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Navigating the (Lint-y) Fabric of the Space-Time Continuum: Photographs of Debbie Harry, 1975–77

LJP (always): “Hey, I’ll take pictures of you guys.”

I feel clunky navigating the world. I see myself as not only physically awkward but clumsy in social situations. To smooth my road, I’ve picked up a camera and used it. That elegant piece of equipment—in this case a Nikon F1—held to my eye forms a bond between me and you, unites us in a further-agreed-upon mystery.

This is a selection of pictures I took of Debbie Harry while she and I were occupying space in proximity to one another from 1975 through 1977. That the negatives survived my many lives and locations since is a bit of magic. They show the wear of time, but their subject remains fresh, un-self-conscious, and I hope, unimpeded by my presence.

Deborah Harry: “Being hot never hurts.”

It’s hard to complain about looking into a wholesome, beautiful face, especially one that also conjures “Kung Fu Girls” and “paka lola luau love.” Some memories I had and discoveries made while microscopically clearing the negatives of their accumulation of dust and scars:

People were always giving us clothes, and the clothes often came from the trash. We took for granted the eradication of bedbugs, had the impression we were getting a grip on disease, never thought twice about dragging furniture or fashion in off the street. When we dressed up we weren’t just wearing clothes; it was “drag.” Items from the 1930s and ’40s were particularly coveted. We celebrated trash, hand-me-downs, and thrifted haute couture from any recently deceased doyenne. Fabric was manufactured in a different way during that span of decades. It was thicker and therefore stiffer, but it also didn’t pill as much. Lint was more of a thing. Or maybe that was just because of how we lived and laundered. Not sure.

I can't look at any of these photographs without thinking of the people who made us. The scourge of AIDS hadn't yet taken friends who'd extol the virtues of our waists, call them "wasp," take out a lipstick, use it to make our lips "bee-stung," give us work or point us toward power, lead us up the ladder as they stood backstage or in the audience applauding. Those friends helped girls like us grow self-esteem even when ours was next to nil. And we were "girls" and none of the girls, even Ms. Harry, who struggled at the time to show up her detractors, had a core of confidence—and this wasn't because an abundance of lint. These angels lifted us; some left holes in our hearts. I see them in these stills.

Chris Stein (to me): "C'mon, bring us the pictures, already."

I probably can't write anything new about Ms. Harry, but here are the photos. They speak for both of us. There's no gauze, no Vaseline on the lens, no special lighting; just a smoldering bottle-blonde woman in a band who at the time was still making stained-glass belt buckles for a few cents apiece and cooking breakfast on a hot plate in a freezing loft on the Bowery.