

“The One about Princess Margaret”¹

by Kip Jones

*“Princess on the steeple and all the pretty people
They’re drinkin’, thinkin’ that they got it made”
—Bob Dylan, ‘Like a Rollin’ Stone’²
©1965 Warner Bros. Inc*



NARRATOR (Voice Over)

The peculiar thing about the 1960s is that people think that the decade happened all at once, as though we woke up one morning to some sort of overnight transformation. We did not. Instead, we found ourselves, in transitory increments, participating in life differently, listening to new music, creating our own pastiche of alternative clothes to wear, and going to novel places or old haunts with new agendas. One cold Friday night in the autumn of 1965 my friends and I decided to take the train from our hometown of Philadelphia to New York City. Simon had moved there

¹ The audio/visual production created from this script is available online at:
<http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=876851065821614838&hl=en-GB>.

² *“‘Like a Rolling Stone’ was recorded on June 15, 1965, in Studio A at 799 Seventh Avenue, then the New York headquarters of Columbia Records, where I worked as the coordinator of new releases. I was invited to sort through a stack of records and demos that were to be junked. Among them I discovered a gem: a studio-cut acetate of ‘Like a Rolling Stone’. I carefully packed it into an empty LP jacket, carried it home and that weekend played it more than once in my apartment. The effect was the same as it had been the first time I had experienced it. Exhilaration. Heart pounding. Body rolling - followed by neighbors banging on the walls in protest. Then, on Sunday evening, it came to me. I knew exactly where the song could be fully appreciated. [At the time, the hottest new disco in Manhattan was a place called Arthur, on East 54th Street.] The D.J. was very polite when asked if he would kindly play the acetate. The effect was seismic. People jumped to their feet and took to the floor, dancing the entire six minutes.”*
—Shaun Considine, *The New York Times*, (Dec. 04 2004) “The Hit We Almost Missed”
http://www.b12partners.net/mt/archives/2004/12/the_new_york_ti.html and personal communication).

to become an actor (as one did) and we wanted to see him again. Ross had his father's Playboy Club card (we could use it to get free drinks) and I wanted to go to a disco club³ that had been opened by Sybil Burton, recently divorced from Richard.⁴

This flagship club of the new mod era was called, 'Arthur', supposedly because one of the Beatles (either Ringo or George, depending on who tells the story) was questioned by a reporter who pointed at his hair and asked, "What do ya call that?" The Beatle responded, "Arthur". In fact, the Beatles had just made the film, 'Help' that summer and had appeared in New York's Shea Stadium in August.

Sybil Burton had remarried—a hairdresser/singer/actor from Ohio named Jordon Christopher who was more than a decade younger than her. You see, because Richard had run off with Liz Taylor, Sybil really was on a rampage of revenge. By taking this plunge, Christopher eventually managed to stretch out his fifteen minutes of fame into twenty years of steady work by catching the eye of several film directors.

Being queer wasn't some overnight transformation either. In 1965, it would be another four years before New York's Stonewall Riots and gay liberation on front pages. Closets abounded. Gay bars in my city of Philadelphia were raided by the police frequently. "Coming out" back then meant the stealth required to get out of one of these establishments unseen or at least without harassment from the cops. Being gay was something you did in the dark, on the side, in spite of daylight normalities.

³ Arthur's silent partners were famous - Mike Nichols, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Edward Vilella and Roddy McDowall.

⁴ *"The impact of the Mod-era discotheque reinvigorated American nightlife. It inaugurated a second wave of disco development that was more populist, democratic, and in tune with American popular culture. The flagship club of the new era was conceived by a jilted woman as a stylish act of revenge. Overnight Sybil stole the headlines from Dick and Liz to become the queen of the international discotheque scene"* - Braunstein, P. (1999) Disco. *American Heritage Magazine*, 50: 7 (November 1999). (Available at: http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1999/7/1999_7_43.shtml)

I had a huge crush on Simon, who was straight, before he left for New York. So bad a crush, in fact, that I dated Billie. A year later, Simon phoned me from New York to say that he was in a relationship with an older man and that they were living together in Greenwich Village. By then I was trapped in a marriage with Billie. Life is full of irony.

