

# Irving Klaw

**Pornographer,  
1910-1966**

**by David Rosen**

Irving Klaw opened a small, basement-level retail sales and mail-order fulfillment business on East 14<sup>th</sup> Street in 1938.\* It sold second-hand books, movie-star photos and erotic paraphernalia. It grew in popularity and, by the '50s, was offering a host of suggestive, "cheesecake" photographs, "3D color stereo slides" and short, semi-professional 8mm and 16mm movies or "loops," dubbed "stag" film. A 4x5 black-&-white shot sold for 40-cents each, 8 for \$2.00.<sup>1</sup> One scholar described him as "perhaps the most prolific supplier of girlie photographs to both underground and legitimate magazines."<sup>2</sup>

Born in Brooklyn on November 9, 1910, Klaw was the son of subway conductor on the old Brooklyn BMT line. His parents were both divorcees and their combined family included six children, three boys and three girls. The Klaws lived a hardscrabble life and his father died when Irving was in high school. Remarkably, Klaw developed a special -- and mutually shared -- affection with his youngest, non-biological sibling, Paula. During the Depression, between 1933 and 1937, he worked as an apprentice in the fur trade. In 1938, he opened a used bookstore in a basement-level store at 209 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

The Klaws, brother and sister, were a life-long business partnership, an unlikely-looking couple of

pornographers. In photos, Irving comes off as a short, balding, portly man who regularly dressed in a white shirt and tie. In '47, the *New York Times* described him as "a short, jovial, roly-poly man [who] looks like King Cole."<sup>3</sup> Paula looks like she came from a different family, which she did. She was taller, thinner with lush, long brown hair often worn in a pompadour style; Foster describes her as a "slightly homely girl."<sup>4</sup>



The Klaws sold books, magazines and entertainment memorabilia. Ever entrepreneurial, Klaw established Nutrix (i.e., new tricks), a company that sold magic tricks and novelties through the mail. According to legend, Klaw noticed a young girl ripping out a picture of Clark Gable from a photo magazine and decided to sell still pictures of movie stars. He soon added pin-ups of movie stars and erotic photographs also offering them through a biannual mail-order catalog, *Cartoon and Model Parade*. As his business took off, he relocated to the street-level storefront, keeping the store open from 10 am to 11 pm. With further success, he moved to a large storefront across the street, at 212 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street. He initially renamed the business "Irving Klaw's Pin-Up Photos," but soon changed it to "Movie Star News"; he stopped selling used books. The store's window had a sign reading: "Pin-up photos of your favorite movie stars, latest movie scenes, bathing beauties, popular cowboy stars and vocalists,

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\* Photo: Dark Forces Book Group

bandleaders.”

According to Paula Klaw and John Coutts (aka John Willie, a noted '50s pornographer and publisher of *Bizarre*, a leading s&m and fetishist magazine) and acknowledged by Klaw's grandson, Rick Klaw, sometime around 1947 Klaw “was approached by a prominent lawyer with some ‘special needs.’” The lawyer, fondly named “Little John,” was a wealthy man into s&m who offered Klaw a deal he couldn't refuse. The terms were simple: Klaw agreed to produce original bondage pictures while the unnamed lawyer would pay all associated costs, receive a copy and Klaw would retain the rights. “The man who started us in this business,” Paula Klaw later recalled, “ironically, [he] died that very way because he himself got tied up by some model who used a cigarette on him and he died of burns.” Klaw also worked with other special interest customers, including men interested in photos of models posing in black rubber outfits and in white underwear. They followed Little John's deal, paying for the model's time, film stock and giving Klaw the rights.<sup>5</sup>

Klaw's first “special needs” bondage star was Lili Dawn (aka Lili De Mar) who posed for Klaw and other freelance photographers in midtown studios. Dawn starred in *Violated*, a 1953 film produced by the porn distributor Eddie Mishkin.<sup>6</sup> By the late-'40s, Klaw's s&m photo business was quite successful and, as it grew, he changed his business model. He opened his own porn production studio, Beautiful Productions, in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor room above his East 14<sup>th</sup> Street shop and worked with freelance photographers like Jack Bradley.

Klaw's greatest discovery was the celebrated Bettie Page, often referred to as the “Queen of Bondage.” Forgotten for decades, Mary Harron's

2005 biopic, *The Notorious Bettie Page*, put her back in the spotlight. Page reigned as one of America's foremost pin-up girls of the mid-50s, second only to Marilyn Monroe. Her images adorned tabloid magazines, record albums and matchbooks; her likeness served as the model for innumerable figure-drawing books, automobile ads and covers of pulp magazines. She was featured in seven *Playboy* centerfold spreads, including *Playboy's* Playmate of the Month – with a cover shot -- for January 1955.\* It was Klaw's bondage, s&m, spanking and fetish photos of Page and other women that incited the underlying desires -- perversions -- that so offended American moralists.

