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Continuous Motion

# Victory Tischler-Blue: Embracing Drama in All Forms

by Daniella B. Walsh



Wild thing  
you make my heart sing  
You make everything groovy, wild thing  
Wild thing, I think I love you...

Those lines open “Wild Thing,” a song put onto the charts in 1966 by The Troggs, one of the myriad British Beatles offshoots.

A decade or so later, The Runaways, a group of teenage female rockers led by superstar Joan Jett, recorded the same song.

Little did Vicki Blue, the group’s last bass player (1977-1978), know then what a huge part everything wild would play in her adult life, after she embarked on an entirely different mission and purpose as Victory Tischler-Blue.

First, she had to cut loose from teen band travails such as touring and divergent, often rudderless bandmates, a predatory impresario and effects of fame that rose like a punker’s scream and descended into a Joplinesque wail.



As it turned out, though, she had put band life behind her at the right time. “With MTV starting up, there came a new genre of music videos,” she recalls. “I immediately pronounced myself as a music director. Anything goes with those music videos.”



She rapidly morphed into a videographer, director and film producer, first in television, then in independent films.

In 2004, she chronicled the rise and fall of The Runaways in “Edgeplay,” a soul-searing but widely acclaimed documentary. “The film became the highest-rated rock doc on Showtime,” she says.

Making videos and films revived a childhood dream for Tischler-Blue: She had wanted to be a photographer since age 12, but the prospect had proved daunting. Dyslexia prevented her from grasping the intricacies of the medium and its machinery, but when her father gave her an Instamatic with a film cartridge, it became a constant companion, she recalls. The Instamatic has since given way to sleek Leicas.

She began making music as a lark, a cool thing to do for any California teen.

“I enjoyed the band,” she recalls, “but photography was my first love. My fave during the band days was going into photographers’ studios.”

## Wild Things

Tischler-Blue grew up in Newport Beach, California – not exactly a place that evokes the “wild” West that she came to love. “We toured America, Europe, Northern Ireland and, after the Runaways, I lived in London for three years, as a songwriter,” she says. “That made me realize how much I love California and the West. I feel that most real creativity takes place in the West, but I find Los Angeles, and cities in general, suffocating.”

Currently, she lives with her partner of 16 years in Palm Springs, on what was the last horse farm in the city. Now, it is also home to three Andalusian, aka Pure Spanish, horses and a photo studio filled with compelling, mostly black-and-white images of women, men and horses.

One quickly grasps how intensely Tischler-Blue loves all things wild: The uninhabited West, wild horses and the deserts they roam and untamed people – the latter meaning women and men who follow a self-charted course, who embrace the dark as well as the light, people whom most of the bourgeoisie would dismiss.

For Tischler-Blue, photography is all about intimacy and the element of surprise, she says. She finds magic that comes along with things not planned, that leave a lot of space for the unscripted to manifest. “I’m always drawn to the outliers,” she says.

What all, human and beast, have in common here is an extraordinary, sometimes haunting beauty.

Her photographs documenting desert herds of wild horses reflect her empathy with beings at the mercy of humans. Over time, she has rescued 17 wild mustangs which are now housed at the Return to Freedom American Wild Horse Sanctuary.

“When the Bureau of Land Management rounded them up, they were starving. To find those horses and have them brought from Nevada to Utah was the biggest accomplishment of my life – more important than gold records,” she says. Their close-up portraits dispel any doubt about animals possessing souls. Every face looks different; the only common element is their eyes – introspective and, yes, soulful. “They would stop and look at you – the wind is blowing, and they look at you, and nothing exists except that moment. It is spiritual, ethereal, humbling, emotional and overwhelming. Photographing the wild horses, there is no more intimate scenario.”

On a road trip through Nevada, Tischler-Blue and Pat, her partner, encountered their first herd of wild horses along a roadside. She discovered that they belonged to the Cold Creek herd, and spent the next eight years following and photographing them.

“Over time I became familiar with the horses, getting to know the herd and the family bands, up to four generations. I’d park on the side of the road and walk into the desert,” she recalls. “Then, in 2015, a horrible drought





struck, and the horses starved. The government rounded them up and took them away.”

Persistence prevailed: After calling every wild horse sanctuary, including Return to Freedom, and wrangling with the Bureau of Land Management, she found every one of her horses and adopted the ones she'd photographed. They now live in Lompoc, California. “I made it happen,” she says, noting that she supports her equine models by holding photographic workshops.

### A Lens on a Different World

During another road trip, Tischler-Blue and Pat stopped at Bella's Restaurant and Espresso in Wells, Nevada. One of Tischler-Blue's envisioned photo projects had been to photograph the inner workings of a brothel and the women plying their trade in the sex industry. At Bella's, the opportunity presented itself since the eatery's proprietor also owned Bella's Hacienda Ranch, a legal Nevada brothel.

Bella wholeheartedly embraced Tischler-Blue's intent of presenting the self-described courtesans not just as sex workers but as empowered, entrepreneurial women. “The women are good people working in a stigmatized occupation,” Tischler-Blue says. “They come from all walks of life, sometimes from horribly abusive backgrounds.



THE RUNAWAYS L-R Victory Tischler-Blue, Joan Jett, Lita Ford, Sandy West

Then there are others who are there for the adventure, living their own lives and their own fantasies.”

Over time she struck up friendships with Bella and her workers. “I was welcome as a woman,” she said. “There was a warmth and welcoming that surprised me. We had a wonderful time together. The ladies contribute their talents to my art project. They are my art models; I am paying them, and they are doing something they are proud of. Their work is not about sex; it's a form of therapy, filling human need, about empathy and touch.”

Photographs taken so far at Bella's will be featured in an exhibition at the Leica Gallery in Los Angeles. Curated by gallery director Paris Chong, the show will open on March 5, 2020. Eventually the “Bella” works will be turned into a book.

Chong and Tischler-Blue met accidentally at the gallery. “When I found out that Victory had been in the Runaways,” Chong says, “I asked to see her work and, it was great.” Originally the show was to feature landscapes, but when Chong saw examples of the “Bella Hacienda” project, she chose those photographs instead. “I love Susan Meiselas' ‘Carnival Strippers,’ and liked that Victory's pictures reminded me of that book. Her pictures are a bit racy without putting down women. She captured the women with respect and honesty. They are honest photographs,” says Chong. “The show will do well here; it has a lot of rock and roll.”

### A Road Not Traveled

Asked if she ever thought of becoming a photojournalist, Tischler-Blue answered in the affirmative. “I think about that a lot. If I did not have the career I had as a kid, I would have become a war photographer. I love the drama, the intensity,” she says. She went on to say that she has shot some horrific things in her life, but once behind the viewfinder it's all about getting that shot. “I wish I could have gone to Vietnam, to Afghanistan,” she says. “That is one of my few regrets.”

But then, the Runaways played Northern Ireland in the '70s. Their hotel was bombed, she recalls. “That's the closest I've been to a war.”

Summing up her career thus far, she says: “I really don't care about having been famous. It opened a lot of doors for me that would not have opened up. By nature, I am a very private person. That's why I opted for directing films. I am in control.”

