

# ALEX STREETER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN LOWRY







A lanky, rakish figure regularly seen riding around Tucson on various two-wheeled motorised machines accompanied by Jake, his faithful 15-year-old Chihuahua, Alex Streeter is a renowned jewellery designer, world traveller, and outstanding raconteur whose stories manage to beggar belief while being firmly rooted in fact. From seeing Roy Rogers at Madison Square Garden as a child, brushes with future Manson Family members in San Francisco at the dawn of the 'Summer of Love', living in a loft above Walter de Maria's New York *Earth Room* on Wooster Street bought in a 'midnight deal' from Fluxus founder George Maciunas, being photographed on his boat by Bill Cunningham, the piquant and sometimes astounding particulars of Streeter's life are suffused with picaresque effervescence. After operating his pioneering concept shop at 152 Prince Street in Soho from 1971 to 2001, he decamped to a 1904 adobe house in the Old Barrio, where he continues to craft ingenious talismans while living with an eccentric accumulation of memorabilia and art, making his home-slash-museum a destination for locals and international devotees alike. Those who cross the transom are greeted by a live-in docent dressed in evocative 19th-century cowboy dandy garb who offers a cup of coffee while enthusiastically furnishing juicy anecdotes and commentary. Permeated with satanic overtones, occasionally macabre, the numerous relics are both complement and contrast to Alex's decidedly upbeat, personable, and highly entertaining personality. This singular environment, a bygone New York-meets-Sonoran Desert Wunderkammer chock-full of curiosities and bibelots, slightly dusty, eclectic, deftly curated with intent, generates an immersive ambience reflecting a remarkable path in life and art and the intersection and inseparability of the two.

Quite possibly a distant descendent of the Welsh privateer Sir Henry Morgan, Streeter can also lay claim to constructing a 'supplemented outhouse' featured in the *Sag Harbor Express*, having his rings and necklaces appear on Robert De Niro and Charlotte Rampling in *Angel Heart*, and mingling with such disparate figures as Axl Rose, Jimmy Page, and Malcolm Morley. At his home an air of mystery prevails, with numerous framed magazine pages (Madonna in *Vogue* wearing a Streeter-designed silver eye patch, to name one example), carved corkscrew walking sticks, stage pistols, plastic dog skeletons, emblazoned saddles, and rolled woollen blankets, just to scratch the surface. A rustic, fragrant, almost cinematic experience, the stage for strippers from Curves Cabaret showing up to dance around the fire at block parties held in Jake the Chihuahua's honour, and where the roguish, sculpturally maniacal spirit of Benvenuto Cellini holds sway over the proceedings. Here the allegorical and the mystical meet tales of the most outlandish adventures, and inspiration and what that animates are incarnated in the exceptionally alive person of Alex Streeter himself.









Why don't we start with your childhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan?

A brownstone at 12 West 83rd Street, a quarter of a block from the park, with a big staircase, banisters, a great old library, bay windows, and all three brothers living on the top floor. I worked in the basement under the coal chute. That was my domain and I'd go there right after school, chop wood, and make bows and arrows and fashion things constantly, feverishly, from the age of five. Also plastic models, leather holsters for six guns, and knife sheaves.

What did your parents do?

My father was a lawyer with an office in the Chrysler Building.

Your father was American and I surmise from a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant background?

Super Waspy, almost Quaker, old New England. My mother was Welsh and had given up being a Shakespearean actress in England. All her friends were actors or directors. Actually, she tutored my older brother Rhodem to be a child star appearing on live television, *Playhouse 90* with John Gielgud and Rex Harrison. And we all went to fencing school.

En garde. So you're making these things, and do you ever look back and ponder the impulse and wonder where that came from?

Hiding from the family. I'd go down there and it was a great solace to be on my own in this cave. And when I finished something fantastic I'd race up to show my parents before the paint dried. So, as always, looking for adulation or acceptance and wanting to feel important.

Childhood escape but also seeking validation. Yeah, and being a kind of outlaw or outlier in the family.

How did your passion for model boats begin?

