

Cultural Daily

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KIPPER KIDS

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2020

While speaking with [Bette Midler](#) about the TV series *The Politician*, I was reminded of my experience of photographing the [Kipper Kids](#), because she has been married to Martin von Haselberg for decades. Martin (born in Argentina of German parents in 1949) and [Brian Routh](#) (born in England in 1948 and passed away in 2018) started the performance art duo in 1971 in the UK, both taking on the name of Harry Kipper. They performed at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich and all over Europe. When they moved to Los Angeles in late 1974 at the invitation of the Long Beach Museum of Art, I heard about them because my friend, Venice video artist [Nina Sobell](#) (who had posed for my Black and White photo series “[Ladies in Ladies Rooms](#)”), married Brian.



Kipper Kids at Vanguard Gallery © Elisa Leonelli

Brian returned to Europe and came back to LA in 1977. It was then that I first saw the Kipper Kids perform and felt the palpable excitement and even fear in the shocked audience, considering that these half-naked guys were throwing soup, beer, flour and paint at each other, while grunting, farting and burping. But there was a method to their madness and a ritualistic rhythm to their act. I was even more impressed when I saw their artist friend [Anne Bean](#) (born in Zambia in 1950) join them for a few performances in 1979, matching them in outrageousness and daring. I had been the Los Angeles correspondent for the Italian newsweekly *L'Europeo* since 1976, so I proposed to write and photograph a story about the Kipper Kids, and invited Martin, Brian and Anne for a photo session in my studio. It was an electrifying and creative day. A shortened version of my article was published in the *L.A. Weekly*. For the complete files [click on this series](#) in the [Elisa Leonelli Photojournalist Collection](#) at Claremont Colleges Digital Library.



Brian, Anne, Martin (c) Elisa Leonelli

I was friends with Danny and Rick Elfman of the [Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo](#) ([click here](#) for my 1976 photo session), when Rick started filming his experimental movie *Forbidden Zone*. [Click here](#) for a scene where Marie Elfman watches the Kipper Kids in a boxing ring. Another [video clip here](#) when they staged a performance for the 1982 variety special hosted by Bette Midler, *Mondo Beyondo*. [Here's a link](#) to a 2013 MOCAtv interview with Martin, where he explains how the Kipper Kids' stylized shows were inspired by the Japanese tea ceremonies, followed by their performance at NYC the Kitchen in 1988.



Martin, Anne, Brian (c) Elisa Leonelli

I have been a fan of Bette Midler since her first film *The Rose* in 1979, and met her several times in one-on-ones, roundtable and HFPA interviews, often asking her, among other things, about Martin and their daughter Sophie, born in 1986. In 1988 she said to me: “I knew immediately that Martin was outrageous when I first met him. I liked the fact that he was not afraid to be different, that he was an outsider like I am, that he was not complacent, that he stood aside from the mainstream.” Martin has continued to express himself artistically as a filmmaker, a photographer and a painter.

I saw Midler perform live at Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas in 2009 in *The Showgirl Must Go On*, and in 2013 at the Geffen Playhouse in the play *I’ll Eat You Last: A Chat with Sue Mengers*, but missed her in the musical *Hello Dolly!* since the Broadway production did not travel to Los Angeles. You may [read here my latest article](#) about the Divine Miss M, published in the Golden Globes website.

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