



The Forty Deuce

THE TIMES SQUARE PHOTOGRAPHS OF BILL BUTTERWORTH
1983-1984

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THE FORTY-DEUCE:

The Times Square Photographs of Bill Butterworth, 1983-1984

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The Family Devotee

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intro

LIVE GIRLS AND B-BOYS

The Great White Way, the Crossroads of the World—Times Square has had nearly as many nicknames as it has had urban mythic identities, but when Bill Butterworth was photographing there in the early eighties the more fitting sobriquets were Sodom and Gomorrah on the Hudson and Slime Square. That Butterworth captured the sites and sights of Times Square with neither a prurient gaze nor worse, the kind of pitying, inevitably condescending eye of the witness-photographer that has been documenting how the other half lives since Jacob Riis, serves his subject well. Working primarily as a humble tradesman, photographing the denizens of the Deuce as a daily job remunerated by returning to sell prints to those who had posed for him, his pictures then are not directed towards the chance tourist or casual passerby, but specifically addressed to those who, like him, were there on the hustle day in and day out. Though the prevailing opinion always was that the seediness of the area had driven away the middle class, the truth was that they were there in droves, bored out of their suburban minds and looking for cheap thrills. But this was not what Bill Butterworth turned his lens to—few of those visitors would have willingly participated—he captured something much more akin to what we would call a community.

Perhaps our appreciation of Times Square as it was in this, Gotham's great lawless era, is in part reactive to a discontent with the puerile and soulless middle-American spectacle it now peddles. Although this perverse nostalgia is informed by the present, we can learn as much about the world Butterworth inhabited by understanding how it came to be such a place. The Forty-Deuce may have long been the epitome of sin by the

time Butterworth walked on the scene but it neither engendered such transgressions nor truly invented any of the vulgar forms of entertainment it is most famous for. Beyond the proverbial truth about prostitution being the world's oldest profession, even Times Square's most notorious innovation, the peep show, has its own precedents. Before 42nd Street brought us its live-girl shows in 1972, peeping had been an urban pursuit of Manhattan as far back as the days when whorehouses lining the Bowery entertainment district would feature girls in states of partial undress in their windows to lure customers. And though it was an entrepreneur by the name of Marty Hodas who in 1966, tinkering with old jazz movie jukeboxes, created the device and personal empire of peep shows that would dominate the ground level topography of Times Square, we might as well blame Edison for the Kinetoscope's turn to girlie pictures, or at least acknowledge that pornography is migratory by medium, from print to photography to movies, videos, and of course now, the Internet.

Whatever lineage we may draw for the lowlife paradise that Times Square became, however, we are better served by understanding just how and why it came to personify sleaze in the city more than any other place on earth. Before it was dubbed Times Square in 1904, when it was part of a general migration of the city northwards and called Longacre Square, it already had a reputation for its "silk hat brothels." By the teens and twenties, when it was more aptly known as "the Tenderloin" for its prime location (a presciently fitting meat metaphor if there ever was one), and was a favorite haunt of such show biz personages as Fred Astaire, Irving Berlin, and Charlie Chaplin, already the myth of "naughty, bawdy, tawdry, 42nd Street" would have its taboo allure in our popular imagination. Such adjectives are a long way from the lurid visual language conjured in Bill Butterworth's vernacular photographs, but we're getting there.

To begin with, as a matter of public outrage—which shaped the fate of Times Square as much as any other influence—we might note that a lot of our perceptions have been dictated by the role of race and class in America's hypocritical measure of criminality. What was the idle leisure of silk hats and celebrities becomes something far more sinister when it is the

vice of the lower classes, and while the record left by writers like Malcolm X or books such as *Manchild in the Promised Land* offer us a wonderful portrait of what life was like for young, African American men hanging out in the Deuce, the cultural polyglot that it turned into would be even more intimidating to the social norms of our national identity. By ignoring the predatory patrons that bankrolled the industries there and focusing on the players, Butterworth's pictures are notably neither very white nor affluent. But if we are to accept Times Square as the paradigmatic signifier of all our desires run amok, we need to understand that it was not simply carnal lust but unmitigated greed that made it what it was. Forty-Deuce did not just offer sex; it sold it. Sex of course matters, but it is money after all that makes the world go around, and in the microcosm of that exaggerate universe economics has always held the key.

