

OCCIDA

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LOOKING FORWARD From the grandness of the past to the realism of the present, and exploring the future [to come]



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styling: MELVIN KLEIN 205W30NYC - photographed by JENS INGARSSON

Sigourney Weaver.



INTERVIEWED BY KYLL JOHNSON
PORTRAIT COURTESY OF GUDRUN GEORGES

Whether it is photographing big-named bands like The Clash and The Police or shooting campaigns for the likes of Shinola and River Island, Janette Beckman is the one to call. As she's pretty much done it all. And now, with a new campaign out for Levi's along with a collaboration project with Shepard Fairey featuring her photo of Chuck D, she's hotter than ever. Keep reading to a glimpse of what lies behind the lens of this talented photographer.

First, why don't we start off by setting up the story with a bit of background information. Where are you from and how did you get into the art of photography?

Growing up in London I always loved art. My parents sent me to King Alfred's, a liberal school in Hampstead, where I spent as much time in the art room as possible. I wanted to be a portrait painter. David Hockney and Egon Schiele were my idols. I got into St. Martins

Foundation for a year but, somehow, I didn't think my drawings were good enough, so I went to the LLC in Elephant and Castle to study Photography.

Some of your first gigs working in the industry were shooting The Clash, Boy George and Siouxsie and The Banshees for magazines like *The Face* and *Melody Maker* along with album covers for The Police. Could you talk about two or three of your first assignments for us?

When I came out of the LLC, punk was starting to happen. I got a little darkroom space on Neal street, I loved music and, one day, I walked into the weekly music paper *Sounds* with my portfolio and met the features editor Vivien Goldman. She commissioned me to photograph Siouxsie and The Banshees that night at the Roundhouse. I had never photographed a band before but, somehow, I figured it out and came back the next day with the photos. That started my career shooting 2 or 3 bands a week for magazines like *The Face* and *Melody Maker*. I loved all the youth cultures that were colliding in London at the time: punk, mod, 2 Tone, rockabilly etc.

In 1980, I went to photograph Paul Weller (The Jam) meeting his hero Pete Townshend (The Who) for the first time, for *Melody Maker* magazine. We met outside the Marquee Club on Wardour Street. They asked me where I wanted them to pose, I told them they looked perfect standing side by side on the curb. One of the first shots I took of them that afternoon is my favorite – it is a moment in time – Weller looking so sharp in his pin stripe suit.

As Weller later said, "The working class' love of clothes, looking good, rising above your station [...] These clothes, my haircut, reflect my attitude and the music I listen to, and they say 'I am an individual.'" Later that year *The Face* magazine assigned me to document a music festival in Loch Lomond. By the time I got there it had been raining for days, the place was a sea of mud and the bands were waiting for the rain to stop. I walked around the site and started to photograph the fans. A group of young mods standing under a tree, a rocker playing air guitar in a river of mud and beer cans, a gang of skinheads waving a flag that said "Skinheads". For me, the story was always about the fans as much as the bands.

You've worked with some pretty great artists. Did you grow up listening to any of these artists? Was shooting them something you dreamed of as a kid?

No, not really. I always loved Motown and soul as a kid. My cousin was a year older than me and he gave me all his albums when he went off to South America, so I started listening to bands like Crosby Stills & Nash, Pink Floyd, The Who. I had a subscription to *Rolling Stone* and used to pore over all the great black and white photos of bands like the Rolling Stones. I never dreamed that I would be taking those photos myself.

So your work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone* and *Glamour*. When your first photographs hit the newsstands, what was your initial reaction to seeing your work featured in major publications?

I think the first photo I had in *Rolling Stone* was The Beastie Boys in 1985, I remember them coming to my studio with their producer Rick Rubin. They were really fun, a perfect blend of the punk bands I had shot in the UK mixed with hip-hop attitude. When that issue came out I thought "WOW! I have a photo in *Rolling Stone*!" That was something I had aspired to since I was reading those first issues back when I was a kid.

In the 1990s, *Glamour* magazine hired me to travel around America photographing the 'Glamour Women of the Year.' We traveled round with a grey seamless and a bag of strobes, photographing amazing women like Martina Navratilova, Madeleine Albright (then Secretary of State), Julie Krone (the first woman jockey to win the Triple crown), Rita Dove (Poet Laureate) and many more. It was great to see my portraits of some of the most important women their time published in one issue.

