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The New York Times  
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## Cops, Clowns and Cameras

By James Estrin Jan. 13, 2014

[Jill Freedman](#) was always attracted to closed societies, groups that didn't much want her as a member. But her persistence always paid off.

During the 1970s and 1980s, she rode atop fire engines, traded expletives with cops and joined the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. She patiently gained access and produced books — "[Firehouse](#)," "[Circus Days](#)" and "[Street Cops](#)." Long before reality television, those books showed the real inside story.

"They're all separate little universes," she said. "And I had to prove myself, more than anyone else, because I'm a woman."

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A woman and an officer from the Midtown South Precinct on 32nd Street. Circa 1980. Credit Jill Freedman/Getty Images

Ms. Freedman, 74, is a woman full of stories, not just about the subjects of her intimate black-and-white images, but also her own colorful life. She grew up in Pittsburgh, wanting to move to New York as soon as she was old enough. But before she made it to Times Square, she sang and played guitar in nightclubs in Israel and Paris, and performed for two years on a BBC television variety show in London.

She must have been a pretty good singer, because she barely knew seven chords on the guitar.

It was only after crossing the Atlantic in 1964 on the Queen Mary that she arrived in New York. She landed a job working with test audiences researching commercials and later became a copywriter.

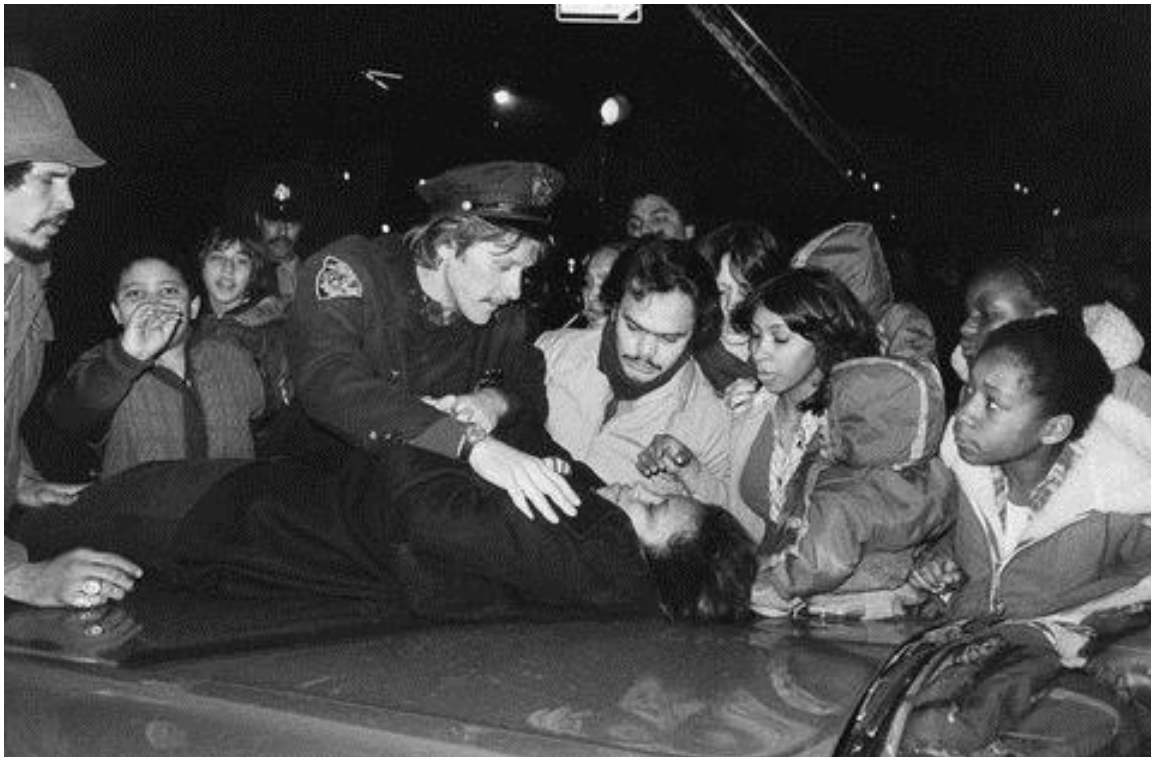
She started photographing on an impulse.

“One day out of nowhere I woke up and wanted a camera,” she said. “I had never taken a picture in my life.”

