

Interview with Abigail Rosen (McGrath)



From Billy Name's contact sheet for *Tub Girls* with Viva and Abigail Rosen

Abigail Rosen was the first door-person at Max's Kansas city and the woman in the afro in Andy Warhol's *Tub Girls* (which also featured Viva and Brigid Berlin in the cast). She currently works in film and the arts under her married name, Abigail McGrath. In 2004 she wrote the screenplay for *Au Pair Chocolat*, starring Martin Scorsese's daughter Domenica Cameron-Scorsese. She is also the founder of the Renaissance House artists' retreat on Martha's Vineyard and is currently working on a screenplay based on the life of the civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer.

Thanks for doing this interview, Abigail. Can you tell me a little bit about your background? How did you come to be in New York during the 1960s?

I came to be in NYC during the 60's because I still lived at home. I was born there. My mother was the Harlem Renaissance poet, Helene Johnson, and she was raised in Boston, Massachusetts. Actually, she and her cousin Dorothy West, the Harlem Renaissance novelist and short story writer, were raised together as if they were sisters. They did not know that they were cousins until they entered the Girls Latin High School in Boston. They won a contest in *Challenge*, a literary magazine at the time, and the prize was a trip to NYC. Once my mom saw Harlem, she never looked back. Harlem was the place to be and my mom made a big deal about my being born in New York City. So when, almost nine months pregnant, she moved down south to everybody's consternation to have a child born in Harlem.

Of all the writers during this period, my mother was the only one to have a child, It is so strange that she should spend her youth during the flapper period in NYC when life was filled with wild abandonment and that I should spend mine during the so called hippy period in NYC - talk about wild abandonment! Like mirror reflections only the mirrors were Coney Island fun house mirrors. So, here we have a poet mom raising a child on her own, not in NYC as was her dream, but in Brooklyn as was her reality. We are talking educated poor here - think about it, how many wealthy poets do you know? It is easier to get a job as a meteorologist than as a poet.

What was it like living with a poet?

Living with a poet is a lot of fun because you never know that you are poor. I went to a prestigious private school - a tad on the hippy side, but prestigious none the less. We went to the Broadway theatre, the opera - we took advantage of everything the city had to offer on a salary that was lunch money for the parents of my schoolmates. And she got what she wanted - I am a serious, died in the wool, New Yorker.

What private school was it?

It was called the Little Red School House. While there I became friends with Johanna Lawrenson. Her mother was also named Helen and her mother was also a writer. The two Helens used to get together on the phone and discuss our homework - cause they both did it for us. They had a great time comparing their grades.

Did you go to college? Or did you start working right away?

Both. I worked quite a bit as a model. NY was just beginning to use enough black models so that you could think you had a shot at a career. But I did something few of my friends did. I went to college. I went to Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. The only time I ever left New York was to go to Paris as a dancer at the Folies Bergère. I entered Bard a virgin and came out a mother with a two year old child. This child is what separated me from the others. This child is what grounded me. This child is why I am still alive and sober and a sweet little old grandma. My oldest son, Jason Rosen, has a band called Last Tribe NYC (<http://www.lasttribenyc.com>) and Benson McGrath, the youngest son, is a Los Angeles attorney who writes screenplays when not in court. I also

have a granddaughter, Danica Rosen, who is a straight "A" student at Brown University and a flamenco dancer.

In those days there were only a few jobs a black person could get that would guarantee a creditable living; a singer, a dancer, an actress or a madame. If I could sing, I could have ruled the world. So, since I was a theatre arts major in college, had two left feet, and had been a virgin since my son was born, I became an actress - not just an actress, mind you, but a director as well. Yes, I was amongst the first to say "I may be a hat check girl, but I really want to direct."

Did you say you worked at the Folies Begère?

I went to Paris after I graduated college. Most of the other kids at college got a trip to Europe as a graduation present. I went with money my mother had saved and that I had earned and with my toddler son Jason. I don't remember why I went - something about a cheap ticket comes to mind - but I do remember that it was the first time I was ever in a plane and that I had a terrific team of Johanna's friends welcome me at the airport.

I thought that because I had French in high school that I could speak French... duh!!! I was overcome by fear and immediately gave myself strep throat. I called my mom about every half hour but I could not tell her how scared I was. I spent most of my money within a week. So, I had to get a job. I got one modeling for an actress named Madelyn Robinson. She was really, really kind to me and understood my silent panic. I was living in a hotel and had Jason settled in a crib but I needed more money if I were to continue. So, I went to the Folies Bergère and got a job as a "Mannequin." A Mannequin is a non-dancing (two left feet, remember?) show girl who walks around in a big hat, 7 inch heels and no top.

