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## Behind the Lens with Jill Freedman

By: Rebecca Bates

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The legendary street photographer shares her backstory and that of two of her iconic images.



Photographer Jill Freedman's youth was one of productive impulsivity. Not long after moving to New York in late 1964 after traveling through Europe, and taking up a job as a copywriter, she tells Paddle8, "I woke up one day and wanted a camera, out of nowhere. I'd never taken a picture in my life. I borrowed a friend's camera, went out in the street, and shot two rolls." The friend who had lent Freedman the camera showed her how to develop film and, she says, that was that. "I looked at them and said, 'That's it, I'm a photographer. What a pity that I had to find this out when I'm so old.' I was 26. Ancient," she quips.

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Ancient? Of course, not. But even by 26, she'd already led the sort of adventurous life that's the stuff of mid-century travel novels. "I graduated college in June 1961, and I took the first ship leaving for Israel after my last final," Freedman says. "When I was in college, we had a little jazz group—piano, bass, tenor sax, and me, the girl singer. In Israel, I lived and sang. When I ran out of money, I sang. Then I went from Israel to Paris. I had the name of a woman who had a club on the Left Bank, and I got a gig there. I had a guitar, and I knew seven chords. I would do two sets a night, then jump in the cab and go hear Bud Powell at The Blue Note on the Right Bank."



The casual charisma that earned a young woman with limited knowledge of the guitar nightly gigs in Paris translated well to a photographer's life. Freedman borrowed a friend's Volkswagen bus and traveled with the circus, eventually selling a portfolio to Popular Photography. While a resident of Greenwich village, she easily charmed the regulars at her favorite watering hole, the Lion's Head. There she befriended a fireman, who would inspire her "Firehouse", intense images of firemen running into burning buildings, trying to resuscitate children, sitting among the blackened ruins of someone's former home. Developing a documentarian bent to her work, she also tagged along with cops on their nightly beats, and detailed the lives and relationships of the inhabitants of the short-lived Resurrection City in Washington, D.C.

Overt politics wind in and out of Freedman's work, but the magic of a good moment is always at the center of her search for the perfect image. With two photographs by Freedman in

our latest Photography auction, we asked this quick-witted photographer for the stories behind these snapshots and how she developed her artistic philosophy.



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On Her Best Mentor: “I thought I would just teach myself so I wouldn’t pick up other people’s habits. My dog, Fang, was really my photo teacher because when you go down the street with a dog, they don’t miss anything or anyone. He taught me to see.”

On Her Early Inspiration: “In the beginning, my chief idol was W. Gene Smith, who did those great photo essays for Life: ‘Country Doctor,’ ‘Nurse Midwife,’ ‘Spanish Village.’ Also, André Kertész. I was walking down 5th Avenue—I was still working as a copywriter at the time—and Hallmark had a gallery on 5th, and that’s where I saw my first Kertesz print. I remember it was of a side of a building with a wooden structure, and there was pigeon flying right in the corner. It was so... ah.”

On the Future of Photography: I had to be dragged onto Instagram and Facebook, kicking and screaming, because I didn’t want to contribute to the deluge. But the Lord suddenly struck me that I was just avoiding the social part, but suddenly it was driven home to me by a couple friends that I could be my own media, put up my own pictures. I’ve been on Instagram a little less than three months, and I can just put up anything I want for no reason. Facebook, also. You know, you get to vent and say things that are not that wise, but what the hell?





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On Shooting Blondie, Warhol, Studio 54 and Disco Culture: “I guess it was a party for her cover of Interview magazine. I just went to Studio 54 a few times because I really hated disco music and those flashing lights. The first time I saw disco I thought, this is going to put musicians out of work. I still feel that way, really. But I went because I always got great pictures. People were stoned; they did ridiculous things. This [photo] I just did for myself. They had the ropes up and all that, but, you know, I always got in when I wanted. A lot of those people were there every night because they wanted to show off and have their pictures taken and be seen. The wonderful thing about photography is sometimes you just get lucky and you have to be ready for it. It is lucky just to get a moment like that. I think that moment is so fantastic, [Debbie Harry] making that face, and [Andy Warhol] gossiping. Studio 54, Blondie, Warhol, and all that, that stuff’s so New York. You have to spend a lot of time watching, and then work your way in. A couple of vodkas doesn’t hurt either.



On Shooting Love Kills in the Flower District: “That was just a wonderful moment. She was wearing an animal print. They’re looking different directions. If they looked in the same direction, it wouldn’t have been right; the symmetry of it, it’s all got to work. I didn’t ask [if I could photograph them], because if you ask, you can’t get the moment. Some people, you feel like talking to; others you don’t, you’re just shooting them. I’ve found if I’m really into something, I can’t talk, I don’t want to talk. Like hunting, I guess. You have to be ready.”

Place your bids on images by Jill Freedman, Nan Goldin, Alex Prager, Thomas Ruff, Irving Penn, and more in the Photography auction, through May 31.