Greed, quite sadly, is something more than mere economics, for it is too close a companion to power in society; and it is their combined force that made Times Square what it is far more than the sum of our carnal appetites. While it is commonly held that the Great Depression wrought the real downfall of this legendary crossroads (along with the typical presumption that all this was symptomatic of some deeper ongoing degeneration of morality values), the society that Butterworth encounters is a peculiar kind of social structure—what sociologists would look at as a human ecological relationship—where the society is inextricably bound to the landscape it inhabits. Sex and drugs did not simply descend on Times Square, but grew there, and in many ways it was something of a free zone we all collectively built. Wonderfully direct and remarkably even-handed as these portraits of exceptionally colorful characters are, they are just as evocative, attentive, and telling of the physical and psychological place they occupy. Inseparable as subject and setting are here, to understand the former we must also contend with the latter.

Times Square is a construction of America's binary impulses: a puritanical state of tremendously punitive intolerance and a society of nearly unprecedented freedoms. Repression and tolerance played an equal hand in making the Forty-Deuce what it was. The Great Depression no doubt

played a significant role in debasing the demographic of those who went to this epic pleasure center, but it was equally Mayor LaGuardia's battle against the grand vaudeville houses that dominated the area which spelled its doom. Forced out of business or to relocate to other areas of the city, something had to take the place of these amazing theaters. On the one hand we see with this, the rise of cinema's popularity and the emergence of the grind house movie theaters—still prevalent and popular in the days when Butterworth was working there. There is no doubt offered a rather tawdry trip down memory lane for those of us old enough to remember the kinds of exploitation, martial arts, splatter, violence, and porn movies we see advertised on the marquees in these photographs. It should be noted that the 1948 government anti-trust ruling that prevented the major studios from operating their own monopolistic chains of theaters engendered the possibility for these myriad genres of sensationalistic, low-budget, independent B-movies to flourish. Along with prohibition, which in 1918 forced the closing of all the legitimate nightclubs there, we see a major change in the architecture of the area that created the environment distilled in Butterworth's pictures. Economically hamstrung, all the legendary palaces that were once the pride of the area were forced to give up their palatial, elegant entryways for the incentives of retail, dividing them up into the small retail storefronts where flea circuses gave way to shady auction houses that would eventually become even less dignified peep shows and sex shops, with of course the ongoing hustle of cheap electronics and tourist souvenir stands that we also see in Butterworth's photos.

Through an endless succession of prohibitive rezoning laws, much ballyhooed anti-smut campaigns, and civic cleanups with names like Operation New Broom, Times Square festered on as an embarrassment of riches not simply through the ingenuity of its entrepreneurs or that when it comes to pleasure where there is a will there will always be way, but because it was born on all sides by the vested interests of capital. No matter how low it sank in the eyes of some or was loudly decried by the opportunistic voices of others, what really mattered remained the real estate, and the smart money knew that it would always be the Tenderloin, the choicest, most desirable location. Amidst the mirrors and flash that