But back to that cold autumn night, 1965: we all decided to go to New York—me, Billie, Ross (who lived near me and was childhood friends with my art college roommate) and Graham, another of Ross's boyhood friends, a brooding, strapping guy, the kind I liked to meet up with on those dark, on the side, nights. Later, Graham and I did 'hook up' as they used to say and actually had our first time in bed together in Simon's apartment in the West Village. After that, I went home and told the wife, "I don't think our marriage is working". My shrink agreed with a sigh of inevitability.

Billie was stunning. She did 'a little modelling on the side'—a phrase used often then and even sung in "Bells are Ringing". She worked by day for an advertising firm; by night we spent our time with friends in an infamous local Philadelphia bar called Dirty Franks. The marginal, the creative, the wannabes—all either future members of Twelve Step programmes or eventually prematurely dead—attended nightly. They called the two of us, 'The King and Queen of Frank's'. If they only had known who the queen was! (If I had only known who the queen was.)

I worked for a small chain of trendy boutiques doing window displays and so forth. Billie often modelled for them and they even let me borrow clothes for her to wear from time to time:

"Return 'fresh' by Monday A.M., please!"

I had 'borrowed' a particularly wild black dress for her to wear to New York—kind of Spanish in style with a deep flounce at the bottom and matching shawl. She looked great in anything, but particularly looked stunning in the most outrageous. One night she went out in Baby Doll pyjamas, Courrege-type tights, long

false eyelashes and makeup; no one even guessed that she was dressed in sleepwear.

We keenly sensed that things were changing around us—fashion, music, lifestyles, etc.—and we wanted to be at the forefront of all of that. So we experimented. We had to be there where and when things were happening. This was all part and parcel of the things that eventually led up to the Summer of Love in 1968⁵—the culmination of the 60s, but we couldn't have predicted that; rather we partook piecemeal.

Arriving in New York City, we headed for the Playboy Club, a place that was intense and strange. It was my first-time seeing Playboy Bunnies up close; they were other-worldly, not quite human, a bit like the time that I met Ethel Merman in the flesh—a flesh that looked more like waxworks. It was crowded, but the drinks were free thanks to Ross's Dad. Simon met up with us there. He was still the most interesting of all of us really—an intelligent, handsome son of a Jewish glove manufacturer, educated at Penn and just beginning to find himself in New York. I was desperate to get out of the Playboy Club and on to Arthur, away from this strangely too-close-to-the-bone palace of heterosexuality and on to an alternative mod paradise and the potential, I assumed, for a more inclusive world that I had always longed for. This interior conflict was one that would trouble me for some time. After several stiff scotches we went back out into the streets of New York, eventually finding Arthur on 54th Street⁶.

⁵ *"It was the year of sex and drugs and rock and roll; it was also the year of the Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, Prague Spring, the Chicago convention, the anti-war movement and the Tet Offensive, the student rebellion that paralyzed France, Civil Rights, the generation gap, the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, and the birth of the women's movement. 1968: That world-changing year of social upheaval, when television's impact on global events first became apparent and where simultaneously, in Paris, Prague, London, Berkeley, Chicago, New York and all over the globe uprisings spontaneously occurred. 1968 encompassed the worlds of youth and music, politics, war, economics, assassinations, riots, and demonstrations—and the media, -- how we got to where we are today". (Martin KURLANSKY, 1969 The Year that Rocked the World, Random House 2005).*

⁶ Arthur was built on the site of the by-then defunct El Morocco and inspired by a trendy London discotheque named the Ad Lib.

There was a queue (or 'line' as we called it then) to get in. We decided it was worth the wait, this new club that brought the British attitude that we were just beginning to hear about in music and see in film to the streets of New York. This was the club where a few years later Mickey Deans, the night-manager, met Judy Garland⁷, eventually married her and took her to England where she died.

When we got to the entrance, the bouncer came up to our group and barked,

BOUNCER

"Sorry, but I can't let a group of four lads and one bird in."

NARRATOR

He was speaking "English" at us! Not knowing what to do (and now having finally heard a British accent in the flesh) we were certainly eager to be let in. Out of nowhere, ad libbing as I spoke, I alleged:

"Oh, this guy (Ross) is my manager and" (pointing at Graham), "the big one is my body guard. Billie and I are staying with Simon while we're in New York."