Well, my dad was a sailor, but aside from that, seeing the pond in Central Park, the boats, and clubhouse. An eye-popping experience for a young lad. There was a clan of membership and hierarchies and subgenres and who was building what, and why, and racing. I went every spring with a strongly bonded group of boys and we educated ourselves about ship terms and the history of boats. Also we bicycled around the loop

and took a bike trip to Vermont, camping out on the way. And playing football, getting chased by people, misadventures, and flirting with girls from the French embassy that came down to the pond. We were totally dedicated and had a mentor named Al Hartig who took us under his wing. He was our guru and later became known as the 'Nantucket Kiteman' because of the National Eagle and other delightful kites he made.

When did you go to San Francisco, and what was the impetus?

I went there in 1966. Having some concerns about the Vietnam War, I dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania and headed west with a friend. Stopped off in Colorado, had a ski accident, and laid up in Denver before hitchhiking over the Rockies in the middle of the winter. A very desperate thing to do. And arriving in this golden land for the first time and tried to ship out and found it very difficult on the waterfront to get a job as a seaman.

Did you find it hard to get work in the merchant marine?

Because you have to have a sea book and you have to be part of the union, and how do you do that? I lived in the Tenderloin and soaked up the ambience of the cable cars, Market Street, Union Square, and being away and on my own for the first time was a huge learning experience. Street life, so to speak, with soapbox philosophers, hobos, transients, and transvestites. Finding out about the diversity of life outside of the college education, while trying to unlearn some things too. Beatniks, City Lights Bookstore, Chinatown, the old spirits of the cowboy hotels, the myth of the west. Immediately I entered the California dream and was transported. Then I got to working and realised how hard work was, so I said, 'It's better to be back in school'. Somehow I got accepted into the Rhode Island School of Design and, '67 being what it was, it was an extreme experience, very advanced, with some geniuses and so on. I really prospered but ended up of course being thrown out because I was a little too inspired. With a group of 24 other students, a mass purge. You got a letter from the dean, 'Be out of town in 24 hours'. Unbelievable. No reason given, and I still have the letter. Then I jumped on a motorcycle with everything I owned, again in wintertime, February.



Immaculate timing.

My brother was at Harvard, and he was generous enough to pass on a little bit of money. I got a BMW 250, which is a huge motorcycle with a little, little engine. Old-fashioned. You have to kick-start it every morning, warm it up, and then you're going 50 miles an hour with everybody whizzing by you, kind of dangerous. Wheezing up the mountains, slipstreaming behind trucks to get up on inclines. Very underpowered.

So you're going west again in the winter, in 1967, stealth camping along the way.

And when I got back people said, 'There's

absolutely horrified the church by turning it into orgies, with belly dancing and dripping wax. But they had a very good time.

I can only imagine.

This was the church where Bobby Beausoleil met Kenneth Anger. Bobby organised an orchestrated orgy, but I missed it by one day. It's a sad evolution what happened with him and the Manson Family, but he's one of my heroes, a dynamic, magical, and slightly threatening, special kind of guy. Anyway, I was thrust into the epicentre and having the whole scene emerge, walking by the Grateful Dead playing and panhandling. But I was a Janis guy, and



something going on in Haight-Ashbury right now. You should go on up there'. Something just inscrutable in the air. The Diggers were an incredible group I fell in with by way of hitchhiking, and I lived in an all-female commune of Digger girls. Met a couple, Diane and Peter, who had one of the first psychedelic stores there, Wild Colors. Worked at the store selling Bill Graham posters, going out every Friday night with our free passes to the Fillmore, the Avalon Ballroom, the Carousel, and really special events at the Straight Theater. The Diggers had a three-day celebration taking over the Glide Memorial Church, a very avant-garde house of worship, though they

the blues. It was a great time because there'd be a hippie group with top billing with a blues legend like John Lee Hooker sandwiched in-between them and some jazz person. Three different kinds of music stacked together, really diverse every week.

You were a painter at that point, and also doing drawings?

As an artist my big dream was to have a poster coming out with Bill Graham, something like that. I did do one that was kind of space age-y, a little too bizarre, probably, and took it in to Chet Helms, the legendary promoter who introduced Janis Joplin to the world, in a sense.







He said, 'Kid, I'm sorry, this is too far out for me. Try again'. As I turned around, my all-time hero Rick Griffin, with long, long hair and a hat with a feather, came through the door, carrying a big portfolio.

He's such a major figure in the aesthetics of 1960s and '70s surf culture, and of course the poster art, and as a regular contributor to Zap Comix. Who later died from injuries sustained in a motorcycle crash.