Klaw had a not uncommon movie making technique. “Irving Klaw had this loft and he was acquainted with an awful lot of strippers,” recalled Lili St. Cyr, a popular performer. “His mode of operation was that he would take these separate segments -- one with me, and one with Betty [Bettie] Page, and all these other girls -- then he would splice these together until he had enough time, fifty minutes or whatever, and make what he would call a full picture.” Klaw would then put together “a bunch of segments of ten or twelve different girls doing their various acts,” she reports. “He'd piece them together in several different movies.”

Page was featured in the 1953 burlesque film, *Striporama*, starring St. Cyr.<sup>7</sup> Two of Klaw's “classic” stag movies -- *Varietease* (1954) and *Teaserama* (1955) – also featured Page; St. Cyr appeared in *Varietease* and *Tempest Storm* in *Teaserama*. Often overlooked, these two works of ostensible heterosexual imagery include as a featured performer, Vicki Lynn, a celebrated drag queen. In *Varietease*, Lynn appears in a red wig

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\* See “Bettie Page.”

and dress and performs a provocative dance. After the dance, he pulls off his wig and, ever masculine, lights a cigar. Lynn raises the stakes in *Teaserama*. He first appears in full drag only to perform a provocative striptease that ended with him removing his wig and the top of his costume revealing his flat chest. "The sight of a man in a dress in the burlesque films is not, as one might expect given the period, demeaning, nor is it comic in the same way Milton Berle's cross-dressing," notes historian Eric Schaefer.<sup>8</sup>

Klaw also published provocative s&m graphic images by two noted illustrators, Eric Stanton and Gene Bilbrew. Stanton was born and raised in Brooklyn, the child of Russian immigrants. According to one critic, Stanton was "best known for vivid images of subservient males and cruel haughty dominatrices ...." His illustrations appeared on the covers of many s&m book during the '50s and '60s. Bilbrew, also known as ENEG, was an African-American s&m illustrator. Like Stanton, his illustrations appeared on book covers and magazines during this period. Both had been classmates at the Art Student's League.<sup>9</sup>

In 1955, Klaw was subpoenaed, along with a half-dozen other publishers, to testify before a special Congressional hearing in Foley Square on juvenile delinquency and pornography. Sen. Estes Kefauver (D-TN), an ambitious politician and presidential candidate, led the hearings. Wearing his customary white shirt, tie and shabby suit, Klaw, replying to a forced subpoenaed, "took the Fifth," refusing to provide income tax returns and financial records. He was not a happy man, worried what would happen to him, his family and his business when the day's events were finally over. The hearings ruined Klaw.

The federal government had long kept a watchful eye on Klaw as a promoter of alleged obscene materials. During the early-'40s, the U.S. Postal Service investigated him after receiving three complaints about Movie Star News catalogs. It found the pin-ups he sold, including provocative shots of movie stars like Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth, "though questionable if not definitely obscene." However, in 1950 federal obscenity policies tightened. Reviewing his catalog, *Cartoon and Model Parade*, it argued that Klaw "is too smart to deal with or handle strictly obscene material ... [the images] are performed by females and ... Klaw has kept males out of the pictures so as to cunningly avoid what many possibly appear to be obscene." The head of the FBI's New York office issued an internal memorandum to Hoover, "Irving Klaw Interstate Transport of Obscene Matter," that stated: "Individuals who handle such material, however, are also frequently found to handle material of a definitely obscene nature."<sup>10</sup>

Refusing to provide his financial records or answer direct questions to the Senate committee, Klaw was held in contempt of Congress. His lawyer, Coleman Gangel, feared that the more he revealed about his business, the more charges Klaw would likely face. Committee aids claimed that his "smut" business netted between \$550,000 and \$1.5 million annually. Klaw was now dubbed the nation's "Smut King."

