

**AMANDA CALLAHAN**  
Aged 62 and a real-estate broker in Michigan, she was a Playboy Bunny when she was 20

**WHATEVER  
HAPPENED TO THE  
BUNNY GIRLS?**

**PATTI COLOMBO BURRUS**  
Now 70, she was a Bunny at the New York club for 11 years, starting when she was 20

They stuffed their corsets with Kleenex, stole the ashtrays and fended off advances from Hollywood's finest. But what does a Playboy Bunny make of her past when she's 70?

**REPORT** Tim Teeman  
**PORTRAITS** Robyn Twomey



**RITA PLANK**  
 Now 66, she began working as a Bunny aged 18. Left: Plank at the San Francisco club in 1969



**A**manda Callahan is a real-estate broker in Livonia, Michigan. Forty-two years ago, she was a Playboy Bunny. Her living room is full of souvenirs from her early twenties, when she worked in the Detroit branch of Hugh Hefner's infamous club empire. Books share shelf space with Bunny-motif ashtrays. "We put olives and onions on them for martinis," says Callahan. On display are her Bunny cuffs and bow-tie collar – the latter still smudged with make-up. "I wouldn't think of washing it off," she says.

Her white Bunny tail hangs on a wooden plaque, which reads "I Caught the Bunny". By keeping the tail, Callahan broke one of the many rules that came with being a Playboy Bunny. (A constantly revised Bunny Manual instructed the girls how to smoke, sit, stand and how to address club members, or key-holders as they were called.) Ex-Bunnies were under strict instructions to return their costumes when they left Hefner's club for the final time.

In their prime, the clubs had more in common with the nascent sexuality of the Fifties than Seventies liberation – and seem, on the surface at least, another world away from the lap-dancing clubs found on inner-city street corners more than 50 years later. Imagine Don Draper from *Mad Men* sipping a cocktail at the bar, a cigarette burning in the logo-ed ashtray. The clubs were as carefully planned and controlled as anything Disney ever built, and in much the same way as Walt Disney conceived Disneyland as an extension of his films, Hefner

designed Playboy Clubs to embody the lifestyle portrayed in his magazines. It was, for the times, a genius bit of branding, even if, looking back, the Bunny Girls, with their cantilevered bosoms and wide smiles, pantomime ears and touch-me-if-you-dare cottontails, seem somehow absurd, even for the early Sixties.

The world of adult entertainment has undergone unimagined changes since Hefner launched the first club, in Chicago on February 29, 1960. Yet the instantly recognizable Bunny Girl silhouette – the satin corsets came in only two bust sizes: 34D and 36D – remains one of America's most famous symbols. (The clubs continued until 1988 and have had several reincarnations since then. Playboy opened an outlet in London in 2011 and plans to launch one in Goa, India, this year, where the Bunnies will wear a leotard-cum-sari.)

It all seems rather quaint, and oddly sexless, looking back to the early Sixties; the women a

cross between prim air hostesses and cheeky *Carry On* characters. Callahan has framed Polaroids taken at Hallowe'en, when the Bunnies carved a huge pumpkin on the dancefloor. There are a couple of pictures of Callahan with Hugh Hefner, whom she and many other Bunnies still lionise: they are proud of their pasts and castigate Gloria Steinem for her famous 1963 exposé – a damning litany of drudgery and sexual objectification – in which she went undercover as a Bunny Girl.

There is another shot of Callahan, a more recent one. It was taken by the photographer Robyn Twomey at a Playboy reunion. Callahan's hair is still blonde, and she's still wearing her Bunny cuffs, but she looks wary, caught off guard, fiddling with her pink Bunny ears. It's just one of a revealing portfolio of images taken by Twomey after she heard a former Bunny Girl talking about her experiences working in one of Hefner's

clubs. Her recollections were all positive, which wasn't what Twomey had expected to hear.