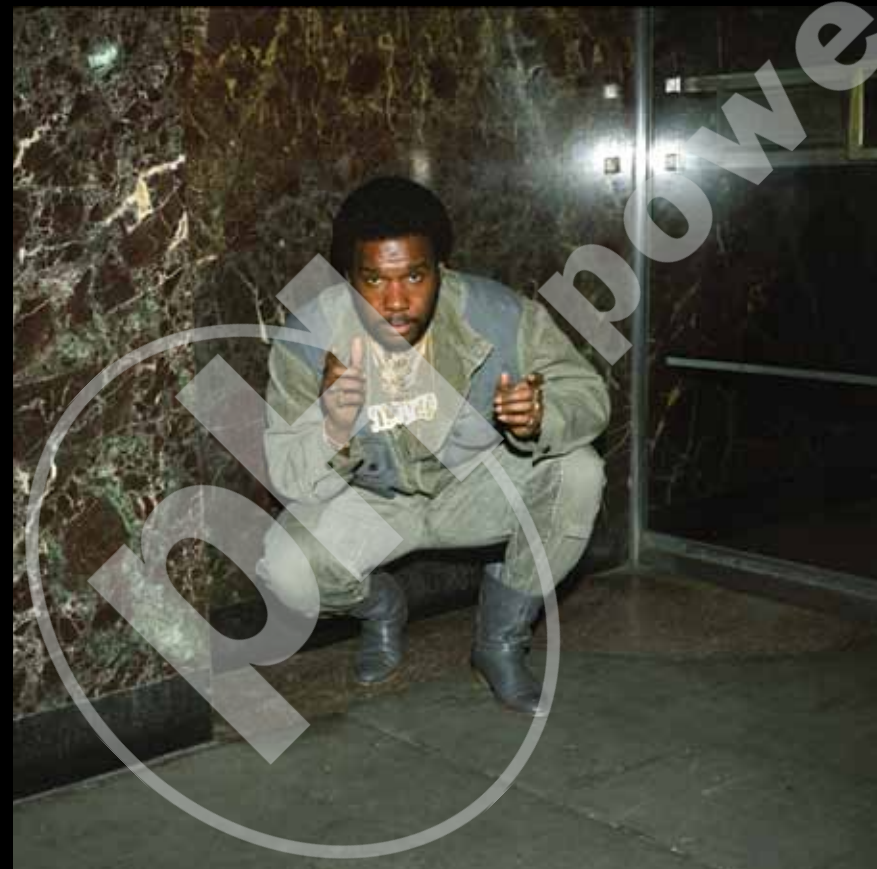
make Butterworth's pictures a bit of a mock-glamor spectacle is the more obvious truth that what was going on was never so much about high end renovation or rebuilding so much as changing the facades of a dying infrastructure where the land owners let out their spaces on a month by month basis, taking up to three times the proper rental value from largely unmonitored cash businesses that could afford the steep prices without caring quite so much about longevity. Everyone, including the great porn mogul Richard Basciano, who revolutionized his industry to new standards and scales creating a veritable supermarket of perversity with places like Show World (dubbed then the McDonald's of Sex) among his more than dozen enterprises, was simply waiting for the redevelopment that had been spoken about for generations. Though Basciano has continued to maintain that Rudy Giuliani remains his lifelong nemesis for doing what he did to Times Square, no doubt the 14 million dollars he got for a portion of his properties from developers helped ease the pain somewhat.

But this was not only about some grand culture war of vice versus virtue. For every outraged citizen, prudish organization (I remember most clearly the vitriol of Women Against Porn), bible-thumping moralist, and pontificating politician looking for an easy enemy in their hypocritical stance against crime, Times Square was the embodiment of a culture redefining itself on far more liberal terms. It is to the ruling by Justice Warren's Supreme Court which narrowed the once broad definition of obscenity to just that which was "utterly without redeeming social value" and to New York State's decriminalization of prostitution (in 1966 and 1967 respectively), that we get to the place where Bill Butterworth took his camera. However one may feel about such a world, it was the ultimate democratic expression of our belief in individual freedom, and for those of us who would continue to argue for the full rights of free speech we must also acknowledge that often means defending this privilege precisely for those who are expressing things we might not like or agree with. Now, as America continues to wage wars around the world in the name of this precarious notion of democracy and all too often finds out that the ousting of one politically inconvenient dictator leads to an even more chaotic and inhumane situation, we can be reminded once again that liberty is indeed a messy proposition.

