

## SUN, SAND, AND SKIN: FIRE ISLAND'S GAY HAVEN IN THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES

By Alexandra Schwartz, August 1, 2017



The summer of 1977 was not a good time to be in New York City. The Son of Sam was terrorizing the town with his .44-calibre Bulldog revolver; the blackout hit in July. But, as the photographer Meryl Meisler discovered, it was a great moment to be on Fire Island, escaping the urban meltdown for the beach. At Studio 54, where she and her Graflex Norita mid-format camera were regulars, Meisler got to know a trans woman named Alexis, who introduced her to Rita, who introduced her to Barnett, a Manhattan beautician who invited her to stay in an attic bedroom at the Survivor, his house in the hamlet of Cherry Grove.

"It was a magical time," Meisler remembered recently. There were dance parties at night, tea parties during the day, a house called "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," after the seventies TV show, "where you could get things they don't sell in the drugstore," and always the beach: sun, sand, and lots of skin. Like the Pines, its famous neighbor to the east, Cherry Grove was a haven for gay life and leisure, and Meisler's photographs—some of which appear in her book "Purgatory and Paradise: Sassy '70s Suburbia & The City," but most of which have never been published—capture the sexy, carefree spirit of a post-Stonewall, pre-aids summer spent among lovers and friends. Fire Island in the seventies holds a special place in the gay-male mythos, but the crowd was mixed, and Meisler's pictures pay attention to women as well as to men, the old as well as the young, to the queens posing in drag and the nudists lounging (or, in one impressive case, meditating in a yogic headstand) in the buff. The impression is one of comfort and contentment, everyone feeling good to be themselves together in what Meisler calls "a little Eden off of Long Island."