

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**SHANNON HARRINGTON**

**Interviewer:** AJ Lewis

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**Location of Interview:** Chelsea, Manhattan

**Transcribed by** Colette Arrand , Sarah Pellicer

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AJ Lewis: Hello, my name is AJ Lewis and I will be having a conversation with Shannon Harrington for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is July 26, 2017, um, and this is being recorded in Chelsea, Manhattan. Hi Shannon.

Shannon Harrington: Hi.

Lewis: Can you just, like, introduce yourself for, uh, the recorder, and if you could just start out, tell us your gender pronouns and we'll start to talk about where you're from.

Harrington: Uh, well, my name is Shannon Harrington. I've lived in New York since 1980. I pretty much, I would say, uh, would describe myself as a trans woman, which—but I don't really, really have any labels. I'm kind of just myself, you know, pretty much, so. But yeah, um, I'm definitely interested in the trans community, been part of it for eons, ever since I was young and a newbie. Since the age of 16, so, I've been on stage as well as behind stage for most of my life, so that's kind of what I do. I'm a wig master. I make wigs. I do a lot of Broadway work as well as regional work, film and television, and have a good, you know, list of good things I've done over the years. But I work in a professional kind of setting, but I work in a very open setting and not a, you know, I can be who I want to be. So, no pressure.

Lewis: Can you tell us, um, where you're from originally and what brought you to the city?

Harrington: Um, I'm from Arizona. Tucson, Arizona originally. That's where I was raised. My father grew up in the Bronx, so he was a New Yorker and I came here, um, when I was 18 pretty much, and got out of school early. My father was in the military, he was in the CIA actually, and we lived all over. So, I lived in Libya, Peru, Iran [Laughter] for a good chunk of my life until I was in my late teens, that's when we came back to the States. But we were always—Arizona was always our home base, so between his gigs of overseas gigs, we would always be at home and be going to school and then, you know, for a year or two we'd be somewhere else, so it was kind of like, in a military setting because we were traveling a bit. But, um, he was a covert operative, so um, he worked for the CIA, but he had usually a cover, and he was an engineer by trade. So, um, even in Iran he worked for Parson Jordans, which was a copper mining company. So, it was pretty interesting. I got to see a lot of things growing up [Laughter].

Lewis: Did you like Arizona?

Harrington: Oh yeah, I loved Arizona, and I went to school there. I went to the U of A, so uh, yeah, so it was pretty cool. Um, it's hot, which I don't like so much now [Laughter] so I kind of don't really like hot climates as much as I used to. So, but yeah, it was great growing up there. I mean, it's beautiful and it was the 60s and it wasn't overdone, and our backyard was a desert basically, you know? And I grew up on kind of a ranch. We had a good amount of property, we had horses and a couple of cows and chickens, and basically the backyard was a desert. We had a huge—well, it's kind of like a wash but it looks more like a river in our backyard. And just grew up—yeah, I have two brothers, older. I'm the youngest. And they're actually—one brother is in Sacramento, California, and the others, I think, I'm not quite sure because we haven't spoke since my mom passed, and he's a Mormon so [Laughter] we don't really speak too much or get along too much on a lot of things, but we kind of had a falling out when my mom died, and he thought he should get something that was going to my other brother, Tim, and I took my brother Tim's side and not his, and he has not spoke to me since, so [Laughter]. But uh, nothing lost. He was a little controlling as a child anyway, and always was doing things to screw with me, you know, growing up. He would do things like, um, call up my counselor in high school and told him I was on drugs and I'd never done a drug in my life. Um, let's see, he outed me to my mom when I was first doing my first drag shows. So, he borrowed my car, which I let him do, and he found my drag in my

trunk. So, he outed me to my parents at the same time, but you know, he expected them to be freaked out more, but they really weren't, so [Laughter].

Lewis: I think you mentioned, described yourself as a trans newb when you were like 16?

Harrington: Oh yeah.

Lewis: Was that sort of when you started?

Harrington: Yeah, that's when I kind of first started doing shows, you know? Um, it was a club called Jekyll and Hyde, [Laughter].

Lewis: That was in Arizona?

Harrington: It was in Tucson, Arizona, and it was on Miracle Mile, which is kind of like—and it was a disco. It was a disco club and I did my first sort of a contest, basically, and I got runner up, but I should have won. [Laughter]. And from that point, you know, I kind of got into sort of the scene with the queens that worked there and they were like, very motherly, and very motherly hen and they wanted to show me how to do it and how to do it right, you know? There was this one queen, her name was Danni—I think it was Danni, I'm not sure about her last name, but she did Judy Garland all the time. And she goes, you've got to wear Pan-stik suntan, and you've just got to put it all over your face and you wear three pairs of eyelashes. So, it was kind of like—and I'm pretty pale as it is, so suntan was like almost like, you know, a mocha for me. I was like, a little heavy on the color. But it was kind of great, they kind of took me under their wing and I did that for a bit and made some money doing that. I was in beauty school at the time, so, um, but Arizona kind of has its limits. You can only do so much, and I was kind of just itching to break out, to go somewhere else, to live a life. And my dad was from New York, um, I had a college roommate that was from New York, and I was just like, maybe I should go. My best friend wanted to go to San Francisco and I was like, oh, I want to see New York. So, I kind of came here, ended up in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey with my roommate Joanne and her family [Laughter].

Lewis: You came here like around 1980 with your friend?

Harrington: Mm-hmm, it was 1980. And no job, couple hundred bucks in my pocket, and decided—they actually put me up for about a month, paid rent, stayed in the maid's quarters. [Laughter]. Big house. They were quite characters. Joanne was quite a trip. She was always—she was never happy unless she had a real major problem. But their dad, who was like—he was a real flaming queen at the time. Always wore big fox coats and big visor sunglasses, so. [Laughter] Her mom is anorexic. You can always hear her coming around the corner because you'd hear the squeaky wheels of her IV. She'd always have this little IV with her and she'd come around the corner and she was the sweetest lady. I really, really liked her. Her brother was totally cool, but he was into heroin. But he was the most fun because he was more relaxed than anybody else, so. [Laughter] But it was kind of a tense situation, but I didn't stay there for very long. Ended up going through the roommate ads and found a place in Brooklyn.

Lewis: Where in Brooklyn?

Harrington: Oh, it was Flatbush and Parkside, so it was not the most best area, but I was, you know, like when you're young you have nerves of steel, and nothing phased me at the time. And I had a bleach blonde flat top, wore a lot of eyeliner [Laughter] and big, heavy, black coats. Big wool coats or leather jackets. And nobody ever bothered me. Nobody ever gave me a hard time. Even the people on the block would be like, are you okay? Do you want us to just walk you? and I'm like, no, I'm fine. And so, they always kind of looked out for me even though it was kind of a high crime neighborhood at the time. It was kind of still safe, it was kind of weird because you were a part of it. Took the D train back and forth, so.

Lewis: Demographically what kind of neighborhood was Flatbush back then? I don't know.

Harrington: Um, mostly black at the time, you know? Black, Hispanic. Occasionally you'd see Asians and white people, but not really so much. And I didn't find it hostile either. I lived in a beautiful brownstone that was my roommate's and we each had our own bedroom. It was like about three floors, so it was quite nice. But it was just getting around. You'd always have to take that D train, you know?

Lewis: Did you take the D train to, like, hang out in Manhattan?

Harrington: Oh yeah, all the time. That was the place to hang was go to the city, go to the Village. So, it was kind of like—that's what we did, you know? But at the time, I needed to get work. Initially I did get work, even before I left New Jersey I started working at Bloomingdales' for Veronni Cosmetics, and um, I was a makeup artist. I did hair and makeup back in Arizona so I was licensed there, so I decided to get a license here in New York, and continued doing hair. So, um, I did makeup there, worked for a couple of years. Met the most incredible people. I think one of the most incredible—one of the first persons, his name was Tony, and he was my co-worker. And he took me to places like The Pyramid, and The Anvil, and all these great places that were a lot of fun, and really crazy at the time. So, everything was very cutting edge. Everything was like, um, the first time I went to The Anvil it was like, here, take this. I was like, okay [Laughter], and it was a little tab of acid. [Laughter]. And we got there around 10:00 and we just, by the time that acid kicked in it was around 11:00 and we were just watching the club just fill up and it was just amazing. And we saw the most incredible shows. They were like—the M.C., he was incredible. I forgot his name, but later on he did a lot of after hours later on. And there was The Amazing Yuba, and she did all Grace Jones stuff, and she was like a spider. She was like a big spider that would come down the wall and do this incredible, you know, whole thing of Grace Jones that was just this incredible. There was Ariel who did Cher, and they just did this incredible show like, every night, every night at the Anvil. And of course, downstairs was the back room and the movies and all of that, but upstairs was like the dancefloor and the shows. It was a lot of fun. I met Freddie Mercury there. [Laughter].

Lewis: Oh. And where exactly was The Anvil?