The doorman went back through the entrance. A moment or two passed, and Ross warned,

"Don't look around now, but I think that the bouncer is talking to Sybil Burton about you just inside the door."

They were having a lively conversation and pointing towards our group.

A few minutes had passed when Sybil Burton herself came out through the swinging double doors and right up to me, gushing,

⁷ Garland had known Mickey for two years when out of the blue, she announced their engagement. They enjoyed each other's company and he told her that if they married she would not have to work again - unless she wanted to....Judy Garland married Mickey Deans at Chelsea Registry Office on 15 March 1969. (c.f. <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/sherwoodtimes/judyshow.html>)

SYBIL

"Oh, I am terribly sorry that you had to wait! Please do come right in and I shall find you some seats."

NARRATOR

It was a funny time, 1965. A man having long hair was still a big deal and not all that common. Remember the fuss around the Beatles and their hairdos? You just didn't see that many guys with long hair and dressed in a 'mod' way on the streets in America. In fact, there was only one shop in all of Philadelphia where you could find mod clothes for men that began to approach what we were seeing in magazines and films⁸, mostly from England. I was one of those guys.

Because things were changing so rapidly and those who had their finger on the pulse were few, there was a kind of natural assumption that if someone looked the part, they got the role. Looking back, I imagine that Sybil Burton (being relatively new as a club owner in New York) fell into that trap when vetting us for entrance into her establishment. We looked like somebody, so we must be somebody.

Sybil (I am assuming that we're on a first name basis now) ushered us into the main room of the club where a rock band was playing⁹. She took us to a table which sat on its own next to the bandstand. There were smoke-tinted mirrors around the entire room, reminiscent of the location's posher days, with banquettes lining the walls, creating a dance floor in the centre and additional little tables with stools. It wasn't too crowded; the club was just beginning to

⁸ The film "Blowup" by Italian director, Michelangelo Antonioni, was released the following year in 1966; it epitomised the 'outsider' view of the mod era in 'swinging' London. This film had particular resonance for me.

⁹ Sybil Burton chose the band, the Wild Ones, led by Jordon Christopher, to be the opening band for Arthur. They were just a group. They never had a hit, but their big song was 'Wild Thing', written by Chip Taylor, brother of actor John Voight and a performer in his own right. During a trip to New York, Larry Page heard the demo of Wild Thing, and the English band The Troggs recorded it in 1965, turning it into a worldwide hit. (<http://www.classicbands.com/troggs.html>).

fill up. There must have been flashing lights and psychedelic projections on the walls, but I can't remember.

Sybil had the waiter take our drinks order and scotch arrived in large goblets. Every drink came in a goblet. Every drink, no matter what you got, which we thought was the coolest thing. Sybil took care of every detail. A bill for the drinks never followed. Jordon Christopher was spotted in leather trousers, a skinny dark-haired guy with long hair about the same age as us. Sybil was older than us and dressed more like the over-thirty and, therefore, not-to-be-trusted adults we encountered in everyday life. Still, she was quite beautiful in person; photographs in the press had never done her justice. Close up, I could see quite clearly what had attracted a man like Richard Burton to her in the first place.

When the first free drinks arrived at our specially positioned spot in the club, we realised that we had better maintain our charade, if for no other reason than to keep the free booze flowing. It was agreed that when I moved around, went to the Men's Room and so forth, that Graham would follow me, standing outside the door, arms folded, with darting eyes and looking serious. This seemed to work; we noticed that we were being casually watched by staff. They were probably just trying to figure out which band they had seen me in.

Sybil came by our table from time to time:

SYBIL

"Is everything all right?"

NARRATOR

At one point she sat down next to me. I causally remarked,

"You know my grandparents all came from Wales and I am told that I look very Welsh".

SYBIL

"Dahling!" "There are *thousands* who look just like you in Wales!"

NARRATOR

My first encounter with British sarcasm.

Things were certainly going more than according to plan. In fact, all that unfolded that night in Arthur was the direct result of an off-the-cuff, momentary rejoinder to the possibility of not being admitted to the club at all. Still, we were a bit nervous, sure that we would be found out and have to pay a bar bill that, by now, we certainly didn't have the cash to cover.