Bill Butterworth, who did in fact get to know many of the people he was photographing has spoken of how a lot of the youthful population there were children of an era before Roe versus Wade, when unwanted and unaffordable kids became wards of the state and after a life in institutions were prepared for little else than what the Deuce offered them. Unruly, even frightening as it often could be there, we should—without misty-eyed nostalgia—at least celebrate that it ever was what it was: something utterly American but in its globalism totally New York, an expression of all our anarchic passions unmitigated by the painful and malignant restraints of personal or public repression. And in these pictures something truly beautiful happens. The scale and the scariness diminish to a human dimension. We get to see lives that are largely forgotten, many cut way too short, and a community of people who often didn't even know one another's real names or backgrounds interacting with their world, as they knew it. Imprinting, as photography always does, far more information than was originally intended, we must appreciate Butterworth's keen eye as he captures the shift from a world of disco to the new urban vernacular of Hip Hop; preserves the styles of the day like Cazal glasses and Kangol hats; gives grace, integrity, and humanity to the pimps, prostitutes, and players who led such anonymous yet public lives; and as he captures the b-boys, bros, and boom boxes in that casual, lazy rapture we call life. In this predominantly male zone (statistics of that time would tell us that there were maybe eight men to every woman in the Deuce at any given time), a place that scared away most of Middle America became a special haven and sanctuary for so many who, because of race, socioeconomics, illegal immigration, or sexuality, had been marginalized. Collectively they constitute an "other" history that is rarely told, but through these pictures I for one am happy to meet them all.

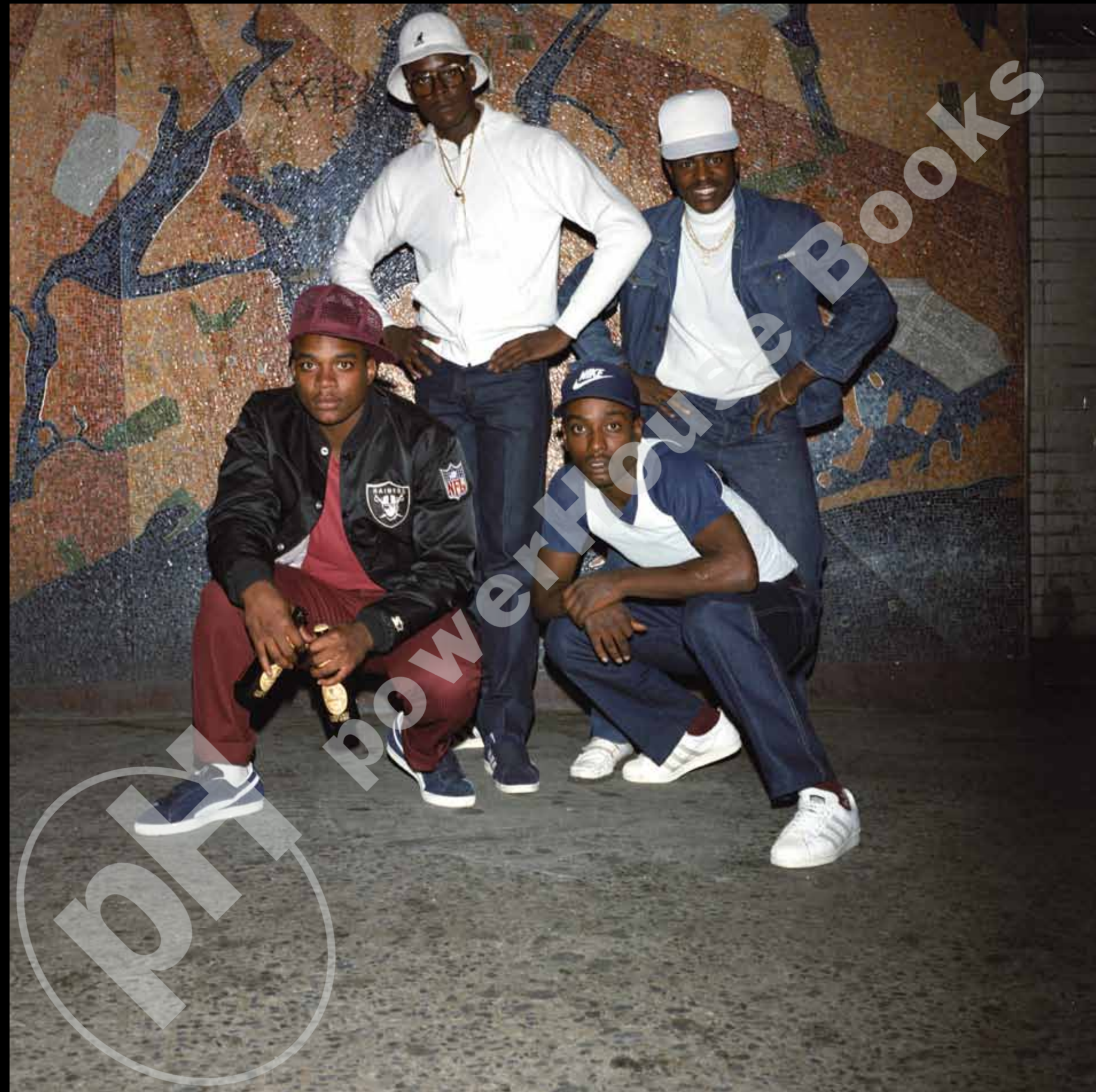
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NEW YORK CITY, 2011





