



Leaning In | Fearless street photographer

Jill Freedman • Stories and Trends | Getty Images

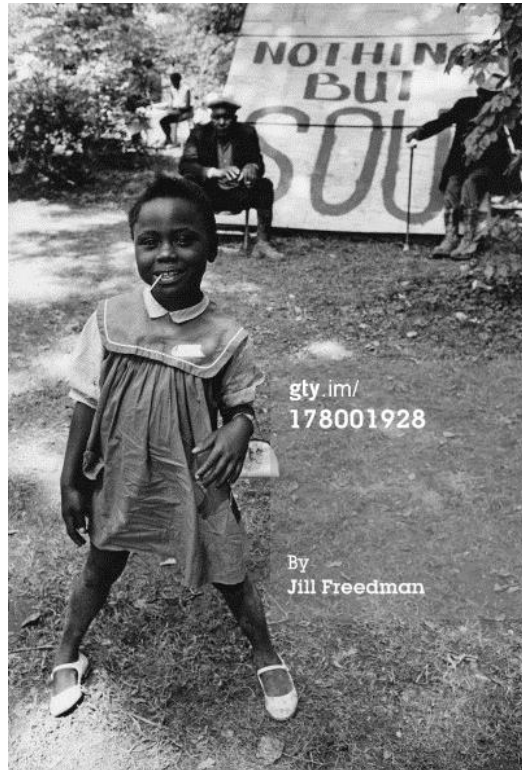
Since the advent of our [Lean In](#) collection, we've been challenging the world to re-picture the visual stereotypes around women. Our weekly 'Leaning In' series sparks discussion around traditional concepts associated with gender. This week, Director of the Getty Images Archive, Bob Ahern discusses the work of street photographer Jill Freedman.

From riding with the NYPD documenting the underbelly of NYC in the 1970s to going shoulder to shoulder with the fire crews of the South Bronx, if you had to use just one word to describe photographer Jill Freedman, it might be fearless.

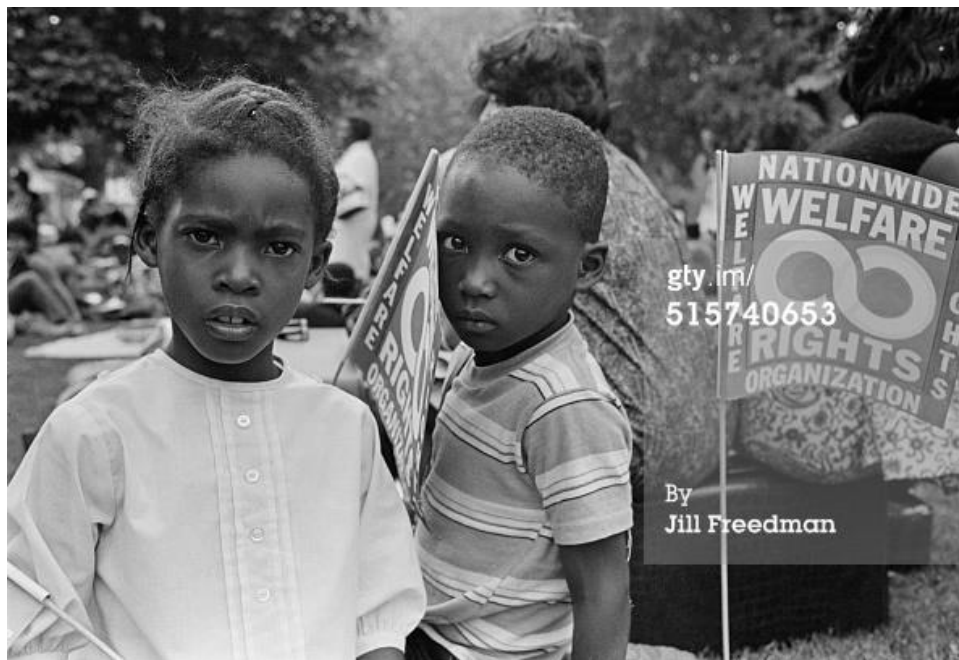
I had known of Jill's work for many years but I first met her in early 2013, at Bemelmans Bar on the Upper East Side. We met to discuss contracts and whether Getty Images might rep her pictures, and it was clear right from the off that Jill was as straight talking as her reputation suggested. Pittsburgh born but at heart a New Yorker who had seen it all. And then a bit more. And as the cocktails kept coming, I also got the impression that this petite 74-year-old was going to drink me under the table.

She told me about her journey into photography, which, like the rest of her life proved unconventional. Having busked the streets of Europe for many years, she discovered photography: "I am self-taught. I got a copywriting job to support myself, and I started learning, devouring books and looking at good work, walking a lot, and shooting." Her first self-assignment was covering the Poor People's campaign in Washington DC in 1968 spending time amongst the protestors of the makeshift Resurrection City. It was quite a debut.