I had my studio on Lafayette Street right opposite Tower Records where I was shooting album covers. It was so exciting to see in them blown up large in the window. I remember counting one time I had 3 whole windows!

In 1983, you moved to NYC and started photographing hip-hop artists. What sparked your interest in moving abroad?

In the fall of 1982 I photographed the first ever hip-hop concert to come to Europe. I had gone to the hotel in Victoria where they were staying to get some shots before the concert. There was something about the style and attitude of these people - so different from the by

now dreary post punk era - I photographed everyone I ran into. I had no idea who they were, years later I found out I had captured some of the legends of the genre ; graffiti artists Futura, Dondi and Rammellzee, Africa Bambaataa, Fab 5 Freddie, Grandmixer DST, the Rock Steady Crew.

The concert that night blew me away, breakdancers, rappers, graffiti artists, DJ's all onstage at the same time. That Christmas I went to visit a friend in NYC and never left.

There's bound to be some cultural or artistic barriers or difference between the US and the UK. Tell us how the New York experience differed from your work documenting the UK's punk subculture.

The New York experience was very different. It was something I was not familiar with. People were so upbeat in spite of everything that was happening politically and economically. Excited about what they were creating. There seemed to be an attitude that you can make your aspirations and dreams come true.

In the UK, I guess people were worn down by the systems that had been in place for centuries. The class system was hard to break. Punk tried to overthrow all that which was great.

While in New York you worked for *Paper*, a city magazine featuring New York news, clubs, music, style, art and food. How did you get the gig?

I met Kim Hastreiter in LA in the late 70s. When I moved to NYC, she showed me around and introduced me to the downtown scene. When she started *Paper* in 1985 with David Herskovitz (who lived in my building on Ave B and 8th Street), I was their photographer friend with a studio. It was exciting to work on a startup, we were a bunch of friends trying to create something different, involved in the downtown art scene, music, hip hop, fashion, clubs. We all worked for free but we were creating something new..

Working with so many artists, you were bound to deal with some pretty demanding times. Is there one experience or project that stands out that you could cite as being the most difficult project you had?

Not that many strangely, apart from some of the hip hop artists turning up hours late for shoots. I remember photographing Bill Cosby for Nickelodeon, he was pretty unpleasant.

One recent fashion shoot I did for *Interview* was crazy. It was winter, pouring rain, a street shoot on Broadway with 5 models wearing very expensive Hermès leather coats that we could not get wet. The models were freezing, we bought umbrellas for everyone and tried to find covered construction spots to shoot on the street. Nightmare.

You've shot album covers for The Police, Salt-N-Pepa and Grandmaster Flash to name but a few. How is shooting an album cover different than shooting and editorial for a magazine?

Shooting an album cover is usually more of a production, hair, make-up, stylists, studio and locations, publicists, art directors, so many cooks... I've been lucky in that most of my editorial portraits have been just me and the artist.

That being said, I work for *Interview* magazine doing portraits and some fashion pages. They really go hard with the styling. When we shot the singer Banks my small studio was overcrowded with hair, make-up people and assistants, the stylist with 3 assistants racks of clothes and 50 pairs of shoes. Luckily I had found an outside location at a nearby boxing club to photograph her.

In 2005, PowerHouse published a book of your photographs featuring British bands and fans, punk, skinhead, mod, 2 Tone, ska and rockabilly called *Made in the UK: The Music of Attitude 1977-1983* with an intro written by Sir Paul Smith. Tell us about the project.

I started to look through my boxes of 8X10' prints that I had brought from London years before. I pinned them up in my studio, hundreds of prints documenting British youth culture from 1976-1982. I showed them to PowerHouse and we made a book. I asked Vivien Goldman, by then the Professor of Punk at NYU, and author Paolo Hewitt, to write essays. Sir Paul Smith wrote the forward and we did launch and exhibition at his flagship store in London. The book did really well.

Then, in 2008 you released another book titled *The Breaks: Stylin' & Profilin' 1982-1990* featuring full-page photos of artists like Run DMC, Salt-N-Pepa and Ice Cube. How did the project come about?

