

## Craig Highberger

Jackie Dearest

Meeting Jackie Curtis during my first week at NYU Film School in 1973 and becoming his friend was one of the most propitious things that has ever happened in my life. Knowing Jackie right after high school truly freed me, inspired my intellect, and opened my mind to possibilities I had never dreamed of.

As Lily Tomlin and others clarified in my documentary, Jackie Curtis lived his life as performance art, rejecting conventional gender classification and shifting freely between female and male as he liked. One day Jackie would be in James Dean mode, scruffy and unshaven, in blue denim and a t-shirt, with a pack of Kools in one rolled-up sleeve. The next day he would be Jackie girl, with his Barbra Streisand wig, red lipstick, rouge and Pan-Cake makeup over heavy beard stubble, wearing torn stockings and a black dress stolen from the closet of a deceased neighbor friend named Rosie.

Each of these amazingly different personalities was Jackie Curtis—an accomplished singer and poet, an actor and actress, and a revolutionary playwright, whose work assaulted all conventions of taste and form, toured internationally to packed houses, and simultaneously garnered derision and accolades from critics. Yet his influence was pervasive, and in a sense it still is.

In 1971, Curtis had stagehands place the wrecked shell of a VW on the La MaMa stage as part of the set of *Vain Victory*. Later that year, an automobile was part of a stage set on Broadway for the first time in “Grease”. Bette Midler came to see *Vain Victory*, where on stage Candy Darling vamped in a mermaid outfit and Paul Ambrose did drag in a wheelchair, and a year later Midler toured the country wearing a mermaid outfit in a wheelchair. More than a few rock icons saw Jackie Curtis as both a boy and a girl, and there followed a number of years when quite a few singers began to wear women’s clothing and makeup, blurring the lines between sexuality and gender just as Curtis had.

Jackie and I spent some of the summer together in 1983. Part of the time Curtis was a boy, part of the time a girl. I took lots of photographs and videotaped Jackie in various drag outfits, performing a number of his best poems, segments of which are in my documentary. I will never forget sitting at the breakfast table less than two years later and turning the page of *The New York Times* to see Curtis’ obituary.

I loved Jackie, and he loved me. I felt guilty that he had died, wishing I could have prevented it, if things had been different. Today, I have no doubt that if Curtis had not died so tragically and so young, he would have continued to write, to perform, to be a major force on social media, in films and on stage. I am so glad that I have helped to commemorate the life and work of such a great artist and personality, whose cultural influence and joie de vivre touched me, and so many others.

Craig B. Highberger, March 2016

## Hattie Hathaway/Brian Butterick

Pictures of Ethyl in My Head

Ethyl Eichelberger, my sister, my mentor, my friend. . .

In 1986, I had the brilliant idea to do hardcore skinhead music matinees for all ages on Saturdays, at 3 p.m. at the Pyramid. Ethyl knew the club would be open early, so she came by to get ready for an early show somewhere. I went down to the basement dressing room, when the club was packed, to talk to the bands and there was Ethyl, surrounded by 25 somewhat homophobic skinhead boys with tattoos and bleachers who were enthralled by her and her makeup application.

It is only by reaching out that we live forever.

There will always be a picture in my head of Ethyl go-go dancing on the Pyramid bar with plugged-in Christmas lights woven into her wig, wearing impossibly tall six-inch heels.

Shining on eternally. . .

Ethyl, wheeling a shopping cart through the streets, piled insanely high with costumes, wigs, makeup boxes, from where she lived in Staten Island.

The show goes on forever, distance be damned. . .

Ethyl appeared in Broadway’s *The Threepenny Opera* in 1989 with Sting. I appeared in Threepenny with Alan Cumming in 2006.

We are indeed birds of a feather. . .

Ethyl killed herself in 1990, when her body began to break down due to advanced HIV disease. The only two recourses for her then would have been a painful, lingering death, or slow poisoning via AZT. Ethyl’s ultimate gift to me was the knowledge that, in some cases, suicide is noble.

I miss you, my brave sister. . .

Hattie Hathaway/Brian Butterick