Harrington: Oh, it was at the very end of 14<sup>th</sup> Street and the Westside Highway. Now I think it's a hotel. It's kind of like a Comfort Inn or something like that, but it's kind of this—it's all on its own. It's kind of this little patch, and it still stands there. And The Anvil was the first floor and the downstairs, and you sort of—you entered on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, so that's where you'd—and it didn't open until—you couldn't really get there, like, the best time to go if you were going there was like, after three or four. That's when—and it'd go all until the next day. People would be like—you'd walk out and it would noon so you'd always make sure you had your sunglasses, you know? And you'd go to the diner down on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 14<sup>th</sup> Street and get yourself something to eat, but you'd see everybody kind of coming out of The Anvil just like, oh my God. [Laughter].

Lewis: Was that your favorite bar to go to in those years?

Harrington: Well, it was a club, and it was more, at the time, yeah. It was a lot of fun because they did like New Wave Nights and things like that, but there was also like Danceteria, and The Pyramid Club, and Club 57, and then later on came Boy Bar, so there were a lot of clubs to pick from at the time. They were everywhere. I mean, everywhere you looked there was going to be something new coming up, so.

Lewis: Do queens hang out at all of those?

Harrington: Every one of them. Every single one. Queens in general were kind of a very solid staple of night life. I mean, either we were behind the bar, at the door, or doing a show. So, we were in every aspect, you know? And there were so many people that I knew from that point that were just that, they were either door people or bartenders or show queens, or, you know, and just kind of worked in that realm. So, everyone worked the nightlife, you know, a lot of times. But at that time, I was working the day and the night, so later on you know, you kind of switch over, so. But I was still doing the 9 to 5 kind of like, store hours kind of thing, and things like that. It was fun. Because you're young and you've got all this energy, you know? It's like nothing really stops you, you know? You could party all night and work all day, and then do it again, you know? Just sleep when you can, you know? But there was always so much going on, so there's always something to see. Art was new and everywhere, graffiti was a new thing at the time, hip-hop was new. So, I mean, there was so much going on. There was so much. You couldn't sit still, you couldn't not participate. Because everybody you knew did, so they were part of it.

Lewis: Were there any particular parties or things you went to that especially stand out?

Harrington: We used to do Susanne Barr's parties, which were always really amazing back then because even before—she did them later on, like even up until recently, but the early ones were the best because they were balls. They were like a big deal. They were like something that people anticipated and looked forward to. They'd have celebrities as well as everyone else. It was really kind of cool. And it was like, it was a parade of fashion, it was a parade of music. It was just everything [Laughter].

Lewis: Where did she have those parties?

Harrington: Oh God, let's see—the Ballroom, which was the one that just closed? Not that. The Rose, uh, Roseland was one of them. The Saint, which was another place. But usually it would be just a venue. It could be, um, oh, there was a great party at The World, which was a club on Avenue C that was kind of like a big ball. It really was where you'd sort of compete. And her kind of take-off was from the early stuff was like, Paris Is Burning for instance, where um—those were really happening, those things were really going on, and we'd go up after we'd work all night up to the Elks Lodge in Harlem off 125<sup>th</sup>, and get there around like 10:00, stay there until 8:00, 9:00 at night, and it would just be a show, it would be a constant show. And it was a ball, and it was a competition. So, it was just like, you know, you do your walk and stuff, and it was just amazing to watch. I mean, they had different categories and, you know, femme realness, and femme real-realness, and it was just amazing. Different houses, different things, so. Later on, I kind of participated, but at the time I was like, um, one of the few light-skinned girls around, so it was kind of like, you were kind of drawn between should I compete, should I compete, you know, it was always that kind of fine line. So, later on—but at the time I was, like, being such a newbie to the scene at the same time it was more, like, just kind of kick back and watch and see how things go. But pretty amazing. Pretty amazing.

Lewis: What kind of houses were there? I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit more about that?

Harrington: Oh, House of Extravaganza. There was, um, God, there was so many. Uh, well those are just some of them, but there were quite a few, but I can't think of one. [Laughter]. But a lot of, oh, St. Laurent, House of St Laurent. They always had a name, like a designer name. Chanel, you know? They were always kind of like that, and there'd be like groups of people that belonged to it, and so it was like a family. It was a family for them as well. I mean, um, it's a little different, especially with, you know, people of color at the time. It was more a way to have a family, you know, kind of support you and help you out. And there was a mother of the house, there was, you know, everyone. They made their own outfits or clothes or, you know, they put you in the competitions that they wanted you to go into, so it was really kind of cool. It was really interesting to see it first hand [Laughter].

Lewis: Can you, like, tell me a little bit more about what it was like sort of being new in New York City and, like, meeting other queens and sort of like, coming into that, like, scene?

Harrington: Well, um, you just kind of—it's just amazing how you kind of gravitate toward each other in a lot of ways, because everyone that's here is usually from somewhere else, and somewhere else where they weren't necessarily welcomed, or had friends, or could make friends, or had a club to go to. So, it was kind of like, it was like instant recognition. It was kind of like, oh. You know? And you just kind of gravitate and you just sort of—no one is your enemy. Everyone is your friend at a moment, you know? Like everything is new, everything is fresh. So, you want to be part of it. You want to like, join in, so [Laughter].

Lewis: Was there anyone in particular who was especially important for you early in life? Like, late teens, 20s?

Harrington: Um, yeah. I mean, um, too bad they're not here anymore, but um, yeah, some of my best friends at the time like Dale LeHahn, who was another hairdresser that I worked with, and he was incredible. He was older and a little more experienced with stuff and kind of took me around, and then there was, you know, Tony and George and—and these weren't necessarily queens, these were just, I would say gay men at the time that kind of took me under their wing and said oh, you know, girl, you need to do this or you need to do that, and showed me the ropes, and showed me how to get by, and what to do, and where to go, and how to make money [Laughter] basically in the city—how to sell yourself in a lot of ways. So, that's kind of what we did, you know? You know, you didn't really worry about things. Things were cheap enough to where you could have an apartment for 400 bucks a month, believe it or not. And we always had roommates and things like that, so. As you get older, you know, you sort of see things in a different way and say, oh, I have to get that job and I have to make this money and all of the sudden you get that responsibility and stuff. But yeah, I mean, basically it was just go from one thing to another. You kind of live from paycheck to paycheck, but it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like you were hurting for money or hurting for work. there was always enough out there, so it was okay. You didn't worry too much about that. Then later on I think that kind of creeps in and you start thinking about it more so. And I met my husband in '87, so, and we've been together you know, since, pretty much. I mean, a year off, maybe? [Laughter]. In that time, but during that time I met him doing shows, you know? Stole him away from somebody else, so. [Laughter] And her name was International Chrysis, which I think you might have heard about her, so. And she was great. She's a lot of fun. But yeah, I stole her boyfriend away, and I had to deal with the dishonor of that for a while. But she got over it and everyone else seemed to, so. And we're still together, so it must have meant something, so. And his name is Kenny, so, [Laughter].

Lewis: Did you start performing right away when you got to the city?

Harrington: No, I didn't actually. When I first—I kind of left it behind, drag, in a lot of ways. And I started doing—working kind of normal jobs like doing hair and makeup in salons and things like that. It was only until around '85 that I started getting back into doing more drag, and being more into the scene in that way. But even before that, it was kind of like, I knew everybody in the scenes, and they were like, yeah you know, you're pretty androgynous to begin with, so when I really said okay, I'll start up again, and it was at Boy Bar that I started again, and it was —Paul McGregor owned it, and Matthew Cassian did the shows. And you might—you could find Matthew online as well as Paul, but remember the movie Shampoo with Warren Beatty?

Lewis: No, I haven't seen it.

Shannon Harrington: Well, it's about kind of a rambunctious, horny hairdresser [Laughter] who kind of has this sort of like a scope of women and everything, and he had a salon and he was quite famous. And that was Paul McGregor. And in fact, the movie was sort of based on his life, you know? He had—drive up in a Rolls. This was the old Boy Bar, but actually Boy Bar was, prior

to Boy Bar, was his hair salon, where he invented like for Jane Fonda for Klute, he did that shag. That was his thing. So, he was the inventor of the shag [Laughter]. And he had a line around the block for people that just wanted to come to his salon. But he was great. I mean, he was older at the time, but even then, he was in his 50s and he was always on roller skates, has about 10 kids, [Laughter] straight, but he ran this incredible gay bar that was just incredible. And he loved us all like his own kids in a lot of ways.

Lewis: Boy Bar was in the East Village, is that correct?

Harrington: Mm-hmm, right on St. Mark's between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, so it was right in the middle of the block. So, it was actually his old salon that he converted. And he had an apartment upstairs, which was a small apartment toward the front, but then there was a bar upstairs, a bar downstairs, and a big stage, and a big dance floor downstairs. And there was kind of a lounge more upstairs.

Lewis: And it opened around when?

Harrington: Oh, I would say '85. And then, um, I became Ms. Boy Bar in '86 because, um, they were bugging me like oh, you should do it, you should do it. We're going to do a contest, you should do it. So, for Halloween one night, I came as Marilyn Monroe. And they were like, they were a little, oh my God, you look incredible. So, I'm like oh, get over it, you know, like this [Laughter]. And kind of worked on the outfit, the whole bit. I had blonde hair at the time so it was easy to kind of work my hair into anything. So, um, it was a lot of fun, so they were like, you have to do Ms. Boy Bar, so they kept bugging me and bugging me. So, Matthew goes yeah, you're going to do Ms. Boy Bar. So, we did this whole competition, and it was with Connie Girl, Glam Amore, and a whole slew of a bunch of others, and I won. I became Ms. Boy Bar. And for that, you were able to get shows and start doing your own shows., so from that point on, then I started doing shows at Boy Bar.

