

# Bettie Page: Queen of the Fifties pin-ups who became a cult figure

By Pierre Perrone

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Though her modelling career only spanned seven years in the Fifties, the American pin-up Bettie Page fuelled many a fantasy and helped usher in the sexual revolution of the Sixties.

Indeed, she made such an impression on successive generations of men and women – who still copy her jet black glossy hair and trademark bangs – that she remained an iconic figure for more than half a century. Page showed no inhibitions when posing naked but was just as famous for her bikini and see-through negligees and lingerie photos which went around the world, while her racier fetish and "Damsel in Distress" shots and featurettes exploited her striking figure and put an S&M spin on her wholesome charm.

For much of the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties, Page vanished from view and was unaware of her cult status. She became a born-again Christian, battled mental illness and spent time in a state institution. But in the Nineties, with the advent of the internet and the return of burlesque, her profile rose again and even eclipsed her Fifties popularity.

Two biographies – one official, one unofficial – were followed by TV documentaries and two biopics. In 2004, she was portrayed by Paige Richards in the low-budget straight-to-DVD film *Bettie Page: Dark Angel* while, the following year, Gretchen Mol starred in *The Notorious Bettie Page*, a feature-length movie directed by Mary Harron. Next year will see the release of an authorised documentary biography entitled *Bettie Page Reveals All*.

Born Bettie Mae Page in 1923 in Nashville, Tennessee, she was the second of six children, unloved by her mother and molested by her car mechanic father. Her parents divorced when she was 10 and she helped care for her younger siblings while her mother worked two jobs to make ends meet, hairdressing and taking in laundry. For a while, she even put Bettie and her two sisters in an orphanage. "All I ever wanted was a mother who paid attention to me," she said. "She didn't want girls. She thought we were trouble. When I started menstruating at age 13, I thought I was dying because she never taught me anything about that."

Yet, Page was a God-fearing student who loved the movies and kept trying different hairstyles. She took part in amateur dramatics, co-edited her high school newspaper and yearbook and was even voted "Most Likely To Succeed" by her fellow students. She won a scholarship to Peabody College in Nashville, earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and briefly worked as a teacher but found she had trouble controlling her students, especially boys.

In 1943, she married Billy Neal, her boyfriend of two years, and moved to San Francisco while he was drafted into the Navy. She worked as a secretary, modelled fur coats at a local store and had a screen test for 20th Century-Fox. But when Neal turned violent she left, divorcing him in 1947, though they remained on good terms. She relocated to New York where, in 1950, she was spotted by Jerry Tibbs, a police officer and amateur photographer who took pin-up pictures of her.

"He was the one who got me wearing bangs," she said. "For years, I had my hair parted down the middle in a ponytail tucked down around the sides. But he said to me, 'Bettie, you've got a very high forehead. I think you'd look good if you cut some bangs to cover it'. Well I went and cut the bangs, and I've been wearing them ever since. They say it's my trademark."

Within a few months, Page went from outdoor sessions to posing for what were euphemistically called "camera clubs", often making her own bikinis and lingerie. Her unique appeal lay in her lack of inhibition and her belief in the body beautiful. "I was never one who was squeamish about nudity," she said. "I don't believe in being promiscuous about it, but several times I thought of going to a nudist colony. I love to swim in the nude and roam around the house in the nude. You're just as free as a bird!"

With that kind of enthusiasm, Page graduated to more professional shoots involving photographers who did justice to her dazzling blue eyes and exceptional 36-23-36 figure. She also began appearing on the covers of men's magazines with titles evocative of a more innocent era: Wink, Eyeful, Titter and Beauty Parade.

By 1953, she was studying acting under Herbert Berghoff and had small parts off Broadway and on television, most notably appearing on The Jackie Gleason Show. To finance her acting classes and career, she continued taking on glamour work and, while on holiday in Miami in 1954, she posed for the model-turned-photographer Bunny Yeager. The two got on famously, Page responding to Yeager's instructions – "Alluring! Mysterious! Tempting! Vivacious!" – with gusto and girl-next-door-gone-bad poses.

