider and bacon.

