

To call Sal Terracina a photographer is like calling Leonardo da Vinci a painter. The New Jersey-born grandson of immigrant puppeteers didn't design flying machines or deconstruct the human body. Terracina's varied talents were of a different sort: piano player, mask maker, mind reader. These pursuits did, however, place him in extraordinary environments that supplied the raw material for a lifelong urge to make pictures. By the time Terracina died in 1995, he

PHOTOGRAPHY WAS AT THE HEART OF A LIFE THAT INCLUDED MIND READING, MASK MAKING, PIANO PLAYING, AND CONSORTING WITH GANGSTERS, CIRCUS FREAKS, AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLES. THIS IS THE TRUE STORY OF A WHACKED-OUT RENAISSANCE MAN WHO MAY BE THE MOST INTRIGUING IMAGE-MAKER YOU NEVER HEARD OF.
BY RUSSELL HART

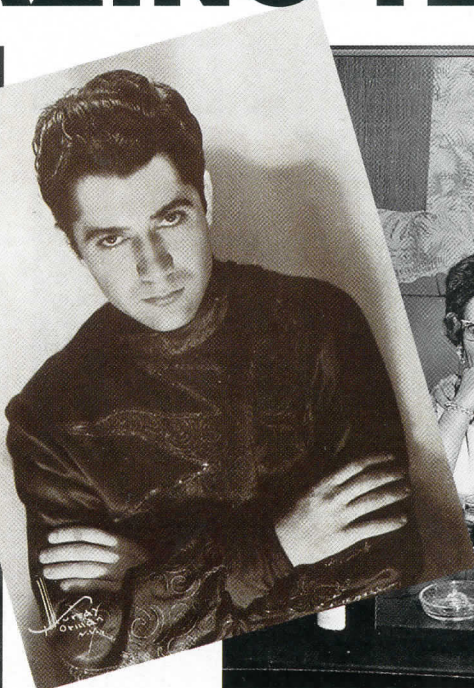
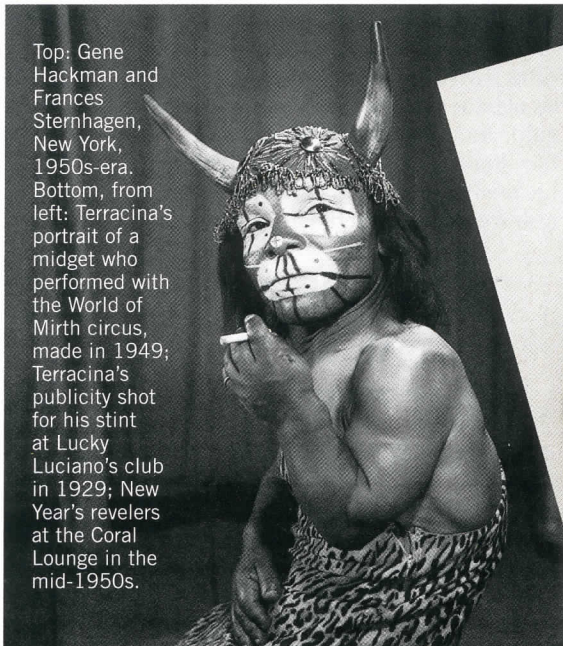


EDITORIAL CHOICE

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THE AMAZING TERRACINA

Top: Gene Hackman and Frances Sternhagen, New York, 1950s-era. Bottom, from left: Terracina's portrait of a midget who performed with the World of Mirth circus, made in 1949; Terracina's publicity shot for his stint at Lucky Luciano's club in 1929; New Year's revelers at the Coral Lounge in the mid-1950s.



DISCOVERY

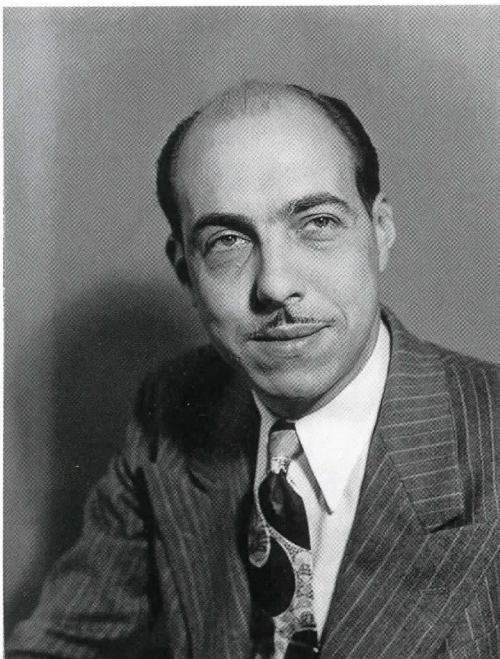
left a legacy of 80,000 negatives, three-quarters of them shot with a trusty 4x5 Speed Graphic. His remarkable images show everything from leering gangsters to shady circus acts, from far-flung tribal peoples to scantily clad gay men. If photography is the crux of today's visual culture, then Sal Terracina was a Leonardo for our strange times. Here is his story.