Lewis: But what did you do for that competition to become Ms. Boy Bar?

Harrington: I did, um, well there's this whole thing where we did like, swimsuit and hair and all this kind of stuff, but I did Debbie Harry's Blondie's Rip Her to Shreds [Laughter], and I wore latex, [Laughter]. And I had a big, big giant bouffant hairdo and I had a big, huge red bow. I came out this wide out of the bathroom, and I had a latex skirt that was about this long [Laughter], and I had on, um, what we called Marley high heels. They were the English high heel that had a needle toe and a five-inch spike heel, so, [Laughter] and I kept snapping my skirt. And that's what one judge goes, when you snapped your skirt I knew you'd won. So, I was like, [Laughter]. So, and from winning you got your own shows, and in fact, my first show was Welcome to My Trailer Park. And I had International Chrysis was my first show guest, so [Laughter].

Lewis: Can you tell us more about your show and about her?



Harrington: Oh, wow. Chrysis was always kind of fun. She was very motherly in a lot of ways, and she felt as though she should be to all the young queens in a lot of ways, because she was about, I would say, about a decade older than us and had been around for a while and was stunning. She was drop dead gorgeous, and real tits—she had her silicone tits on, and curvy, and gorgeous. And actually, she is in *The Queen*. So, you might look for her in that movie, because she actually is one of the young queens in *The Queen*, so. She has a little gap between her tooth, so you might recognize her from that. But um, she was a lot of fun. She was amazing, she did a lot of great stuff with spotted jewelry and um, she also did, with Nick Nolte, her first film. And I'm trying to think of what it is. And she gets murdered in the film. But she was actually sort of groundbreaking before RuPaul came along. She had done so much stuff. Let me actually ask my husband, [Laughter].

Lewis: Q&A.

Harrington: Q&A, yeah, and she was in, also, there's a documentary on Chrysis called *Split* that, actually that's my apartment, so if you see the apartment in *Split*, it doesn't look the same, but that's my apartment [Laughter] on Cornelia Street. So yeah, I mean, Chrysis was kind of groundbreaking before anybody else. I think she'd probably been one of the first queens to get a major role as a queen in a major movie, and that kind of got her into SAG. And she started kind of doing stuff, but her life was shortened because of cancer. And after—actually she died before Q&A came out, so it's kind of a sad thing at the same time, but she would have been something, that's for sure. [Laughter]. She would have been something we'd have all been proud to go [sucks teeth] that's my sister. [Laughter]. But um, I mean, the fact that Kenny left her for me was kind of weird. She wanted him back, and he didn't want to go back. I was kind of a bitch at the time and didn't want to give him up, so [Laughter]. But um, you can't make somebody stay if they don't want to, and she went on to do so many other things as well, so even before she had passed away. And Kenny was by her side when she was sick most of the time. He took care of her. So, I never felt like it should be any other way, so. But um, yeah, I just kind of miss her in a lot of ways. Makes you think about her. She looked like Rita Hayworth. Big, red hair, beautiful smile. Just amazing. So, she was very motherly [Laughter]. But after *Boy Bar* and stuff, I kind of—God, that's when I met Lee, that's when I started working at Lee's *Mardi Gras*, because after *Boy Bar* I was still doing shows and stuff, and I was still—but I wanted, like, needed income. You needed a good job. So, I started working for Lee. And I ended—I found an ad. I answered an ad.

Lewis: I want to hear about Lee, but I also want to hear about *Welcome to My Trailer Park* before we move on to Lee. [Laughter].

Harrington: [Laughter]. This is funny. This is actually a funny thing to say about Chrysis as well because she was so New York. She was so New York and she grew up in New York, and New York was her life, you know, pretty much. And when—it was kind of like it was after new year's, and Matthew called me up and he goes, we have to name your show. So, and I was like, I mean, hung over from New Years' Eve and I go, ugh, welcome to my trailer park. It's like, that's it. He goes, that's going to be your show. And I'm like, great. And it was kind of like when you think of like, kind of like white trash meets sort of, like, well, basically trailer parks are everywhere in Arizona,

so [Laughter], and it wasn't like your, you know, upper breed kind of like upper echelon of society that lived there, but it wasn't your down and out either. It was kind of like, they made these really nice trailer parks, I mean, like roads and swimming pools and little recreational, you know, little areas and saunas and all of that, so it was quite nice. But I kind of thought of it as more like, really on that kind of a little John Watersy kind of do it. And Chrysis was like, what should I wear? I know it's the theme of the show and everything, what should I go? And I think I'm going to wear these red shoes and a blue dress and a yellow belt. Is that trailer park? And I'm like, girl, whatever you do is going to be good, so don't worry about it. So that was her idea of trailer park was just kind of like gaudy and kind of tacky kind of thing, and it's more of a mindset, I would think, more than anything else. So, it was just fun. It was just a lot of fun, and many shows followed. So, to know them all would be like oh lord, but, [Laughter]. But yeah, it was kind of like, just kind of big hair-dos, pointy bras, and high heels. So, there was a lot of that.

Lewis: Are there numbers or routines that you especially remember?

Harrington: Oh yeah. You would have a guest star, but you would basically carry the show on your own. So, there would always be a theme or something that you were doing for that. And usually there was a lot of like, if you had favorites and things, because there was always—the audience always wanted you to do, you know, what you're known for in a lot of ways. It was kind of good. I mean, I did a lot of Debbie Harry and I did a lot of Dolly and I did a lot of things that—I did a lot of country because that's how I kind of grew up, you know? Like listening to Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn and all of that. So, I kind of brought that old twangy country sort of back, which was kind of tongue and cheek because there were always these great sort of songs about losing your man and getting him back or drinking. [Laughter] Yeah, always hooking up with someone else and doing something else, so they always had a great story. So, they were great for that. Yeah, I kind of did build my shows around that a little bit more. And I loved big hair, so it was just like, the bigger the better. I mean, who had more bigger hair than 60s country stars? It was a lot of fun. I mean, just doing them was great, because I mean, that's where you would focus all of your time would be like, from your show to your next show to, you know, what are you going to do after that? So, it was always in a planning stage, but, um, there were always so many ideas to bounce off of, too, where Boy Bar was one thing, you could do something completely different at Pyramid or at Mars or things like that.

Lewis: Like how were they different?

Harrington: Well, Pyramid was more like, cutting edge. It was more like, avant-garde and more extreme and really kind of like Klaus Nomi kind of stuff, or Nina Hagen.

Lewis: What would be an example of that sort of thing?

Harrington: Oh gosh. Just kind of things that were very kind of new wave and punky at the time, like you're familiar with Nina Hagen? Yeah. It's kind of like, um, kind of like where space meets kind of like—I mean, she had incredible octaves. This incredible range, you know, that her voice. So, she would make her voice sound like something completely different, you know? Not like a

voice. Kind of like Yma Sumac would do. So, it would be kind of like, out there. It was more like sound than anything else. So, you could build a show around that so entirely, so um, there were great performers that would do it like, Ethel Eichelberger would do some incredible stuff that was early on, but I mean, there were so so many. You know, Freida. There were so many other stars out there doing so many things. So, you could really kind of take that and run with it and get as extreme and weird as you want, you know? And be a little more cutting edge. And that's kind of how we felt because in a lot of ways I was like—that was the time of our music in a lot of ways. Hip-hop was just kind of breaking ground and there was a lot of kind of cool stuff with that too. And that came later, with other clubs like The World and Mars and things like that. So, you got to see different sides to everything. But it was kind of great, because Pyramid was great because you could always have a job at Pyramid, and you could always—

Lewis: Where was Pyramid?

Harrington: Avenue A and 6<sup>th</sup> Street, and it was between, right off the park, like if you went a little further down, the park is like a block away like on the corner, like 8<sup>th</sup> Street is where you'd be. And you'd just walk down to about 6<sup>th</sup> street. But um yeah, it was really different. We'd dance on the bar, we'd go-go on the bar and not much in anything else, really. [Laughter]. Besides lingerie and, you know, little G-strings basically. So, the thing was, it's like you never wanted to be at one end of the bar if RuPaul was at one end, because she's so tall and so big that she could actually hold on to the pipes above the bar and could walk herself from one end to the other. But if you weren't tall enough to reach the pipes, every time she would be bouncing on one end, you'd be bouncing on the other. So, you kind of have to time it, because the bar was only so wide, and people on this side were ordering drinks basically through your heels to the bartender down there, so you'd have this much space and make sure you didn't knock over their drinks at the same time. [Laughter].

