

PRINCESS

Models Beverly Johnson and Pat Cleveland - in the pages of Vogue - were indelible influences on a Jamaican-American princess growing up on Long Island

By Andrea Marie Thompson

The library of my junior high school in Baldwin, Long Island, was my home away from home. It was there where I first saw a copy of Vogue. I flipped through its pages, greedily inhaling every article and image even though they had no relevance to my 11-year-old life. But it was the pictures of Pat Cleveland and Beverly Johnson that really got my heart racing; I was intrigued by any photo layouts that featured these two preeminent Black models of the 1970s and 80s.



Model Beverly Johnson on the cover of Vogue



Pat Cleveland in the pages of Vogue

They were both so beautiful: Lean, one fair, one dark, everyday girls and exotic. In 1976 Long Island, where I grew up, they were out of my world: Black women in well-tailored clothes with bold colors and prints, outlandish make-up, and gorgeous backdrops that evoked wealth without apology. I. Was. Hooked. I could not get enough of Vogue and went back to the library on lunch hours, free periods, and after-school to lustfully peruse its pages.

Too young with not enough allowance money to buy my own copies of the magazine, I instead counted down the time until the next month's issue would arrive, harassing our friendly and patient librarian about the exact day it would arrive. Some might say my Vogue gene was lying dormant until it was awakened and stroked and fed. I don't know. I just know that when first reading and flipping through those pages something clicked and felt good and I knew what I wanted in life: the rich, sumptuous

haute couture dresses, handbags, fur coats and sparkly jewelry that were displayed on long-limbed models in sexy locations around the world. Some of those models, like Pat Cleveland and Beverly Johnson, were Black like me and that made me feel good, as if anything was possible.



Model Pat Cleveland

At the time I attended Baldwin Junior High, a public school in Baldwin, Long Island, a stalwart middle-class community on the island's south shore, 45 minutes from Manhattan. My family had been in America only a few years, fully relocating from Kingston, Jamaica in 1973. My parents, a teacher and a police detective, were a hard-working young couple who, although doing very well in Kingston, were like many young people in Jamaica at the time, and thought they could evolve from middle-class to upper-class on a faster trajectory by immigrating to the U.S.

My adjustment in the States was rocky at first. I went through the typical student immigrant experiences: I was picked on by a group of girls who were puzzled by my foreign accent and my unusual British pronunciation of words. British words, mannerisms, and way of life were firmly entrenched in the Jamaican people and our culture since the country had been colonized by the British until its independence in 1962. So when called on in class and asked to give the answers to questions I would pronounce zero, naught and the letter "Z," zed, among other faux pas. I was also, after being comprehensively tested, moved ahead by one grade making me almost two years younger than my classmates. It was a recipe for disaster, at first anyway.

One afternoon, a group of about seven girls led by 10-year-old Felicia who fancied herself a diminutive gang leader in training, confronted me after school, taunting me and making fun of my accent, pushing me and doing a great job of intimidating me. It seemed that they had worked themselves up into a frenzy of hate over nothing else but the differences between us. I was probably the quietest kid in our fourth grade class and was too shy to approach or speak to classmates at first. I went to school and went home as my mother had directed me to do. So when surrounded by a menacing group of girls from my own class, I was terrified and ran as fast as I could. They ran after me. I sprinted to my

aunt's house where my family lived briefly when we first moved here, and banged on the door desperate for my aunt to let me in. Hearing the frantic knocks she quickly opened the door and seeing the elementary school gang on her front lawn, and the desperate expression on my face, figured everything out in about five seconds and yelled at them to leave me alone and go away. I almost fainted my heart was pounding so hard. It was the most frightening experience of my young life.



Me, in junior high

But life improved dramatically after that – and after my mother complained to my teacher about what had happened - and I soon became best of friends with Felicia and her crew. Two years later my family moved to the adjacent town of Baldwin where I started junior high – today called middle school – and I fit in well. My accent was not as distinct and I had quickly learned the American way to say British words. In seventh grade, I was 11 years old but already mature beyond my years. I already knew I was intrigued by words and besides being a voracious reader also loved to write and soon began writing articles for the school paper. And in spite of my frightening initiation with American schoolgirls, I was friendly and sociable, with friends of all races and both genders.

