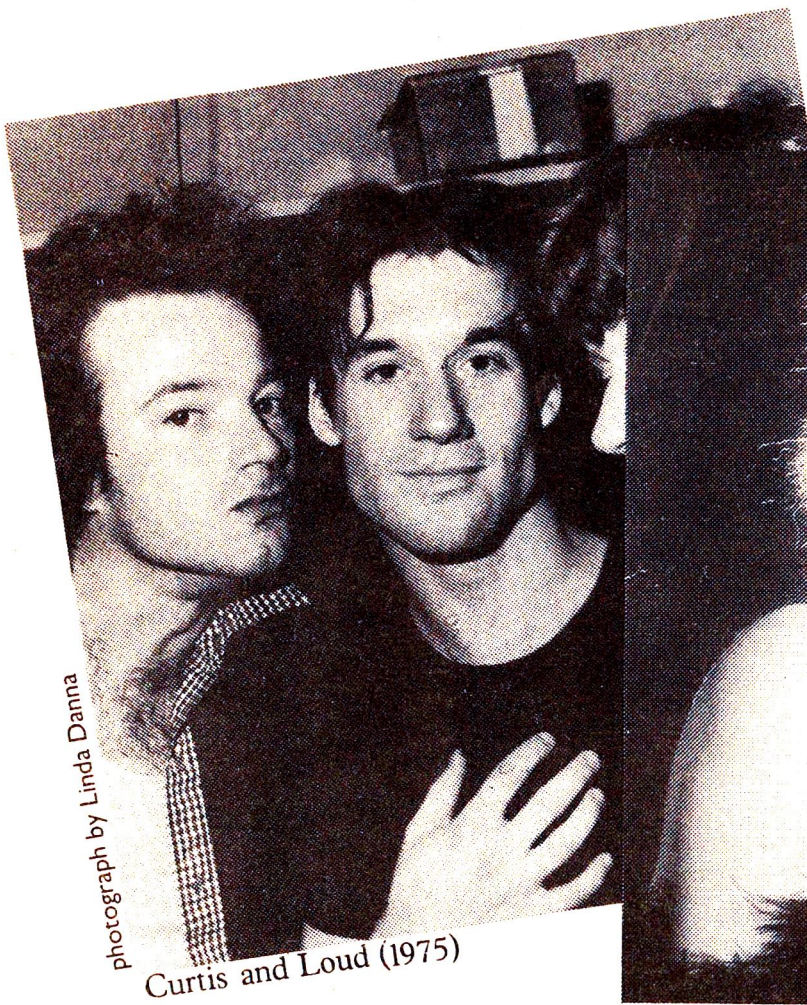


CITYSIDE



photograph by Linda Danna

Curtis and Loud (1975)



photograph by Roy Blakey



Photograph by Scavullo

Ron Link and Jackie Curtis (1976)

'Good-bye J.C.'

Starved for Fame, Abandoned Warhol Protege
Jackie Curtis Dies of a Heroin Overdose at 38

□ By Lance Loud

□ **By Lance Loud**

Jackie Curtis was a superstar in the tin foil galaxy of the Swinging Sixties. Inaugurated as a "superstar" by Andy Warhol, immortalized in Lou Reed's tragi-techno ballad, "Walk on the Wild Side," ("Jackie is just speeding away / thought she was James Dean for a day . . ."), Jackie Curtis was an unrepentant tradition breaker of the era, decked out in glitter and go-go boots, sporting a mouth that could move a wise-crack a minute. On May 15, Jackie Curtis was pronounced dead in New York City of a heroin overdose at the age of thirty-eight, joining a host of other members of his era who came to despair of their own possibilities outside of that near mythic time, losing themselves in the past tense.

No one ever knew too much about Jackie's past, pre-'65. Much of what came from Jackie's mouth was most certainly invented on-the-spot. What is known is that Jackie began life as John Holder, Jr., son of an Irish father and an Italian mother who separated soon after his birth. Virtually abandoned by both parents, Jackie was raised by his grandmother on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His grandmother, known as Slugger Ann, had a reputation all her own, owning and operating one of the toughest saloons on the Lower East Side. Jackie (who changed his name in the mid-sixties) was left to a gaminlike existence mostly on his own, living in his grandmother's small and impossibly cluttered apartment one flight up from the dirt and noise of East Fourteenth Street. He spent most of his youth on the streets of the city or in the dilapidated movie palaces of the downtown area where he watched

and worshipped the celebrated images of the silver screen who became his reel family.

New York in the early sixties was undergoing major redefinition as the culture turned from fifties bohemian into sixties avant-garde pop. Many of the changes began right under Jackie's nose in the East Village. Jackie was a teenager and willingly signed on for active duty in this popular culture rebellion. First appearing in a legendary production by the Theater of the Ridiculous entitled *Miss Nefertiti Regrets* (which also introduced the young Bette Midler), Jackie began writing his own starring vehicles that brought him a slight following in the Off-Off-Broadway theater scene.

Inspired by the vast wealth of movie and movie star knowledge and his convoluted desire to be like them (one of his early pseudonyms was "Greta Bogart"), Jackie compiled a visual image that matched the outrage and passion of his writing. By the second half of the sixties, Jackie Curtis had become the visual prototype, clad in trash and tinsel, for ambisexual pop heroes of the stature of David Bowie and Boy George.

