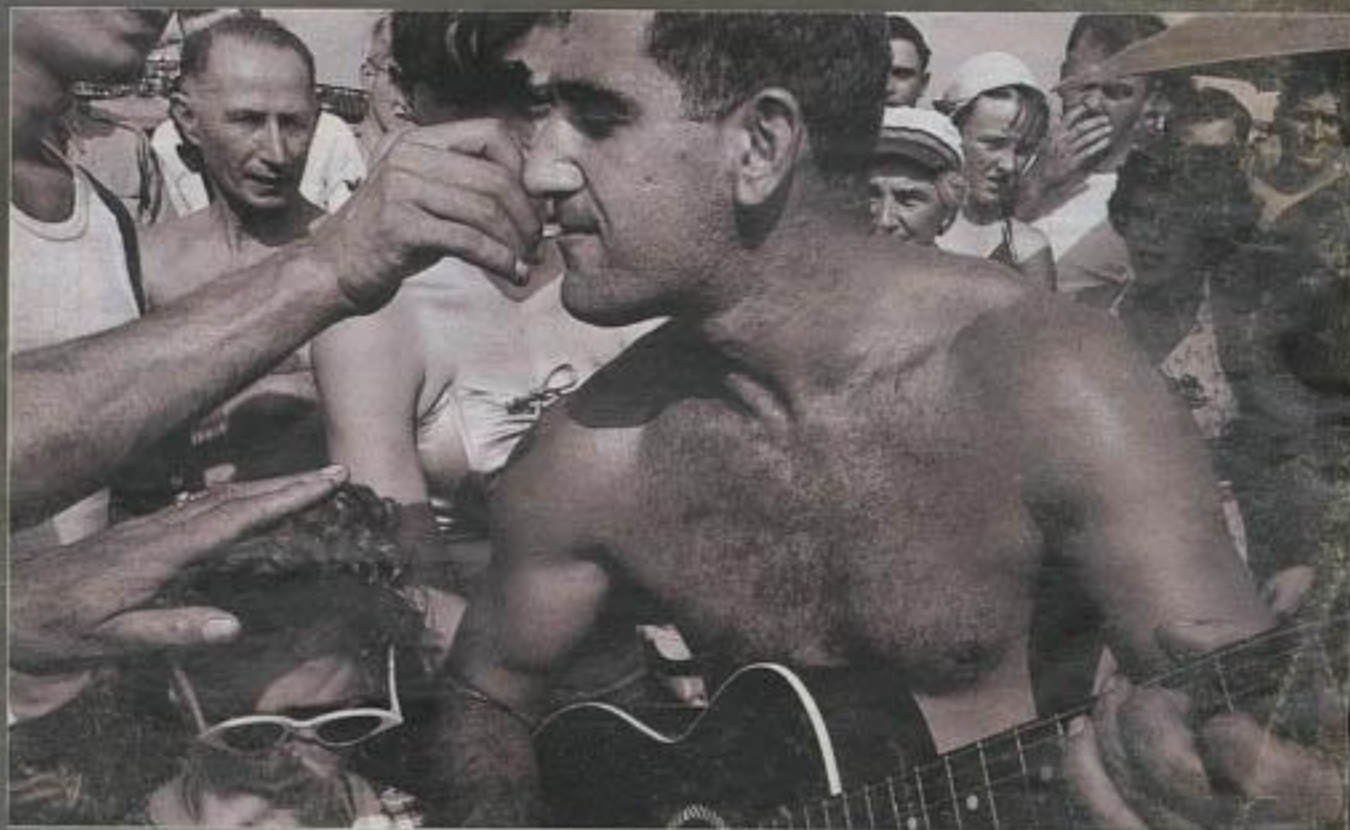


**THE  
MAN  
WHO  
LOVED**

# **CONEY ISLAND**



**Words and Pictures by Harold Feinstein**



*The Newsday Magazine*  
**CONTENTS**

## The Man Who Loved Coney Island

WORDS AND PICTURES BY HAROLD FEINSTEIN

For this photographer, growing up in Brooklyn in the 1940s fostered an undying love affair with the borough's world-famous beach and amusement park. And as a teenager in love, he began photographing the object of his affections and the people who share his passion for a wonderland of sun, sand, ocean and entertainment. "I have never felt like an intruder," he says, "because people are too busy having a wonderful time to be concerned about a photographer." His words and images, depicting scenes at Coney Island during the late '40s and early '50s, prove his point.



## His Mission: Street War on AIDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BINDER TEXT BY WILLIAM B. FALK

Jon Parker is a man with a mission: to help control the spread of AIDS by providing drug addicts with clean needles. To accomplish his goal, the former Yale medical student and ex-addict has taken to the meanest streets of Boston and New York, dispensing the "safe" needles even though such distribution is against the law. "We're in an epidemic," he says, "and in an epidemic, you use any weapon you have."