Lewis: Was it mostly men went to the bar and queens just performed, or did queens like—

Harrington: No, it was kind of like—it was a mix of everything. Um, Pyramid wasn't really the kind of—it was like you would say a tranny bar would be. It was kind of like a mix of everything. There were gay guys and gay women, straight women, straight men. It was a kaleidoscope. But it was all, like, very, you know, progressive, you know? The music was new, the clothes were new. I mean, everyone was, you know, straight or gay you looked incredible, you know? So, it was like—and things weren't expensive. You know, you made stuff, you found stuff. Thrift stores were everywhere. We'd go to Williamsburg and just hit the thrift stores for like a couple of days and just buy tons of clothes and make things out of it. And I loved vintage stuff, so I was great with the 50s and 40s, and, you know, it was everywhere at the time. You could find so much. And cheap. [Laughter].

Lewis: What were your favorite bands back then when you were doing it?

Harrington: Oh my god. Tears for Fears, I loved them. But there were some of the—Plasmatics. Um, God, Luxx. [Laughter]. There was, gah, the Sic Fucks, which were really good. [Laughter]. But that was Tish and Snooky. And they were great. They had a store down on St. Mark's called Manic Panic. So, they were actually—they started out with Debbie Harry, so and then they spun off their own thing. So, there were like—there were a lot of like, New York Bands, too. Anne Mandisin had her own band. There was just a lot of like, really kind of fun stuff. There was Dueling Bankheads, which was really a lot of fun, which was Clark and David Ilku. So, there was always new stuff, and new kind of fun stuff. But yeah, all the early bands—they played the bigger clubs like Danceteria and things like that, where Pyramid was more home grown I would say. It was more like local talent more than anything. But the big venues would be like, you know, Billy Idol or Madonna would come and play at Danceteria, or The World or things like that. It was always kind of fun. Bands always kind of change so much, you know? It was more the sound that we were interested in more than anything, and it was before techno and before anything else, so it was kind of—we liked it because it was kind of like, not too hardcore but it wasn't not—it wasn't mainstream, so it was something totally different, like your own niche. And where you could look slick and look vintage and look, you know. Love that. So, it was kind of like, you weren't quite like extreme punk at the same time, which was a lot of fun. We loved those clubs too, like, you know. That was a lot of fun, because then you could just thrash around and be even more extreme. So yeah, it was a good mix. [Laughter].

Lewis: And you mentioned that it was sort of like, I think before we turned on the recorder, like that there was this sort of older generation of queens that was sort of more like, big sequins and—

Harrington: Oh well yeah, well that kind of was—well the thing was, during the 80s, drag wasn't a big deal. I mean, in fact it was kind of being pushed over in this way for more mainstream to kind of take its place because even when I—like we haven't talked about Lee yet, but with Lee Brewster, it was like when I first started working for him, he was like, well you know, I never got too much from the gay community in a lot of ways because they don't really understand my business or my way of thinking as to how we're all really in this big sort of box together, and that if you don't understand that, and he couldn't really see why, you know, the kind of the straight/gay kind of community at the time wasn't too open or accepting. And like he, it wasn't that he didn't have money, he had money, he had a good successful business. So, like everything was kind of good in that respect, but he didn't feel like he got the respect from them, or the acknowledgement, because he would do things that they'd be like, oh, well, okay, but yeah, but we don't want you representing us kind of thing. And it was that kind of line drawn in the sand that really kind of segregated us in a lot of ways. And it wasn't until later that that started to come together. And those walls started breaking down in the 80s. That was kind of left-over stuff from the 70s kind of stuff, and it was kind of like, because we had other things to worry about with AIDS and everything else, there were other things to worry about besides those little lines in the sand, you know? And I think that's what really broke it down in a lot of ways. But yeah, I mean, you could go walk into a gay bar in the upper east side in drag and they'd be like, no, you can't be here, you know? And show you the door or wouldn't let you in at all. So, I mean, yeah there were always that kind of line to where like, you knew where you were accepted and you

knew where you weren't in a lot of ways. It was that kind of atmosphere, that kind of made us kind of create our own venues in a lot of ways. And when we kind of started doing—more drag was coming back into kind of the limelight of the 80s, because we were dragging it back, we were bringing it back, and said, this is part of us, you know, this is how we see ourselves, too. We didn't see ourselves as like, these, you know, outdated, you know, Judy Garland types. I hate to say it, from even my early mentors was, we didn't want that. We didn't want to be out there doing Judy Garland. We wanted to be more cutting edge. We want to be in your face [Laughter]. We want to be like, yeah, here it is, suck it, you know? Just like, so what? You know, we wanted to show them as well that, you know, we're a force to be reckoned with in a lot of ways, and we did. We did. Because we—basically the whole nightlife and everything kind of revolved around it, so yeah.

Lewis: Yeah, it sounds like a pretty big, vibrant scene.

Harrington: And I think that's why you couldn't avoid it, or you couldn't really not participate, because you'd be swept up in the wave kind of, like if you liked it or not, you know? But it was kind of like—it was out there. It was like, we wanted to be in your face. We were confrontational in a lot of ways. And we felt like we had to be. Because if we weren't, you know, what were we supposed to do, like, fade into the woodwork? You know, it wasn't going to happen. Not by any account. Not to the people that I knew. And they were angry. You know, there was a lot of anger going on, too. Because there was so much that wasn't being done. You know, there was so much. There were so many people dying, that like I said before, I mean, you would hear somebody was sick and within a week they'd be gone. And you'd be like, what, how, when?, you know. And it would just blow you away. And then you would think of the last time you saw them, you know?

Lewis: Do you remember what it was like in the sort of initial months and years when people started getting sick?

Harrington: Yeah, it was just quick. And they didn't talk about it so much. My early friend Tony became ill, and he hid the fact that he was sick. And I was like, what's going on? And he was like, well, you know, I've got HIV, and he didn't last very long. I mean, that was the thing. I mean, that's when Bailey House sort of came around, which was at the end of Christopher Street. And my friend Dale became ill, and it was just so quick. I mean, I would go with him to doctors, and they wore masks and gloves and everything, and hospitals didn't want to—nurses didn't really look after patients. We did—I started doing stuff for God's Love We Deliver, you know, early on, and go into sitting with patients in hospitals and talking with them, and um... Sorry. Just, you know, you would see them just... fading away. And nobody wanted to touch them. [Crying]. So that's why we went. Families didn't want to know where they were or who they were, and the people that were there to help them didn't know how to help them. So, it was sad. We saw a lot of people... didn't make it and that was hard. It was hard. So, a lot of my early best friends didn't make it. And I always wondered what they would think of how things turned out, or how New York has changed, or how do they look at it? Would they see it differently? Or what changes they would have made, or how—you know, they all died so young. I mean, Dale was 38 years old. And I'm 57, you know? There's so much more living that I got to do that I wish they were around. But that's just it, I think, because you learn so much so young, you had to learn to say goodbye at an

early age to see people, just wither away, with no help in sight. And you grow up fast. You grow up really fast. And you think, if you can get through this, you can get through anything. And that's what keeps you going in a lot of ways. I mean, you always think you've done your share. I mean, I didn't join ACT UP at the time or anything like that. But no, that's not true. We were doing things. We were doing the other end of things. And we were protesting in the street, we were still doing a lot of stuff, but at the same time you just—you didn't really have a choice. You really just had to do something. You couldn't sit back. You couldn't see people die. You couldn't watch people die. And Dale was one of the first recipients of AZT. And he was staying at Bailey House. And because his roommate threw him out. His mother wouldn't come and see him. He was from Florida. Those people were his friends, too. And they cared for him and took good care of him, looked out after him. And they called me and a few other friends to come and say goodbye when he knew it wasn't going to get better. And we came, we had dinner. They gave him like a last dinner. [Crying]. He lasted two more days. So, I got to say goodbye. That was the hardest part. To know that they weren't going to make it, and you were going to have to say goodbye. So yeah, you learn. You learn. You see the good sides of people. You see the bad. And it drives you on. Keeps you going.

Lewis: Sounds like you did a lot to take care of each other.

Harrington: Yeah. It's—you try. But you know, when people are sick and they're angry, they get bitter. And they're not the people that you remember, because they look different but they're also changed. And some people are very accepting, and others are angry and mad, and they just don't understand as to why. And they feel—they start feeding into all that, like maybe I deserve this kind of bullshit from everyone else saying it. It's not the way it should be. No one should be treated like that. And yeah, you saw it first hand, and it was hard to watch and hard to see, and you would see somebody, you know, they look awfully thin and you're like, are they okay? And then they wouldn't be around and then you'd wonder why. And so, it was fast, and it was quick, and nothing was being done. We had Raegan as a president, and he wouldn't even mention the word, you know? So, it wasn't a great time. But at the same time [sniffles] with all of that going on, there was still constant-ness going on. Constant creativity and constant, like, movement, I think, in the community in a lot of ways, and I think that's how we got things done. Didn't give up.

Lewis: You mentioned that the queens put on shows and benefits.

Harrington: Yeah, benefits all the time.

Lewis: Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

Harrington: Oh yeah, I mean, we just basically get together and there'd be one of us that worked in a club, you know? And we'd be like, oh, let's do one here. Let's talk to so and so, and you know, so and so is out of work and they need money, so let's do the door. Let's see how much we can raise. You know, we would do a night, we'd do a couple of nights, but then we started doing bigger things, and we started raising money for God's Love We Deliver and other things, and

other places. So, we did it on a bigger scope, and that's how we kind of started it. Wigstock kind of started that way.

Lewis: Huh, I didn't know that.

