

written by
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roberta self portrait

Roberta Bayley took some photography courses at her high school in Berkeley, California. When she wasn't dreaming of her own British Invasion she'd snap a few photos with her Instamatic, but that was it. Years later, in New York City, Bayley found herself propping Ramones' bassist Dee Dee atop a brick so he'd be just a bit taller in line with his other bandmates. That 35mm, black and white photo of the New York punk legends—developed in her rented darkroom—would end up being the legendary band's first album cover, ranking among *Rolling Stones'* Top Album Covers of all time.

Patti Smith, Talking Heads, the New York Dolls, Stiv Bators, and Blondie—with whom Bayley toured frequently—would soon become her camera pawns. Today, a Flickr twenty-something would die and go to heaven before so casually shooting our YouTube ruling musical elites, but Bayley was ultimately in the right place at the right time, and was happy to capture one of the most important eras of music in New York City's Lower East Side:

"I was traveling around a lot, and I didn't have a darkroom. I didn't really get serious about it until 1975. But the reason that I specifically bought a camera was to document what was going on at CBGBs and lower Manhattan. This was a scene that needed to be documented."

I was basically photographing my peers. It wasn't somebody I was particularly in awe of or anything. These were just people I knew. We were all pretty much on the same level, so that was a different factor in the whole thing."



THE RAMONES



debbie harry of **BLONDIE**

A college drop-out, Bayley, who lived in London from 1972 through 1974, first began to follow music when a San Francisco band, The Flaming Groovies, moved to England:

"I followed music with the British Invasion. I was a big Beatles and Rolling Stones fan and saw all those bands when I was a teenager, but then I also went through the San Francisco scene in the '60s, where a whole bunch of different bands [were] playing to their peers. The bands would just be playing in the park [...] It was before the rock scene became so huge, where people would be separated from the audience. The bands would hang out with the crowd after the shows. They didn't have to be sequestered away in VIP rooms. It was a more relaxed scene."

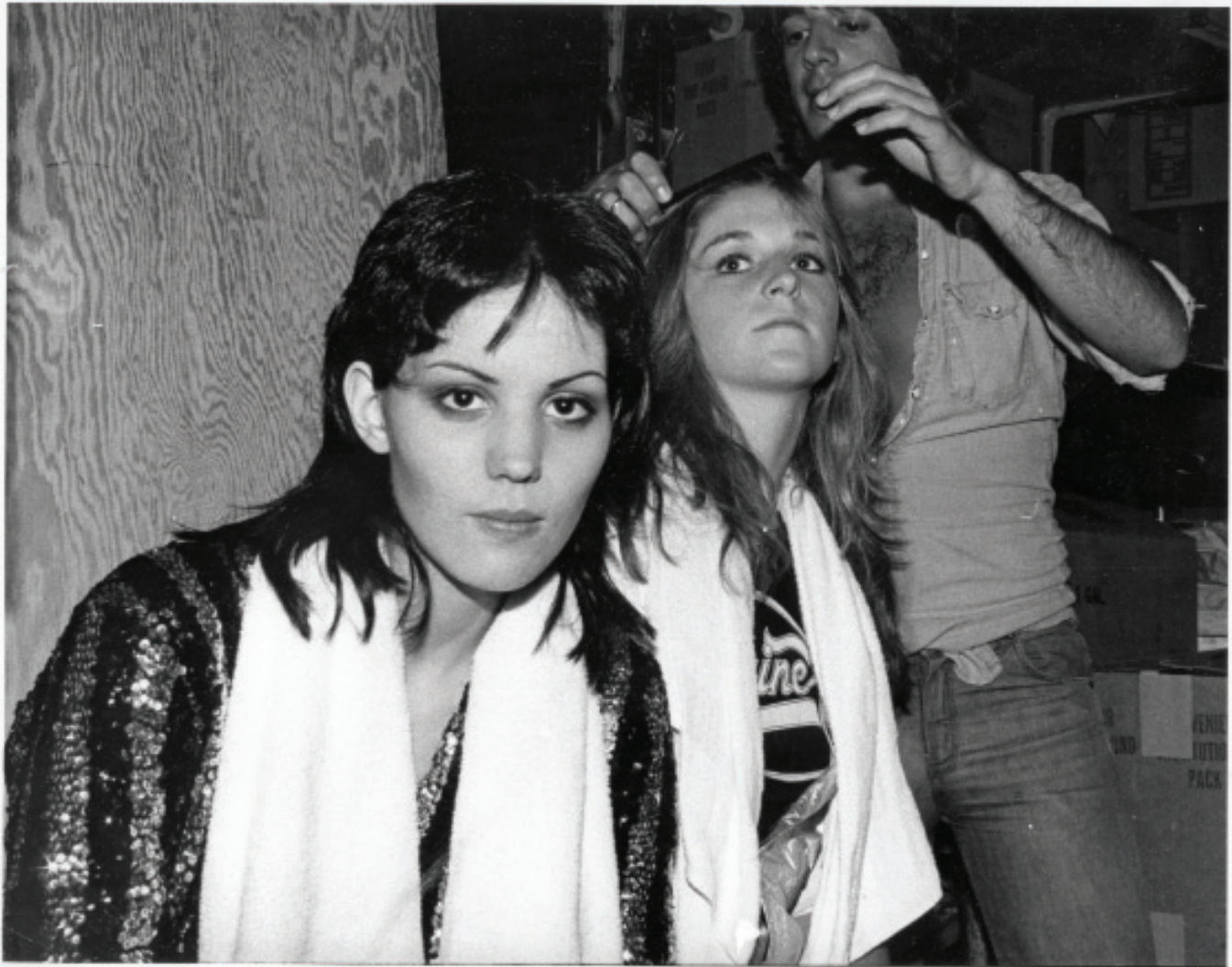
Rock 'n roll is just so big now—music in general. It's just so much bigger. People are either big right away or there's no underground scene happening for a couple of years that gets them discovered. By the band's first rehearsal, they already have a record deal—if indeed there are even record deals anymore."