The flying eyeball. My all-time god, and my great regret is not throwing myself at his feet and declaring, 'I'm going to stay with you, and be your helper. You cannot say no'. But I didn't.

I started realising that I could make more money with my little crafts. So I went out into the redwoods and started collecting bark. Oiled, sanded, planed, and varnished the pieces, painted a little flower, mushroom, or heart, and tied a colourful silk cord to a little screw at the top. A hippie necklace, and I couldn't make them fast enough, selling them for a dollar a piece on the sidewalk, set out on a blanket.

So, the first thing you're selling are these sculptural objects that could also be worn that were in a broad sense jewellery. As a kid you made bows and arrows, you've been painting, and now you combine the two on a piece of



Often one has brief encounters, especially in your 20s, with notorious or even famous types, and sometimes you think back and wonder, 'Why didn't I approach them?' But there's being shy; it's hard to do. Also it has to do with a certain detached coolness, or a notion of dignified behaviour.

Yeah, less to be like a stupid fan.

And to respect their privacy and not impose upon them. So your ambitions are in the realm of two-dimensional visual art at that point. How did that change?

I did work for one of the sub, sub, subculture papers of the time, called *The Maverick*, but

wood, and voila! Then to jump ahead a couple years, you return to New York.

Well, I moved back and made paintings, did art, and found this little place to live, a cigar store in Little Italy, Soho before Soho existed. I moved in with the king of the village gypsies, Damien. Him, his wife, his two little children, and his boyfriend were all sleeping together in this one giant, maybe 8 by 10 foot bed in the back.

Then you opened the store on Prince Street, which was called, eponymously, and appropriately, 'Alex Streeter'.

On Prince I had these big great windows to







the world, a shopfront, and I turned the back room into a workshop. The store was my original concept, a little bit like Claes Oldenburg's Ray Gun Manufacturing Company in the East Village at the start of the '60s. An art store but leaning towards magic and crafts. Kind of gave everything a try, leather, silk-screening, bleaching, tie-dying, silver, and metalwork.

So, at first it wasn't exclusively jewellery. How did that change and develop? Was jewellery more economically viable?

Jewellery just took over, because it was the most magical and historical and could last for a lifetime. And it's definitely more glamorous

with time I had really beautiful people who would collect my things and go, 'This is really crazy, but great'. Also I let them know that I could do anything they wanted, and they'd say, 'I have a daughter who's a ballerina. Could you make a little ballet slipper in gold for me?' Well, of course I could. I would do pre-drawings for them, more or less like a fortune-teller. Invaluable because I got to know what they really wanted, in a specific way, very fast. Instructive. I would carve it in wax, and I learnt how to do what you'd call 'repoussé', pushing from behind in sheets of wax, using dental tools, and casting. I had quiet celebrities that came through that



than a T-shirt. I had so much to learn, being taught by great friends who were gold and silversmiths, and from going up to the diamond centres on 47th Street. Finding out everything I could about settings, stones, prices, buying materials on spec, and got a lot out of tool catalogues, as well as advice from store hands who were helpful and patient.

When was the point where it started attracting a certain clientele that you found, or they found you?

Very slowly at first because the strange items I made were not very acceptable, not quite fitting into the normal range of things. But

I didn't recognise, and Andy Warhol was on my corner 40 feet away every Saturday morning, giving away copies of *Interview*. A circus, and it just happened to be at the crossroads of destiny right there.

Let's talk about Robert Lee Morris, who at the time was one of the only others doing similar work, someone who always and justifiably gets mentioned in relation to this topic.

He was my almost exact contemporary, a great friend in a way; we were art school people who turned to jewellery making. He was very conceptual and had a whole group of people who followed him. The concept







that artists made jewellery got traction, strangely enough, because of a store in the Plaza Hotel founded by Joan Sonnabend, called Sculpture to Wear, where she sold Salvador Dalí jewellery. Robert was nice enough to bring in a gallerist from Florida and say, 'Mr Goldstein, you have to meet Alex Streeter'. Goldstein brought my stuff down and I showed with him for years at his 24 Collection in Miami.

