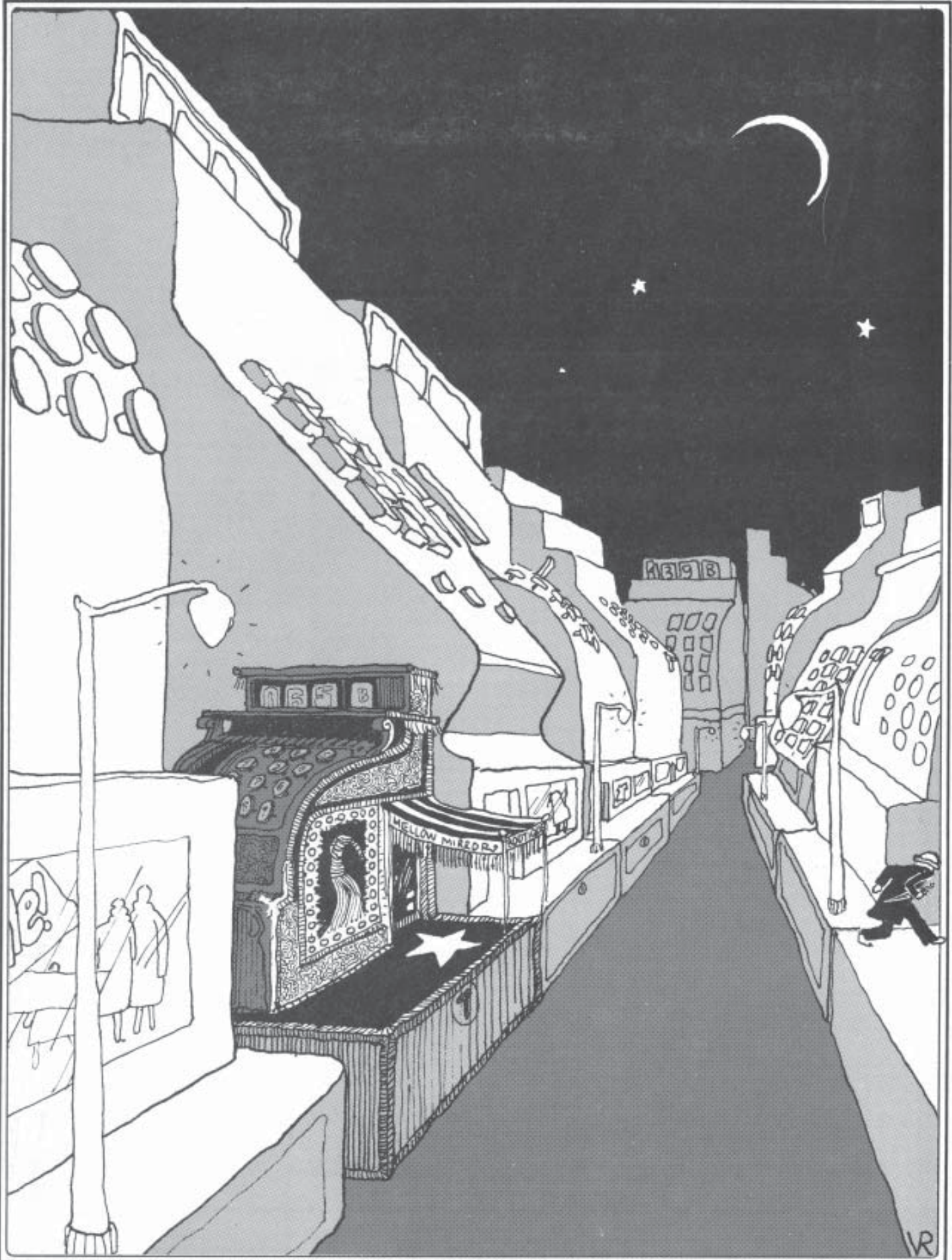


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A Rags Special Report: Boutiques and Hip Capitalism

I. Everything Must Go

The black velvet hillock in the middle of the floor moves gently up and down, almost as though the unborn child within it were rocking himself to sleep. But the oceanic movement is only Marcia Flanders breathing deeply as she lies on the floor of the huge back room at Abracadabra, the New York boutique she used to own and still manages, and considers. She rolls her head to one side, focuses on her interlocuter, and speaks.