Bayley worked a day job for Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, the late Sex Pistols' manager and designer, at the infamous clothing boutique called Let it Rock. She worked alongside Sid Vicious, who was in a band called Flowers of Romance, and once described him as a "gentle and a sweet young boy."

The boutique would soon change its name and fashion. First, it was called Too Fast to Live Too Young to Die, and then turned into SEX. There on King's Road, Westwood and McLaren responded to fashion being heavily influenced by music, from the 1950s brothel creeper shoes and drape jackets worn by the Teddy Boys to early '70s rock bell bottoms:

"Malcolm McLaren had been in New York before in the mid '70s and managed The New York Dolls, and he was very much influenced by Richard Hell—the ripped T shirts and short choppy hair. He took those looks back to London and applied them to what became The Sex Pistols. Style has always been a big thing [in London]. They took the fashion and exaggerated it, so it was much more than a look. In New York, everyone had their own look. It wasn't just one look. Talking Heads were very preppy. Patti Smith was kind of a hippie."

Malcolm had been in the fashion business. He came over here in '72 when he first met the New York Dolls in their early days, because he was at the boutique show in New York and [guitarist] Sylvain Sylvain also had a clothing business at that time [with NYD drummer Billy Murcia]. [It was called] Truth and Soul. He met them in the boutiques' shows when all store owners would meet up."



joan jett of **JOAN JETT & THE BLACKHEARTS**

In 1974, Bayley visited New York City and saw glam rockers the New York Dolls at the now-defunct transvestite bar, Club 82. She also saw bands like the Ramones, and she knew she had to pack up and move. After a brief stint at home in California, Bayley headed to New York in 1975. She started dating Hell, McLaren's muse from afar, and working as a hostess at CBGBs.

Pentax Spotomatic in hand, she prowled Max's Kansas City and other Lower East Side venues, particularly fascinated with what was happening at CBGBs. She soon hooked up with Legs McNeil and John Holmstrom, who had a little magazine called PUNK, and started working as their photographer:

"I think that's what really engaged me and made my work have a little bit of an oddball twist. We were doing very oddball things—not straightforward photo sessions. It made things a little more interesting, and PUNK was a very popular magazine. Everyone wanted to be in it, so we got to photograph anyone we wanted, really."