Jackie's growing affiliation with Andy Warhol was initially because of the fact that Andy thought of Jackie as someone who had a future. Andy put Jackie on a salary and had him write screenplays to satisfy the demand for stories that the Factory needed to keep up their production of films. For Andy, Jackie wrote *Women In Revolt*, *Flesh*, *Big Badge*, and others, taking the lead female honors in *Women In Revolt*, something that

this gender-bending young playwright did often in his plays. The link between Jackie and Andy grew; like Edie Sedgwick before him, Jackie became Andy's protege, willingly absorbed into the raging media attention that dogged Warhol's every move of the time.

Jackie left the confines of the East Village to become a habitue of the parties, clubs, and happenings that made up the vortex of the Warhol-Pop existence. Quoted in newspapers, photographed and lovingly captioned as a new celebrity, Jackie was well into his glory and convinced that it was only the start of something very big: JACKIE! "J.C. . . ." Jackie mused throughout his life, "first it was Jesus Christ, then it was Julius Caesar and *now . . .* it's time for the Jackie Curtis Show!"

But time ran out before Jackie had much to show for it. He became too unruly and undisciplined for Warhol, who had himself grown increasingly conservative after barely escaping death at the gun-slinging hands of one of his Factory hangers-on. As booze and methadrine began to filter into Jackie's life more and more, invitations from the Warhol camp trickled off. Andy stopped calling. "She never really gave Andy up for lost," said an anonymous friend, referring to Curtis in the feminine, as did almost everybody else, no matter what gender he/she was dressed as on a given day. "Till the end of her life, there was something inside her that said that Andy would come back." Jackie waited but Andy never showed.

Jackie and I became a team in the interminable seventies. Together we moved through a stream of cocktail

parties, a stream which rarely subsided for Jackie in all his thirty-eight years. Entranced by my own brush with notoriety at the hands of the Media (Loud was a member of the family portrayed in the midseventies PBS documentary, "An American Family."—ED.) Jackie saw my status of

Like Edie Sedgwick before him, Jackie became Andy's protege, willingly absorbed into the raging media attention that dogged Warhol's every move of the time.

television documentary oddball as a bond between two misfits. "We'll get married!" Jackie rhapsodized. "Just think of the press: All American Boy Weds Jackie Curtis—the All American Girl! And don't worry, your mother will love me like a daughter." My mother did like her a lot, but was not particularly overjoyed by such a prospect. For that matter neither was I, having suffered too many hangovers just trying to keep up with her nightly nightlife. Jackie went back to her cocktail parties without me.

Los Angeles actor/artist Tomata DuPlenty recalls chumming with Curtis in the early seventies. Rummaging through trash on a New York street (one of Jackie's favorite pastimes) one

night, Tomata and Jackie found nothing but a pile of discarded financial statements, which the ladylike Curtis proceeded to pounce upon like a Green Bay Packer. "Keep these!" he hissed through his drag with the femininity of Lady Macbeth, "we can use the names to get backers for shows!" Always in his lust for life, Jackie was never at a loss for imagination.

Jackie kept busy during the long post-Warhol era of his life by doing very Off Broadway shows, singing in nightclubs, and bouncing back and forth between reformed substance abuser and devout substance abuser. His main role in life became that of a latter day Joan of Arc to the Me Decade, slowly burning at the stake of his own self worth, alternately flashing between brilliant and boorish as the fevered search for reclaimed star status dragged on. But he was never without his humor or originality. One night, backstage at a club he was singing in, a gay man came backstage and effusively told La Curtis what a camp she was. "I'll give you camp," he spat out, "concentration camp!" This was, of course, after the man had departed. "There is no sense in biting the head off of a fan," Jackie had added, sweetly.

"Jackie Curtis crossed the sexual frontier without a passport," director Ron Link, who is currently directing *Delirious* at the Pilot Theater, said in tribute to his close friend and co-worker. Link, a noted instigator of darkly humorous contemporary theater, was responsible for Jackie

Curtis's best moments on stage, directing both the original and the refurbished versions of Jackie's paean to moviestardom, *Glamour, Glory and Gold*, which, in its second staging in the midseventies, won critical acclaim and a strong box office. Once again taking the female lead, Curtis was kept off booze and crank by Link's watchful eye, and turned in the best performance of his career. "Glamour, glory, and gold were what Jackie Curtis lived for," Link says today from his home in Hollywood. Pausing a moment, he added, "She got the glamour and the glory, but Jackie never got her hands on the gold."

One last image of Jackie comes to mind: Shortly before aligning himself with the Warhol crowd, Jackie had posters made up showing himself in fur and full makeup, over which ran the familiar logo, "What Becomes a Legend Most?" One night, Jackie and his fleet of renegade drag queen cronies papered much of Manhattan with them. It worked. The next morning, the newspapers mentioned Jackie's outrage; he was noticed and congratulated on the streets; he was somebody special at the start of his famous walk on the wild side.

In the end, however, the wild side took a walk on Jackie Curtis. The energetic youth, always so "ahead of his time," lost his time altogether. The "wild side" was Jackie's legend. Ever so sadly, to that legend, Jackie Curtis was lost. Good-bye J.C. □