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Once she started, though, she could not stop. Ms. Freedman taught herself photography from books and spent her weekly paychecks on building a darkroom and buying camera equipment.

Angry about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, and the Vietnam War that she strongly opposed, Ms. Freedman quit her job and joined the Poor People's campaign in 1968.



An officer of the Police Department's Ninth Precinct tended to an unconscious girl on the Lower East Side. 1978. Credit Jill Freedman/Getty Images

"It was a week marching through different towns, and then sleeping in churches and peoples' homes, and then six weeks in the mud in Washington," she said.

The photographs she took were published in her first book, "[Old News: Resurrection City](#)." Afterward, she was wandering about New York, photographing street scenes of the late 1960s when she found the circus. Well, actually, the circus sort of found her.

It's best to let her tell this one.

"There were people sitting around drinking Jack Daniels and smoking dope, and one of them was a 6-foot-4-inch drag queen named Cleopatra, the ugliest broad you ever

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wanted to lay eyes on,” Ms. Freedman recalled in an interview last month in New York. “She talked about riding elephants in the circus with white satin gowns and feather boas and I said, ‘I want to run away to a circus.’ I had never been to a circus, never thought of a circus, really. We drove down to Philadelphia where the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus was playing and introduced me to her friend who was the head clown who helped arrange for me to travel with the circus. I just immersed and lived, that was my way, and I realized years later, when I was doing the firemen, what sociology was. I wasn’t doing art — I was doing stories. I consider myself a storyteller.”

Next, she got permission to follow firefighters in the Bronx and Harlem. She’d spend up to six days in a row with them, but the rules were that women had to be out of the firehouse by 10 p.m. Ms. Freedman slept in the back seat of the chief’s car and on the floor between engines.



A roustabout on top of the canvas as the "big top" of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus was pulled down. 1971. Credit Jill Freedman/Getty Images

It took a while for them to take to her. Ms. Freedman’s politics were much more liberal than the firefighters, many of whom were veterans. And she wasn’t shy about expressing herself. But in time they accepted her and she found them to be “true heroes.”

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“They were like soldiers in that they die for someone else but they’re not like soldiers because they don’t kill — they bring life, not death,” she said. “So that’s what had me interested. Plus, good-looking guys with those boots on their legs. I was very fond of men. I really like them. I like them a lot.”

Embedded in the fire stations, and later precinct houses. Ms. Freedman was very much in a man’s world. “I got to see men like women don’t because men feel they need to impress us,” she said.

After her firefighters project, Ms. Freedman focused on everyday police officers on the beat. She looked for the “non-Hollywood version” of police officers, starting in the pre-gentrified Lower East Side, then moving to Midtown.

Ms. Freedman spent the most time with those officers whom she thought were good cops, who knew the streets but had a heart and a sense of humor. She enjoyed the adrenaline rush of her subjects’ lives, and she grieved alongside them at funerals of their fallen uniformed brothers.

Her books sold well, but it has never been easy to make a living off of photography books. Nor was she adept at hustling assignments. In fact, she has struggled over the years with financial and health problems.

After 24 years of living directly above the Sullivan Street Playhouse, Ms. Freedman was forced to move when she could not afford the rent. She settled in Miami Beach in 1992 and worked occasionally for The Miami Herald. Maggie Steber, who became the director of photography at the newspaper in 1999, described Ms. Freedman as “filled with the joy of photographing.”

“I think she’s been thoroughly under-recognized,” Ms. Steber said last week. “To me, Jill is one of the great American photographers. Always has been and always will be.”

After a decade in Miami and a few years on Long Island, Ms. Freedman returned to Manhattan, shuttling between friends’ apartments before finding a place near Morningside Park in 2007. Now she lives by herself among shelves of negatives, prints and book mock-ups waiting for a publisher.

While her books were successful in the ’70s and ’80s, her work is not well-known today. But she is featured alongside Elliott Erwitt, Bruce Davidson and Joel Meyerowitz in the recent film about New York street photography, “[Everybody Street](#).” Getty Images represents her work and has scanned more than 1,000 negatives that can be found [on its site](#).

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And Ms. Freedman is clear she is eager for rediscovery: "I'm still like a rebellious adolescent," she said.



Two firefighters after a call-out in New York City. Circa 1976. Credit Jill Freedman/Getty Images