Sal's abilities, photography included, were self-taught. But his artistic nature found expression long before he picked up a camera. As a boy in Elizabeth, New Jersey, he made dolls, usually in secret. Following the tradition of his Italian forebears—his parents hailed from the Mediterranean seaside town of Terracina—he also made marionettes and staged puppet shows for his peers. (The proceeds were a source of revenue for art supplies.) Meanwhile, another talent was emerging. "He aroused the interest of his school teachers," reads a 1932 newspaper profile of the prodigy, "with his uncanny ability to foresee what they were going to write on the classroom blackboard before they even picked up the chalk." Terracina's talent for the piano was just as unexpected, according to the same article. "The first time he sat before a piano Sal astounded not only his listeners, but himself, at his ability to interpret on the pianoforte the melodies he had heard. Today he can play the scores of more than 50 operas by ear."

Hoodlums owned the streets when Terracina was a teen, so priests at the family church tried to keep the boy out of trouble by making him their organist. Despite their good intentions Sal spent four months in jail for bank robbery (he denied the heist) when one of the guns used in the crime was found under the church's organ. By then Terracina was supplementing his ecclesiastical duties with piano gigs at local bars and nightclubs. The act quickly evolved to include his mind-reading skills, practiced on audiences eager to suspend their disbelief. Sal's billing as the world's youngest mind reader caught the attention of local gangsters, who spirited him to Chicago to perform at the Otis Beer Tunnel, a speakeasy backed by crime boss Lucky Luciano. "Just from Broadway to You," announced Sal's advertisement, "The Internationally Famous Pianist, Psychist [sic], Artist Salvador Terracina, In Person." The mobsters had an ulterior motive: They hoped Sal would be able to guide their illegal betting operations. Fortunately, they liked his act so much they didn't kill him when his predictions weren't always on the money. Sal also worked gangland parties, but when one turned

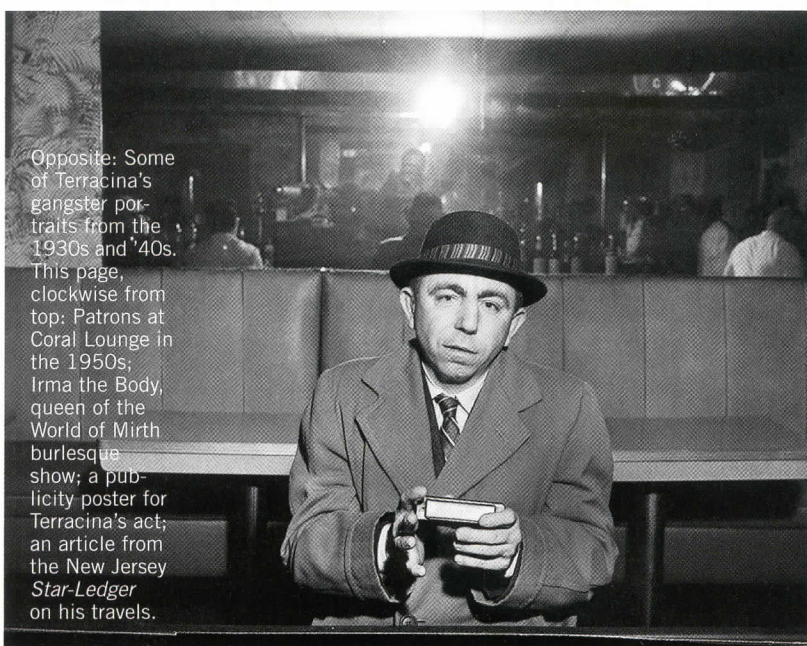
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Opposite: Some of Terracina's gangster portraits from the 1930s and '40s.

This page, clockwise from top: Patrons at Coral Lounge in the 1950s; Irma the Body, queen of the World of Mirth burlesque show; a publicity poster for Terracina's act; an article from the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* on his travels.



into a shoot-out he made a beeline back to Broadway.