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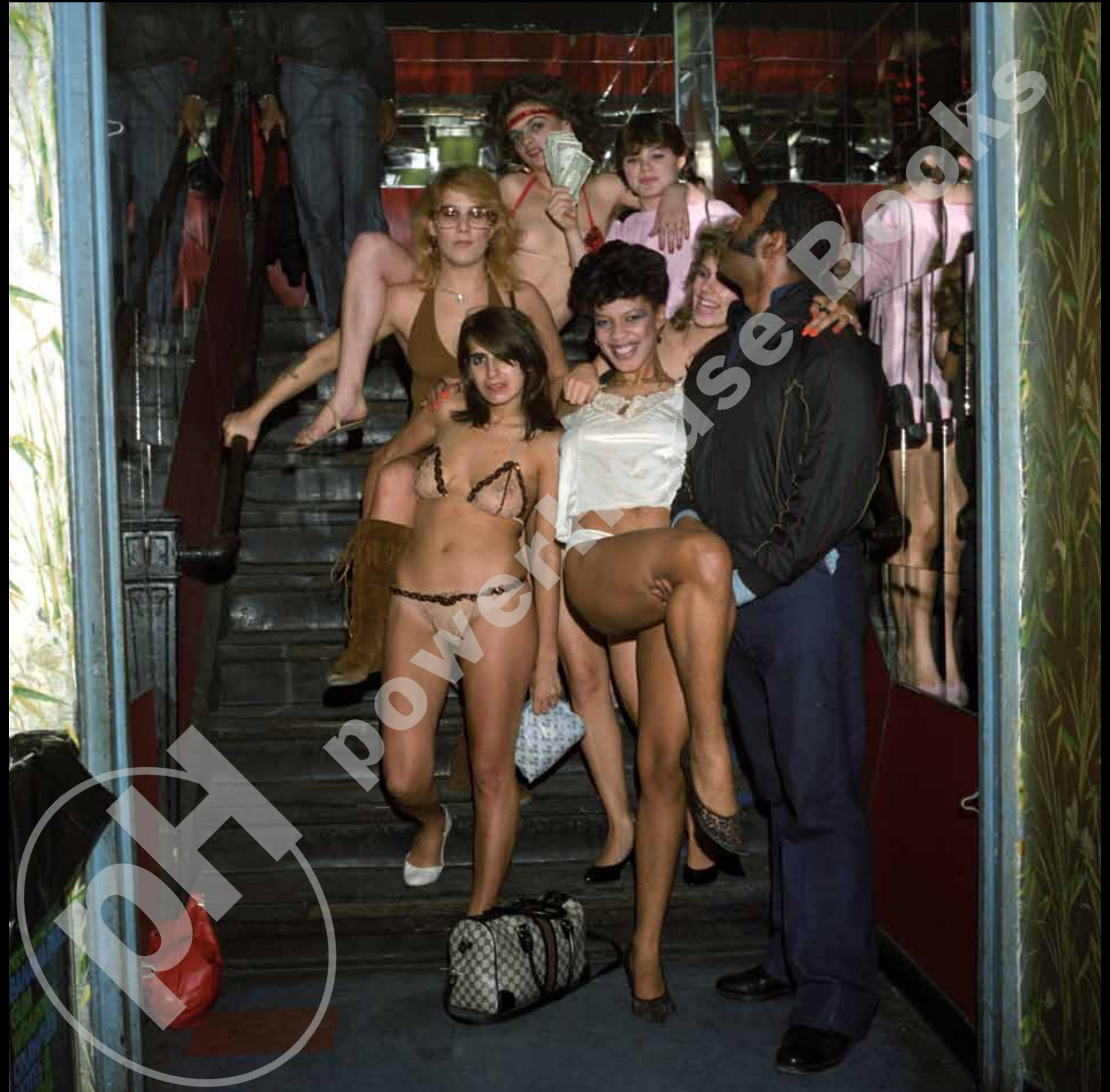