After about an hour, Sybil came by again and sat next to me:

SYBIL

"I hate to do this, but I'm afraid that I am going to have to ask you to move.

I've just had a telephone call from Princess Margaret's people. She's at a ball at the Waldorf¹⁰ and will be coming to the club shortly. I'm terribly afraid that I am going have to ask you to give up these seats for her. Would you mind awfully if I found you another place?"

NARRATOR

I mumbled,

"Oh, okay"

or something like that as Sibyl ushered us to a section of banquette just to the side of our 'special' table. Here, though, we would have to sit with 'ordinary' patrons next to us.

I turned to the stranger now seated next to me and said,

"Princess Margaret is coming!"

¹⁰ "Friday, Nov. 19th, 7:45 p.m. Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon arrive at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel for the dinner and ball given by the English-Speaking Union of the U.S.A., the Pilgrims of the U.S. and the U.S. Churchill Fund. Dress: White Tie and Decorations". (*Courtesy of the Royal Archives and with the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for use of this material*).

"Yeah, right"

was his dubious response.

Sybil sent a fresh round of drinks to our new table to thank us for being so understanding. After about 15 minutes or so, Princess Margaret, Lord Snowdon and their entourage of about 20 people dressed to the nines in ball gowns, tiaras and decorations, descended upon Arthur. They were immediately ensconced at 'our' old table near the bandstand. Lord Snowden (all 5' 3" of him), didn't sit, but immediately started dancing with one of the ball gowned ladies, pushing her around the dance floor to rock music as though he were still at a formal ball. His head was about the same height as her overflowing bosom, creating quite a funny picture. During the time that we were at Arthur, the two royals not once acknowledged each other and this was only a few years into their marriage.

Princess Margaret sat in the middle of our former table—her ball gown draped with an encrusted sash, crown on her head, an elbow-length gloved hand clutching a long cigarette holder, covering her ears to the loud music and bouncing her head to and fro so that her crown became precariously perched at quite a jaunty angle. She was (obviously) very drunk. Princess Margaret looked like someone's little sister dressing up as a princess. But then she was someone's little sister, wasn't she?

After some time watching this rather strange pantomime played out in a trendy British style rock disco run by a former B-movie actress who'd married well until Elizabeth Taylor came along and put a spanner in the works, starring the drunk sister of the queen of England and her second-choice husband and, in bit roles, her assorted hangers-on, a collection of patrons from New York City, New Jersey and environs, and a rather too enthusiastic long-haired display queen, his girl friend, and several men that he wished to sleep with or did—we decided that it was time for the outrageous piece of theatre to end.

We were quite drunk ourselves by now. Someone in our group mumbled,

"I think we'd better make a run for it
before the bill comes."

I pleaded,

"I can't leave without saying thank you to Sibyl. The rest of you slowly make your way to the door; I am going over there to say thanks."

"But she's sitting right next to Princess Margaret!"

"I don't care"

I slurred,

"I want to say good-bye and thank her!"

I made my way to the table. Princess Margaret was still seated in the middle of the banquette, Sybil on her left; some of Princess Margaret's entourage sat to either side. Jordon Christopher, was relegated to the end of the table as, perhaps, his position deserved. As I approached, they were all facing me.

I leaned over the table in front of Sybil and emoted,

"Thanks so much for making tonight possible for me. I so seldom get to go out in public and not be bothered."

She smiled back.

I then concluded, throwing a glance Princess Margaret's way,

"... and I didn't mind at all-giving up my seat for your friend".

This was received with a stunned silence. Not missing a beat, I immediately turned on my heels and made a dash for the exit and my own waiting 'entourage'.

We spilled out of the club into a chilly, drizzling New York night. Laughing while skipping up the rain licked streets, Billie threw her shawl over her head. We went back to Simon's first-time-in-New York, struggling actor's small apartment. We stayed up for some time, repeating the evening's events over and over again to insure that they would not seem a dream when we awoke the next morning.



*They say ev'rything can be replaced,
Yet ev'ry distance is not near.
So I remember ev'ry face
Of ev'ry man who put me here.
I see my light come shining
From the west unto the east.
Any day now, any day now,
I shall be released.*

—Bob Dylan, "I Shall be Released"
©1967 Dwarf Music

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