Ironically, because of Klaw's strict adherence to a non-nude photographic policy, the FBI found none of his photos obscene. Kefauver, however, invoked a higher moral standard and found Klaw's publications perverse. He charged that the works fell into "a twilight zone of obscene material ... and deals particularly in fetishes, masochism, sadism, and other forms of perversion." Going further, he

insisted that Klaw dealt “exclusively in fetish, bondage, whipping, torture, and related pornographic material.”<sup>11</sup>

The outcome of the Kefauver hearings could almost be predicted given '50s sexual politics. It had a devastating impact on both Page and Klaw. Fearful that she might face prosecution and tired of posing for girlie magazines, Page moved to Florida in 1957, where she modeled fashion for a few years, often working with the acclaimed photographer, Bunny Yeager. In the late '50s, Page became a devote Christian and worked as a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher.<sup>12</sup>

Sadly, as John Heidenry reports, “the [investigation] process broke Klaw.” He adds: “... withdrawing from the [porn] business, [he] died years late, a bitter man.” Klaw was hounded by U.S. government agencies during the next five years, making his life miserable. The firm that long reproduced his photos – and also had Disney as a client -- dropped him, apparently under FBI pressure. He shuttered his 14<sup>th</sup> Street operation and had his sister open a new business in Jersey City, NJ.

In '56, Abe McGregor Goff, the Post Office's solicitor, denied Klaw use of the U.S. mails, insisting he was “one of the nation's largest dealers in pornographic material.” Adding injury to insult, some claim his phones were bugged and mail intercepted. In '56, Klaw's 47-year-old sister, Mrs. Fanny Cronin, was busted for operating a \$2 million New Jersey “pornographic films and photos mill.” In 1963, three years before his death, Klaw and his brother-in-law, Jack Kramer, were indicted – and convicted -- for conspiracy to send pornographic materials through the U.S. mail. Robert F. Kennedy, the “liberal,” Catholic Attorney General, soon-to-be Democratic Party presidential candidate and an assassinated martyr, led the campaign

against Klaw. The Supreme Court overturned the conviction.<sup>13</sup>

According to Rick Klaw, in order to avoid a \$5,000 fine and a five-year prison sentence, Klaw agreed to destroy some 5,000 photographs (including many original glass negatives) and movie negatives. Rick Klaw, reflecting philosophically, noted, “My grandfather never really understood what he had done wrong. He had never knowingly broken any laws. He always paid his taxes.” He adds: “He was just a businessman. For the remainder of his life, I Klaw would collect bondage images from wherever he could find them, hoping to redeem his reputation by demonstrating that others were producing similar images without legal problems.” Years later, Paula Klaw revealed that she had hidden a cache of Klaw's bondage negatives. “Paula, unbeknownst to her brother, preserved his legacy – and her financial future – by hiding thousands of the images,” notes Rick Klaw. “Without Paula's foresight, Irving Klaw might have been just an odd, barely remembered footnote in the annals of pin-up history and Fifties puritanism.”

During the Labor Day weekend of September 1966, Klaw suffered an appendicitis attack yet went to work; during the day, his health condition deteriorated due peritonitis and he unexpectedly died. He was a defeated man. A half-century later, in July 2012, after nearly 75 years in business, the Klaw family enterprise finally closed. Ira Kramer, Paula and Jack's son, took over Movie Star News, still located on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, in 1996 following his mother's death. He sold the Klaw archive of some 3 million photos, 10,000 movies and 250,000 negatives for a reported seven-figure sum. “It's one of the most important photo archives in Hollywood history,” said Stuart Scheinman, co-owner of the Las Vegas-based Entertainment

Collectibles, who purchased the collection.<sup>14</sup>

**For more information:**

Richard Foster, *The Real Bettie Page: The Truth About the Queen of the Pinups* (New York: Citadel Press, 2005).

James Petersen, *The Century of Sex: Playboy's History of the Sexual Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1999).

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senate Hearings, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress; \$2.00 in the 1950s is equal to about \$17.50 in 2013 dollars.

<sup>2</sup> Heidenry/376; Kroll/13

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.irvingklaw.com/index.htm>; New York Times, "Monarch of Pin-Up Business," November 16, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Foster/60

<sup>6</sup> <http://vintagesleaze.blogspot.com/2011/01/yowch-lili-dawn-lili-de-mar-another.html#.ULOH3o59nwx>

<sup>7</sup> Foster/57-58; Petersen/249

<sup>8</sup> Eric Schaefer, "The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 1997), pp. 41-66

<sup>9</sup> <http://permanentobscurity.com/perm-obsc-stanton-klaw.htm>

<http://efanzines.com/EK/eI15/index.htm#sleaze>

<sup>10</sup> Foster/79

<sup>11</sup> Foster/81q; U.S. Senate Hearings, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress.

<sup>12</sup> Heidenry/377; Foster/82-83

<sup>13</sup> New York Herald Tribune, "Arraign 33 in Smut Drive," May 30, 1956.

<sup>14</sup> [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-07-30/news/32946343\\_1\\_negatives-bettie-page-photos](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-07-30/news/32946343_1_negatives-bettie-page-photos); New York Times, "Deaths," September 9, 1966.