"It really all started for me in 1961, when I saw my very first Mary Quant dress. Then I knew there was an answer. Before, you know, there was nothing between kids and women. I always had to wear the same look as my mother or grandmother. After that, I didn't. I was so happy.

"Then, in 1965, when I went to work for my first department store, I started meeting these kids who were coming in with their designs. No one would see them. They'd have to stand in line with a bunch of manufacturers, and when they finally met somebody, it was always: We can't buy from a little kid. How can a buyer take a chance like that? That's when I decided that there had to be a store where people like that could sell their work."

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Boutiques are a French invention. They're nothing more than small specialty shops, really, just like the Village Clothing Shoppe in Your Hometown, but "boutique" is a French word and thus classier and vaguely risqué. They were often located in the corners of hotels, serving tourists who wanted locally made goods without having to hassle with the language barrier.

In the trip across the Atlantic, however, the concept was changed. In the land of department stores, 100-shops-under-one-roof, the galloping homogenization of consolidation, boutiques

served as an alternative. And like many alternatives to American culture, the boutique was seized on by the (you know) young. And the boutique emerged from its bourgeois cocoon and became hip.

And then it became hip to be hip, and there was no stopping it. Boutiques appeared like slugs after a spring rain. There were good boutiques and bad boutiques, plastic boutiques and natural-wood boutiques, psychedelic boutiques and straight boutiques, smart boutiques and stupid boutiques—more boutiques, indeed, than there was room in the mind of God.

It was not a pretty situation.

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A fat white cat squints its eyes placidly and surveys the narrow interior of the store dispassionately, as if trying to decide on new wallpaper. Above its head, flimsy brown paper patterns swing in the warm air. The edge of the desk is some three inches from the cat's nose, and on the floor, at the other end of the five foot drop, an aluminum pie tin full of dry cat food sits next to a water dish on two unfolded pieces of the *New York Times*.

The shop, is called Opening Line and, like the cat, belongs to Judith Berkowitz. She started it on an impulse in 1966, while she was making costumes for the Judson Poets' Theater. "When I opened, I had 15 things—that's all. I sold what I had, and took orders. It was strictly a custom-made operation."

Four years later, things haven't changed much. She still does business out of her cramped store on grimy 9th street in the East Village, where half the sidewalk traffic consists of junkies on another endless, hopeless

search. Judy designs a spring line and a fall line (about seven designs in each, mostly graceful, simple dresses) and sends out a thousand pamphlets announcing the event. That's the only advertising she does. By doing everything herself—designing, pattern making, cutting, selling—she manages to get by. Why does she bother?

"I like the work. I love having my own place. I love having the hours completely my own. It's hard to verbalize . . . it's, you know, thinking of something, and working the whole thing out, picking the fabric, making changes, until you see if you can make it what you thought it would be. That's the challenge."

Like all small designers, Judy Berkowitz has had her ideas copied by the big manufacturers and boutiques. "The manufacturers, they comb the market, looking for ideas they can rip-off. There was this store in St. Marks Place—I won't mention it by name—that took one of my things and copied it line for line. I went in there and told them what I thought about people who did that.

"But there was nothing I could do. There's nothing anybody can do—there are no copyright laws or anything. You can't sue anybody for it, and it's probably just as well, because I'd have people running in here all the time saying 'that's my neckline' and trying to sue. It's probably better this way."

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Opening Line is not the only store where money is tight. Many boutiques have slashed their prices, and in some the portents are even more ominous. The pinch is on, and the marginal boutiques—poorly run, poorly located, too new, too old, too imitative, too original—are going under. The business is alive with rumors about established names floundering, and in more and more stores the most frightening