By 1980, the whole excitement of that five-year punk stretch died down, and Bayley's desire to photograph was waning. As a result, Bayley's post-punk photography career has been selective:

"There wasn't anything worth photographing anymore. I picked up the camera to capture what was happening. My job was done."

I had an assignment to shoot The Strokes a couple of years ago, and I did Mary Weiss [the original singer for the Shangri-Las]. I stopped taking pictures in the mid-80s, so it had been about twenty years since I had taken photographs. I don't have a darkroom anymore. When I started taking pictures more seriously, I thought I should just be digital, because it really makes a demarcation of my early stuff to the stuff I do now. I take a lot of pictures for myself, but nothing for assignments."



BILLY IDOL



johnny thunders of the **NEW YORK DOLLS**

The closing of CBGBs in 2008 served as a landmark for Bayley—a way to measure the change in the musical, as well as political, atmosphere:

“We didn’t want it to close, but things have to change. The Bowery is no longer the Bowery. It’s a totally different neighborhood. CBs never changed, just everything around it—except for the dog shit. That was a time capsule.”

When CBs was closing, all of us were in Tokyo, but we had a computer set up to satellite in Tokyo watching the Mets game on TV and listening to CBs live. We were there with Michael Gramaglia, who directed the Ramones documentary End of the Century. We brought him to Tokyo, and he filmed us there. It was very surreal.”

Though no longer an active photographer, Bayley still shows off her vast body of early work:

“I’m going to do a Deborah Harry exhibit with Patrick McMullan. We don’t have a date for it yet, but it’s going to be at the Clic Gallery on Broome Street. I have a Blondie book out (Plexus). It covers a very specific period, from 1976 through 1980. The Sex Pistols would be the only other band that I can do a book on, but it would only be specifically covering that American tour.”

There was a book called Twelve Days on the Road that exclusively used my photos, but it was a photo book, a story of the tour. John Holmstrom is putting out a Best of PUNK compilation and using a lot of [my] photographs for that.”



joey ramone of **THE RAMONES**

She has made the transition from film to digital in recent years, but more of out of necessity than desire:

"I don't think there's really any comparison. [The move to digital is] just something you cannot avoid. You think very differently because of the expense. In the '70s, we were all so broke. I would consciously limit the amount of pictures I was taking. I would shoot a band and take only ten pictures of them because you were just thinking of the expense—especially with color. But it means you're taking it more seriously. You can't help with digital to overshoot, and it doesn't make you a better photographer. It's like giving a camera to a chimpanzee—he can shoot 2,000 pictures of something and be good."

But Bayley's status has not diminished—especially in Japan, where her past photography takes on Warhol-esque proportions:

"I have a company in Japan that licenses my photos for clothing and accessories. My name is on the name tag. I'm a brand there. It's kind of cool. My own photograph of myself is on the brand, and childhood photos and different memorabilia. That's been very lucrative and fun. It's limited edition. That's how the Japanese operate. They only do things that come out for a month, so everybody is not walking around with the same thing."



richard hell of **RICHARD HELL & THE VOIDOIDS**



joe strummer of **THE CLASH**

An autobiography is also in the works—tentatively, at least:

"I want to just do an autobiography. I've just been very slow in doing it—it's really a daunting task. A lot of people are always bugging me, saying, 'You have to write your book, you have to write your book,' but I have to write it!"

I'll get around to it. The photos are like a diary, so that's a way to lead it through. I'm just really lazy, to tell you the truth. The idea of writing a book is very weird. John Holmstrom is writing a book about PUNK Magazine, and you get to thinking, 'Is anyone really interested in this?' You get very self critical. For the Blondie book they asked me to write 300 words, and I ended up writing 6,000 words—2,000 of which they cropped because it was more about my pre-Blondie life. So once I get writing, I'm a pretty fast writer, but when you're writing about your life—I mean, I'm sixty years old, so where do you start? What do you put in, what do you leave out? What's boring? It's a lot.

Try writing your autobiography. You start, 'I was born ...'"



THE NEW YORK DOLLS



debbie harry of **BLONDIE** & joey ramone of **THE RAMONES**