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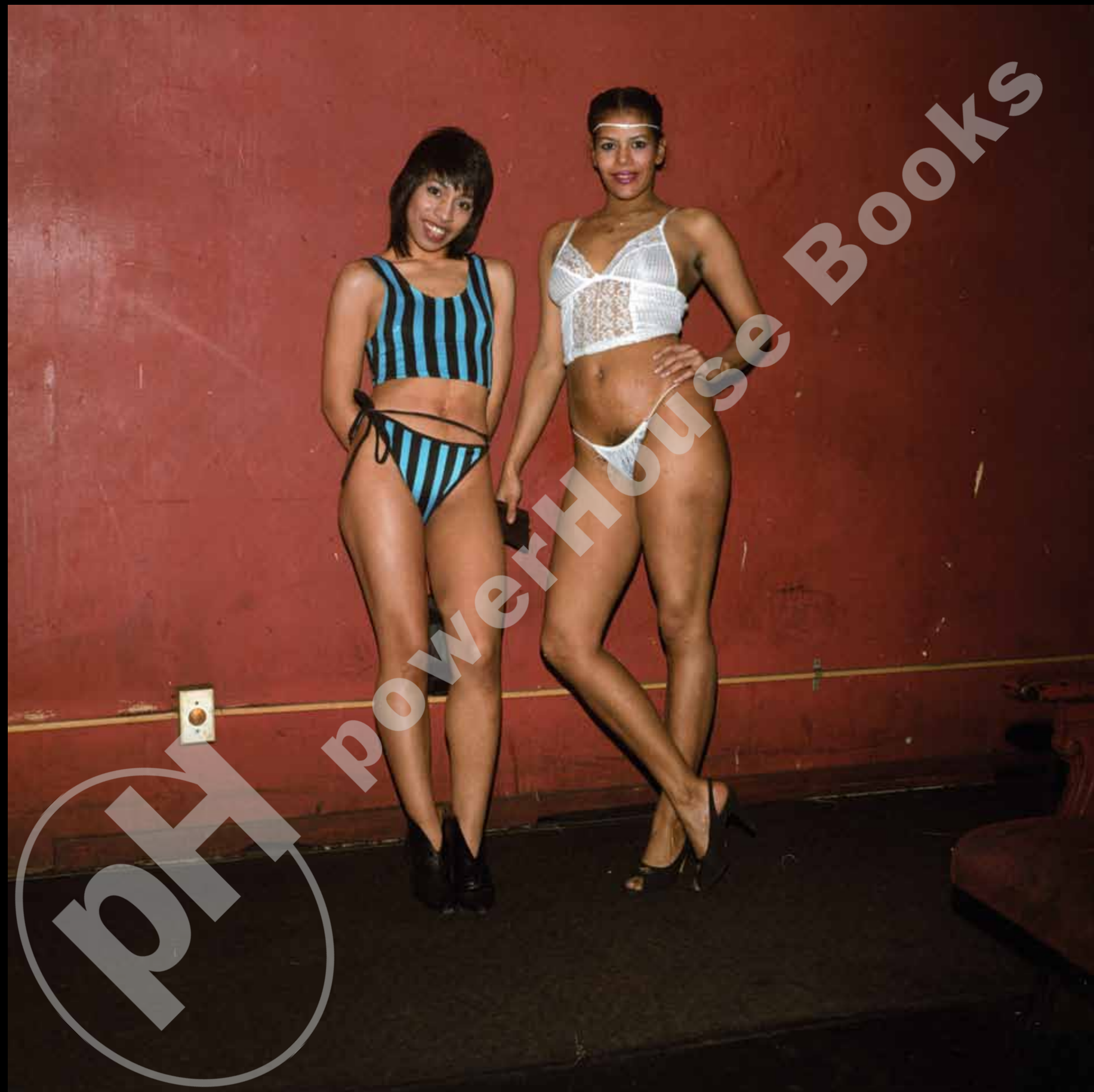