by Jon Carroll

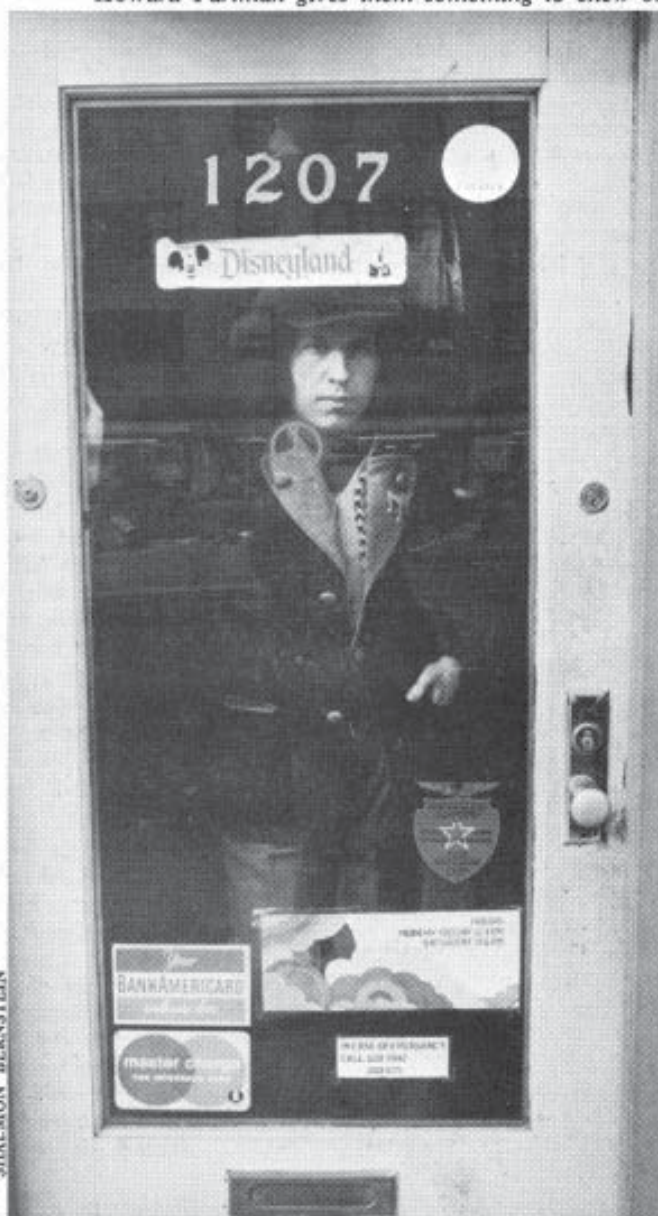




SHALMON BERNSTEIN

Judy Berkowitz about rip-offs: 'It's probably better this way'

Howard Partman gives them something to chew on



SHALMON BERNSTEIN

words of all are appearing, neatly lettered, on the backs of cash registers.

"All sales final," they say. "Everything Must Go."

Everything must go.

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When times were good and everybody loved a boutique, a young designer named Susan Harris started a boutique on 6th street in the East Village. It was called Okefenokee, and it was a success the day it opened. Susan and her store got a good reputation in the industry, and big manufacturers started trooping down to see where the action was. For the first five months of its life, Okefenokee doubled its gross income every month.

Six months later, it was closed.

Susan talks about why. "I knew I had to have my own store, so we scraped together \$2000 and started one. We had a very small stock, and a very large space, but we attracted people. We got lots of nice writeups, and the money started coming in. Then, right after Christmas, 1969, the recession hit. Business began petering out.

"It just got worse and worse. It was like a chain around our necks. It was open from 1-9, you know, and we never went out, never saw anyone. It got so I lost all track of events—I didn't know about anything that was happening outside of Okefenokee. I just got sick of it.

"And then the store . . . the landlord was burning Number 6 oil, which has been outlawed, I think, or it should be, and we were all choking on sulphur dioxide all the time. And the stuff covered everything with soot, and ate away at the stock. I finally decided I better get out now. It was worse than having a baby. I couldn't take it."

Would she do it again? "Never. Having your own boutique doesn't mean anything. There are so few interesting boutiques anyway. They start good, you know, and then they get into making money, and they tone down the style. They don't keep the character of the boutique. It's really a contradiction: Boutiques want to be popular, so they can sell their stuff, yet they have to be different, so that people will come into your store rather than somebody else's. And really original things don't sell very well. Anybody can tell you that."

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The globular pile of gumballs move sluggishly inside their glass dome, and an orange ball clatters down the short

incline and stops. Howard Partman picks it up and holds it out.

"Gumball?" No, thank you.

"This is one of the things we like to do for our customers," he continues. "You can fix these things so that you don't need to put any money in to get gum. So the customers can chew on some free gum while they look around."