Harrington: You know, in a lot of ways. It was more as kind of a group thing, but it was more about awareness, and it was an East Village thing with Bunny, so it was kind of—it was new, but in the same sense that we knew that we could do it, you know? We knew that we could have a little bit of pull and we could do this and we could raise money and we could help people out. So, that's what we tried to do. Lord knows if all the money went to where it should go, but [Laughter]. But hopefully it did. Hopefully it helped somebody somewhere. But I think it really did.

Lewis: Was there like a way—I'm trying to think of the right way to ask this. Like, was there like amongst other queens and like, drag performers, was there like a particular kind of relationship that queens had to the AIDS epidemic or was everyone sort of like, just experiencing it together?

Harrington: I mean, queens were dying too, you know? It wasn't just gay men. It was everyone, you know? So yeah, I mean, you'd hear girls just became sick and that was it, you know? You didn't see them anymore, so. During that time though, during the 80s, I also worked at a club called Edelweiss, which was kind of like the real—a real tranny bar [Laughter]. Truly.

Lewis: Can you tell us where Edelweiss was?

Harrington: Yeah, it was on 26<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue was the original, I think. And Dino, who was a straight Greek guy, and it was his wife's restaurant in the day. It was a German restaurant, but at night it was Edelweiss [Laughter]. And it was a little of everything. There was like guys that loved queens and the queens that loved guys, like straight men. They would all kind of, you know, come to one area. And I mean, we had women, men, gay men, gay women. It was a little of everything, so.

Lewis: Was this like, late 80s?

Harrington: Yeah, it was like, mid to late 80s, and it was a lot of fun. It was, I mean, I'd have John Waters at my bar at least a couple nights a week. And he would come in and I'd be like—he'd come in and he'd hang out. He drinks Tom Collins, and I would fix him a Tom Collins, sit at the end of my bar, which is in the back near the DJ booth, and he'd go, this is the best show in New York. [Laughter]. And he would sit there and he would drink Tom Collins and just watch the parade go by [Laughter], and it was quite a parade.

Lewis: He probably stole your material.

Harrington: Yeah, [Laughter], he really did. I mean, these were like—I mean, we had the gambit from working girls. Like street working girls to show queens to straight guys that looked like they just got out of prison to—we had a scene of guys that would come in because the Garment

District was close by, and they'd come in with a wad, like a cash wad like this, of singles and sit at the bar. And all the girls would start lining around them, you know, seeing if they can get their attention, and they would just be buying everyone a drink and have their little flash wad, and they'd leave early. They'd leave like, by midnight, 1:00, but they'd come in early. So, it was a lot of fun. I mean, there was always a fight going on, too. There was always something. One time, oh, this was kind of weird, I was walking from my bar to the front bar, and I bumped into this guy, and he like, just grabbed me like that. He grabbed me by the arm and I pulled away, and then he reached and he grabbed me but I had my hair in a long ponytail and he grabbed me by my ponytail, and he tried to, like, knock me off my feet. And I [sound of hand smacking metal] grabbed the table behind me and I grabbed a beer bottle, and I thought, okay, I'm going to have to stall this guy until the bouncers from the door get to where I am. And I could see them moving through the crowd, and one of them's name was Nelson, he's this really big guy, and I could see him moving toward, because he knew something was going on, so I was like, I've just got to hold this guy off for a little while, you know? I don't know what he's going to do, but I'm going to hit him with this beer bottle if he comes any closer. So, it was kind of like they grabbed him and they tackled him and dragged him out. And later, he took a trash can and threw it through the plate glass window at the front of the club. So, it was just like, I mean, it wasn't every night that happened, and especially to me because I was nice to everybody, but um, [Laughter], but there was always a little turbulence, there was always something going on, because it was not your average group of people you'd throw together, so. But it was always fun though, and it was always a good time and always packed, so.

Lewis: And you were bartending also.

Harrington: Yeah, I was bartending.

Lewis: Did you have a day job by like the mid 80s?

Harrington: Um, at that time I was basically doing the night gig. And I was doing great, you know? I was making really good money there. And we changed locations at different times, so I still worked there, but we changed locations at least twice, three times, I think.

Lewis: Was it all in the same, like, area?

Harrington: No, I think the last club was this diner up on 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the 50s to the late 40s, and that was the last big Edelweiss club that there was. And it was like an old diner that was kind of on its own. It had its own little corner, and that was kind of the new club. Very slick and modern-like. Very chrome. A lot of chrome in it. But um, Dino tried to do it downtown in the west village later on, but I think like, the moment had lapsed at that point, and that was like, mmm, 2000 or so?

Lewis: Interesting.



Harrington: Yeah, so it was like, I stopped by to say hello a few times, but um, but yeah, kind of—that had faded a bit. But there were also other places. There was Sally's, which was right—it was like in a hotel in Times Square area. That was also like a notorious tranny bar sort of. And kind of shady. It was a little more street. It was a little more dangerous to go there than other places, but it was fun. You know, it was a lot of fun. And because I worked in Edelweiss and I worked in clubs, a lot of people knew me so I could kind of bounce from club to club wherever I wanted to go, and never have to pay for a drink or a door fee. So, it was kind of nice. Yeah, so you'd bounce around so you could save your money [Laughter].

Lewis: And were like, most of the other girls that like you knew and hung out with, were they also like nightlife workers [inaudible]?

Harrington: Yeah, either they were working girls or they were working showgirls or they were working in a club or hostess-ing or doing parties and things like that. So, there was always things going on, so. But it was, I mean, it was—the girls were kind of like—it's funny, we all kind of came from different backgrounds and things, but when we were all thrown together, we were pretty much all the same in a lot of ways. I mean, we watched each other's backs all the time and when we'd see each other, it would be just like, you know, you hadn't seen each other forever, you know? You'd be like, oh, what are you doing? So, it was kind of this, like a sisterhood, I think, you know? You would always kind of catch each other, you know, watch each other's back, get them into places they didn't normally go, you know? That was kind of the thing I would do. I'd be like, you know, take Ruby or Jessica out, who I used to work with, like, because they live in the Bronx, you know? They don't get to go to the downtown clubs or things like that, so I'd take them out for a night and things. It was kind of fun. There was no one. Dorian Corey, have you ever heard of her name? She used to be—she used to always come to Edelweiss all the time, and I remember going with her downtown and sharing a taxi, and she was a big girl. She took up the whole backseat of the taxi basically, and I'm like over here like this [Laughter]. But um, she's infamous for, her story was, which I actually got it first hand, to tell you the truth, was that after she had passed away, they, um, discovered in her apartment that—a body in a trunk in her closet that was mummified. So, I mean, she had wrapped it up, totally, rock salt, and it was a big steamer trunk and it was in her apartment. And I remember her telling the story ages ago, and it was somebody that tried to break in. And then, she actually took him out and put him in that trunk, so, and never mentioned it. [Laughter].

Lewis: Interesting solution, [Laughter].

Harrington: Yeah, it was somebody who broke into her apartment and actually was, uh, trying to hurt her, I think. But um, yeah, so that was her story and nobody ever found it until after she passed away. We always just thought of it as a story but, you know, [Laughter].

Lewis: She told you about it before like legit that there was a body in her apartment.

Harrington: Oh yeah, she told it to me—

Lewis: [Laughter]

Harrington: Personally and, you know, I was like, ooo, that was—it's like later, after she had passed away and it came out, I was like [sucks teeth] she was very nonchalant about it actually, when she talked about it. So, it was something that like, ooo, ouch, that was kind of weird.

Lewis: Were there any sort of tricks or tips or sort of survival skills that other girls or queens had when they were working?

Harrington: Oh yeah, well—always keep your money in a boobie bag. That was always, [Laughter], I was always keeping money somewhere else where you don't have your money in your pocketbook or anything like that. So yeah, there were always kind of tricks for where to put your money. That was always good. Like under your boob, or—don't move anything around too much because you don't want to lose it. I used to keep mine in my corset, like right here. Like right under your bra. So, between your cleavage because you didn't want sweaty money so you'd always put it right here. [Laughter]. But yeah, just to survive on a daily basis, I mean, these girls knew what to do, where to go, and how to do it. And yeah, especially with men. They knew how to deal with men, that's for sure. So, um, they always knew when somebody was like, you know, if they would be really interested and being a paying john or just be some guy that just wants to get laid. There was always that fine line, you know? But they knew the difference, so. Yeah, Edelweiss was kind of like a working girl bar in a lot of ways, but it had a little of everything to it too, so that kind of made it more special, so.

Lewis: Was it, did you like a favorite place to work at?

Harrington: Um, well, I did—I really did like working for Lee in a lot of ways, because um, Lee's Mardi Gras was really kind of special.

Lewis: Yeah, we can—why don't you talk about meeting Lee Brewster?

Harrington: Okay, um, well, I answered an ad that he was looking for sales help, and this was in—this was kind of early 80s, but kind of like—no, actually it was a little later. It was about 87, 88, and I wanted a steady gig from doing night jobs all the time, so I was looking for a day gig, and me and Kenny had just gotten our first apartment. So just, you know, paying the bills and keeping everything on the up and up, and he was working, so I was like, okay, going to get a day job. So, I did, and I started working for Lee, and he was great. I think he saw a lot of himself in me.

