

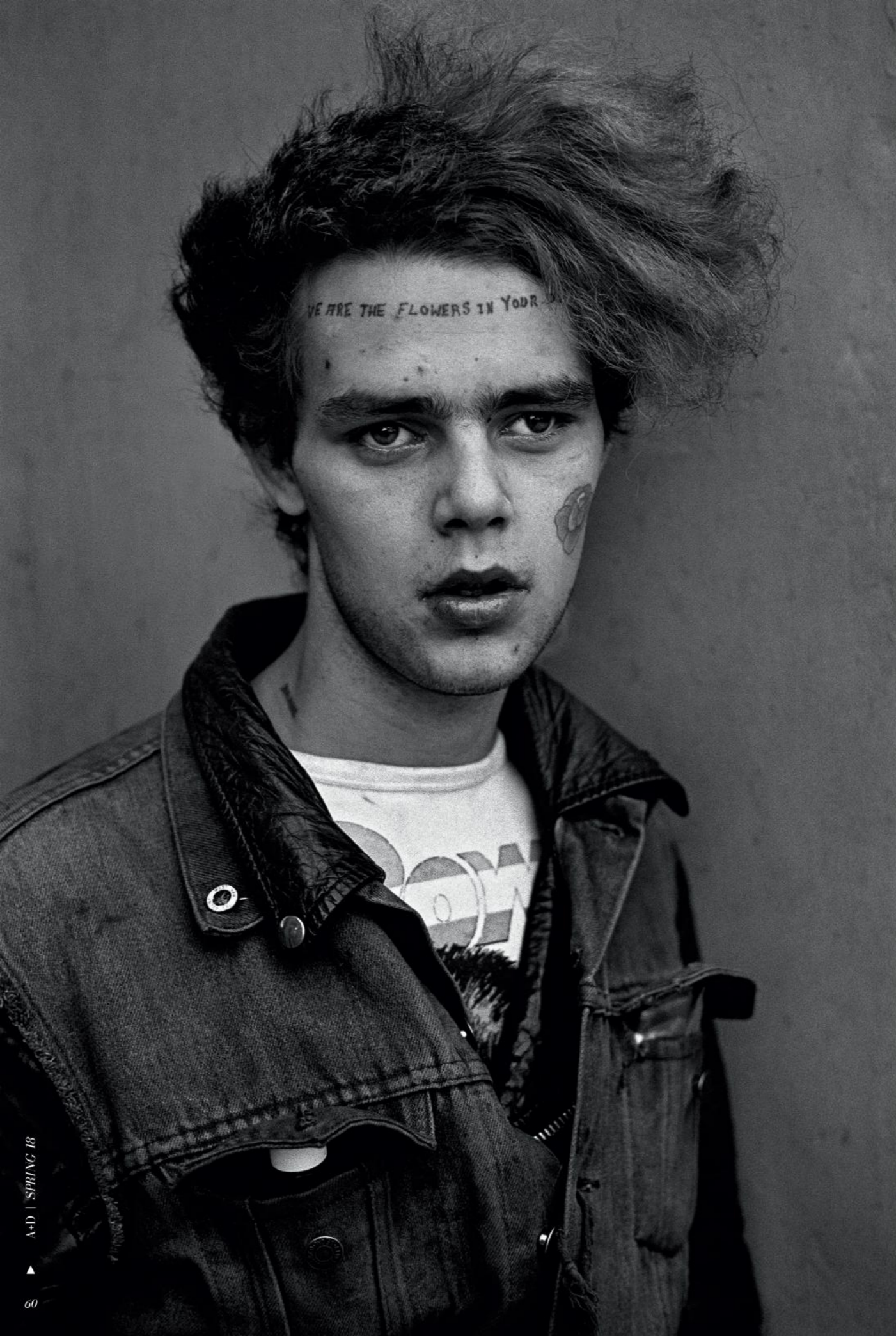
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PHOTOGRAPHER DEREK RIDGERS ON BRITISH SUBCULTURES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON MODERN FASHION.