OK. So you kept the store until 2001, a fruitful, long-lasting tenure there for 30 years. In the meantime, you built an actual, life-sized boat, is that true?

navigation, crossing Long Island Sound to Connecticut, which could be a treacherous operation because of the riptides.

Returning to adornment, the ring you're most associated with is the one that figures so prominently in Alan Parker's 1987 film *Angel Heart*. How did that come about?

I received a visit from two very elegant English art directors, who silently looked around but didn't say anything before leaving. Two weeks later they're back, 'Frankly sir, we've been looking for someone to do some work for a special project and we think you are our man. This is jewellery to be used for a Robert De



Gifford Whitney, a bad boy Whitney—with him I got involved with the old wooden boat movement of the late '80s, members of the boomer generation deciding to forget their degrees and go back to something real. I built it at his place in the South Bronx. He tutored me and saved me from making mistakes, and I built a 20-foot 1882 New Bedford surfboat for two men, authentic in every way and charming to the bone. Launched it where we had a little beach house in Bellport and then moved it to Sag Harbor where I had it for many years. Twice sailed *The Promised Land* to Connecticut on my own, weeklong trips sleeping onboard and sailing at night, coastal

Niro film'. A series of jewellery pieces that all need to have pentagrams on them, that's how the plot is visually connected. I asked them to draw a pentagram and they got freaked out and said, 'You know what a pentagram is'. Theatrical people are very superstitious. Anyway, I got an African bead of solid amber and inlaid into it a star, domed and perfectly fitted, and got it to New Orleans. Then I got the panicked call, 'Mr Streeter, we got the ring, we said big, but not gigantic. This is terrible, we're shooting tomorrow'. So they send it back, I cut the stone in half, cut the ring in half, solder it back in, worked all night long and the next morning, overnight it, and it was a big hit. I've



always been so proud and happy that it's sort of like the crossroads, selling your soul for success, and the dark side, with Louis Cyphre, De Niro's character, who is of course Lucifer.

So when did you first go to Tucson? How did that come about?

Well, a hipster Indian, full on with long hair down to his waist, popped into my store on Christmas Eve and said, 'Hey, I'm a silversmith from Tucson, Arizona. Can I use your polishing machines?' I waved him into the back and he went right to work polishing up his jewellery. That was James Fendenheim, there for the Smithsonian Christmas show at the Museum of the American Indian, a yearly market where he sold his stuff alongside his grandmother.

He's Tohono O'odham, right? So he invited you out to the desert. Did you know anything about Tucson before that?

Yes, he is, and he did. And no, not really, not even about the Gem and Mineral Show; it was just the southwest, cowboys and Indians, I'd go for that. Eventually I did go and arrived at his place, adobe and primitive, it hadn't changed for the last 100 years and the bathroom is a hole in the floor. Brutally simple but enjoyable, and that was across the street from where I live now. They would have these sensational bohemian parties, roaring bonfires, with a great big swing from a tree. The moment I got there it was like being transported into a movie, and James created kind of an extraordinary mythological element to be around.

Almost like a fable, transported in time. Real life but mythical historical figures like Tom Mix and Charles Schmid, the Pied Piper killer, and even now true originals like Clif Taylor, Terry Trash, and Lenny Mental, to name a few. The monsoon season, darting roadrunners, and snorting javelinas. What was the sequence to move there and get the house, which is now your home and your personal museum?

Back and forth a couple of times and falling in love with a century-old row house in the Sonoran style. As I walked through the place I'm now in I was in a state of shock because it was just so filled with spirit and charm, the bathroom with its powder-blue tiles, the three-person tub, the backyard, and the whole layout.

Doing the exhibit at MOCA Tucson in 2015 where we installed all the mementos and ob-

jects d'art from your house in the galleries, it's worth mentioning that was entirely museum director Anne-Marie Russell's initiative. And related to that, to this day, and it was your suggestion, I think *Best Dressed Pirate* is one of the best exhibition titles of all time.

Oh yeah! I really appreciate Anne-Marie, so let's give her as much credit as we can. She reminds me of Alanna Heiss, the founder of PS1, in that they both were able to create something out of nothing and that's an extraordinary thing in this world.

I wanted to ask you about a few of the things that were in the show, particularly the sculpture of the horse's head.