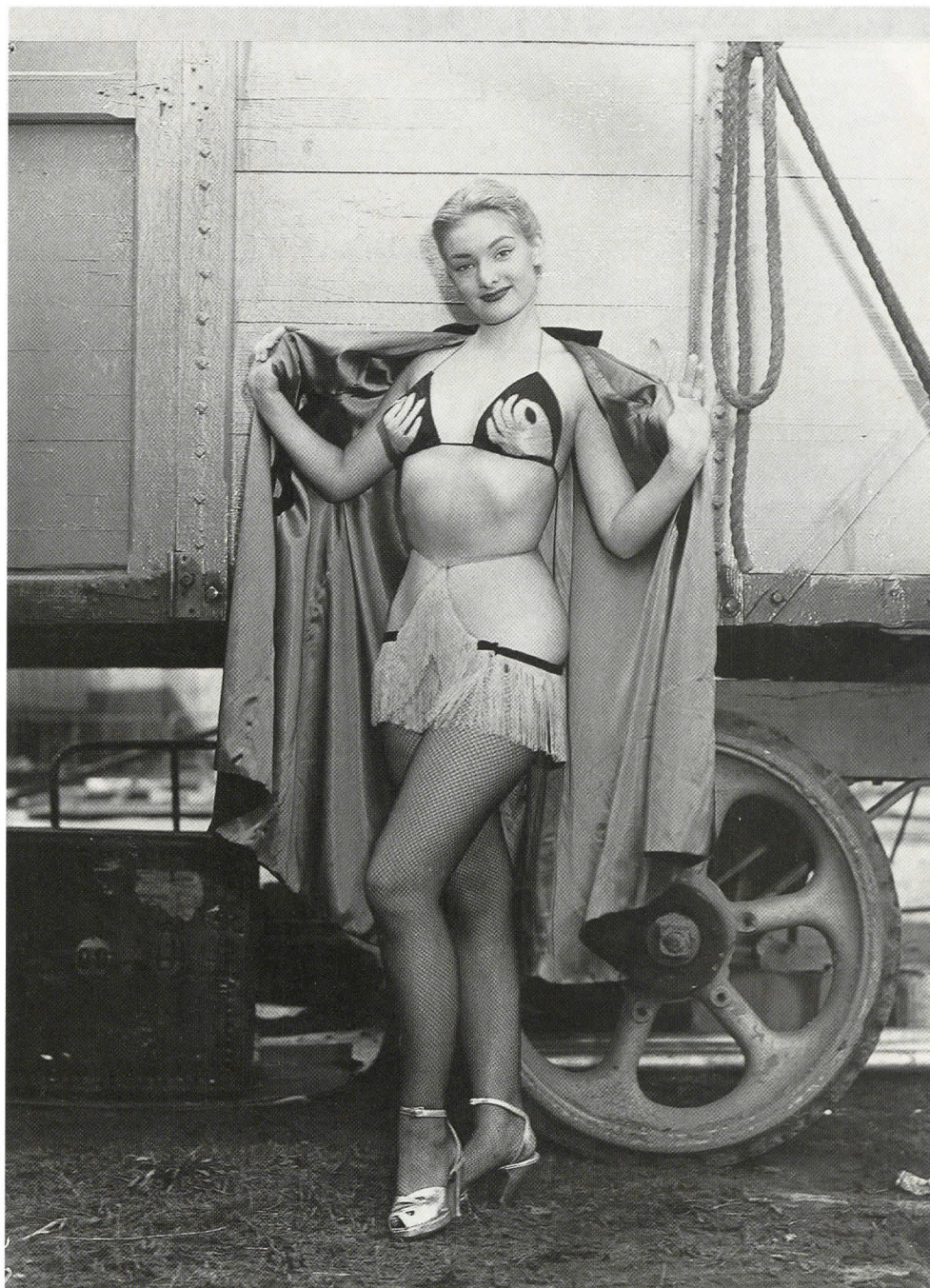
The rich material of criminal and nightclub society dazzled Terracina. He had taken pictures of family, friends, and local wise guys for years, starting out with a folding pocket camera. Now he began photographing bar and nightclub patrons, wise and regular guys alike, with a 4x5 Speed Graphic. "In the '30s he was working dozens of clubs in New Jersey and New York, using stage names

like Salterra and the Great Saltarr," says Keith Terracina, Sal's grandnephew and chief evangelist, now the keeper of his massive archive. "He was a regular at a famous off-Broadway speakeasy called Bill's Gay Nineties. After a set of piano playing and mind reading, Sal would take his Speed Graphic

behind the bar and shoot people hanging out and drinking. He would just do a 4x5, boom." These photographs are full of life, with a powerful directness that transcends their period feeling. Photographs, projected as 4x5 lantern slides, became

part of Sal's act. "Terracina: Character Analyst, Mystic, Mental Telepathist," reads one flyer from the time. "At the Piano, Cocktail Hour." A poster depicts Sal's head floating in front of a disembodied skull that has X rays emanating from its eye sockets.