I did the interview in French and tried to be cool. When he asked how much I wanted, I should have known that I was in the cat bird seat, but instead, since I was always a red diaper baby, I said "Comme les autres" which means "like the others." Well, the others were getting \$7.00 a day - who knew? Within a few weeks, I was called back to NYC to appear as Diana Sand's understudy in an improv group called The Living Premise. It seemed like a good excuse to leave Paris and not have to admit what a failure I was.

Is it true that you were the first door person at Max's Kansas City?

Yes, I was the first "door person" at Max's. In fact, I was "the bouncer." We weren't called door people until the uptown places started having folks cull through the wannabees and select the lucky ones who could come into a restaurant or dance club. We predated the velvet rope. Lord, I can't believe I am this old.

How did you get the job at Max's?

I owned coat check concessions at a place called Your Father's Mustache, a dixieland music beer hall and The Village Vanguard, a jazz club. My friend Johanna Lawrenson was very in with Mickey Ruskin and that scene. When Mickey wanted to do a hat check concession, Johanna mentioned me.

When Mickey met me, he thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread and that I knew everyone there was to know. Ha! I just knew Johanna and her friends and Mickey was such a sweet and trusting rube that he assumed that I was in with the in crowd too. Nothing could have been further from the truth. But, I liked Mickey and I smelled money, so I took the gig. I hired Nawana Davis and a couple of the other girls who worked for me at the Village Vanguard to help me out.

Nawana was from Hamtramck Michigan. One of thirteen children of the only black family in all of Hamtramck at the time. She was funny, also an actress, and really, really likeable. One of my cardinal rules was "No fucking the customers." Nawana endorsed it because those rich dilettantes would always dump you and marry their peers. Nawana was on the job for less than a year and up and quits. My dear, this country bumpkin had started dating one of the customers. Next thing I know, Nawana is in Los Angeles, has learned how to drive, is driving a brand new Rolls Royce and bangs into Cass Eliot [from the The Mamas and the Papas] who is driving her brand new Rolls Royce but is so daunted by Nawana that Cass starts apologizing and offers to pay for Nawana's repairs.

I understand you were the person who hired Dorothy Dean to work at the door at Max's. How did that come about?

I had to replace Nawana, as if anybody could! So, I tell my incredibly chic gay pals Michael Maslansky and Frank Macfie that I need an assistant. They tell somebody and somebody else tells somebody else and next thing I know, Mickey is groveling at my feet thanking me for Dorothy Dean. I had never met the woman. I had heard that she was a caustic, mean bitchy alcoholic fag hag. Nothing could have been further from the truth. When we finally met, she was actually warm to me.

The big deal about Dorothy and a lot of people like her is that they want to be noticed at all costs. So, she would

say outrageous, scintillating, scatological, sexy things - not because she meant them, but because she wanted to be remembered and noticed. She wanted to make sure that people didn't think she was ordinary. Being ordinary was the cardinal sin in those days.

Did Mickey Ruskin prefer to have women at the door?

Mickey hired mostly women as door people and mostly smart, sharp women because there is an art to kicking someone out or in this case, not letting them in. Now, the rule of thumb was, that if they looked as if they were bridge or tunnel folk, they could not get in. God forbid a man with a nine to five job, three kids and a mortgage should be seen at the bar. It was my job to KNOW everybody - and this was before Goggle.

Did you ever have any embarrassing situations at Max's where you didn't know recognize somebody who you should have?

I only slipped up once - and it was a big time slip up. This very average looking guy was at the bar and the bartender signaled to me that he was drunk. It was my job to kick him out without making a scene. Which I did. The trouble is, he kept coming back or trying to come back in. Finally, I had to tell him that he wouldn't be happy there and to go home to his wife and children who loved him and needed him and how would he feel if his mother were to see him in this state. He got into a taxi and left. The next day, Mickey found out that it was Stanley Kubrick. He hit the roof. "That is what I pay you for, you are supposed to know everybody." I didn't know that included the west coast - also, he [Kubrick] was living in England at the time - it shouldn't count.

How long did you work at Max's?

I don't remember how long I worked for Mickey. I had both the hat check concession and was a bouncer. Together that paid for my oldest son's private school. I worked as a copywriter at an ad agency during the day and I made box lunches to sell in Central Park on the week ends. So, my schedule was, take Jason to school, go to day job, pick up Jason from day care, take him home and make dinner, go to Max's, get home sometime after 4 am, shower, make breakfast for Jason, take him to school, blah, blah, blah. On the weekends, Jason and I would sell home made picnic box lunches in Central Park. If you can find a place in that schedule to "misbehave" or better still, enjoy the free-wheeling spirit of abandonment which was redolent during that period, show me, please, cause I sure missed it.

How did you know Viva (Susan Hoffman)?

