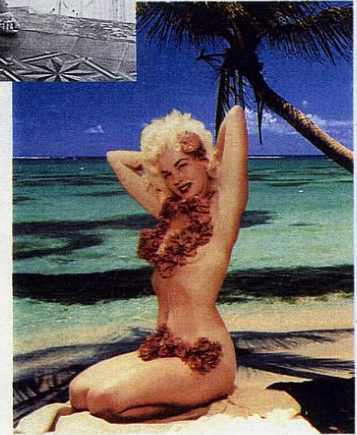


Opposite: a Bunny Yeager self-portrait, 1962. This page, from far left: Bunny on the cover of *US Camera*, 1952; a self-portrait, 1959; Maria Stinger - Miami's Marilyn Monroe - taken by Bunny in 1953



Ahead of the curve

How did Linnea Eleanor Yeager – an awkward, gangly red-haired teenager – become Bunny Yeager, the blonde, curvaceous pin-up-cum-photographer whose pictures – and body – came to define the 1950s? And why is her cheery brand of glamour now more popular than ever? Alix Sharkey meets the queen of cheesecake in Miami

Every day on his way to work Kevin Arrow would drive past All Florida Photo, a dusty old photographic shop on NE 125th Street, North Miami. The store caught his attention because, as a multimedia artist, he was always on the lookout for discarded colour slides to scratch, paint or draw on, before projecting them on to gallery walls.

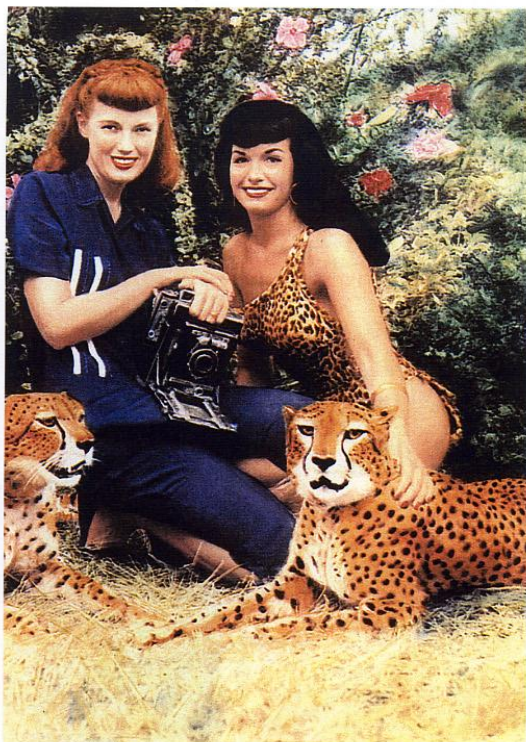
One evening he noticed the store had closed down. He pulled into the car-park where he found 'a dumpster overflowing with bottles of stinking chemicals and trash, everything rain-soaked'. After rooting around he uncovered a batch of dirt-streaked 4x5in transparencies, which had begun to stick together. They showed a voluptuous, dark-haired woman posing on a beach. He washed them in a puddle and held them up to the light. Immediately he recognised them as original colour slides of the legendary pin-up girl Bettie Page, taken by the equally legendary model-turned-photographer Bunny Yeager. The images were 50 years old. He was, he says, 'looking at the Rosetta Stone of glamour photography'.

As a Miami native, Arrow also knew that Bunny Yeager was alive and, remarkably, still working. But when he called her studio she insisted the

slides couldn't be hers. She had been by All Florida Photo a few months earlier, she told him, and collected all her work. He persisted and eventually they met, whereupon he handed over his treasure trove and, he says, 'Tears welled up in her eyes.'

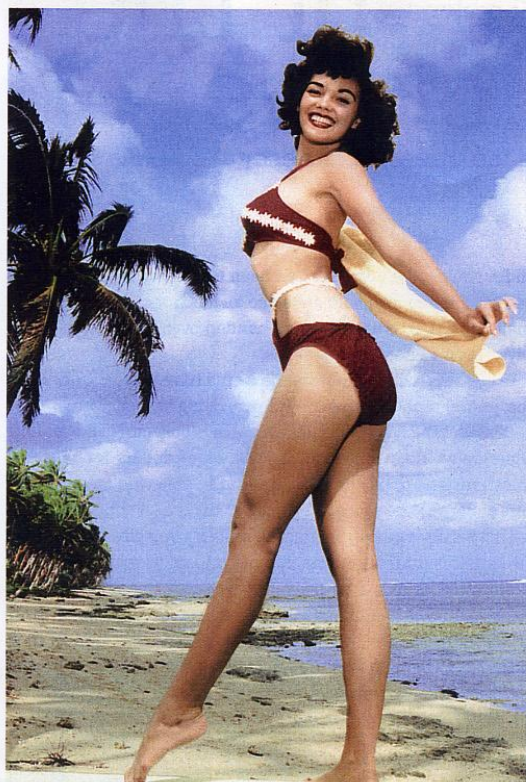
Yeager was lucky. Not everyone would have been as honest. Eric Kroll, the photographer responsible for reviving Yeager's career in the early 1990s when he worked as her agent, says collectors all over Europe and America would pay tens of thousands of dollars for those slides, no questions asked. 'You're talking about people who are ferocious collectors of Bettie Page images, and the Bunny Yeager shots are the best.'