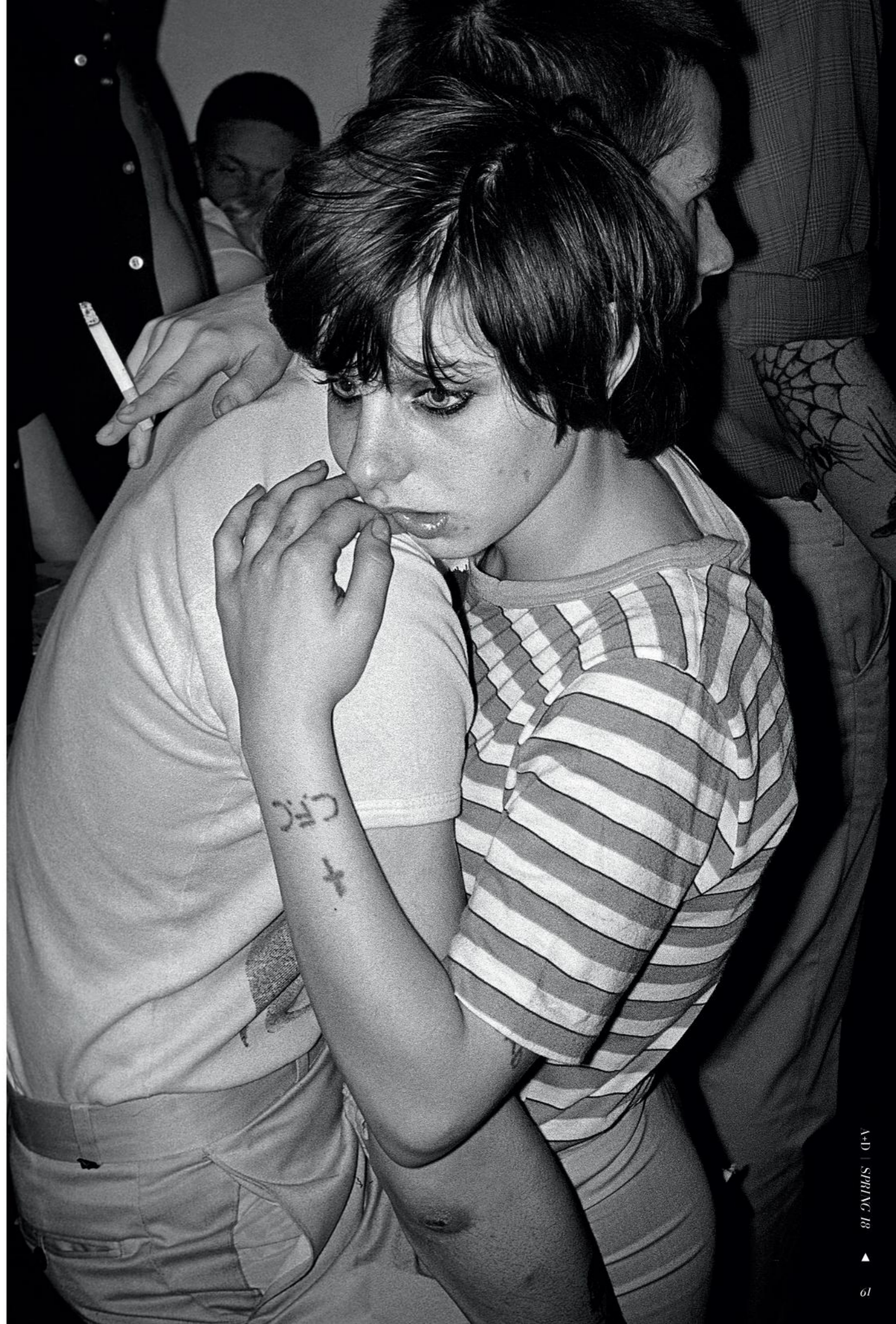
by ILIA SYBIL SDRALLI / photography DEREK RIDGERS

FROM THE VERY START OF HIS CAREER, **DEREK RIDGERS** HAS CAPTURED THE BRITISH UNDERGROUND SCENE, DOCUMENTING COMMUNITIES, LIKE PUNKS AND SKINHEADS, WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE WOULD USE THEIR APPEARANCE AS A TOOL FOR REBELLING AGAINST MODERN SOCIETY. ONCE REPRODUCED IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA, THOSE SUBCULTURES HAVE **INFLUENCED TRENDS AND INSPIRED FASHION DESIGNERS** SUCH AS ENGLISH PUNK PIONEER **VIVIENNE WESTWOOD**. RIDGERS HAS ALSO CAPTURED, WITH A RAW YET SENSITIVE GAZE, POP-CULTURE ICONS WHO HELPED SHAPE SOME OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL TRENDS OF THE 20TH CENTURY. HERE, HE TALKS FASHION, POLITICS, AND THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA.