Twomey had just left college, with what she describes as "a feminist-Marxist perspective" of sexual politics. For women like her, it was Steinem's experience of working at the New York Playboy club that resonated. In her 1963 essay, Steinem describes sexual come-ons and arduous waitressing, dressed in uncomfortable outfits – the "Bunny bosom stuffers", she notes, included "Kleenex, plastic dry-cleaner's bags, silk scarves, gym socks". Serving one lunchtime, a male customer harassed her, saying that he was vice-president of an insurance company and that he would pay her to serve at a private party in his hotel. "Another got up from his fourth martini to breathe heavily down my neck. When I pulled away, he was sincerely angry. 'What do you think I come here for,' he said, 'roast beef?'"

But what Twomey discovered when she

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## 'THEY WERE IN A PARTY MOOD. I DIDN'T MEET ANY BUNNIES WHO FELT EXPLOITED'

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started to track down former Bunny Girls was a surprisingly different story. Many of the women, who worked in the Playboy clubs of the Sixties and Seventies, were fondly nostalgic, defiant even. What seemed to unite them was the normality of their post-Bunny lives – they had had conventional careers, been married and had children. "They were mostly all in a party mood. I didn't meet any Bunnies who felt like sex objects or felt they had been exploited," says Twomey. If they had any regrets it was the fact that, now older, some of them widowed, they were no longer the object of a man's appreciative gaze. They feared that they were no longer seen as sexual beings.

One former Bunny says that when she tells men what she did, "They get a glint in their eye." Sex might not officially have been on offer, but it was a job that still summons up a potent fantasy.

Twomey shot 50 former Bunnies. Many, like Callahan, felt they belonged to a sorority. "There wasn't one type of Playboy Bunny. Some were strong, independent, women's liberation types; some were delicate and feminine." The unifying issue for these women was ageing. "Some of the women threw away the Polaroids I gave them. They'd say, 'I looked so much better 20 years ago.' That saddened me." Some Bunnies, who had cheerfully spent their twenties posing in their

### BOBBIE BRESEE

Aged 70, she still holds Bunny reunions, 43 years after first joining the club



revealing outfits, hated their latter-day pictures so much, they have forbidden Twomey from publishing them.

It was "ironic", says Callahan, that she became a Bunny aged 20. "At high school people teased me that I looked like a rabbit. I had two long front teeth." It was friends who suggested she audition. "I was a little, top-heavy blonde, smiling and gregarious." She loved the costume at once – a strapless ruched corset, the legs cut high enough to reveal buttock cheeks, sheer tights and 3in stilettos. "Thank goodness my mother was British: she taught me how to comport myself. I knew how to wear a nice fitted dress and high heels."

Every candidate had to audition. Kelly Morgan, who describes herself back then as a typical girl-next-door, with barely any lipstick, freckles and perfect teeth, worked for a year at the New York club in 1976. "I called them and said, 'What do you need?' They replied, 'Long

legs.' I said, 'Well, I've got those.'" She was told to walk and turn around. She asked why. "Because we want to make sure your thighs don't touch," they said. (In the early days, reported Steinem, Bunnies had to undergo an internal examination, a blood test and smear before they were employed, a practice that was later discontinued.)

A Bunny couldn't have runs in her tights, smudged make-up or "be sloppy", recalls Patti Colombo Burrus, who worked at the New York club from 1963 to 1974, from the ages of 20 to 31. Her wages would be docked for chewing gum or eating on duty. Get caught doing these things three times and a Bunny would be dismissed. At her house in a gated community for over-55s in Lake Worth, Florida, Colombo Burrus also still has her costume, as well as Playboy Club ashtrays, glasses, mugs and cuff links. Clearly, no one paid attention to the no-souvenirs rule. "I

loved the girls," she says. "My best friend, Renee, another Bunny, was maid of honour when I married my husband, Bill. You never stop being a Bunny." This despite the fact that she says she was let go when she was 32 for not conforming to "the Bunny image", and took the club to court. "They wanted fresh blood. We weren't young and perky." She lost her case, "but I still loved my time there".

There were Door Bunnies to greet customers, Camera Bunnies to take Polaroid pictures, Gift Shop Bunnies to sell merchandise, and Cigarette Bunnies. Most were Table Bunnies, which meant memorising 143 brands of liquor and persuading the mostly male clients to run up a hefty bar bill. They were all taught by "Training Bunnies" and overseen by "Bunny Mothers", who, says Colombo Burrus, weighed them before every shift. If they had put on weight, they were ordered to lose it. According to the Bunny bible, they couldn't dance with the customers or date them (officially, at least); customers were not allowed to touch the Bunnies (according to one account, they were more likely to be touched by women, who were allowed to, than men, who were not). If a customer was offensive, he would be cautioned by "room directors". If he was threatening, he would be ejected.

