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Multi-talented Deborah Anderson doesn't just have a creative vision: she lives it

by **Elyse Glickman**



Deborah Anderson with her new book, *Paperthin*.

LOS ANGELES IS famously home to many offspring of movie and music royalty. Many of these lucky individuals reside in West Hollywood,

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an area with a mix of bohemian visionary vibe and high fashion. Deborah Anderson, who just happens to be the daughter of the wildly creative and risk-taking Yes front man Jon Anderson, is one of its residents.

However, Deborah Anderson is far different from most of her well heeled celebrity neighbours. You can see it in her quaint and tidy little bungalow, which makes more of a statement about *her* rather than who she hired as her decorator. Sure, there are some requisite investment pieces (decadent raw silk-covered couches) and antiques blended with simple tables and shelves. However, what gives her space life—and tells you a lot about where she's coming from—are her expressive photographs channelling Robert Mapplethorpe and Man Ray mixed with Asian art, crystals and family mementoes that show her clan was not the usual rock-star–showbiz family. The presence of Deborah's sister's dog, Harvey, coming out to greet me roots everything in reality.

Harvey is closely followed by Anderson, who is tall, elegant and casually chic, yet is fresh scrubbed and devoid of obvious labels or bling. In a time where adult celebrity kids try to get out from behind the shadows of famous parents, the only shadows Deborah deals with are the ones that exist in her photos, which she stylizes for artistic effect. Imagine that: somebody who slowly and steadily has made a name for herself in the most authentic side of the term.

Anderson, who serves piping hot cups of Rooibos tea before settling down for the interview, explains she has called West Hollywood her home for the past five years, after moving back from Paris. 'I lived there for three-and-a-half years,' she says. 'I originally moved to Paris because I had a clothing line, and I felt the city had the right kind of energy and creative place for me to grow aesthetically. Though 9-11 had just happened, I originally felt it wouldn't affect me directly. However, it did and I found myself wanting to do something expressive with my clothing line that was vintage-y and one of a kind. This is how I fell into photography, styling and setting forth to capture the pieces in a certain way.'

Prior to her stint in Paris, Anderson and her younger siblings (Damion and Jade) went into the family business in the 1990s. This is not surprising when you consider father Jon Anderson was as focused on the *art* and global range of music as he was at making a career in the "biz". She was good at it and still is. However, she notes that music is a part of the picture, figuratively and literally. Her latest recording, *Silence*, (melodic chill-electronica in the vein of acts like Zero7), echoes the mood set by her first major art photography book, *Paperthin* (available at deborahandersonphoto.com and Amazon.com). The portfolio features a mix of



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'I know people are quick to judge, but if I didn't have the ability to do what I do, I wouldn't be where I am. I worked so hard to get to this place, and it has been based on the trust established with people I see through my camera lens and my constant focus on getting better at my work'—Deborah Anderson

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celebrities (Minnie Driver, Natasha Henstridge, Fergie, Pink, Jodie Kidd and Sophie Dahl, who wrote a short article on female sensuality for the book), models and friends pushing the envelope of their femininity against the backdrop of Paris.

'In the beginning, when I told somebody I was going to shoot flowers, she said, 'Oh, leave that to Mapplethorpe,'' Anderson recalls. At the time, she was making her mark as a fashion designer with her own line, with a following that included Minnie Driver and Nicole Kidman.

'I was taken aback, as my aim was to have fun,' she continues. 'My first photos were un-retouched images, and when I started playing with them, I absolutely loved the effect because you are seeing them in a very natural yet ethereal state. All the original images from *Paperthin*, likewise, are shot with 3,200-speed Ilford film and are not retouched. There is just a cleaning of specks of dust, where today, we are so used to seeing retouched photos, shaping and reforming people in every fashion magazine out there. *Paperthin* is real, and what you see with these women is what you get: their natural beauty. It was more about the lighting, the make-up and the ambience of where I shot the photos rather than the notion of perfecting the pictures. I decorated the shooting sites and created a special world for the models to live in for that moment, which was a lot of fun.'