Susan Hoffman and I were friends through our mutual friend Johanna Lawrenson. Susan and Johanna knew each other from their country houses on the St. Lawrence River. Sue lived in Syracuse, I think, and Johanna in New York City. Okay, so Sue is also a model and lives in NYC with some rather well known photographer whose name I have forgotten.

Oh yes, its all coming back to me now - Susan wanted to be an actress and asked me how to become one since, after all, I had gone to college for it, had a degree in it and I should know something about it. So, I give her all this advice - study at HB Studios, start reading Shakespeare and by the way, your friend Andy makes movies - ask him if you can be in one. Next thing I know, Sue is a movie star and I am writing Anacin commercials and going out with a sensitive actor who has two more weeks on unemployment. I don't know how Susan did it, she must have hit Andy over the head with a frying pan or something but, somehow she convinced him that she was a creditable actress and indeed, the woman was stunning looking and had a very nice quality about her.

How did you come to appear in *Tub Girls*? Do you recall if Andy was actually operating the camera during the shooting of it?

Susan called me up one day and asked if I could help her find unusual tubs because Andy was making a film with her in different tubs. I was cool on the phone and did my best to sound gracious. There is no way in the world that Susan could have seen the steam coming out of my head or the daggers shooting from my eyes. Now, let us speak clearly here, by now Susan is my friend. Johanna, Susan and I are going to parties together and knocking them dead when we walk into a room. So, I am happy for her, but I could be a little happier and I say to Sue, "Okay, I will get you a tub but I gotta be one of the people in it." Bless her heart, she said "Sure." As far as I know, she never spoke to Andy or checked with anyone, just said "Sure."

So, I get them this see-thru tub which had been used in a beauty commercial and kazaam, in a trice, I am sitting in the tub naked as a jay bird with Susan in front of me. The thought that this could be constructed as a lesbian scene never crossed my mind, the thought that there could be some sort of hidden sexual agenda never crossed my mind, all I could think of was "I hope I don't leave a ring around this damn tub. I'll never hear the end of it."

Audrey Hepburn was my idol at the time, Katharine Hepburn was my all-time idol, but Audrey was young and

sensitive and educated and my kind of star, so I was doing her accent and trying to act like her. I would have done a character had there been a script, I would have done an improv had there been a scene set up, but as I remember, the way it went down was, Andy came into the room, watched Paul Morrissey do the lights, took a few phone calls, turn on the camera, let Morrissey shoot, took some phone calls and finally said "cut."

Susan did the whole thing. She positioned us in the tub, she thought of the subjects to talk about, she set the tone, the timbre of the scene and I followed. I have never really seen it, but as I recall, Susan kept trying to go salacious and I kept trying to bring some sort of normalcy to it. The one time I saw either a rough cut or out-takes of it - I forget which - Susan looked terrific, spontaneous, charming and effervescent and I looked like Eliza Doolittle in an afro. I'm not making excuses, just telling it like it is.

Brigid Berlin was also in *Tub Girls*. Did you have any contact with her?

I'm told that Brigid lost a lot of weight and became a Westchester matron. Well, truth be told, she was a Westchester matron then - the kind who swap husbands and do key parties and in general have no idea how grateful they should be. The kind of rich girl who would do anything on a dare yet was always protected by her sense of etiquette. Part of her deal was being rich. The other part was being lonely. The worst part was this insatiable need for attention. You had to like Brigid, no matter how poignant you might find her. You had to like her because she tried so hard - just like the women in the junior league. Andy loved Brigid because she was rich. Andy loved the rich. You could be an ax murderer but if you came from a prestigious wealthy family, Andy would be your friend.

The last time I saw Brigid, she was with Mickey Ruskin. They took Mickey's daughters to see a production of *Jack and The Beanstalk* that my husband and I produced (Yes, I married the unemployed actor - could've done worse, could have done a lot worse). Brigid stole a prop which was a painting of a hot dog on wood. We did two dimensional props in a Commedia dell'arte setting. I saw the prop in her bag and she saw me see it and whipped it out and said "I loved this hot dog so much, I am going to put it in my book of cocks." She said it right in front of the girls. Brigid was another sensitive person who would not be satisfied with being ordinary. She had to be different and make sure that you knew she was different - at any cost.

Brigid also taped the performance, didn't ask, just went ahead and taped it. We didn't mind. I have no idea what she did with the tape. I should have asked her for a copy of it. The next day, Mickey told me that his daughters liked our production over the circus and some other big ticket item which pleased us very much. He also told us that the girls had fallen out of the back of his car while he was driving them home. How much dope do you have to take to know when enough is enough? He was upset because his New Jersey, ex-wife was angry. What exactly did he expect?

Did you get paid for your work in *Tub Girls*?

I am probably the only person who was paid, Andy paid late, but I finally got a check for \$100 and paid my rent with it. Poor Dorothy Dean actually GAVE money to Andy for her film. For some reason, Andy did not mess with me, maybe because I was in the union, maybe because he believed the myth that I was "well known."