## Home: Their 'Urban Cottage'

Country living, city style.

## Food: He Does as He Pleases

A young, individualist chef on the rise.

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### The Cover

A guitarist entertains Coney Island beachgoers in a 1950 photograph by Harold Feinstein. He's shown at top left in photograph by Judith Thompson.

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## KIDS ON T

1949

These kids were my age, and the portable radio was 77. I know he made into a poster a few years ago said, "She's more beautiful now beach, and they just called her picture," something like that. So straight down. I was 18, and I'd read books much — anything was fun to pull me in.

**M**Y PHOTO shop "Photography Heart," but something to land, I Love You." Between me and Coney Island.

I do love the place. So my photographs; I'm not a dispassionately, I'm in it. I beach. I'm certainly one ruler coaster.

When I was whatever able to walk, I run away from Coney Island. We lived wasn't that far away. And me back home, carrying my prophetic occurrence in me.

My father used to give me back in Bensonhurst in the day, and I could go to Coney

Harold Feinstein is a Brooklyn native who has appeared in *Life* and through-the-years Coney Island for two and a half months.

Words And  
Pictures  
By Harold  
Feinstein

# THE MAN CONEY

# WHO LOVED ISLAND





were three cents then, and I took the trolley to Coney Island. Once I got there, of course, I didn't know where to run first — which ride. The motor smoothers or the Cyclone or the Whip.

The hot dogs were only five cents — I mean, I'm talking about Nathan's, a first-class hot dog. And the Cyclone was only about seven cents, but still I'd blow that 35 cents in a very short time. And 35 cents was an immense amount of money to me. I really felt my father was generous — and he was.

But the money was gone quickly, and soon I'd be pawning for the carfare to go back home. But as soon as I got some more nickels or dimes or pennies, I'd blow 'em immediately on other rides. Or maybe on one of those frozen custards that cost a nickel. I still salivate thinking about those frozen custards. There was no such thing as cholesterol in those days. And the cotton candy — that was one of my dishes. Anything that's sticky, that drips, that smelts — that's the dining situation at Coney Island. Forget wine and tablecloth and glassware.

**A**NYWAY, I'd blow my carfare money, so I'd end up hitching on the back of the trolley car back to Bensonhurst. Getting to Coney Island and leaving there — it's all part of the mystique. I think of everybody ready to leave — tired, exhausted, exhilarated — with prizes, with girlfriends, whatever. It's a wonderful place to arrive at, and it's a wonderful place to leave. If I could only communicate the excitement I felt getting off the subway or trolley car as it pulled into Coney Island! There I was, with the whole world ahead of me.

In the movie, Pinocchio looks across and sees "Crossed Island," and it's glittering and glowing. He wants to go to that place! Well, that's how I've felt every time I've been to Coney Island. And I still do.

Somehow or other, money has never been a major object of desire in my life — but when it came to Coney Island, it was. The idea of having unlimited funds so I could spend all the time I wanted in Coney Island on as many rides as I wanted, eating as many goodies as I wanted — that certainly seemed like heaven to me. I had a brother-in-law named Sid. He's dead now. But he used to take me and his son to Coney Island. And with Sid, money was an object.

When I was around 13, I started raising money



## TATTOOED MAN 1 9 4 8

I was 17, and I was crouching on the beach loading my camera. I'd just wound the film to No. 7, and I looked up and there this guy was. Afterward, I was surprised I took the picture. If I'd had time to think about it, I might have been intimidated: I might have wondered whether he'd like it. I mean, those tattoos aren't reassuring. The scar on his stomach isn't reassuring. If his philosophy of life is tattooed on his arm, it's a good distance from mine. I'm more of an optimist. But one of my strong points is that I don't think when I'm taking pictures. I don't use my brain — just my eyes and my heart.

out there by drawing portraits of people on the boardwalk for 15 cents. And that was one of my ways of supporting my Coney Island habit. I also worked in hot dog stands, and occasionally I served beer on the boardwalk. "Stop right up!"

"On the boardwalk" — Oh, what a ring that has. That place, the boardwalk — just mentioning it makes me want to go to Coney Island today — while I'm writing this.

I had an artistic bent right from the beginning. I was quite precocious, and my family supported my efforts. My mother was Austrian-born, and my father was Russian-born. So I'm really first-generation, and I can certainly relate to all the immigrants who have come to Coney Island. There's always been one ethnic group or another eager to root there — it was the Jews, it was the Italians, it was the Russians and the Irish, and now it's the blacks and Hispanics.

It was 1946 when I began photographing Coney Island. When I was about 13 or 14, there was an old-timer who'd pull me aside and say, "Hey, kid, you shoulda seen it the way it used to be."