"THE LATE '70S AND EARLY '80S WAS QUITE A BLEAK AND DEPRESSING TIME IN THE U.K. AND LONDON IN PARTICULAR."





HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INTERESTED IN PHOTOGRAPHING LONDON'S VARIOUS SUBCULTURES AND CLUB KIDS? DID THAT INFLUENCE YOUR PERSONAL DRESSING STYLE?

In the '60s and early '70s I had virtually no interest in becoming a photographer. To begin with, I was just a music fan with a camera that I'd borrowed from work. I just wanted to get a bit closer to some of the bands I loved. So I started taking a camera along to gigs, pretending to be a photographer and forcing my way to the front.

But when punk came along at the end of '76 the audience suddenly became more photogenic than the bands. And so, starting with the punks, I developed something of a compulsion to record some of the fantastically exuberant and colorful young people I saw, both in nightclubs and, later on, on the street.

I certainly never wanted to be a photographer. It's just that when punk happened I found myself in the right place at the right time. Then once I'd started, I could never quite think of a reason to stop. Photography gradually drew me in and took over my life.

I'm absolutely no sort of fashion plate myself, and the various subcultures I photographed had zero influence on my personal style. I wear similar clothes now to what I wore when I was a student at art school: Levis, Dr. Martens, Ben Sherman shirts, that kind of thing.

the main fashion scene as such, but almost everything became assimilated very quickly. When punk happened in the U.K. in late 1976 you could buy punk-influenced clothes in some of the major chain stores within months, certainly by the spring of '77. The big brands jumped on punk very, very quickly.

DO YOU THINK THAT SOCIAL MEDIA HAS INFLUENCED SUBCULTURES?

Social media is just like a big echo chamber. Whatever one is into, no matter how extreme, one will find other like-minded people and plenty of validation for it, somewhere on the internet.

When I first started shooting British subcultures, there were several distinct tribes and they socialized separately and were often totally antithetical to one another.

These days, you can show yourself off and socialize via social media without ever having to leave your own home. And you can find events with many different subcultures all in one place at the same time. Anthropologist Ted Polhemus calls it a "vast supermarket of style."

I think there is plenty of room for everything. And, furthermore, I think there's a desperate need for them now, too. Young people

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I've dealt with this

THERE WAS A SPECIAL PERIOD IN ENGLAND THAT SPAWNED MANY OVER-THE-TOP LOOKS. WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS HAPPENING?

The late '70s and early '80s was quite a bleak and depressing time in the U.K. and London in particular. There were often strikes and power cuts, unemployment was (back then) at an all-time high, and there was a sort of shantytown of people living on the streets around Waterloo. Rubbish used to pile up on the streets for weeks on end, and for some of the '70s we had a three-day working week. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became prime minister and the government took a sharp shift to the right. She sorted out most of the strikes, but, in reality, life for most ordinary people got much worse. And the punk slogan "no future" became a reality for many young working-class kids insofar as they felt they didn't have that much in life to look forward to. Dressing up, going out, and having fun was, in my opinion, just a reaction to the rather limited life prospects most people felt they had.

DO YOU THINK THE VARIOUS YOUTH CULTS YOU WERE PHOTOGRAPHING WERE PART OF THE MAIN FASHION SCENE? WHEN DID THAT HAPPEN?

The various youth cults I was photographing weren't part of

always have a need to express themselves as they are growing up and their characters start to form. And against some of the social, financial, and political pressures we are facing right now, there is a distinct need for fun, self-expression, and frivolity.

YOU HAVE WORKED WITH A LOT OF CELEBRITIES. WHICH QUALITIES DO YOU AIM TO SHOWCASE WHEN TAKING A PORTRAIT?

Now

Nowadays, nothing. I want everything to come from the process and the subjects themselves. I try to insert myself into that process as little as possible.

When I first started shooting rock stars and celebrities, I used to come up with all my ideas before I'd even met my subject. Sometimes I'd sketch ideas out in a notebook and discuss them with my subject beforehand. I abandoned that approach very quickly because it was boring. I was doing all my thinking ahead of time and never during the moment.

As I got older, I've learned that shooting portraits (for me) isn't really about ideas. It's more about a realization of the possible. It's more about being in the moment and trying to keep your head clear and your eyes open. That way, one can try to harness serendipity if and when it comes along. ▲



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“PHOTOGRAPHY GRADUALLY DREW ME IN AND TOOK OVER MY LIFE.”