These days, with pornographic imagery steadily polluting the mainstream, it is difficult to imagine the impact of Yeager's photographs of Bettie Page. Together, says Kroll, Yeager and Page redefined the cheesecake tradition, joyfully celebrating the female physique in an era of sexual repression. 'For guys of my age, men who are now in their late fifties, Bunny's images of Bettie Page represented sexual freedom. They were absolutely liberating.'



Bunny with
Bettye in 1954.
Bettye's picture of
Bunny, 1953

**'No one in Miami knew that I used to
be too shy to talk to boys. I learnt that
a good smile takes you a long way'**



most iconic,' says Mary Harron, who directed the film *The Notorious Bettie Page*, due for release next year, with Gretchen Mol in the lead role and Sarah Paulson as Bunny Yeager. Harron, whose previous films include *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996) and *American Psycho* (2000), says her script relied heavily on Yeager's own writings – she has published more than 25 books – and how her models were 'nude but not naked'.

'Those early images are so natural, so lovely, so perfect,' says Harron. 'They still hold up so well today because they're a cross between art photography and cheesecake – neither one nor entirely the other. And that's because Bunny was a master of light in glamour photography; she made the girls look so wonderful.'

'We worked well together because we both loved what we were doing,' says Bunny Yeager, who at 75 still runs her business from a small office in Miami. Her platinum blonde hair is held in a side ponytail with a blue scrunchy; her cornflower-blue eyes peer through gold-rimmed glasses. She wears pink lipstick, a blue and white gingham shirt, pale jeans and black sneakers.

The office is pink, right down to the carpet; on the walls are photographs of Bettie and Bunny in their late-1950s heyday. Every available surface is overloaded with boxes, papers and files, and there are more boxes against the walls. She admits her filing system is 'a bit of a mess', and it's easy to understand why she might lose track of even her most valuable pictures. But she's just so busy, she explains, and there's so much to do. There's her autobiography, and a new book coming out, and another to start, and girls are always calling to arrange photo shoots, and, well, she could do with an assistant. Then again, she has always preferred to work alone, even at the height of her career.

'Bettie could see I knew how to pose and photograph her,' she says, when asked about their relationship. 'We had respect for each other. The

only bad thing about Bettie was that she was always late. It drove me crazy because I was a professional and I used to show up not only on time, but also a little early. But she was an excellent model and I put up with that small imperfection.'

Born in Wilksburg, Pennsylvania, in 1930, Linnea Eleanor Yeager was a Depression-era child whose early years were marked by hunger and deprivation. Her mother, whose acting ambitions had been thwarted, enrolled her in beauty contests. 'I didn't see myself as pretty, growing up. But Mom did. She thought I could be another Shirley Temple. But every mother thought that of their daughters at that time.'

After watching her as a rabbit in a school play, she says, her parents dubbed her 'Honey Bunny'. Years later the star-struck schoolgirl saw Lana Turner playing Bunny Smith in *Week-End at the Waldorf* and realised Bunny could be a real name – her name. So when her family moved to Florida in 1946 the painfully shy and gangly Linnea was left behind. In her place a dazzling, leggy 16-year-old called Bunny enrolled in Miami Edison Senior High School.

'I found that if you act like you're popular already,' she recalls, 'kids think you are. No one in Miami knew I'd been a wallflower at dances, too shy to talk to boys. I learnt that a good smile takes you a long way.'

Following a brief modelling course she became popular with the local and visiting 'shutterbugs' who scoured Miami Beach looking for pin-up girls. The hours spent studying Lana Turner et al paid off; she was soon featured on the covers of photographic and glamour magazines, and in publicity materials for the city of Miami Beach. Her photographs were even syndicated to saucy British tabloids such as *Titbits* and *Reveille*, and by the mid-1950s she had appeared in more than 300 magazines and newspapers, collecting two dozen beauty-contest titles along the way. You might even say Bunny Yeager was the first supermodel.

Physically, she was the archetypal 1950s bombshell; 5ft 10in, 36-24-37, with long, lean legs, her naturally red hair bleached and teased into

a platinum blonde mane. It must have taken a lot of work to maintain. Did she diet and exercise? She chuckles, shaking her head. 'I knew nothing about dieting. We didn't exercise. We didn't sweat. That was what men did! Exercise in a gym? Not beautiful girls! No, no!'

It wasn't just her looks. She was also sharper and harder working than her rivals. While most models owned one swimsuit for posing, Bunny had a closet full, many of which she made herself – in primary colours, since they worked best for the new colour photography. When shooting black and white she wore high-contrast outfits, again sewing them herself. And once she started taking photographs, she made unusual bikinis for her models. 'Of course, they were not as brief as the bikinis of today, though some girls thought they were too risqué. But a lot of my designs were copied by manufacturers straight from the photos.'