Howard is part-owner and manager of the San Francisco New World Clothing Trust, which is not in San Francisco at all but on First Ave. at 65th in New York. Howard and his partners started SFNWCT in March of 1969, following a period of heavy disillusionment with the straight rag game as employees of Spencer Industries, Clothiers to Men. Now, of course, things couldn't be better—except for the recession.

"Well, business should be better," says Howard, looking around for someplace to put down the declined gumball, "because around this time it's usually pretty good. In the Spring we noticed the decline, and it just hasn't picked up since then. But don't get me wrong—we're doing all right."

Howard Partman, just like the most enthusiastic Rotarian from Duluth, believes that the way to grow and prosper inside the system is to try to keep the customer satisfied. "Face it, this city is saturated with stores. Over-saturated. So you have to offer people something different so they'll take the time to find you. We try and treat people well. We treat them just as a friend—show them new things, rap with them, offer them things. If you don't do that, you're just like a department store, and you might as well go out of business."

Howard gets up from his low stool and moves around to the front of his counter. He picks up a Tootsie Roll lollipop from a basket near the cash register.

"Have one?" he asks. "It's chocolate. The chocolate's very good. So's the grape."

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"To those of You Who Feel Illegal Simply Because You're Alive" reads the stark black headline. The copy underneath continues the theme. "Ahah. There you are. You. Funny Pants. Long hair, LP albums, peace in your eyes, love in your heart. You, freak pinko anarchist who probably have smoked the dread marijuana, and think too much. Your necktie (if you wear one) is too wide and colorful. My God, you are against the law."

Marshall Stackman leans on his counter and gazes up at a reprint of the ad, run last November in *The Village Voice* on a kind of hip, one-shot get-out-the-vote campaign. "You like that?" he asks. "We just felt we had to kick people's butts a little. See, I really know where it's at with Nixon's America. I really do."

"I mean, I was into money. My father, my sister and I took his \$800,000 blouse business and turned it into a \$4 million enterprise. And I know there's one thing you have to do with money—you have to put it where your mouth is. Really. You have to take care of people. The rest of it is bullshit."

"I mean, if Nixon's America continues, that means my America will die. If he wins again in 1972, I'm going to leave. I mean it. So I have



SHALMON BERNSTEIN

Marshall Stackman, butt kicker

no choice but to be political. I have to buy space for ads like that, and do whatever else I can. It's the least I can do."

He stands silent for a moment, looking back into the dim and elegant recesses of *The Stitching Horse*, the heavily-leatherized boutique he started in 1968. At the back of the shop, on 64th St, off Lexington, a spiral staircase winds up to the recently-opened second-floor annex. The shop, unlike so many around the city, is busy and prosperous. The recession seems unable to penetrate beyond the curtain of soft, expensive leather goods in the front window.

"See," he continues, "there's really a feeling of pride in this store. The employees like working here, and they're proud of the stuff they sell. We have very earthy, very natural stuff. I've had people tell me they get real rushes in this store. We know we have good vibes, because we all feel good about what we're doing. We look out for each other."

"I mean, sometimes people come into this store, and they don't fit. You know what I mean? We've turned

down \$300 sales like that. We just told them to go shop at *Bloomington's*. Because it wasn't right that they should have that thing. Their heads just weren't in the right place. When you buy something like this—" he picks up a Buffalo skin jacket and runs his hand down the front—"you're buying somebody's feeling."

"This stuff is funky, earthy and real, you know what I mean? The finest leather goods in the world today are being made by long-haired Americans. I don't care, European, Moroccan, whatever you want—this is better. But some people don't appreciate that. They want it to fit like a fabric, but it doesn't—it fits like a skin. You can drop it on the floor, put it in the bathtub and wash it. It's real."

Reality comes high at the *Stitching Horse*. Leather belts with fancy buckles cost \$26; fancy fringed jackets start around \$175. But many of the more expensive items are made by individual entrepreneurs who are unable, and unwilling, to use the kind of volume buying, mass production techniques favored by the large manufacturers. The *Stitching Horse* says it favors the standard mark-up—double its cost—but it probably runs a little more, because the shop is doing so well.

"We're very up front with people," Marshall says. "They come to us and quote us a price for something they've made, and if we think it's too high we tell them. We get most of the stuff COD, and we have like 30 seconds to decide whether we're going to pay for it or not. So we have to be straight. But some of the customers . . . I mean, they really get off looking at this kind of craft, but they're not willing to pay the price. We tell them to shop at *Bloomington's*."