Tub Girls was going to be my ticket out of the ad agency and three jobs and hanging up strangers' coats all hours of the night while forbidding John and Jane Suburban from entering Hades because they got an average score on their SAT's and went to safety schools. Instead, it wasn't even released in the U.S., at least not as far as I knew. There was no way I could afford to continue working with Andy, I wasn't a trust-fundee, an heiress or a dope peddler.

So, I kept my day job and started doing what I kept telling folks that I was. I began directing at The Off Center Theatre. Tony McGrath, (the actor with a few more weeks of unemployment) had started a double Off-Broadway theatre in the basement of a church on 66th St. It was around the corner from what soon became Lincoln Center. People would stop by and say "Is this Lincoln Center?" and I would say "No, it is Off Center." Again, too dumb to realize that the shows we did were off-center both politically and socially.

We did political satire in the streets and in the parks as well. We wrote a show *Hope for Life* which played daily at places where people congregated for lunch. It wasn't your typical "Rich is Bad, Poor is Good" kind of fare which one expected from Street theatre in those days. It was more like "the government is lying to you and here are the facts." We were the darlings of the agit-prop theatre circle and, protected by friends in high places, we were never arrested and never got a ticket. One of the first things I teach in my film classes at NYU is "Try not to get arrested." It is the hardest thing to do. I became a director and did, well, "One of the best half hours of theatre I have seen all season" said Ross Wetzsteon in the *Village Voice*. I have Tony to thank for that.

My job at the ad agency ended when I got pregnant with my second son, Benson. Since I was the one who could write a full sentence, I started writing grant applications and we were able to sustain a theatre company and a family on grants, ticket sales and begging in the streets. After a while, I began doing almost all of the administrative

work and very little of the creative. I was turning into my mother. She stopped writing poetry when she had to support a family.

Did you ever go to any of the screenings at the Factory?

Once I arrived between the screenings of two short films Andy was showing and I sat next to Ravi Shankar, the great sitar player. He said that he had seen *Tub Girls* and congratulated me on my work. Then he said: "Is this something you do often? These blue films?" Blue films? I did not even know what the term meant. "Yes, said he, soft porn." I looked at him and he gently said "Pornography." He could see how shocked I was as I stuttered..."er, um, um, is that what they are?" I got so embarrassed that I started to cry and he said "no, dear, not really" but I knew that he was only trying to be nice to me. I ran out of the factory before the second showing. That was the first time it ever crossed my mind that what I was doing was - um - wanton. I never told my mother or any of my friends about it.

You're also in that famous Philippe Halsman group photo of Warhol's stars - the one that is reproduced in Ultra Violet's biography. Do you recall the photo session?

I recall the photo session as if it were yesterday. Susan called and asked if i wanted to be in the photo shoot, said Andy told her to call me. I said "sure." But, I could tell there was something going on because Susan kept down playing it and telling me that it was not important and not worth my time. She also told me that it was at 1:00 p.m.

So, I arrived early cause I assumed that there would be make-up and stuff. When I arrived, they were already on the set deciding who would sit where. I walked in off the street. Philippe took one look at me and said "sit over there." I did. Then he said, "Why are you late?" And I said, "I'm early. Susan said the shoot was at 1:00 p.m." He said, "It was for 11." Everybody laughed because they knew what was going on. I didn't have a clue. I apologized and said that I must have written it down wrong. Susan gave that shit-eating grin that she gives when she gets caught and later I learned that Susan didn't want to be photographed with Blacks or pets - that they took the attention away from her. Lordy, can you imagine being on the set with those "stars" and thinking that all eyes were on you?

Strangely, in the reproduction of the Halsmann photo in Ultra Violet's book you are listed as an "unidentified woman" despite the fact that in Billy Name's photographs from *Tub Girls*, you are correctly identified as Abigail Rosen.

I know. My children make fun of me because they say "They have your name when you are naked as a jaybird, but when you are wearing clothes they call you 'unidentified woman.'"

As you still live in New York, I'm curious - did you ever run into Warhol later - during the 80s?

I saw Andy years later at a party at Jean-Michel Basquiat's. I knew his dad who was an accountant for a friend of mine. Andy was sitting in a room surrounded by hangers on. He saw me and his eyes lit up. I, of course, assumed he thought I was someone else and had no idea who I was - it had been almost 20 years. So, I go through my bashful thing: "Hi, Andy, you may not remember me, I was in a..." and he interrupted me saying, "Abigail Rosen, the only actress I ever had with any training, I hear you have two boys and married a straight actor - here have a seat next to me, your son must be all grown up by now." It was that great "who is she? who is she?" moment that all Cinderellas have in their lifetimes and I truly appreciated it.

Gary Comenas
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