That dates from a time when David Dinkins was mayor and all of the stores in Grand Central Station were vacated because of too much crime. People were coming in by train and having to go through this labyrinth of huge, empty hallways, a very tragic look. So the city wanted to brighten up the situation by engaging Alanna Heiss, and she invited my then-wife Sabina, who was given a run of windows on 42nd Street to do a huge, long drawing, 20 feet or so, of horses stampeding and biting each other. It also had a soundtrack of horse hoofs clicking and piles of gold-plated horseshit, and she commissioned me to do two golden horse heads. There was a massive opening and maybe it did help turn the corner for Grand Central. And it was so nice that someone drove by and decided to pull out their pistol and shoot at the horses, seeing as one day there was a bullet hole in the glass. It says a lot about New York, and success with the public.

You got an honest, bona fide, in-your-face New York City review. And how about those *botas tribales*?

The super pointy cowboy boots? I saw them at this marvellous store in Tombstone and wanted to try them on but they said, 'That's a display pair, sir. Don't be silly'. They were \$300 but fit, and though I was out of my mind to spend that kind of money, they've kind of paid their way ever since.

They don't look very practical.

It's a lot like wearing skis, but they're completely comfortable, though you have to take wide turns. And I had to be foolish and take them to Japan on one of my tours; it's really a challenge getting on a crowded Japanese







subway with them on, and even if the Japanese are discrete I could see that they were just blowing everyone's mind. They bring on incredible suffering to get around in and wear, but I sure do love them.

You've been to Japan many times, to stores and events, promoting your wares?

About 15 times by now. Years ago a very nice Japanese gentleman would come and buy wholesale and he ended up expanding from being one of those sub-stores in a department store and built up to his company CREAM. They sell variations and replications of the Angel Heart ring, because the movie is like the *Gone with the Wind* of goth. It turned out to be a popular seller, along with my other designs. And the people we work with would take us on these remarkable cultural excursions, puppet shows, canal tours, the Pearl Islands, staying at amazing luxurious hotels.

Your jewellery is available out there in different places; Lily, your daughter, is involved in the business, and who else?

Rebekah Harris is my associate, basically, taking it over from the old store days. I met her when she was working at *High Times* magazine and stole her away from them, and now she has her store Shipwreck in Montauk. Through thick and thin is what I'm saying, Rebekah has been able to keep everything going, and I've had a superhero group that I work with, multi-talented, brilliant, just wonderful.

That's a heartening testament to loyalty and longevity. Let's return to motorcycles since they've been a theme. I know you had that really nice all-black Honda 900cc Shadow Phantom, but now you have that RadRunner electric bike. I saw Jake in the cockpit, so he's obviously made the adjustment. You and he are such a team.

That Honda was superb, water-cooled, with the fairing, and Jake and I rode around. Just gorgeous, then one day I went outside and it had been stolen. It was seen around town and they rode it into oblivion and then stripped it for parts. The police found it down on the South Side and brought it to me all covered with white dust from the fingerprinting, bleeding oil and gas, like a crime scene. So I had to scrap it. It was just horrifying because it had been the most perfect thing. Then I looked up into heaven and realised I'd been saved from

some terrible end because I've done the craziest things on motorcycles, crossing continents and dodging taxis, and I'd survived without a scar, and it was time for me to just give it up. The angels came and took my motorcycle away and said, 'You've done it enough now'.

Presently, you've been writing episodes from your life, and I really hope they see the light of day. You have a sense of affinity with Benvenuto Cellini, correct? A feeling of kinship based on his ribald and extra colourful Autobiography written in the 16th century, in which he plots and commits murders and discourses on the metallurgical arts.

Yes, an inspiration for sure. What I've been doing is throwing out things as fast as I could, my life as far as travelling and jewellery design and how they intersected. Carving in India, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Mexico of course, and Morocco. Interesting as far as time and place and interactions with famous people, and not so famous. Because of the *Autobiography* Cellini is legendary, but nobody knows his work except for the exquisite Salt Cellar he did for Francis I of France, the bronze *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, and a few other statues, because things were melted down into canons or otherwise destroyed, so there's not much left. He was a business guy, self-promotional, an exaggerator broadcasting his own greatness, with an inclination to danger and adventure. I can relate to that, wheeling my way through impossible situations, dealing with troublesome clients, projects often on the verge of disaster. And, you know, the romantic, action-packed, even lurid life of a goldsmith.