While sunbathing on Miami Beach she met Chuck Schwind, a blond, blue-eyed body-builder. He took her to his evening photography class, and, after posing a few times, she enrolled herself. When Roy Pinney, a freelance photographer down in Miami on his annual 'working holiday', heard about her new interest, he organised a shoot with her at once. Within a month her photograph was on the cover of the August 1953 *US Camera* magazine, with the heading **THE WORLD'S PRETTIEST PHOTOGRAPHER!**

Bunny photographing Mary Poole in 1953, below, and, bottom, as she is today

'I knew nothing about dieting. We didn't exercise. Exercise in a gym? Not beautiful girls! No, no!'



She hadn't even finished the course when her very first colour shoot, a class assignment, became her first paying job. She drove her friend, the model Maria Stinger to a Boca Raton theme-park called Africa USA and photographed her in a home-made, faux leopard-skin bikini, walking two full-grown cheetahs on leashes. The shot made the cover of the March 1954 edition of *Eye* magazine. Yeager was now officially a professional photographer.

But it was her collaboration with Bettie Page that catapulted them both to fame, in particular their centrefolds for the recently established *Playboy* magazine. They first met in the summer of 1954 when Page, already a successful pin-up girl, fled New York for Miami in the wake of a federal witch-hunt; some bondage-themed photographs of Page, sold by mail order, had aroused the moral indignation of Senator Estes Kefauver and the FBI, who were looking to link pornography and juvenile delinquency.

The photographs Page and Yeager produced over the next three years could hardly have been more different. Even today, the freshness of those nude shots taken on Miami Beach – the same photographs Kevin Arrow would find in a bin nearly 50 years later – still shines through, uncorrupted and undimmed. 'Bunny had a huge impact on glamour aesthetics,' says Mary Harron. 'She was one of the first photographers to shoot regularly for *Playboy* because she shared that aesthetic with Hugh Hefner. Hef was a champion of that naturalistic, playful, wholesome pin-up photography. He wanted to get away from the kinkier stuff, the grainy heels-and-hose stuff. Bunny celebrated nudity, the female body, and paved the way for the more liberated attitudes to nudity that emerged in the 1960s. In that respect she was way ahead of her time.'

Maybe, but the times eventually caught up, and her work was deemed passé by the late 1970s. 'In the 1980s I put my camera down for about ten years,' says Yeager. 'Nobody wanted to buy old-fashioned Bunny Yeager pin-ups. They wanted the explicit, clinical type... pornography. The editors said, "You're not keeping up with the times." Well, I tried.' So did she take pornographic photographs? 'No, no, no. They showed everything, a naked girl with her legs spread, but... nothing else. But I ended up feeling disgusted with myself, so I stopped.'

Yeager might never have resumed had it not been for Eric Kroll, who came across a battered copy of her 1964 book *How I Photograph Myself* in the early 1990s and was astounded by both the images and the text. 'I kept thinking about [the conceptual artist] Cindy Sherman,' he

recalls. 'The images were so strong, but fresh and natural. The writing was pithy, full of insight and good advice.' After lengthy negotiations, Kroll agreed with Yeager to produce a portfolio of 13 of her most iconic images, high-quality prints in a linen box, aimed specifically at serious collectors. 'It took a while to convince her that her work was art,' he recalls. However, it was Bunny who insisted that he include two images of Bettie Page.

'I knew [Page] more as a snarling bondage queen. But my life changed as a result of those two images,' says Kroll. 'Collectors from all over the world called me. One flew in from Paris the next day to collect his photos. It was extraordinary.' The success of the portfolio led to a deal with the art publishers Taschen and a revival of interest in Yeager's work. It also, Kroll admits, gave a huge boost to his own career.

And what of Page? She and Bunny only worked together for three years. In 1957 Page, shaken by the FBI's investigation, found religion and disappeared. She is still, at the age of 82, a total recluse. Yeager hasn't seen her since, yet says they remain friends.

As for Bunny, she is considering making a documentary about herself.

The fashion photographer Bruce Weber wanted to do it, but Bunny wasn't keen. She'd seen his 1988 film *Let's Get Lost*, a grainy, monochrome documentary about the life of Chet Baker, and found it, well, a little too gritty. She insists that she can do a better job herself. 'I'm ready to do it all now,' she says, meaning the autobiography, the documentary, the archiving of her work. 'I put it off because I'm busy. But I have to fit it in now, because I'll die, and somebody else will do it, and it won't be as good. These people don't really know me; they have no idea what I've been through.' But this is the thing that's holding her back, I suggest – her reluctance to delegate.

She snorts, and tells me how her late husband had asked her to stop working. "Retire!" I said, "You want

me to sit on the porch and rot? I can't do that!" I have to be busy, have to do things. I'm not doing it for the money. I work because it keeps me going and keeps me young.' ●



'Bunny Yeager's Pin-Up Girls of the 1960s' (Schiffer, £29.95) is available from Telegraph Books (0870 428 4115) at £25.95 plus £1.25 p&p