Lewis: And this was at Lee's Mardi Gras.

Harrington: Lee's Mardi Gras, right, boutique, the department store for queens, [Laughter]. The tranny department store, we called it. Yeah, it was 10,000 square feet. We had a huge space. It was the third floor on 400 West 14<sup>th</sup>, which was the corner building. Big building. In fact, on the third floor we could always tell when the girls were coming down to work, because that was a big sort of area, too, for working girls, because when it would start to get dark, they would come

like, oh, there's Vanessa, she's coming down, walking down the street, and they were all customers, because they would all buy their shoes. Where could you get a five-inch heel in a size 13, you know? So, it was like, they knew Lee's and he had steel shanks that went through the heels so they could run in them. That like, if they don't last running from the po-po, that was it. [Laughter]. So, it's like, we had one queen that, she would always come in and her name was Christine, and it looked like an explosion had happened in her shoes every time. She goes, I don't know what I did, it's like—it looked like the whole front of her shoe just exploded, like—so she'd be like—she'd come and she'd buy a new pair, you know? Lee would be like, oh, I can't take these back, you know? So, she'd buy a new pair. We'd see her every like three weeks or so, you know? But yeah. I mean, the working girls would be around, and we'd be leaving work and they'd be coming in for work, so. But they loved Lee, they really did. He treated them with respect. He treated them like paying customers and said, what do you need, what do you want, you know? He was more annoyed with like, the gay guys that would come in and just shop for like, Halloween or something, because they would look around and then they were like, I know where I can get that cheaper, you know? And just be like, like this—and he would order stuff that would be—I mean, he had corsets and lingerie and dresses and shoes and wigs and makeup. He had everything in that store, so.

Lewis: And when did he open? When did he start the boutique?

Harrington: He started it on—in the mid-80s. He did start earlier. I didn't come to him until a little later, but he started in the early 80s and the store was on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the 40s, and he lived upstairs and he had the bookstore, as well, with the store. But the store wasn't as big. It was kind of small and then there was a bookstore kind of adjacent. When he got the place on 14<sup>th</sup> Street is when he got all this incredible space. So, you know, we always had a good crew of people to work with. There was Robert and Ronnie and Terry and, um, there were just so many that were good friends of Lee's that he had known for years, like Bebe, who he had known for years who was assistant principal for eons at the New School. I think she's retired now, but um, they were good friends of Lee's. So, when they were there, they kind of like, worked with Lee. They would work with Lee. Like, Tony Stevens was another one that I worked with that was good friends of Lees, and they all knew Lee in the earlier days. So, it was like, and we would kind of sit back and hear the stories of like, how Lee got started and what Lee was up to, because Lee didn't like to talk about it as much, and we would always be like, come on Lee, we know—we'll dress you and we'll take you out. He was like, no, no, no, no, no. He goes—because those days for him were kind of like, he felt like behind him, you know? He was like, oh no, I don't know if I could do—you know, he would do the lace-front wigs and he was gorgeous, you know? So, he wasn't really doing the drag at the time, so he would live kind of vicariously through us in a lot of ways. Because he'd be like, where did you go, what did you do, you know? But he would always take us out to dinner once a week to a fancy-ass restaurant. Places that we could normally never afford. And he would take us and be like, come on, we're going to dinner, and he would be like, invite Kenny. You know, and I'd invite my husband and we'd have dinner and it would be like the whole homestead or cherchez la femme, like Josephine's, you know? It would be like places where you wouldn't normally go and you normally couldn't afford, but Lee could and he would treat you to dinner and it would be quite a spread. So, and he loved doing that. He was a very generous guy at the

same time. So, that's kind of what made Lee very special. I think I learned a lot from Lee. I learned about the whole—there isn't just queens or pre-ops or, you know, post-ops. There's this whole grey area, there's a whole grey area of straight men who feel kind of trapped and feel like this is the way they kind of like live themselves out to, you know, that will never come out or never, you know, walk down the street in drag ever, you know, in their entire life. But he always thought well, they're good because they purge and then they re-buy everything, so it's like, [Laughter], Lee kind of thought of it as the good side of everything, you know? But he'd be like oh, you know, I've known him for like—she'd be like Shannon, go and deal with him, you'll be able to deal with him fine. He's been coming here for 20 years. He looks around and then he runs out the store. So, it's like—and they're always very nervous and they're always looking at a book like, you know, is anybody watching me right now, and we have the one area in the store that were all the magazines and books, and it was like this separate room. And it wasn't really—I mean, it was kind of pornography but at the same sense it was Drag Magazine that Lee had published. So, it was kind of like the stuff that he had put together and had letters and places and, you know, where people meet and things like that, or discussion groups, or TVs loved things that would go for outings, where they'd go somewhere, where they can dress up for a weekend and be their femme selves, you know, pretty much. So, there was always things like that going on, and they loved that. I mean, there were guys that are attracted to queens, and then there are guys that would want to be queens, you know? So, there's always that kind of fine line. They didn't want to really—they weren't into you so much as they wanted to be like you. So, you were like, their inspiration in a lot of ways. So, they would come in and you'd be like, well this is what you would need, and you would outfit them from head to toe. And some were long-standing customers I'd see ever since I worked there. I mean, I worked there for about four years initially, and then I started working for Patricia Field, and I worked for her for about nine years. And then when I stopped working, Lee asked me to come back, and those were like the last couple of years of Lee's life, so. And I came back for that, so. And um, it was so funny because um—it wasn't really funny, but it was just like—Lee was always like, he always was trying to lose weight. He was slightly rounded but not by any means overweight. So, he loved his diet pills. So, he would [Laughter] take these little diet pills, and he would be zipping around the store like all the time, and he would wear these little, like, little penny loafers, but he would always be shuffling. So, you'd hear him like, [shuffling noise], like, [shuffling noise], like while you were in the store. So, he was like, always so hyper, you know? And there were things going on, but he didn't know why. Like, he would get dizzy all of the sudden or lose his balance. So, we'd go to the doctor and the doctor would be like, well we can't find anything. And then, um, one day we came in and Bebe came I think first [inaudible], and it was the night before, we had just had dinner, and we came in, we were always open on a Saturday. And Lee had passed out and was on the floor. And they couldn't really get him up, you know, right away, so we called 911. And he never really came out of the hospital after that. And it was cancer, but they didn't find it until much later, and it was a little too late for Lee, and it was very unexpected. I mean, because Lee's life was so unusual in the fact that he started his store and his business from his own apartment, initially, and he sort of grew from there. He started dressing at an early age. Like, he would dress men that had called him up for ads and things like that. But it wasn't necessarily—it's not necessarily a sexual thing. It's more of a kind of—that's kind of what Veronica does in a lot of ways, but that's how she knew Lee, and that's how Lee started in a lot of ways. So, I think like, it was kind of like passing the

baton in a lot of ways to Veronica from Lee in that regard. And she took it to a whole other level, you know? She started writing about it and doing things more on that, where Lee was more on the business end of just about everything. But he was like, there's always different degrees of people, you know? There's some that are always going to be more comfortable with who they are and there's some that aren't, so. But he first started doing balls and things. He did the balls very similar to the ones up in Elks' Lodge in Paris Is Burning. Those type of balls. But he would do, kind of in Manhattan, like at Roseland and things like that, and he would MC them, and he would bring everyone in from outside and do a competition ball, like in The Queen. Kind of—that's I think is where Sabrina got a lot of that was from Lee. So, and he would be, he would like, um—he loved feather boas, so he had tons of feather boas in the store, but he would do this thing where, um, we saw a little thing go, he'd described it, because he never would show us any films and stuff, but he would like, be wrapped in a boa from head to toe, and they would like—he would have something on the side, and spin out onto stage into the boa. And he'd take the boa and he'd be like [gasps] like this, [Laughter]. And he would be like, oh, tonight, and then he would like, open the show, you know? Like it was in a nude suit with spangles in the right places, you know? So, then he was like [gasps] and like, the boa would fly off to the side of the stage. So, he's a real showman in a lot of ways, so. And he learned, I think, that from the earlier things, like, from The Queen and things like that for that era, you know? The 60s kind of era. So, he did that initially when he first came to New York, so.

Lewis: Do you know why he like, stopped sort of performing and just sort of did the behind the scenes business side?

Harrington: I think he felt like he—it's—and I can understand it because you're not going to meet your own expectations of when you were 20 or 30 or even 40. And he felt like he wouldn't bring it back to that. Like Bebe and Terry would go to Florida, I mean, not Florida, New Orleans every year for Mardi Gras. So, they would do this traditional trip, but Lee would never go. Although, he did go in the earlier stages of it. But then I think he just didn't want to do drag so much anymore. And you know, he was just kind of like, well, I've done it, you know, I want to kind of move on a little bit. And he kind of did the business end of it. But I think he did miss it. Because um, I think probably Bebe has his portrait. I think she probably does. She probably does have his portrait.

Lewis: Is that Bebe Scarpi?

Harrington: Yeah, has a portrait of Lee, like, in one of his iconic photos. And there was a painted portrait of him, like kind of all spread out, like there's the hair flowing, feather boa somewhere I'm sure.