After several jungle-themed shots, including some with a couple of real cheetahs, they did more in a studio, including a picture of Page kneeling naked in front of a Christmas tree wearing only a Santa Claus hat, holding a bauble and winking at the camera. Yeager thought it might interest a calendar company but, having noticed Playboy magazine on the news stands, she sent Page's photo to Hugh Hefner, who had launched the publication the previous year. Duly impressed, Hefner used it as the centrefold in the Christmas edition (dated January 1955) and the issue sold impressively well. Page became known as "The Girl with the Perfect Figure", "The Queen of Curves", "Dark Marilyn" and "The Temptress from Tennessee", while Hefner conferred on her the title of "Miss Pin-Up Girl of the World".

"The origins of what captures the imagination and creates a particular celebrity are sometimes difficult to define," Hefner said on Thursday night. "Bettie Page was one of Playboy magazine's early Playmates, and she became an iconic figure, influencing

notions of beauty and fashion. Then she disappeared. Many years later, Bettie resurfaced and we became friends."

In New York, Page also posed for the photographer Irving Klaw and his sister Paula, who had developed a lucrative sideline in "Damsel in Distress" photos and short 8mm films alongside the more standard cheesecake situations. "Usually, they would shoot four or five models every Saturday," she said. "He wouldn't pay for the regular pictures unless we did some bondage. So I did bondage shots to get paid for the other photos – \$80. But I never whipped anybody in my life – it was all pretend. Paula was one of the nicest women I've ever known in my life, bar none. Only Paula was allowed to tie us up. She was very gentle, caring and considerate. She never tied any ropes too tight. She was very sweet."

This racier material – Page would be shown tied up, suspended or spanking other girls – was sold under the counter and via mail order. Inevitably, this attracted the attention of the authorities and a United States Senate Committee Investigation was set up by the Tennessean senator Estes Kefauver in 1953. Though Page didn't appear or testify, Klaw did, and subsequently agreed to destroy much of the material during another obscenity trial in 1963. Even if his sister saved thousands of negatives, this fuelled the Page myth, since she had given up modelling in 1957.

"I had lost my ambition and desire to succeed and better myself. I was adrift," she later reflected. "But I could make more money in a few hours modelling than I could earn in a week as a secretary."

When she stopped, she simply disappeared. If anyone recognised her and asked if she was Bettie Page, her standard reply was: "Who's that?" She moved to Florida and ran away from another doomed marriage on New Year's Eve 1959. Seeing a white neon sign over a church, she walked in. "The Lord took me by the hand and we stepped inside," she said. "I was crying in the back row about my sins. I turned my life over to the Lord."

Page threw herself into the Billy Graham Crusade and even considered becoming a missionary. Yet she suffered from violent mood swings and, after threatening to stab two different landladies, was sentenced to eight years in a California mental institution. She conquered her demons, found strength in her renewed faith and came out of Patton State Hospital in 1992.

All the while, she had been unaware of her legendary status. Illustrators like Dave Stevens and Olivia De Berardinis used her as the template for the images they created but Page received no income or royalties for the use of her likeness. Eventually, she acquired an agent, Mark Roesler, who could lay hands on some of the profits from the merchandising – action figures, lighters, lunch boxes, magnets and playing cards, as well as the ubiquitous posters and T-shirts – and set up an official website which has received 600 million hits over the last five years.

When she gave interviews in recent years, Page usually refused to be photographed, saying "I want to be remembered as I was when I was young and in my golden times. I want to be remembered as the woman who changed people's perspectives concerning nudity in its natural form." In fact, she retained her good looks and dazzling smile.

She reconciled herself somewhat with her past but could never quite figure out why her appeal proved so enduring. "I don't know what they mean by an icon," she told *Playboy* in 1998. "I never thought of myself as being that. It seems strange to me. I had a very natural smile. I tried to imagine my camera was my boyfriend and I was entertaining him, with poses to please him. Young women said I helped them come out of their shells. And 13 rock groups have written songs about me. I never kept up with the fashions. I believed in wearing what looked good on me."

*Bettie Mae Page, model: born Nashville, Tennessee 22 April 1923; married 1943 Billy Neal (marriage dissolved 1947), 1958 Armond Walterson (marriage dissolved 1963), 1963 Billy Neal (marriage dissolved), 1967 Harry Lear (marriage dissolved 1972); died Los Angeles 11 December 2008.*