Terracina even created his own props for his performances—giant, painted papier-mâché masks of exotic, often frightening faces. He had made and used them in sets for a burlesque show at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, where he was performing during his stint at the Otis Beer Tunnel. The masks, which Sal had been making since childhood and numbered about 500, were also used for set decoration in Broadway productions of *Tobacco Road*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and other plays. "He came up with a



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recipe where he would mix some kind of battery acid with papier-mâché," explains Keith Terracina. The mix apparently had archival qualities: "Art dealers still can't figure out how papier-mâché masks could be in such perfect condition after so many years." The masks themselves figure prominently in many of Sal's photographs.

Then, in 1948, Sal attended a circus performance at which the resident organ player failed to appear. ("I think he died," says Keith Terracina.) Sal offered to stand in, and he soon signed up with the World of Mirth, which billed itself as "The Largest Midway on Earth." Sal went on to impress audiences with his mind reading and piano playing. "After a while, he was running the whole freaking World of Mirth," says Keith Terracina. It turned out to be Sal's richest source of photographic material yet. "He loved midgets, and that place was packed with them. He would dress them in little bikinis and photograph them. Or he'd dress them up as Caesar or Spartacus and photograph them. He took a lot of pictures of Irma the Body, queen of a nude burlesque show. Basically he hung out with clowns, dwarfs, and freaks for two years, and the photographs are amazing."

In 1951 Terracina returned to New York and opened his own Manhattan photo studio. Its specialty was a natural extension of Sal's sense of theater: portraits of actors. For two years he shot up-and-coming stars such as Gene Hackman, James Earl Jones, Frances Sternhagen, and Ed Asner. And then Sal received another offer he couldn't refuse. The Seafarers International Union, an association of merchant marines, asked him to travel the world as its official photographer. In the late '30s Terracina had taken his nightclub act on cruise ships to Cuba, Italy, and Hawaii. But his new itinerary was far removed from those sunny stops. "He would go to places where no one wanted to go," Keith Terracina says. "Whether it was the voodoo huts of Haiti or the opium dens of Cambodia, he'd be the first one off the boat. My father was always getting strange souvenirs from Uncle Sal in the mail." Sal's destinations included Borneo, Ecuador, Zanzibar, and the Belgian Congo.

The photographer came home a few years later with a collection of shrunken heads and thousands of negatives. These images sometimes show Sal posing with his subjects; in one shot he has his arms around two bare-breasted African women, and in another he's surrounded by a family of pygmies. He is always immaculately groomed. "He could be in a jungle hut and he's got on a silk shirt, khaki pants, and alligator shoes, looking like a model out of *GQ*," says Keith Terracina. "He was super-good-looking."

Once he returned, Sal began spending more

time with his brother Tony, Keith's grandfather. Tony had moved to Key West, Florida, says Keith, after mobsters left him for dead in New Jersey's marshy Meadowlands when a deal went bad. After a stint smuggling rum and CIA agents throughout the Caribbean, says Keith, "Captain" Tony (who was later elected Key West's mayor by a narrow margin) bought a local bar that had been Ernest Hemingway's favorite post-fishing haunt (still in business as Captain Tony's Saloon). Keith Terracina spent a good deal of his youth there. "We'd spend hours at the bar, and that's where I heard Sal's amazing stories," he says. Terracina drinking buddies included such Key West regulars as Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, children's book author Shel Silverstein, and *Hollywood Squares* comedian Paul Lynde.

It was a gay scene in the modern sense of the word, and Sal seized its photographic opportunities. He convinced the locals, mostly young men, to pose for him in outfits of his own creation, from cutoff jeans to mock-Roman armor and leopard-skin loincloths. The pictures' overriding theme is nautical (ropes and nets), but they're liberally seasoned with pharaonic elements (busts of Tut). To call them campy is to understate their strangeness.

Cut to 2002. That year, Sal's longtime lover turned the photographer's archive over to his grandnephew. "There were 60 boxes of negatives and prints in his apartment," Keith recalls, "and even more, along with a spectacular number of his masks, in a warehouse in the Bronx." Keith, himself a professional photographer specializing in pictures of nude go-go dancers for a magazine called *Mentertainment*, already had a small collection of Sal's work. But he immediately realized that his inheritance was a visual gold mine. He sent samples of Sal's images off to German publisher Taschen, which he knew had a reputation for producing edgy photography books. Benedict Taschen agreed to do at least one monograph on Sal, due out in 2005, and possibly additional volumes based on the various themes of Sal's oeuvre. He assigned the task of editing the project to Eric Kroll, perhaps the world's leading authority on (and practitioner of) fetish photography.

Kroll and Keith Terracina are still sifting through Sal's tens of thousands of images. In the process, Keith, who has put together a Website of some of what has been unearthed so far (salsimages.com), is reliving his grand-uncle's extraordinary life through photography. "To me, my uncle Sal was the most fascinating person I ever met," he says. "He didn't care about money or fame. He just wanted to take pictures, play the piano, make his masks, and please people." Sal Terracina was, in the end, an artist. ■



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