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Another Man

CAREFREE PHOTOS OF GAY MEN ON FIRE ISLAND FROM THE 1970S

By Miss Rosen, July 17, 2018



Sun, sex and disco: American photographer Meryl Meisler looks back on the summers of '77 and '78

In July 1978, Donna Summer released Last Dance, the final word on the dancefloor – the last record spun at the club before the lights come on. American photographer Meryl Meisler could not have known then just how apt that track would be when it released during her last summer at The Survivor, a cottage on Fire Island.

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Just one year earlier, Meisler had made her entrée to the Fire Island social scene, after meeting a hairstylist named Barnett through a friend of a friend she knew from her nights at Studio 54. Barnett had just gotten out of a long-term relationship and took a shine to Meisler. He extended an open invitation to his home, and for two seasons Meisler made her way to heart of Cherry Grove, accompanied by her childhood friend Judi Jupiter.

During those first years in between the Summer of Love and the advent of AIDS, New York was a carefree candyland, equal parts innocence and decadence. Camera in hand, Meisler captured a forgotten slice of New York LGBTQ history in these photographs, some of which appear in her books *A Tale of Two Cities: Disco Era Bushwick* and *Purgatory & Paradise: SASSY '70s Suburbia & The City* (Bizarre Publishing). Meisler looks back at this Edenic idyll 40 years on.

“When I was nine or ten years old, I was a Girl Scout and we camped out on the beach at Fire Island. Other Girl Scouts told stories about places out there where naked fairies were living in little houses with names like Shirley Temple. I was curious to meet these fairies [laughs]. I had no idea what they meant were nude beaches for gay men.

“Barnett was a generation older than I was, but I always had friends of different ages. The Survivor was on one of the main streets in Cherry Grove and there was always a room available in the attic. He had a home there for decades and everyone knew him. That’s why I used to carry a medium format camera – I had a place to hang out and put the camera down if I wanted to jump in the water.

“1977 and ’78 were the height of disco, and the party scene would continue from the city to the beach. It was the first time I hung out on nude beaches. We went to tea dances, to nightclubs like the Ice Palace, and events like the Miss Monster Festival or the Miss Fire Island Contest. I remember one night, I went to this wild Star Wars party; the film was just out that week and the party was amazing. I wasn’t dressed properly but I had a smile and brought my camera, and no one had any objection to my photographing.

“Cherry Grove, the Pines, and all of Fire Island was a magical place. One day, thousands and thousands of Monarch Butterflies descended and were there for the entire day. It was really magical. This is a place that is a part of their migration. They entire island was immersed in butterflies the entire day. It was absolutely stunning.”