Moment's Musing: Can any revolution, even one based on getting out the vote, be financed by \$200 leather jackets? Why not? After all, if you believe in the revolution, it shouldn't matter where the money comes from. On the other hand, the moral fabric of such an operation feels a little like chintz. But that's probably middle-class folk-purist inverse snobbism. Or is it?

There are no easy answers.

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Marsha, the wholesomely pregnant guiding light behind *Abracadabra*, has risen from the floor and moved to a plush chair near the wall. She's been dealing with small designers and en-



trepreneurs since Abracadabra first opened in 1966. It has not always been pleasant.

"We've been a one of a kind store from the moment we opened, but now some people think we're part of the establishment or something. I mean, these people come in and lie to you, they lie. It really freaks me out; I could just go berserk when it happens. I mean, you get some angelic flower child in here who says he just made these for you last night, and you look at them and know that they were made two years ago and he's been peddling them to every store in town. It's crazy. I've broken my ass for small designers, and I still have to take shit like that."

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Two young, vacant-eyed salesgirls lean on the tiny counter and discuss the relative merits and empirical distinctions between cocaine and codeine. One of the drugs—though it's uncertain which one—is more "up" than the other. Neither of the girls seems to care much which is which, and the conversation ends as a customer approaches. The girls don't have that much time for conversations, because the girls work for Betsey, Bunky and Nini. Betsey, Bunky and Nini is the Rolls-Royce of boutiques this season. Everything they touch turns to money.

Betsey is Betsey Johnson, the by-now famous designer whose work is the major attraction at the boutique. She's in India right now, but Bunky (who is never called Bunky) and Nini (who is seldom called Nini) are available. Their real names are Barbara Washburn and Anita Latorre, and they run the place.

Betsey, Bunky and Nini met when they all worked at Paraphernalia, which was the hot boutique several years ago. (Indeed, in many ways, Paraphernalia was the grandmother of American boutiques.) They were very good at what they did, and when they left, in 1968, they had all kinds of offers. "It's funny," remembers Barbara, "but it was easier for us to raise \$400,000 to put out a wholesale line than to raise \$50,000 to open a little store. But we left Paraphernalia because we couldn't do what we wanted to there, and we couldn't see getting into wholesaling or franchising or something. It was all too personal to us—we didn't want to get involved with something we couldn't actually control."

After a year out of work, they found their store on East 53rd, near



Bunky and Nini: 'It's a matter of two extremes'

Second Ave, signed the lease in May, and opened in September. Their success was immediate and huge. Much of the initial bonanza is attributable to the drawing power of the Betsey Johnson name, but it was more than that.

"You must remember, three-quarters of this store is not Betsey," Anita says. "Before we opened, Barbara and I went to Europe to buy things. We went to places that people hadn't been before, and picked out the stuff we liked. We thought that other people would like it, but we weren't sure." She grins. "But they did."

Betsey, Bunky and Nini became a self-fulfilling fad. The quiet area of 53rd Street where they opened their store became littered with boutiques, many of them (it is guessed) hoping for the overflow from BB&N. When Anita goes to Europe on one of her buying tours now, representatives from major department stores tag along after her, asking the stores she has visited what she bought and what she declined to buy. And every Saturday, BB&N is filled with designers looking for a quick knock-off.

Barbara and Anita are aware that they're riding the crest of a fad and, while they don't fully understand it, they have at least a preliminary notion about why it's happening. Barbara talks about it.

"I think what a boutique needs is an ability to sense what the needs are. If we stopped caring about the store, and got out of touch with our customers, then we couldn't understand that need. For instance, I think now people are into less extravagant

clothes. Well . . . that's not it, exactly. It's a matter of two extremes. People will want something very special, one very special thing, and then they want lots of very functional things, like blue jeans and long T shirt dresses. And that's what we try to give them."

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Musing, Part II: BB&N has very good stuff, but it's also very expensive. The same applies, with bells on, to the Stitching Horse. Where all that money goes is a matter between boutique owners and their gods, so it's hard to know if the distribution of wealth fits your economic-moral code. Does it matter?