Callahan's customers were mainly successful businessmen who "treated us like their own daughters", or football players (she ended up dating one). Bunnies would date, but if they were found out they were sacked.

For years, another of Twomey's subjects, Bobbie Bresee, kept pictures of her Bunny career on the wall of her home overlooking Beverly Hills, including a picture taken with O.J. Simpson. "He signed my cuffs: you tried to get the celebrities to do that." At their peak, the Playboy Clubs were popular with everyone from the Beatles to Sean Connery.

The highly maintained Bresee laughs about Twomey's recent picture, in which she poses beside a swimming pool. "I look so stuck up, and a little too old." When she joined the LA club in 1970 her family were "appalled". She was about to become a teacher.

"But I put on the costume and felt fantastic," she recalls. The seamstress would cut the costume to fit the woman's body exactly. "The whalebone corset in the front and back was like wearing a nice back brace. But your feet hurt: you had to be in heels for eight hours minimum." Later she posed, swathed in robes, as a Playmate. She says she never found wearing the outfit objectifying or demeaning.

It was fun being a Bunny, these women claim. If men got drunk, "They might say something inappropriate or try to touch us," says Callahan. "If they tried to touch our tails, we'd say, 'Uh uh, mustn't touch Bunny.' You were polite." In the old days, says Bresee, Bunny tails would snap on and off, "and when



Hugh Hefner, Playboy founder, surrounded by Bunnies in 1966

## 'I WOUND UP ON MICK JAGGER'S LAP, ASKING ABOUT HOW HE AND I WERE BOTH LEOS'

a customer did that, you would turn around and say, 'Excuse me, could I have my tail back?'" Later, the tails were hooked on, "so if someone grabbed it, they'd end up pulling you, drinks, tray and all, into their lap. I'd make a joke of it: 'If you get the tail, you get the whole thing.' The room director would say: 'You're going to have to leave the Bunny alone.'"

The Bunnies were told to be attentive to female guests, there as part of male-female couples, so the woman wouldn't feel ignored.

The ex-Bunnies Twomey photographed claim they earned "a lot". "Eighty cents an hour, but the tips meant you earned around \$5,000 a year – a lot for the Sixties," says Colombo Burrus. But pay would be docked for misdemeanours. Bunnies were not allowed to sit, although they could perch. They were not allowed to chew gum or stand with their legs apart. "You didn't have a surname," says Callahan. "You introduced yourself to guests, 'Good evening, I'm your Bunny Mandy.'"

Bresee once berated a client for not having his membership key – only to find she was chastising Hefner himself. She was mortified, but Hefner told her she'd been right to

criticise him. "The nicest guy; not a bully, an intellectual," she says.

Rita Plank is photographed by Twomey in a strapless top, her blonde highlighted hair piled high, pink plastic earrings swinging above her bare shoulders. She looks nonchalantly at the camera lens like the rock chick she once was, enjoying being in the limelight again. "My parents were functional alcoholics, so I'd spent a lot of time in bars waiting for them," she recalls. "In Bunny training, I knew all the drinks and garnishes." Known as "Little Big Boobs" when she was a teenager, she began work at the San Francisco club in 1965, a year after giving birth to her daughter Allison. Plank turned down the overtures of actor Robert Wagner, offended because he had approached her best friend first. The highlight of her Bunny days was when Ike and Tina Turner came to the club when they were supporting the Rolling Stones. She managed to get a ticket and go backstage, where she was introduced to Mick Jagger. She "wound up on Jagger's lap in a big easy chair, asking questions about the set list and how he and I were both Leos".

