

THE AGONY
AND
THE ECSTASY

BOB
CARLOS
CLARKE

THE AGONY
AND
THE ECSTASY

BOB
CARLOS
CLARKE

For Lindsey and Scarlett



















Forever Young

Bob Carlos Clarke was a provocateur. His visual interests—women and rubber, in particular—sealed his reputation as a photographer of erotic images. However, Carlos Clarke was far from one-dimensional. Serious about his work, he studied at the London College of Printing, where he fell in love with the sensual space of the dark room, and then as a postgraduate at the Royal College of Art. His work would span the genres of fine art, celebrity portraiture, photojournalism and advertising photography; his signature style a dark, brooding vulnerability.

He had described his native Cork, which he left as a young man, as ‘no place for a libidinous adolescent.’ A quarter of a century later, he found the perfect location to observe teenage lust: Public School Balls. Such events feature the holy trinity of ‘getting off with’ the object of one’s desire: alcohol, music and easily removable clothes. Carlos Clarke, who was sent to board at Wellington College, saw this orgiastic spectacle as ‘a peculiar side effect of a British public school education’, in which access to the other sex is limited to the point of obsession, if not actual sexual persuasion. Yet in a club, the Hammersmith Palais, this explosion of unleashed sexuality mirrors the same scene in youth clubs, living rooms and public parks across the country. Lips lock, tongues dart, fingers probe, hands grasp flesh, in this rite of passage from innocence to experience. Carlos Clarke captures its crescendo in a joyous tempest of foam, pumped out across the dance floor. Everyone tries to catch it, to rub it in to their skin and that of their friends, wanting it—and the moment—to last forever.

Years later, Carlos Clarke said it was amusing to observe people’s reactions to recognising themselves in these pictures ... the wider question is, which of us doesn’t?

Max Houghton

















Passion and Angst

Photographs of real life events encapsulate a vast amount of information, far more than the photographer can assimilate at the moment he releases the shutter. That is what makes pure photography so rewarding. When I shot the teenage party series I was working in near darkness with the focus and aperture pre-set. As the images appeared in the darkroom, it was fascinating to see the abundance of fine detail emerging from the passion and the angst.

In 1994 I heard about the Public School Balls, notoriously orgiastic parties for rich kids. So I went to check one out, loitering conspicuously at the bar of the sweltering hot club the Hammersmith Palais, trying not to look like a parent or a pervert. Outside, a long line of Jaguars and BMWs were disgorging noisy offspring with anxious chauffeur-parents attempting half-ignored goodbyes.

A queue materialised of a thousand floppy-haired youths in black ties and Daddy's dinner-jackets, shirt-tails flapping above falling-down trousers and filthy trainers. The girls were cool by comparison, predatory and self-assured, pouting and sucking provocatively on Marlboro Lights, hungry for fun and new sensation.

Later, when I realised what the events were about, I was torn between paternal feelings and the demands of photojournalism. I longed to shout crazy warnings to the doomed parents: 'For God's sake don't send your precious baby in there!' Meanwhile, the professional part of me was willing the queue through the doors of Hades and onto the tangled crush of nubile bodies.

Watching from an indiscreet distance, I felt a twinge of voyeuristic guilt mixed with a sudden, poignant recollection of my own adolescent fumbblings. Above all, I sensed the thrill of an anthropologist chancing upon the bizarre mating ritual of the children of the English upper middle class.



A cherubic brunette, tightly-trussed in her velvet party-dress, pushed past me, head up, cheeks flushed. Minutes later, she was sprawled on the floor between the end of a shabby banquette seat and a cigarette-machine. At her head, a small, red-faced boy busily alternated his attention between her lips and the plump breast that he had extricated from beneath her pushed-up brassiere. His colleague employed his hands on her nether regions, the left wedged somewhere deep beneath her buttocks, the right trapped between the mesh of her tights and the waistband of her pants. Like worker-bees they administered to their swooning queen bee, oblivious to the semi-circle of goggle-eyed boys jostling for a better view.

Without further delay I collected my camera from the car and returned to the club for a series of photographs that revealed some of the peculiar side-effects of a British public school education. The series was first published as a cover story in the Sunday Times Magazine, and later went worldwide to Stern and other glossies and books.

Years on, it's amusing to observe people's reactions when they recognise themselves in the shots. They're usually quite wistful, remembering the night when they finally and irretrievably abandoned their innocence.

Bob Carlos Clarke





















The Agony and The Ecstasy
Bob Carlos Clarke

Designed by Jane & Jeremy
www.jane-jeremy.co.uk

All the photographs were taken
at the Hammersmith Palais,
London, 1994

The Little Black Gallery
www.thelittleblackgallery.com

First Edition of 200, 2018

Text by Max Houghton
and Bob Carlos Clarke

All photographs ©
Bob Carlos Clarke Estate