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St. Marks Place, which is equivalent to 8th Street in the East Village, is wall-to-wall boutiques between Third and Second Avenue. Many of them are marginal, competing for an increasingly impoverished clientele in the midst of recession. They fight each other, just like gas stations and hamburger stands, with loss leaders and eye-grabbing plastic psychedelia. There are dozens of them in that one block—Hindu Khush, Intergalactic Trading Post, Once Upon A Time, Kristina Gorby, Grizzly Furs, Sunita's, Boutique Plastique, The What Not Shop, and on and on—and they won't all last the winter. Salesgirls peer out the window, searching the faces of pedestrians for customer potential. And the sad cold street people, trying to find a buck for a meal, look back at them. It smells of decay on St. Marks Place, and nobody knows what to do about it.

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SHALMON BERNSTEIN

Marty Freeman in Limbo: Toward meaningfulness

Limbo is on St. Marks Place, but Limbo isn't worried about winter. For one thing, there are now five Limbo-owned stores scattered about the city, and they're not all in bad locations. For another, Limbo will always have what people want. The clothes there may not be beautiful or unique, but they're cheap and they'll last.

The man responsible for Limbo is Marty Freeman, who resembles Bill Graham in more than just his thick, tough Brooklyn accent. With a street-fighting business sense derived from years of running a small clothing store in Brighton Beach, Marty Freeman managed to cut through much of the boutique bullshit and build a store which, if it did nothing else, served the needs of the people most likely to buy from it.

Today he sits on a bale of some exotic, sturdy cloth in the large warehouse behind his store. Up front, Freddie Billingsly, who came to Limbo, shortly after it opened in 1965, fresh from running a sandal shop in Spain, operates the cash register and watches the customers. Freddie, who made the buying trips to Europe which resulted in Limbo's pioneering stock of British bobby caps, Afghani great-coats and all-wool gabardine coats from England, is as responsible as designer John Kraus, who now runs the \$200,000 Limbo wholesale business, or Marty himself for the steady rise of Limbo.

In their location, Limbo is particularly subject to the kind of desperately clever shoplifting young junkies get into. "Every store handles it differently," says Marty. "We put all the

expensive things under glass, and there's no self-service here at all. Freddie handles most of it. We rely on initial eye contact a lot—you get a sense of who's looking to rip you off after a while, and we just stare them down. And when we catch someone . . . well, we try to work it out. Freddie had a young kid in here who boosted a suede jacket, and he started talking to him finally took the kid home—to Ridgewood, Queens—in the middle of the night, and got into a heart to heart thing with his parents. We very rarely turn someone into The Man—skag is a big enough problem around here without our taking people downtown and fucking them up more."

Freddie has wandered back and stands listening to the last part of the conversation. "What I usually do," he says, "is I make them pay for the item and then I keep the item. They usually get the point. And sometimes we have no choice but to give them a crack upside the head. They usually don't try again."

Along with all this toughness is a kind of sinewy idealism. Marty is asked if running Limbo is enjoyable. "Right. I dig doing it. I mean, I dig the fact that black and white cats are getting together. Our uptown store is completely run by blacks, and the manager there will probably be a partner pretty quick. I mean, now that I've got my security trip taken care of, I'd just like to say, 'This is mine. Take the whole thing.' We're kind of evolving into everybody's store. We're showing people that kids are really where it's at, and we're showing kids

that there are meaningful ways to lead their lives. That feels good. More than anything else we do here, that feels good."

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Marsha at Abracadabra has some final thoughts. "Things have changed, you know. People have a kind of social consciousness now. They don't give a shit about clothes — they're really frivolous and unimportant. There was a time, when Abracadabra was first open, when everybody was going discotheques, and they wanted to be seen in some way-out outfit every night. But nobody's anyplace any more. They're staying home and getting into themselves.

"See, whatever Nixon says, we're in a depression. When you're in a depression, clothes are depressing. It's no longer the ultimate thing in anybody's life. The plastic boutiques will die with the plastic people. I used to be into flashy, faddy things, but now I just wear the same thing every day. It's comfortable and functional, and that's all I care about.

"If, two years ago, someone had told me that Abracadabra was going to fold, I would have wanted to die. Now . . . well, it wouldn't really phase me at all. I'd be sorry for the people who earn their living from the store, but personally, I'm just not getting off on clothes anymore. Dressing silly people in silly clothes doesn't seem very important."

She looks down at her fecund belly. "My baby is the most important thing in my life right now. Maybe that says something." 🐾

Marsha, great with child



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