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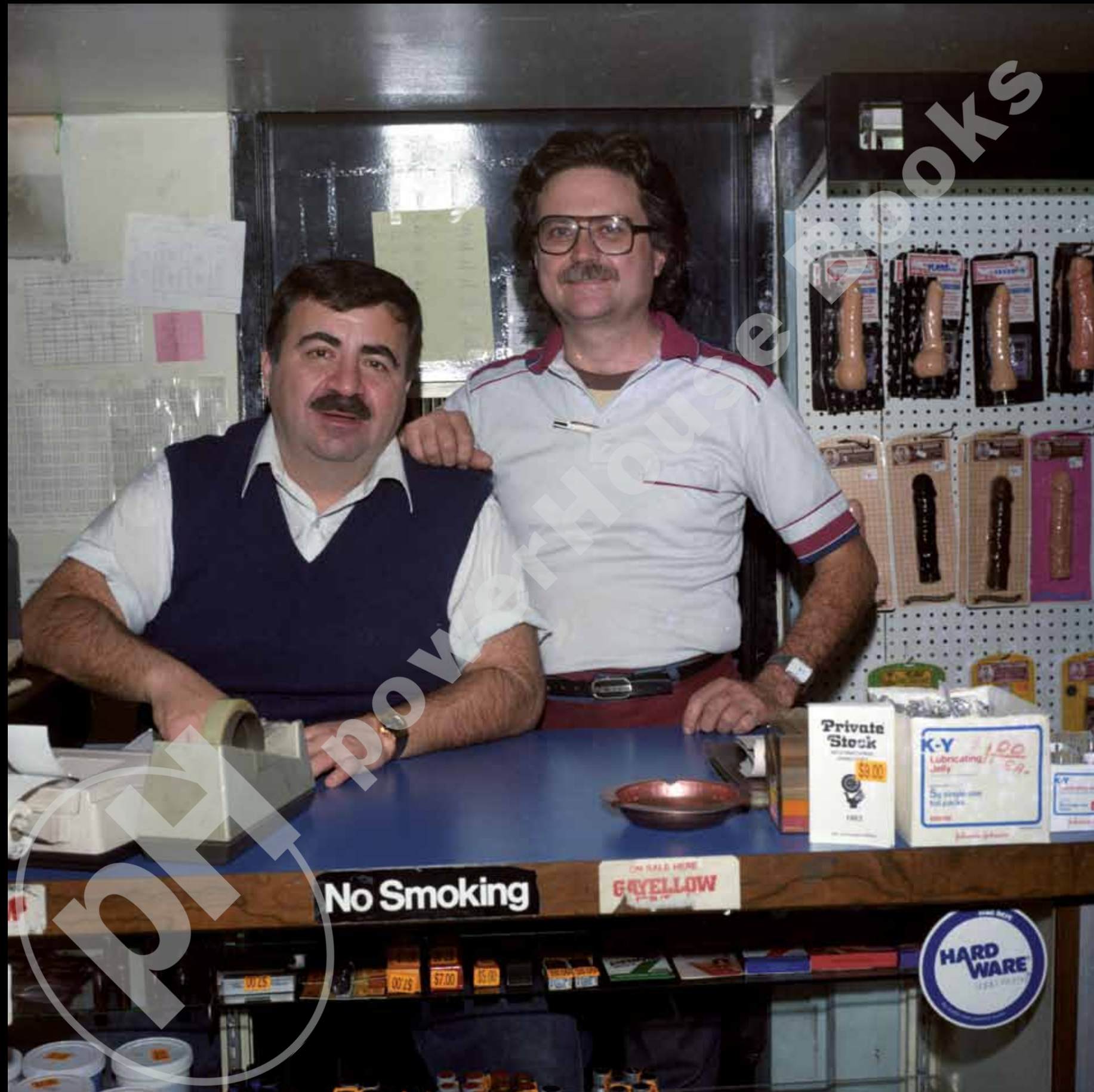
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