At home my mother was making sure my younger sister and I were well-rounded young women. From a prominent family in Jamaica, my mother was stylish and house-proud. She and her house, our house, were always impeccable in case anyone should drop by on a whim, a common custom among the Jamaican community. Always using my sister and I as an excuse to go shopping, my mother bought us good quality, matchy-matchy outfits from department stores like the long forgotten TSS, JC Penney and Macy's. With her roundelay of wigs, pantsuits, handbags and shoes, my mom was always the best-dressed woman on the block and she made sure my sister and I were also well-turned out. She also made sure culture was a big part of our lives and began to take us into Manhattan to attend Broadway shows, the opera, the ballet and to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unlike our African-American neighbors who often thought you had to be white and rich to see an opera, there were no racial or economic barriers in my mother's mind. We were all equal and her children were going to have the best and be exposed to the best life had to offer.



Johnson's first cover for Vogue magazine

After discovering Vogue, I realized that my mother was on the right track and seeing Beverly Johnson in the pages of Vogue was the confirmation: There was nothing I couldn't have or be. Still fascinated by each month's issue and the glamorous and seemingly perfect young ladies it portrayed in pictures and print, I was more than willing when my mother suggested that I attend the Ophelia Devore School of Charm – a finishing school for young girls from some of New York's most progressive Black families. My mother had heard about the school from a neighbor and thought her oldest daughter, her already discerning princess, would be the perfect candidate. Every Saturday morning for a year my mother, younger sister and I would board the Long Island Railroad for the 42-minute train ride into Penn Station and then walk to Ophelia Devore then located in Midtown. While my mother and sister attended a theater matinee ("I saw every single show on Broadway that year," my mother often says), I was taught how to walk, speak, eat, apply makeup and carry myself on all fronts like a young lady. Unlike other pubescent girls may have at 12, I never once resented it and looked forward to the Saturday morning trips into Manhattan, a city I had fallen in love with, and to being taught by instructors who only wanted me to be my highest and best self.

Attended by Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson, among other well-known Black beauties, Ophelia Devore opened her charm school in the 1950s. A pioneer for today's ethnic models, Devore began her modeling career at 16 taking it as far as she could before starting her own modeling agency in 1946 that specialized in promoting ethnic models, one of the first in the country. But getting bookings for her models was difficult as clients, fashion photographers and even makeup artists had never consistently worked with Black models before. In the early fifties, as a means of supplementing her rather sparse agency income, Devore started the charm school hoping to pass on the lessons

learned from her own experiences to young women who she wanted to see break down future barriers.

Charm school was a mix of cliché and wonder. We walked and sat with books on our heads to practice perfect posture; received lessons in diction and pronunciation; were told what eye makeup shades of grays, whites, blues, green and purple were right for our complexion and what lipstick colors to avoid. We were sternly instructed that our fingernails and toenails should be trimmed, filed and polished (clear if your parents didn't allow color) at all times. Our etiquette classes were giggly affairs as adolescents with little reference as to how relevant a desert spoon, wine glass and water dish might be to our lives, were painstakingly taught how to maneuver and manipulate them in order not to embarrass ourselves at future state dinners and museum fundraising galas. We learned how to walk like runway models not only because it would be important for our professionally staged fashion show on graduation night, but also because it boosted confidence and promised that an Ophelia Devore girl would be a standout on any street and in any room.

On the night of our graduation I was excited and disappointed only because I knew I wouldn't be back the following Saturday morning. I loved every minute of that night because it was time for me to apply all the skills I had learned. With dozens of girls and about three changes of outfits each, the fashion show was intense and long. Little darlings in full makeup and grownup clothes strutted our stuff down a long runway in evening gowns, casual short sets, and flirty dresses for our families and invited guests showing off our perfect posture, bright smiles and painstakingly applied makeup. I had never felt so glamorous and became a sister in spirit and now reality, in my mind anyway, with Pat and Beverly. For one night I was living the life of my paper bound mentors. It was enchanting and thrilling.



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Today, Vogue is still one of my favorite magazines, a book that I identify with in my quest to continue being my highest and best self. My desires for only the most beautiful and luxurious things in life have been defined, molded and decided by its content. I fantasize about, and sometimes even buy, some of the designer clothes that

hang from the bodies of Giselle Bunchen and Liya Kibede. When I get dressed my mother's sartorial expectations and Vogue's depiction of impeccable style are still my guiding forces. Decisions on how to wear my hair, makeup and clothes and my expressions of diction, posture, etiquette and taste have all been formed by a variety of experiences with Pat and Beverly as silent but strong forces in my life. Their proud and pioneering legacy has changed my life and probably those of thousands of young Black women everywhere.