Lewis: Did you ever go to like New Orleans or like the Fantasia Fair or anything like that?

Harrington: No, I didn't. They wanted me to at that time but I'm such a New York girl that—and there was always so much going on here for me, and I was kind of like, um, like me and Robert were the youngest ones, and we kind of look a little like bookends, me and Robert. Because we're small, black hair, blue eyes, and we'd always kind of be like, oh you know the one with black hair

and blue eyes, and they're like, which one?, and I was kind of like, they always thought of me like, as more of a woman, like, they always, for, even you know, early on in life, it was kind of like, she or like—I never was one to, you know, correct anyone. Because I'm like, it's fine with me, you know? It's like, you know it doesn't bother me at all. So, I kind of lean to that sort of side of it. So, drag was always very natural for me, too. It wasn't really something I had to work too hard at to kind of pass, so. It was kind of an easy thing to do. So, for doing shows and things like that it was like, it was just constant. I mean, I was always working at that time, so. And then I got back into more—into doing hair more, and started doing wigs more and stuff. I actually started doing that more with Lee, because I was the wig buyer. So, I would buy more wigs for the store and resupply, and I was styling for customers. He let me do that. I used to do a lot of stuff for Lypsinka early on. In fact, still do, once in a while. So, um, she would come in and I would do her hair for the shows that she was doing. So, then I started doing a lot of show queens in that scope and direct instruction did that for years. And then I started doing more theater work and film work and stuff.

Lewis: Like in the 90s you started?

Harrington: Yeah, I kind of really kind of switched over and started doing more building and more theater work, so. And I still do that now, so. But I pick and choose more to what I want to do so that I don't have to—I swing on Broadway, still. But with a cane, I can't run around as much as I used to. So, I can do supervisory kind of things more or less. But I build a lot, because I can build a show, shipping it out, start on a new one. And then building a show is basically building all the hair for that show, doing all the wigs, pre-done, to be shipped off to do that show, so. And for, um, television stuff, I just do it when I'm called and asked and to do it that way, so. But Lee was kind of got me back into doing wigs and hair more. So, and then I did that for Pat, too. I was her wig buyer.

Lewis: Were you like always into wigs or did you just sort of fall into it once you started working—?

Harrington: You know what it was? It was kind of because I was doing hair and at the same time, yeah, I kind of did do a lot more with wigs, and um, it was something that, you know, they don't talk back, you know? They're a customer that you know, doesn't really talk back. So, in a way it was kind of nice to be able to get back to it, so. And I still do it, and I still love doing it, so. For years. [Laughter] See how many more years I've got, so. [Laughter] But um, but yeah. I mean, during that time was kind of cool because it was always kind of new. There was always something new going on, and something fresh. But when Lee passed away, it was kind of like—we didn't know what to do with the store. I mean, I don't know—

Lewis: Lee passed away in the early 2000s?

Harrington: Yeah, I think it was 90, yeah, it was—wait, let me see. Yeah, it was right after 99, so it was early 2000, 2001, before 9/11, so it had to be 2000. Yeah, and it was very sudden. And we were all working at the store and so we were all like, what are we going to do? So, we basically sold as much as we could out of the store. Lee didn't have a lot of relatives. He had a brother who

was a preacher who didn't really know too much about Lee's life in general, and he always had, um, he had nieces and nephews that he constantly was always putting money away for. You know, always had a little, you know, money for them at some point I'm sure that they received. But for the store, his family didn't know anything about it in that regard, and the thing that really—I think, and I really think this is what kind of drove Lee to the point where he became as sick as he did because of the stress he was under. It was like his rent tripled in the matter of a couple of years. I mean, it went from 5 grand a month to 10 to 15 and then they wanted 20 grand, and he just, you know, he just could not see it possible to being able to do that every—I mean, they wanted the rates that they are charging probably now back then, and with commercial leases, and he had a huge space. So, it was like, did Bebe tell you what she did? [Laughter]. Well, after we kind of closed the store out, we sold everything, I have actually still some of the mannequins from the store, believe it or not, some of the wig mannequins. And um, I took the wig stock, the stock of wigs, [Laughter], for the store, kind of actually started my business in a lot of ways. And we raised as much money as we could to pay off as much creditors as Lee had at the time, and then just kind of locked the store up kind of the way that it was. But we really all hated the landlord [Laughter], so Bebe decided that we were going to put an Italian curse on the place, and she did. We came in one night, did this whole ritual, and we put a big, dead carp in the air vents [Laughter].

Lewis: [Laughter]

Harrington: And they didn't rent that place for about three to four years, and it permeated fish for the longest time [Laughter].

Lewis: [Laughter]

Harrington: But it's kind of ironic because initially before the space was actually Lee's Mardi Gras, it was a club called The Toilet [Laughter].

Lewis: I didn't know that. That's funny.

Harrington: And it was kind of in the same vein as, um, what was the other one called? Oh god, there was a few of them. The Mineshaft and things like that, which were kind of like really kind of, um, very interesting because I remember the Mineshaft. I had gone there a few times actually. But it was not—it was kind of more, because for us, I mean, we didn't really fit that sort of type of clientele that they normally had. I mean, leather and you know, all of that. That wasn't our thing. Although we did wear leather, but we just, you know, bustier and shit, you know? But it was kind of like, uh, I think laying in a tub and getting peed on kind of thing. It was kind of S&M-y, kind of like, dungeon-y kind of look to it and smelly and dirty and all of those things, but they would do some plays there every once in a while, too. And um, I actually dated one of the bartenders there for a while. And he was a big, strapping guy, too. Big muscle guy [Laughter]. But, um, his name was Shawn. But, um, during that time—so we were like, we're having this play, why don't you come bring some of your friends and you can watch the play and hang out? And he was bartending, so you know, you're just bartending for us too. But it was a lot of fun. It was

a lot of different things going on. Even in those places there was always something going on, so. That's what Lee's was initially. It was The Toilet [Laughter]. It was a gay club called The Toilet [Laughter]. So, after Lee passed, which was very sad for us all and for the whole, I mean, there are so many people who didn't even realize Lee passed away, so many clients and customers and things that when they found out, that they were very upset. Because there was no other place like it, and there's never been another one since. It was quite unusual, so [Laughter].

Lewis: Do you know where Lee got the idea to do a TV boutique?

Harrington: Oh yeah, I mean, there are, actually there are, but they're places you have to drive to. I think there are a couple out in New Jersey and stuff that you have to call ahead and things like that. Lee was pretty much, all you had to do was buzz and we'd say, we're going to come down and bring you up. And that's the way—he was kind of a, like a department store on the street pretty much. But you had to know where he was, and what he was about to a point. So, people were always calling every day going, is this Lee's Mardi Gras? And we'd get everything from prank calls to, you know, oh yeah, I've been looking for you guys for years, or like, oh my God, you exist? You know? I'll be there right away! So, it was kind of unusual for a lot of people.

Lewis: Did you ever get hassled by like by the people coming into the store or like cops, police or anything like that?

Harrington: Never. Never from police or anything. Although, Lee had a great relationship with the mob. So, and in fact because nobody else would publish his books and his magazines. So, the real straight publications wouldn't touch him. So, um, his initially started like, I think he always said about them is that they always treated him with complete respect, and he gave them complete respect, and never had, ever, a problem with the mob, who financed his magazines and stuff to have them printed.

Lewis: So, the mob published drag?

Harrington: Yeah.

Lewis: Oh, interesting.

Harrington: Yeah, and his porn magazines. Yeah, and they didn't care, the fact—what it was about. I mean, as long as he paid them when he was supposed to pay them and got delivery when it was supposed to be delivered, so. And he always had something nice to say about them, so it was never like, an uncomfortable relationship or anything like that. So maybe kind of in the same way that bars did during that time with the mob. Because it was around the same time that Lee started his own business. So, we just carried on for publications with him.

Lewis: Were many gay bars in the 80s still tied to the mob?

Harrington: Hmm.



Lewis: Or was it on the way out by then?

Harrington: Probably on the way out a little bit, but I think that Lee kind of thought about it like, they came to me when I didn't have anybody, and they treated me with respect and as a person, not as something like, oh, some deviant, publishing porn magazines for trannies, you know? It wasn't really kind of looked at like that, so he felt like he really got a lot of respect, so and that's why the relationship really continued.

Lewis: Did you know who he dealt with specifically?

Harrington: I knew their names, but I never met them [Laughter]. Only first names, though. Yeah, they came around about once a month or whatever, but always really pleasant, and always really nice and always really friendly. And they'd known Lee for years, decades. So, they were always very sweet and friendly to him, so. I know, we always think of it in other regards, but he kind of looked at them like yeah, well, they were there when nobody else would be, you know, and it's like, that's how he got things going. And what he put in his magazines were not just porn, they were just about—they were about places where they could meet and get things and order things, and a lot of his stuff, he started by mail-order, even before there was a store. So, he would actually order stuff for his customers and show them to them in brown paper bags and boxes, so. Later on, I mean, even in the store we always did mail-order. So, there was always a good mail-order business.

Lewis: Like all around the country?