For her next book, *Room 23* (Daab) and other covetable projects (such as shooting promotional shots of Elton John), she's opened up to digital photography and Photoshop. In contrast to *Paperthin*, which she feels captures who she was while living in Paris, *Room 23* captures the photographer she has become in LA — savvy, sharp and wise to how a certain film or technique captures a type of light. At the time of the interview, Anderson was focused on the launch and promotion of *Paperthin*. However she did enthusiastically shed light on the process of putting *Room 23* together, which is as much about Hollywood as *Paperthin* was about Paris—down to details such as Diana Jenkins producing and the Peninsula Hotel (where the shoots took place) hosting the party.

'*Room 23* is a fantasy,' states Anderson. 'Working with digital is a whole new world, where you have control of the image's outcome. That said, I am grateful for learning the art of photography in Paris through the creation of *Paperthin*, with an old Minolta camera, not-great lenses, and getting the best image possible based on what is there.'

What was there for Anderson ended up being nearly 100 celebrities (including Elton John, George Clooney, Cindy Crawford, Lisa Rinna, Sharon Stone, Dennis Hopper, Minnie Driver and Hayden Panettiere) shot in one hotel room over four months in Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, she



playfully likened the whole process to something akin to the iconic *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band* album cover. Even with the parade of A-listers coming in, she was surprised and astounded that most of the subjects allowed her to capture them through her lens.

'Because I was on my own in a room (with my subjects), and there was this open palate situation, I was free to give direction to them,' she says. 'What happened from there is that the process becomes an organic growth of the energy of myself and the subject. On one occasion, Sharon Stone wanted to achieve a certain thing (with her photo sitting), but then she changed her mind and trusted me. The pictures just grew into this gorgeous final result where she revealed more of herself than she would have had she had gone her way. Sharon later asked me, 'Why are you here? Why did you leave Paris?' I replied, 'Because you're here.' That's the bottom line. If I had the access to the type of subjects in Paris that I do in Hollywood, I would have stayed in Paris. Here in LA, fascinating subjects for photos are right at your fingertips, and we get calls on a weekly basis for celebrities interested in being shot: it makes more sense to be here.'

Ultimately, Anderson keeps her ego and humility in check, as she believes it is better for the creative process. 'No matter how good your photography is, it's not about thinking, 'Oh! Look how great my photography is,'' Anderson adds. 'It should be more of a case of, 'How wonderful that they trusted me, and how wonderful they were able to give me all of themselves and allow me to do my job over the course of the hour or two they were with me. Doing both books, whether (models) were naked or fully clothed, I never faced a 'No, I do not want to do that.' That was a very satisfying aspect of the process—to go in there knowing what it was that I wanted to do and get out of the situation was also important. If had gone in there blindly, no matter how big the star, I was never intimidated, even by George Clooney or Elton John. I am all about having a small team, and George asked me where my crew was. I replied, 'I am the crew, and now you are too. Can you help me move that light?' He absolutely loved it.'

Though *Room 23* has a drop date of March 2009, Anderson has stayed busy with a myriad of other projects. One of the more eye-catching ones was the images that would become the cover of Pink's new album, *Funhouse*, shot near Death Valley. She casually draws attention to portfolios arrayed on her coffee table with a mix of shots from *Paperthin* and the *Funhouse* shoot, which even in their unadorned formatting, are striking.

'We were aiming for something very fantasy, very circus, very playful,' Anderson details. 'For the cover shot, we took Pink to the desert, and had her on a rocking horse. Getting to that shot was also

an adventure. Pink was on her motorbike while we were following her in a car. It was so hot, and I am not sure how we made it, but the experience was great. She's an amazing artist on many levels, not just as a singer songwriter, but with her energy too, and you can feel it when shooting photographs of her. Likewise, she appreciates my world as well. For Pink, in the case of both *Paperthin* and *Funhouse*, everything worked because she trusted me implicitly with the costumes, styling and final shots. Following this, I will be art directing and doing the styling for her next video.'