I'm sure that line is repeated to today's kids. But when I go there now, I see these kids, and I know that they're having just as wonderful a time as I

## GIRL ON THE CYCLONE 1 9 5 0

I was really just one of these kids. When the roller coaster went hurtling down, I'd show off by lying around and standing up! I'd just stand up and hold my legs in front of me. They thought I was crazy. Now people look at this picture and say "Could that have been my mother?" "Could that have been my niece?" It's everybody's family. I used to go on the Cyclone as often as I could, but it cost more than the other rides — 10 cents. I was 19, so I could afford to go on it twice, maybe three times in a row. Yep, photography is great in the here and now, but financially it didn't serve me well. It still doesn't, really — except for happiness. My father used to say, "You can't eat a photograph, Harold." He was in the meat business.



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But the money was gone quickly, and soon I'd be panhandling for the carfare to go back home. But as soon as I got some more nickels or dimes or pennies, I'd blow 'em immediately on other rides. Or maybe on one of those frozen custards that cost a nickel. I still salivate thinking about those frozen custards. There was no such thing as cholesterol in those days. And the cotton candy — that was one of my dishes. Anything that's sticky, that drips, that smells — that's the dining situation at Coney Island. Forget wine and tablecloths and glassware.

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In the movie, Pinocchio looks across and sees "Treasure Island," and it's glittering and glowing. He wants to go to that place! Well, that's how I've felt every time I've been to Coney Island. And I still do.

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## TATTOOED MAN

1948

*I was 17, and I was crouching on the beach loading my camera. I'd just wound the film to No. 1, and I looked up and there this guy was. Afterward, I was surprised I took the picture. If I'd had time to think about it, I might have been intimidated; I might have wondered whether he'd like it. I mean, those tattoos aren't reassuring. The scar on his stomach isn't reassuring. If his philosophy of life is tattooed on his arm, it's a good distance from mine. I'm more of an optimist. But one of my strong points is that I don't think when I'm taking pictures, I don't use my brain — just my eyes and my heart.*

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## GIRL ON THE CYCLONE

1950

*I was really just one of these kids. When the roller coaster went hurtling down, I'd show off by turning around and standing up! I'd just stand up and hold my Leica in front of me. They thought I was crazy. Now people look at this picture and say "Could that have been my mother?" "Could that have been my niece?" It's everybody's family. I used to go on the Cyclone as often as I could, but it cost more than the other rides — 10 cents. I was 19, so I could afford to go on it twice, maybe three times in a row. Yep, photography is great in the here and now, but financially it didn't serve me well. It still doesn't, really — except for happiness. My father used to say, "You can't eat a photograph, Harold." He was in the meat business.*



did. Oh, there are areas that are decrepit. It's different. It's been abandoned by the middle class. I don't know — was the middle class ever really there? I didn't know what class was when I was a kid. And the truth is I still don't.

It's a shame that Coney Island isn't better cared for. It's a treasure of this city. The multitudes do not go to the Hamptons; they go to Coney Island. It's a people's place. For just carfare, and sometimes not even that, you can really spend a glorious day on the beach, on the boardwalk. It's just a wonderful place to be. And the city seems to be just letting it go.

When you think of the kinds of divisions that we hear about in the city, and then you think how this is a place that brings everybody together — where people of all different races and religions have a wonderful time — well, it's a shame to see it slip at all.

I discovered photography when I was 15 in 1946, and my first subject was, of course, Coney Island. And what's great about the place is that it all hangs out there. That's the Book of Etiquette on Coney Island — let it all hang out! People are kissing — and on the boardwalk, it's almost like Paris. They're eating out; they're screaming; they're being heroic; they're flirting; they're splashing in the water; they're falling asleep. And then they're eating watermelons and hot dogs; they're dripping wet; they're screaming some more.

Coney Island is a stage, and it's paradise for a photographer. Wherever I'd look, I'd see a picture. And I have never felt like an intruder, because people are too busy having a wonderful time to be concerned about a photographer. And when they did see me, I just became a part of their party. They seemed to enjoy that I was even interested in photographing them. "Oh, come on kid," they'd yell. "You don't even have film in the camera."

They say all photographers are voyeurs, and I



## SERGEANT AND GIRL FRIEND 1951

*This is some guy on a lullough or weekend leave who'd put in his time during World War II, and he's just coasting now. He may have a bear belly, but he's in perfect shape at this moment. He's got more stripes around the twinkle in his eye than he's got on his arm. I just love these two faces — the sweetness there. It's wonderful what love and attraction can do. There's nobody there but them — no rent, no cockroaches, no tomorrow.*

think it's true. I certainly am — I love to look. I think there's some voyeur in all of us, and Coney Island is one of those places where you can just look. Many people come there to do just that — sit on the boardwalk or the beach and look.

