



TEEN SPRIT

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Photographs by Joseph Szabo

Text by Robin Muir, London

In 1978 in New York, Harmony Books published a slim, almost square format paperback of black and white photographs of American teenagers. With its title rendered in fat, toothpaste-pink letters and its shiny, plum-coloured wrapper, ALMOST GROWN was entirely of its time. Sold for \$5.95 – and considerably less when remaindered – as the 1970's turned into the 1980s, it became a familiar sight in seconds bins in London bookshops, its cover flapping, its spine broken.

Today, to a generation of young British and American fashion photographers, this modest book has become a cult classic, unobtainable at almost any price. Used as a point of reference, ALMOST GROWN captures that all-too-fleeting instant between childhood and young adulthood. For the first time a photographer had succeeded in documenting that strange time of life and its irrational codes of behaviour, with taste, wit and sympathy- and had done it with brazen naturalism. And that photographer was Joseph Szabo, a high-school teacher on Long Island.

According to the photographer Bruce Weber, it was in the late 1980s that Grace Coddington of British Vogue suddenly noticed that “all the young fashion photographers were looking at Joe’s photographs as their bible”. One, Mark Lally, sowed it to another Jason Evans (both became influential photographers for I-D magazine). Evans enthuses about Szabo’s “fascination with Americana, the fashion detail and his attention to the individualism of his students” though it took him nearly a decade to find his own copy “in a junk shop in Camden in 1993”. Terry Richardson, one-time enfant terrible of Vogue, introduced Szabo’s work to gallery owner Michael Hoppen; Juergen Teller and his collaborator Venetia Scott referenced Szabo’s mise-en-scene; a campaign for Levis jeans by Craig MacDean paid homage. And so it went on.

So what of the photographs that prompted Weber to label them “remarkable”; that caught the imagination of Dinosaur Jr. for the cover of their album Green Mind; that captivated Sofia Coppola enough to base the look of her film of The Virgin Suicides around them; that prompted Cameron Crowe to remark that “Nothing lasts forever – except high school.” Well, the photographs are remarkable and timeless and resonate still in a new, larger compilation TEENAGE that continues Szabo’s document into the 1980’s and 1990’s. As the gallerist Michael Hoppen, puts it: “Joe is gentle and perceptive and looks for the good in his subjects...it’s all about interpretation: when you decide what and how to shoot. Joe sees the other side and his subjects love him for it.” He was the flipside to the urban sleaziness of Larry Clark’s 1971 book Tulsa.

Born in 1944 in Toledo, Ohio, Szabo taught art and photography at Malverne High School on Long Island and his subjects were his pupils. The trust they invested in their teacher allowed him to show teenage life as it hadn’t been seen before. “I felt I was saying,” explains Szabo, “that this is what teenagers are really about, whether you want to admit it or not. They need your attention and care and love. ALMOST GROWN is a celebration of the teenage experience rarely witnessed by parents.”

His milieu was the campus carpark, the beach, the freeway, and as Szabo was also that quintessentially American phenomenon, a “yearbook photography supervisor” he had licence to photograph whenever and wherever he wanted. As a result he was able to “connect on a personal level with all kinds of students, so that they knew I cared and a trust could be developed. This trust is what allowed for the collaboration when making photographs of the students in the hallways, classrooms, hanging out on the streets, making out at parties. I became a much better teacher because I was tuned into their lives.” Szabo’s pictures told of things that had remained, for the most part, uncaptured on film: the importance of peer acceptance, the almost pathological significance of clothes, the stylistic urgency of cigarettes, heavy mascara, convertible cars and Billy Idol, all of which meant, for that time in life, almost everything.

It all started, Szabo explains, because “I was a bit depressed and found a gap between myself and the students that needed to be addressed. There had to be more fun and excitement here, along with good discipline, or I’d never last as a teacher. So, out of inspired intuition, I brought my camera to school and started to photograph the students. It did the trick. I was starting to connect with my students and they with me. I think they felt that I was giving them a special kind of attention they needed. And this was especially important with the ‘losers’ ...they needed the attention more than the ‘winners’. So my approach was to

make school more exciting for all and close the gap more and more between adult land teenager.”

Because Szabo had no axe to grind, no dark side, no agenda, his photos show teenagers at their most beguiling, in moments of almost heartbreaking tenderness against the backdrop of an era when, as one commentator put it, teenagers were “less overtly commoditised”. As the Village Voice writer Vince Aletti observed: “the see-sawing between adolescent melancholy and exuberance. The resulting photos register every nuance of those mood swings, along with a sweet, self-conscious sexiness in period-perfect clothes that make TEENAGE a fashion stylist’s dream.

“I had started photographing teenagers for two reasons: one to get to know them better and become a more effective teacher,” explains Szabo who retired from Malverne High school in 1999. “Two: to give me a subject to explore in depth and in a way that few photographers have done... In general, going to their turf was always a little uncomfortable, but once I was there and settled in, it was exciting. My general rule was no drugs and no sex...but right on with rock’n’roll.