

Twiggy's look was Sixties woman personified

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“I thought the world had gone mad”

Plunged into the heart of Swinging Sixties London at the age of 16 Twiggy has proved to be one of the more enduring icons of the era. By **Simon Evans**

THERE ARE certain images that define an era, and Twiggy's androgynous face, all short hair and eye lashes, peering out from the pages of *Vogue* in 1966, seemed to perfectly capture a time of personal liberation and sexual experimentation.

Twiggy – dubbed the “Face of 1966” by no less an authority than the *Daily Express* – was Sixties woman personified. Smart, independent and sexually ambiguous this was a woman who would not settle for the traditional conveyor belt of school-marriage-children-housewife.

Most importantly, the petite 16-year-old, formerly known as Lesley Hornby, came from good working-class stock, having been born in the London suburb of Neasden in 1949, the daughter of a carpenter and joiner.

Nicknamed ‘Twiggs’ because of her slim build, Lesley was taught to sew by her mother, Nellie – a factory worker – at

a young age. An early role model was Jean Shrimpton, ‘The Shrimp’, the English fashion icon who had appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in 1962, and whose photos Lesley would admire during breaks from her Saturday job at a hairdressers in central London.

Emboldened by Shrimpton's success, Lesley had her hair styled and cut short at the fashionable hairdressers Leonard of Mayfair, which was looking for someone to model its new crop haircut. Professional photos were taken, which were hung in the salon, where they were noticed by Deirdre McSharry, a fashion journalist with the *Daily Express*.

More photos were commissioned by the paper and a few weeks later Lesley – rechristened Twiggy by boyfriend and manager Nigel Davies (who would himself take on the rather grand-sounding moniker of Justin de Villeneuve) – was a star. “The Cockney kid with a face to launch a thousand shapes... and she's only

16,” read Deirdre's breathless copy. Although she was slight for a model – five foot six inches in height, weighing in at eight stone, and with a 31-23-32 figure – the article hailed Twiggy's “new kind of streamlined, androgynous sex appeal”.

Looking back on that sudden rush of fame from the vantage point of 50 years, Twiggy told the *Daily Mail's You* magazine, “I was this funny, skinny little thing with eyelashes and long legs, who had grown up hating how I looked. I thought the world had gone mad.”

Just a month after the *Daily Express* story Twiggy, as she was now universally known, was flying to New York for the *Vogue* shoot that would make her an international star.

A year later, when she flew out to the United States to work with the celebrated photographer Richard Avedon for the first time, Twiggy was greeted by a heaving pack of paparazzi and fans and was the subject of a 100-page feature in the

New Yorker magazine, with *Life* and *Newsweek* also reporting on what they called “the Twiggy phenomenon”.

During the mid-Sixties Twiggy and Justin were at the epicentre of Swinging London, that loose conflagration of pop stars, aristocrats, fashion designers and gangsters who inhabited the same fashionable clubs and attended the same exclusive parties.

Looking back on those years Twiggy is amazed she was able to keep her sanity. “The thing is, when you’re 16, you don’t feel young. At the time you think you’re quite grown up. It wasn’t until much later, when I had a daughter and she got to be 16, that I looked at her and thought, ‘Oh my God, I was that young when it happened.’

“It’s amazing, really, that I didn’t go



Twiggy with husband Leigh Lawson

stark raving bonkers. I was so young that it all went over my head. I was so naïve, but I was lucky in that everything happened to me so fast that I never had to try to climb up the ladder. When you’re trying to make it, that’s when you’re vulnerable.”

At the height of her fame Twiggy was commanding fees of £80 an hour for photoshoots, and brought out a line of her own clothes, known as Twiggy Dresses. The combination of her thin figure, boyish hairstyle and striking, dark eyelashes proved irresistible to fashion magazine editors, and by the end of the decade Twiggy had been photographed by Richard Avedon, Cecil Beaton, Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin, Norman Parkinson and her close friend Linda McCartney.

A pretty face doesn’t last forever, and in 1970 Twiggy officially retired from modeling, saying “you can’t be a clothes hanger for your entire life.” Three years later she broke up personally and professionally with

Justin Villeneuve, who had overseen her career for the previous seven years. A new chapter was opening up in her life. Striking up a friendship with the maverick film director Ken Russell, with whom she shared a passion for old Hollywood movies, Twiggy appeared as an extra in Russell’s controversial movie *The Devils*, following it up with a leading role in Russell’s adaptation of Sandy Wilson’s *The Boyfriend*, a pastiche of Twenties Hollywood musicals. That role earned her two Golden Globe awards and in 1973, with her trademark androgynous looks fashionable again, she graced the cover of David Bowie’s *Pin Ups* LP.

Signing to Mercury Records she released two albums in the middle of the decade but scored her greatest triumph since her Sixties heyday in the 1983 Broadway musical *My One and Only*, which earned a coveted Tony nomination for Best Actress In A Musical.

“What happened to me in the Sixties – I will never be able to eclipse that,” she told *The Guardian* in 2009. “I realised that a long time ago, even though I’m much prouder of starring on Broadway. Eight shows a week is hard work. That’s a real achievement, whereas what happened before – that just happened to me.”

Today, Twiggy and her husband of 28 years, actor Leigh Lawson, divide their time between a smart central London apartment and a coastal getaway in Southwold. Daughter Carly, from her first marriage to the late American actor Michael Witney, has embarked on a career in the fashion industry, including a stint as a print designer with Stella McCartney.

Looking back to her early modelling days, when she was down to about six and a half stone, makes Twiggy uncomfortable. “Much too thin,” she told *The Guardian*, “I had a look – I can

see that now – but I don’t think I was beautiful.”

Whereas back in the Sixties she was often photographed in a miniskirt, today it’s more likely to be a smart jacket and skinny jeans.

She cites Katharine Hepburn approvingly, “who brought polo necks and trousers into fashion. That is so much sexier than a low-cut dress with everything hanging out.”

Needless to say, Twiggy still looks great, which is why, in her early Fifties, she was taken on by Marks and Spencer to front an advertising campaign. She’s still recording, too, releasing the album *Romantically Yours* in 2011, while also acting as a judge on the American TV show *America’s Next Top Model*.

Last year she became a grandma, twice, Carly having a daughter Joni and Twiggy’s stepson Jason a son, Solomon. She also launched a new fashion collection through M&S and has also just created a new beauty collection for the same store.

Explaining the ethos behind her fashion collection she told the *Mail*, “I’ve long since learned you don’t have to suffer to look fabulous – while I also believe firmly that age is no barrier to style either.

“The notion that you should dress your age is anathema to me – I can’t bear it when people say: ‘Oh she’s 50, she shouldn’t be wearing that.’

“In my book, dressing is about attitude, not age. I’ve got items in my wardrobe that Carly and her friends lust after, and vice versa.

“I think it’s rather sad that some of our posher shops only go up to a size 14. If you’re comfortable with your size, you should be able to wear what you want... Appropriate and stylish but comfortable, too – the perfect combination in my book.”



“You can’t be a clothes hanger for your entire life”



With daughter Carly