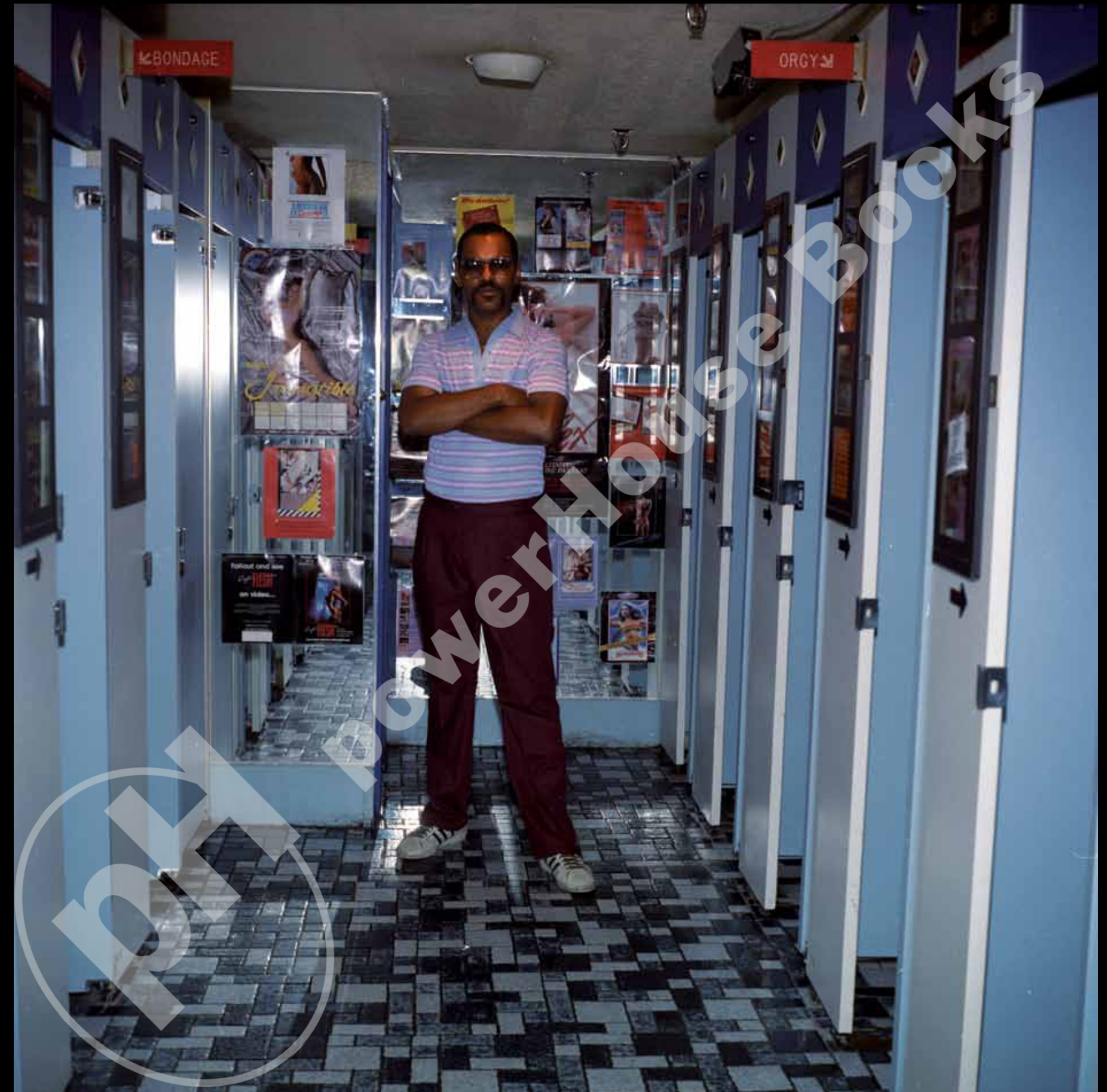
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