But not everyone found Bunny life easy to adapt to. Jaki Nett, who became a Bunny at 23 in 1967, was "terrible at the beginning. I walked into a wall with a tray of drinks." Ginger Gourlay, who worked as a Bunny for five years in her twenties, did it despite being a "prude. I only felt nude when the collar and cuffs came off – the collar offset your bosoms." Nett, who is black, said she "never experienced racism, apart from black customers who felt that if they were spending so much money, why were they being waited on by a black person?" ➔

But she does remember her feet swelling in the heels. “You couldn’t take your shoes off, because you would never get back in them again. We poured cold club soda in them; you’d slop around in them, cooling the feet.”

The women say they don’t recognise Steinem’s portrait of Bunny life. “None of us was conscripted,” says Callahan. “The Victorians showed cleavage. We were treated with utmost respect.” “You’d get more propositions at the office,” snorts Colombo Burrus.

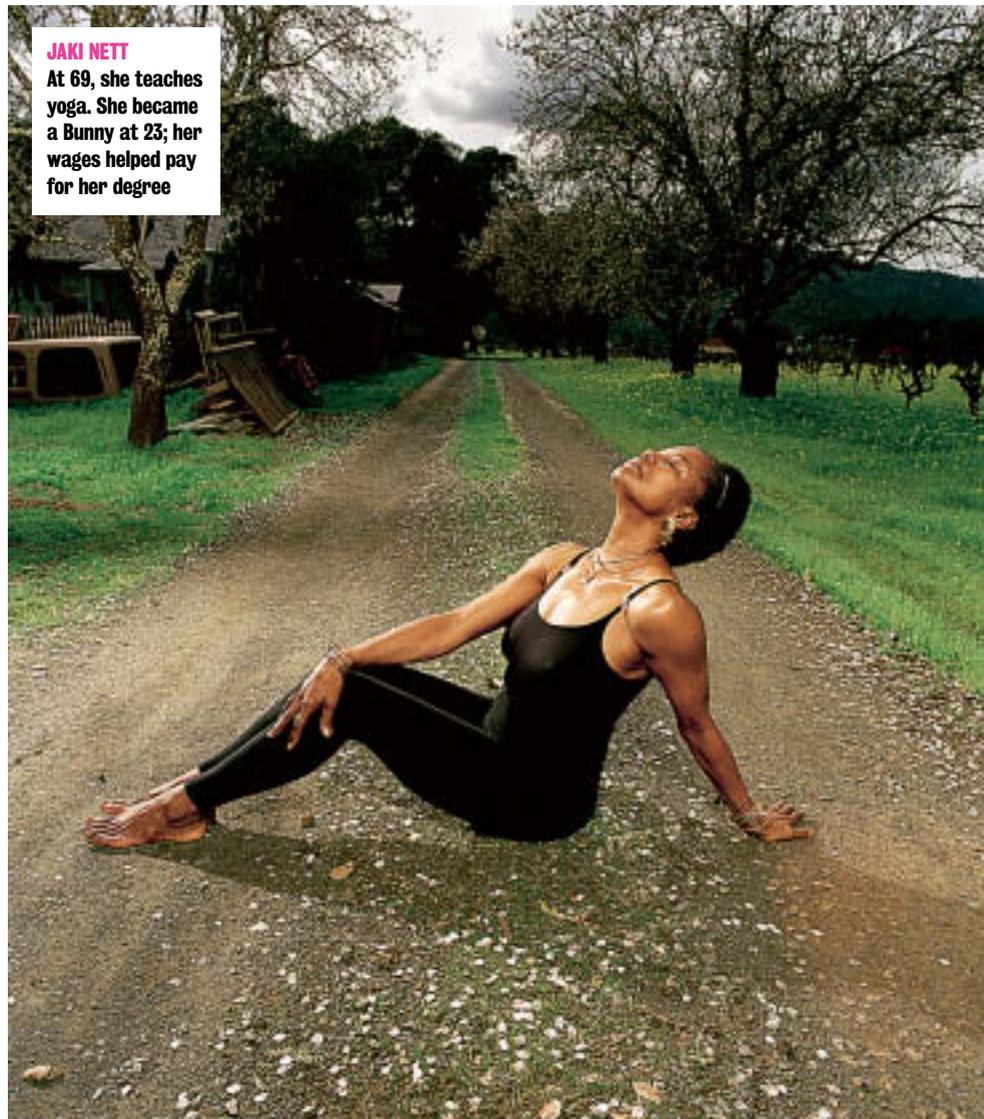
Plank recalls protesters outside the San Francisco club with placards saying “Hugh Hefner Prostitutes the Idea of Women”. “I told them it was the safest job I ever worked in, that I was raising a daughter as a single mother and the women at the club were like sisters.” Nett agrees. “No one exploited me. I chose to be there.” Her wages helped pay for a degree. Sharp says, “Feminists didn’t show us any respect,” and, “There was no glass ceiling for women in the organisation.” “More power to him,” she adds of Hefner’s recent marriage to Crystal Harris (he is 86, she’s 26).