Despite Anderson's consistently serene demeanour, she's as busy as any other multi-tasker in Hollywood. In addition to her day-to-day dealings with celebrities and entertainment-oriented projects, she also firmly stays in touch with her aesthetic side with a gig as Art Director for the New York-based Gansevoort Hotel Group (with locations in or opening in Miami, Chicago and Las Vegas). All photos gracing the walls at the Miami South Beach location are her original photography, and *Paperthin* will be the coffee-table book of record throughout the hotel group. While Gansevoort's boutique properties are designed to make well-heeled travellers feel right at home, Anderson's thoughts are not far from her own childhood home, which like this hotel group, covers some impressive locales, including London, Barbados and the south of France. However, she stresses that although she did enjoy some of the jet-setter perks of a rock star childhood early on, her father made sure his kids never strayed too far from reality. And then there were times reality took over.

'I wouldn't change my childhood for anything, it has moulded and shaped me and allowed me to be the artist that I am today,' she says. 'Seeing so much of the world early in my life shaped me incredibly. There was a lot of freedom, but through it all, Dad was and is very spiritual and had this incredible connection to the divine. I had a choice, and decided I wanted to be connected on that level, and have that focus that's more spiritual like my father's, instead of having that "having of stuff" focus—that was never for me. As I contemplated this, I gravitated toward my Dad's way of thinking and over the years all the more so. I do what I do, as my Dad has done what he has done, because I love doing it. I don't do it for the outcome, but for the journey, even though I know I have to pay my way in the world and my bills.'

For Anderson and her siblings, father always knew best and stayed grounded, even if he was known for his ethereal vocal stylings: 'He never said, "Don't take drugs," but he always said, "Don't sign anything,"' she notes. 'He signed enough contracts to know better. He made his share of mistakes, and today as we're living in such a different era, he really taught us the important of

being who we are. He also taught us that you shouldn't only be concerned about paying the rent, but expressing yourself and doing the things that truly matter to you. That said, my parents made me work for a living. I waited tables here in LA, and I also had to make a personal decision if I wanted to live a certain lifestyle (rock star's daughter) involving the drugs and the partying. I met all the kids, and they are all sadly lost and were not guided. As I see it, my Dad didn't cut me off, but he empowered me to do my own thing and be responsible for it.'

Even with real world responsibilities, the Anderson children were naturally drawn to music and follow in their father's footsteps, but in ways unique to their personalities. Jade had a number-one album in Japan, signed to Sony with a huge record deal that unfortunately ended when the company underwent changes and she was let go from her contract. However, she bounced back with acting and completed work on a television pilot. Damion, who did a single in the '90s called *Close to the Hype* (a nod to Yes's *Close to the Edge*), is based in London and recently completed his first full album. Ever the process person, Anderson is bolstering her own early experience in music via the recording studio in Dad's living room and singing back up on his solo albums having taught herself the Mac Garage Band program. This in turn, brought about her current *Silence* album.

'To follow my father's footsteps in being a singer-songwriter was an interesting thing,' she muses. 'People want to hear you but wonder if you're any good. I am glad that I did a couple of his songs in Europe and recorded a couple of dance tracks. Though I was signed to A&M records in England, Dad didn't do anything. What a lot of people perceive on the outside is a big fantasy. [Industry people] don't hand you a golden key that will open all the doors. Dad was not in that kind of position when I decided to record. Plus there is pressure for you to be twice as good. Since coming into (music) the first time, it has taken me 18 years to get to this place, where I can look at myself and think, "Yes, I am an artist."'

Yes, Anderson is an artist, and has proved it under her own steam and approach. Even if the media that makes her most visible at the moment—her photography—is in the forefront, it is still clear she has not only found her voice but uses it in a variety of ways. Certainly, Jon Anderson would be (and probably is) most proud!

'I know people are quick to judge, but if I didn't have the ability to do what I do, I wouldn't be where I am,' Anderson affirms. 'I worked so hard to get to this place, and it has been based on the trust established with people I see through my camera lens and my constant focus on getting better at my work.'

For this up-and-coming creative talent, success wasn't a snap, but for Anderson, it has been a fascinating journey to see what's developed at every stage of the ongoing process. •

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