What do they see? They see people living. They see people so involved in what they're doing that they're unconcerned, they're not self-conscious. They're just being themselves and having a grand time. Or sometimes they're having a miserable time. Sometimes they're just being lonely or being in love.

**S**O there I was, clicking away, and it was just great. I didn't come with photo assistants or all dressed up. I wore what they were wearing — a bathing suit or shorts or whatever, and I was right there with them. I still am.

So I've been going back to Coney Island every year — usually at least once. I'm still very happy that I fell into this, because what I have is a personal history of this place. It's my story, too, and it's quite unusual. I've been driven by love — love of Coney Island, love of photography. Now I've ended up with something beyond what I was going after, which was just making wonderful pictures of a place I loved. I wasn't thinking historically, but I've ended up with a piece of history, personally experienced by me.

The tunnel of love, the Cyclone, the motor scooters, the whip, the Ferris wheel! And the parachute jump — oh, the parachute jump! I wish it were still there. It was so wonderful. Occasionally, I'd read in a Sunday paper about people getting stuck on the parachute jump, about people who were stuck up there for maybe 30 minutes or a couple of hours, and I'd think: How lucky! I'd wish I were stuck. The jump was so quick — you'd get to the top and then you'd float down. And I wished



## SAILORS ON SUBWAY AT CONEY ISLAND STATION 1 9 4 7

I was only 16, and the country was still under the spell of World War II, so these sailors were heroes to me. During the war, I forged my birth certificate and tried to enlist in the Army — but the Army didn't buy it. My big brother, 11 years older than I, was my hero; he was in the Army Air Corps. I shot this in the evening, when all the trains stopped at Coney Island, and these guys had just had a great day at the beach. I hope they're still that knee and happy now. In this station, at the end of the day, everybody's exhausted, happy, drunk — they've all been through the mill in a special way. I still feel special about it now.



## WOMEN POSING AT "CONEY ISLAND JAIL" SET 1 9 4 7

Look at those pretty women! One more big reason I loved Coney Island in those days, I could have written a book called "Guilt Without Sex." My camera was a way to legitimize standing there and just looking. In this picture, I'm protected not only by my own camera, but by the other guy's camera, too. I would have enjoyed taking his kind of pictures — people just having fun, feeling happy and silly, pictures taken on a dare. But I was too serious to do that — for me, it was always "Art." Listen, let's face it, if you brought together all the pictures this guy took, they'd have a more important place in history than mine. He was in business with his wife on Stillwell Avenue. I'm sorry I never had him take my picture.

I could just stay up there, get stuck like those lucky people.

That was the only problem — time went too fast at Coney Island. And it goes too fast because there's no tomorrow and no yesterday, just that one moment — whether you're on the motor scooter or on the parachute or lying on the beach with someone you love. Or just splashing in the water. You're in the moment, which is what life's all about — or so I hear.

So, in every picture I've taken, I'm in that moment. When I'm looking through that finder, I'm right there in that moment. Which is what these pictures are about.

Now that I'm looking for a publisher for a book of my photographs, I hear some of them say: Maybe it's just a regional subject. Well, Coney Island is regional, but it's universal, too. There's a "Coney Island" in Cincinnati, there are Coney Islands all over the world. It rings a bell for everybody. There's always that "Coney Island of the Mind" that Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote about. He's right, you know.

Coney Island touches people from all over the world. In Europe, people talk about Coney Island with a nostalgic ring. They've never been there; it's like Americans talking about Paris, whether they've been there or not. The quality is universal.



Coney Island is a kid lost on the beach being taken by some cops to a police station and fed ice cream cones or cotton candy. And finally, after he stops screaming, having a wonderful time, Coney Island is showing off, it's being exhausted, it's screaming, it's the greatest art there is.

**I**T'S people sitting on the stairs of the boardwalk, wiping away the sand and getting dressed again. It's well-dressed people on Sundays looking over the boardwalk rail at people frolicking on the beach. It's cotton candy, mustard dripping from a hot dog, loud sounds, looking at pretty girls.

I remember when I was 11 or 12, thinking about a girl named Sally Ackerman, who sat in

the first row at school. I used to dream of buying one of those Coney Island necklaces with the gold-and-imitation-pearl bracelets and having it engraved "S.F. LOVES S.A."

Just think, if they only had a little Ferris wheel in an art gallery! When you think of all the things that parade as sculpture, it's not so fantastic. Think of the merry-go-round horse or the Cyclone! That's sculpture! And think of the sound, the organ music that comes from the merry-go-round, from the carousel.

Coney Island is a place where people have an adventure that they probably can't have in their everyday lives. It's almost as though Coney Island were the real truth about people — when they're not in the straitjacket of suits or pretensions. When they're being the way they should be — the way they are. Coney Island is life.



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