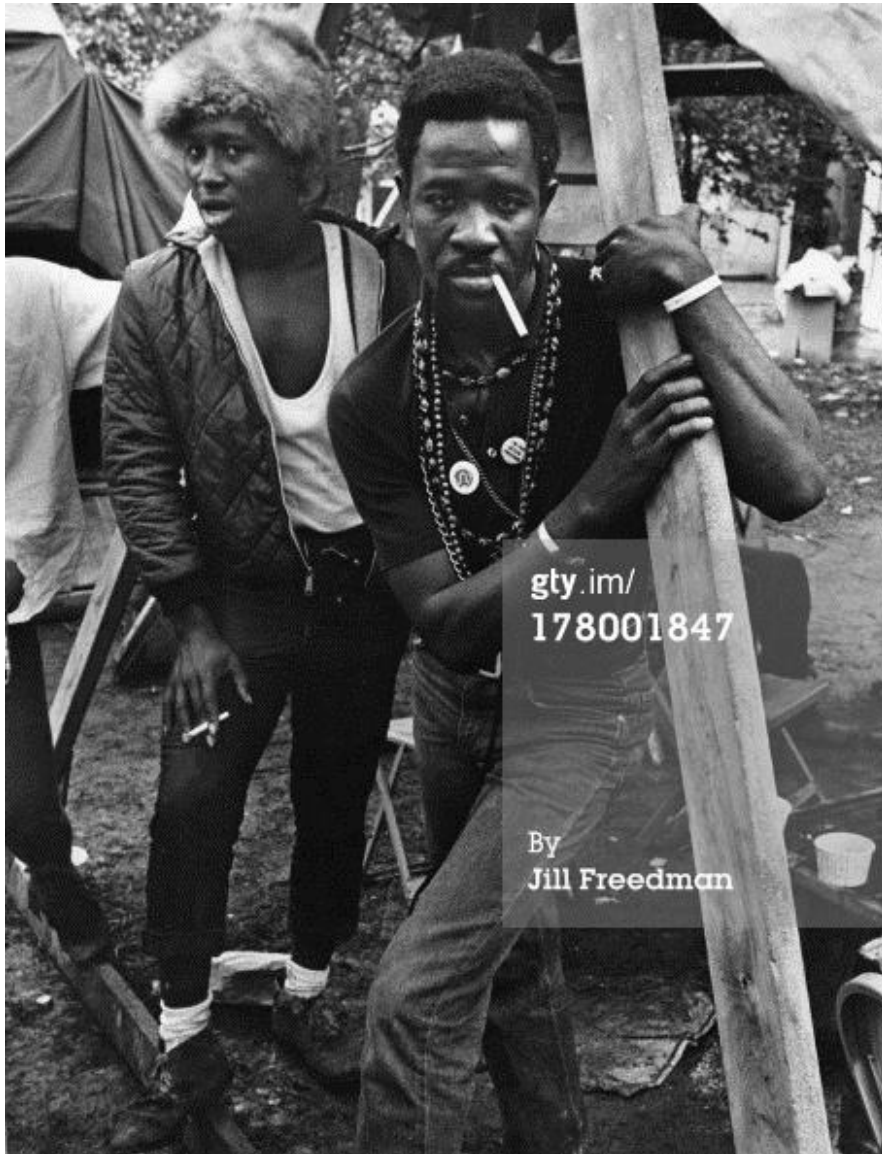
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By the 70s, she had hustled her way into accompanying the NYPD and in covering the darker side of life in the Lower East Side – the crime, drugs, poverty and the violence. She was an unflinching witness, and at times, almost a reluctant participant. Some have compared her to the great Weegee. Yet amongst the harshness and brutality, she recorded compassion and humour too: the good guys and the bad guys.

And on the fire crews of the South Bronx...

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“I’ve always admired them. They were for me the antithesis of all the meanness and cruelty you see in the papers and on the streets. There was an altruism in the very idea of a fireman that interested me. I wanted to see what they were like. What kind of guy will risk his neck for someone else’s? Will run into burning buildings, and feel responsible for every stranger who needs help?”

Women weren’t allowed unescorted in the firehouses after 10pm, so in addition to the grueling shifts to shoot alongside the fire fighters, Jill slept in the back seat of the Chief’s car, for a year – going home two nights a week to process her film. It was almost literally back-breaking stuff.



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Fast forward seven books, numerous exhibitions and a few decades later, and her archive has accumulated into a remarkable body of work. At her home in Harlem, there are boxes upon boxes of prints (she printed herself in her Thompson Street darkroom) showing life on the ever changing streets of New York. For years Jill shot the every-day too, finding the extraordinary in the ordinary in search of the perfect moment, the perfect frame. Telling it her way. If there is an accepted canon of street photography, Freedman is up there with the best.

And in editing her photographs I come across the notebooks too. They are everywhere. Full of hand written quotes pulled from literature, politics, poets, or from the characters and eccentrics she has spent a lifetime seeking out. I sense an eighth book is on its way.

Archives like these don't assemble themselves. They are not only the result of extraordinary talent, sometimes a calling even, but also impossible triumphs and disasters, sheer bloody-mindedness and hard work. Not to mention the dangers of

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working on the edge. And though she dabbled with agencies and assignments she never worked for long in a framework of support. Which makes her output all the more impressive. A singular vision, singularly executed.

Jill once said of the camera that, "It's the only machine that can stop time itself," celebrating it as a weapon of power and influence, and of course in the right hands it is.

So go on. Pick it up. And show the world what's on your mind.

About Jill Freedman

Jill Freedman is a highly respected New York City documentary photographer whose award-winning work is included in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, the International Center of Photography, George Eastman House, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the New York Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, among others. She has appeared in solo and group exhibitions throughout the world, and has contributed to many publications. Jill Freedman is best known for her street and documentary photography, recalling the work of André Kertész, W. Eugene Smith, Dorothea Lange, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. She has published seven books: *Old News: Resurrection City*; *Circus Days*; *Firehouse*; *Street Cops*; *A Time That Was: Irish Moments*; *Jill's Dogs*; and *Ireland Ever*.