Nett went to Hefner’s Playboy mansion, where he held legendary parties every Sunday. “Hefner didn’t do drugs or alcohol,” she recalls, “but he was a backgammon fanatic. On Sundays you’d be allowed in the pool, the sauna and Jacuzzi, and there’d be a first-run movie, then this amazing buffet. After that, he’d show a hardcore movie. If you stayed, you would ‘play’... But I always went home. The pool and grotto were known for orgies. That side to Playboy existed. I was wild away from the club but worked to the maxim: “The dog don’t s\*\*\* in his own backyard.”

That backyard could also be a sanctuary. For Judy Sharp – captured by Twomey in her kitchen in a black velvet dress – Playboy was “a godsend. My first husband was a wife-beating maniac. I was 17, he was 22 when we married. I’d been trying to get away for a while.” He became jealous when she became a Bunny but was prevented from harassing her at work. “Playboy was like a big family. I could make my living without worrying about him.” Later she became a Bunny Mother herself.

Steinem wrote that she was “glad” on her final day as a Bunny. “Somehow the usual tail pullings and propositions and ogling seemed all the more depressing when, outside this windowless room of perpetual night, the sun was shining.” And what of Twomey’s Bunnies? Callahan dreamt of becoming an actress, but never managed it. She married twice and now, at 62, wants to lose 20lb. Kelly Morgan, now in her late fifties, works as a real-estate broker and doesn’t talk about her Bunny past, “though my husband gets some mileage out of it”.

Colombo Burrus, 70, set up a computer supply company. “I married three times, but got it right eventually.” She has not had cosmetic surgery – yet. “I might get a shots in



**JAKI NETT**  
At 69, she teaches yoga. She became a Bunny at 23; her wages helped pay for her degree

the future. There’s nothing like youth, but I have a husband who loves me. I’m like a Barbie doll. I wear make-up and heels every day.”

Just retired, Judy Sharp, 68, feels “bored”, but wants to avoid Botox and plastic surgery: “Sure I have wrinkles. I laugh a lot.” She had two sons and a daughter, has a boyfriend and a granddaughter who turned down an offer to pose in *Playboy*, fearful of “bad publicity” before she went to college.

It’s “hard getting old”, says Ginger Gourlay, who lives on a small Californian ranch. The 70-year-old is single (her second husband died in 1987). She’s used Botox and fillers “to keep my face looking full”.

Rita Plank had a breast reduction at 50: “I went from 32DDD to 36C. It’s great.” For 14 years she had a cocaine habit (“the \$100-a-day diet, we called it”), but she’s been clean since 1985. She gave up alcohol two years ago.

At her LA home, Bresee, 70, still holds

Bunny reunions. “The thing I treasure is the closeness with the other girls,” she says. She has been married to her husband for 40 years. She met him at an event where she and other Bunnies were serving drinks. They have had a “wonderful life”, and she feels luckier “than other girls who didn’t do what I did”. Bresee had a facelift 15 years ago (“I was looking a bit drawn. I wanted to freshen up”) and has Botox injections. She wears her Bunny outfit to parties: “I can almost zip it up.”

Yoga “saved” Jaki Nett: she teaches it. She has been married for 33 years, and has a 31-year-old son. “I feel blessed. My genetics were strong. I see my waistline getting bigger, but my breasts haven’t dropped, thank goodness.”

At one reunion, she says, there were 300 women: the oldest was 75, the youngest in her forties. “We were all shapes and sizes. It doesn’t matter if you’re fat, grey, have lines on your face, facelifts... There is still that Bunny spark.” ■