After the success of *Made in The UK*, PowerHouse asked me if I wanted to do a hip hop book. By then I had photographed most of the legends of hip hop from the last decade. I wanted to show the style and the flavor of the culture. Most of the artists that I had photographed were just at the beginning of their music careers. Salt-N-Pepa before they made their first album, LL Cool J's first press photo, Run DMC in 1984 in Hollis, EPMD's first album cover. I had been working for small labels like Sleeping Bag, Def Jam, Next Plateau.

Apart from portraits of the musicians, the book documents their styles, Adidas (Run DMC), Cazales (DanaDane), Kangol (UTFO the KangolKid), geri curls (Fearless Four), afrocentric style (Tribe Called Quest), Dapper Dan's leather brilliant jackets (Salt n Pepa), hoop earrings (Roxanne Shante), gold chains (Slick Rick) and more.

In 1983, you got the opportunity to photograph an East LA gang which resulted in a book published in 2011 called *El Hoyo MaraVilla*. What were your first thoughts when you got the project?

In 1983 I was in LA staying with friends when I read a story in the *LA Weekly* about a gang in East LA. I was fascinated and got the writer to introduce me to them. I spent that summer photographing the gang with my Hasselblad camera, driving back and forth from Hollywood to East LA in my Rent-A-Wreck V8 Ford LTD.

The East LA area was poor, hot and arid, and there was the constant sound of LAPD helicopters buzzing overhead. The gang members introduced me to their families and showed me the barrio. I was the first British person they had ever met.

In 2011, Dashwood books published my photos in *El Hoyo MaraVilla*. The book got a lot of attention on the Internet and one of the girls I had photographed reached out to me.

I reconnected with her and her friends, they were all successful amazing women, one works for DA, one works in Homeboy rehabilitation and the other in Human Resources. They told me that 95 % of the guys I had photographed were either in jail or dead.

You were the NY editor of *Jocks & Nerds* magazine, you started out shooting editorials for them featuring jazz singer José James, DJ Nature, Dapper Dan and many other artists, musicians, designers and rebels. What was a typical day like for you as an editor of the British style, music and culture magazine?

I loved working for *Jocks & Nerds*. they gave me the creative freedom to shoot what I was interested in. Musicians, artists, rebels, Viva Las Vegas rockabilly festival, the GoHard Boyz, Fightball basketball, Voguers in East Harlem. I spent a year working on getting an interview with Dapper Dan for the magazine. Marcus was a great editor to work with, I could suggest stories to him and I always knew that they would run the photographs full page and we worked with great writers. If we shot clothes, it was always about style rather than fashion. We never used models.

One of your most recent projects was shooting the Levi's Spring '18 Campaign which was host to a two-day block party in Bed Sty Brooklyn featuring DJ's, breakdancers, mural artists, local street cast and models wearing Levi's. What was the creative process and inspiration behind the shoot?

The Levi's project was a dream assignment. I got to collaborate with the producers choosing the locations, models many of whom were street cast, Dj's like the legendary Stretch & Bobbito, mural artist Cey Adams, breakdancers, double dutch girls.

We shot for three days on the street, casting people from the neighborhood, throwing a Trucker jacket on a local grandmother who had come to watch the shoot, or a T-shirt on baby in his father's arms, everyone was included. It was really about community and music, I had the freedom to shoot in the kind of portrait documentary style that I love.

The creative director, Chad Hinson, was so great to work with and Levis made a 'zine about the shoot that was free in stores.

In July of this year, you scheduled to reveal a collaboration project with Shepard Fairey, the contemporary street artist, graphic designer, activist, illustrator and founder of OBEY Clothing. What can you tell us about the project?

I met Shepard at Art Basel in Miami last December. He told me he loved my punk and hip-hop photos and asked if I wanted to collaborate. He chose my photo of Chuck D to work on. In April, I went to his LA studio and we both signed the prints, they look amazing. Chuck D is going to sign them too and then Shepard will launch the edition. I am a huge fan of Shepard's work.

If you could choose one thing in the world besides being a photographer, what would it be?

I would either like to sing like Aretha Franklin or be a painter.