Harrington: All around the country. All around the world, actually, so. And there were always places—there were always magazines calling out. There was always, um, Tootsie. Lee dressed Dustin Hoffman. He picked out all of his clothes. That red sequin gown? From Lee's. [Laughter]. So, I mean, uh, and he was small, so Lee said it was great because he's such a little guy, so everything fit, you know? [Laughter]. But yeah, I mean, Playboy would call up at least four or five times a year wanting him to do a story and they went to do an exposé on the store, and a lot of people would want to do that. They'd want to come in and film and stuff. And he would do them, occasionally would let them do it, but he didn't like his customers to be stressed out, and a camera stresses them out. So, they'd be like, I'm going to get seen, so. He had more respect for his customers than actually for the fame that it would have gotten him, so or the notoriety. So, I think in a way he kind of—he protected them in a lot of ways, his clientele, so.

Lewis: Where did he get his like retail from? Like, shoes in larger sizes and stuff like that?

Harrington: We had them made. Every year, the shoe guy would come in, and I think after the first year, the second year—he knew I was such a shoe queen, so he knew I was into high heels. So, he'd be like Shannon I want you to help me, and we'll pick out styles. So, we'd have this guy from Spain that would come in and handcraft shoes. But he would do it on a larger last and he would also reinforce the heels with steel shanks that couldn't snap off. So, these shoes were built

for 200-pound men, you know, that could take the pressure, you know, so. And they were beautiful styles. He'd come up with some of the most unusual, the most daintiest things to the most, you know, hardcore like, thigh high stiletto boot that laced all the way up from the toe to all the way up here. In fact, they hurt, some of them. And he'd always have me try shit on because he would be like, because I'm like a size nine. I'm like a nine and ten, which was like a good average size, you know? Well now it is the average size, like a size nine for women's shoes is like average size. So, for that he would always like, well you try it on because I can wear really high heels. So, I'd be like okay, and I'd go yeah, they feel really good, they feel comfortable, though what should we get them in, you know? And we'd order. And the day the shoes arrived, that was a big day [Laughter]. So, we'd be stocking shoes. But everything was original with Lee, and shoes were unusual, because he would sit down there and actually order them. But everything else he got from everywhere else. Prosthetics, for instance. They were so used to selling just one to women that had gone through a mastectomy that they weren't used to selling pairs. So, he would always buy things in pairs. They'd be like, you know, you just increased their business by triple fold, you know, just by buying two breasts instead of one. So yeah, we have all kinds of suppliers and everything.

Lewis: Were there particular kind of things that sold the most?

Harrington: Oh yeah. Shoes, hose—hosiery was always big—prosthetics and corsets. Because we would always get our corsets from England that were the best corsets made. They were always denim lined and satin exterior and you could really pull them in. The ones that actually give you that real hourglass figure were the ones that we would get. But then there would be the fancy ones that were more ornate, you know? But the ones that I loved were the black English ones that were satin, real—just, not a lot of—just black satin, not a lot of bows or pearls or any of that crap on it, and just really basic. And I really loved those, so we'd order them by the tons and sell out, because I could sell them all, so [Laughter]. Anyone would be like, we'll put you in a corset. And once you got them in a corset they'd want the corset, so. Same with heels. They'd be like, now who else could give you a shape like that, you know, but a corset. And bracelets and everything like that, so yeah. It was really a lot of fun. And we would get people that were totally shy and others that were just like would run around the store naked, you know? They'd be more like an exhibitor or an exhibitionist than anything else. But you know, we got everything to straight truck drivers to—they'd come in with their wives and shop, you know? So, we had a good variety of people. And there'd be people who would come clear across the world that heard about Lee's and wanted to see it when they were in New York. So, they'd come and just buy a crap load of crap often. We'd see them like once or twice a year and they'd make their pilgrimage and so it was kind of cool. I like that. And some really interesting people: doctors, lawyers, writers, everything. A little bit of everything. Some were friends and some were kind of anonymous customers, so. But it was a lot of fun [Laughter]. Hmm. Lee's was a lot of fun.

Lewis: Yeah.

Harrington: I really liked him. I really do miss him.

Lewis: Yeah, it sounds like he had like a sort of circle of friends who were all like really tight.

Harrington: Yeah, but Lee was kind of like, um, because when you are like, in your 20s, you have friends in your 20s, you know? You don't really have too many people that are older around you that could tell you things to do, you know, what not to do, things you should do, you know? So, he was one of the first, you know, employers that I had full health coverage, full insurance, and it's not like when you need it in your 20s, you know? So, it was like he made sure that we had health insurance and that we were covered, and he knew things were important, and he would make sure to go out of his way to make sure that we were. So, in that regard, yeah, I mean, he would give you really good advice on things and stuff. And he wanted you to make money. He never discouraged me from doing shows or like, even though if you come in late, you know, it's like, but I know this is like what you like to do, so it was like, he made room for that. He made it to where you could be a little flexible. And he knew that I was good with hair, so he liked it when I would do wigs, and I would do all the displays and everything like that. So, in a lot of ways, and I would help him. And I learned a lot from him in that regard. I actually had some of the first connections with wig companies through him. So, with Henry Margu and Rene of Paris and you know, Louis Ferre, I mean, all big companies, that I actually talked to those people in person once a month at least, but probably more because they were starting out as companies but now they're huge companies. In fact, they even named a line of wigs for, um, for Margu Wigs called Incognito [Laughter]. He goes, I need a name [Laughter]. I go, how about Incognito? And then he fucking named his line after that and I'm like, yeah, he should've given me a check too. [Laughter]. Because I used to order from them all the time, so. And even with Pat's I used to [inaudible]. But yeah, so I mean, the 80s I guess was very eventful and stuff. But I continue to kind of do stuff, and I'm not as political as I used to be though. And I think I want to get more to that again, because with Trump I don't think you have a choice. I think we're going to have to fight for whatever we've got to keep and anything we else want—anything else we want, it's going to be hard. So, I think it's just starting again. So, we'll see. [Laughter]. I hope so.

Lewis: Let me check the time. Um, it's been a couple of hours, how are you feeling? Do you want to—?

Harrington: Good. I'm kind of running out of breath a little bit [Laughter]. Is there anything you want to ask me?

Lewis: Do you just want to tell me a little bit sort of like, kind of looking back from, we've talked through the 80s and the 90s a little bit, like, some of the things that seem especially different to you now compared to the 80s or 90s or?

Harrington: Well, um, yeah, I kind of—let me get some water. [Laughter]. Yeah, I mean, one of the things that I see is how things have changed really. It's such a change, and I think an attitude has changed really. I don't know. Are you real connected in social media?

Lewis: A little bit.

Harrington: Yeah? Do you like to be connected into it?

Lewis: Um, we're back. So, I was going to ask a wrap-up question about sort of trans life today versus in the past, but actually I think listeners will want to hear about your experiences with our current president.

Harrington: [Laughter]. Well, um, I did a few additional days on The Apprentice a few years back, about four years ago.

Lewis: Doing just wigs, or doing makeup?

Harrington: Doing additional, being you come in and you do hair on whoever the additional actors might be. And trust me, all that crap is scripted, so, [Laughter], just to let you know. So, I came in to do a couple of days for the additional, and I was actually talking to—sitting next to Trump's hairdresser when we were actually doing the taping of the show, because we have to be on set as we tape. So, he elbows me in the ribs and he goes, do you know what we call it? And I said no, what are you talking about? And he goes, Trump's hair. And I'm like, no, what do you call it? [Laughter]. And he goes, I call it the onion loaf, because I fold it one way and then I fold it back the other [Laughter]. And I kind of looked at him a little in shock, and I'm like, and I looked over and I'm like yeah, that totally makes sense, because it does look like it's folded and then the other way. And then he goes, he also said it's like you never want to see it when it's wet [Laughter]. And I kind of looked and I said, and then I thought about it for a minute and I'm like, you know, you're right. Because if this was wet, this is long, it comes down like this [Laughter], it would be like kind of an odd sort of angled mullet is what it ends up looking like. Like with a little bang here, like a long bang. It will come down here on the sides and then it drops even further [Laughter]. Because this, he goes over the ear, which is really bizarre to tell you the truth, so. But he didn't even get it. He was like, ehh, I've been doing it like this for about 30 years [Laughter]. He said since the 70s, he's been doing his hair, so. I wonder if he's going to survive this presidency though, so we'll see, [Laughter].

Lewis: I wonder if any of us will [Laughter].

Harrington: I know [Laughter].

Lewis: Is there anything that we've you know, either talked about or not? Like, to talk about that you would especially want remembered?

Harrington: Oh, somebody that I remember?

Lewis: No, something that you want people to remember from your life.

Harrington: Oh, oh gosh. That I think I've been kind of lucky in a lot of ways. I've lived a pretty decent life, and I got to do and travel and meet a lot of people. But I would just say that you've just got to go out there and do it. You can't really let people tell you what you can and what you

can't do, and how you should be and how you shouldn't be. Just remember that everything out there, there's a place for you, there's a place for everybody. It's a big world, and nobody can tell you how to live it and how to be it, so [Laughter]. I think you've got to make your own mark. And Ru would say, screw it. Got to live it, got to love it. Get back to your roots [Laughter].

Lewis: That's great. Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

Harrington: Oh sure. Thank you, AJ [Laughter].