

# Black Models

## DREAMS

Debbie Hillaire is just 27 years old. A former model and child model herself, she's in her third year as an agent and boss of 'Dreams'. Attractive, intelligent and very perspicacious, she's the type of person who never gives an order, relying on personality, something she can do on account of her sincerity. She is holding court downstairs in a wine bar, a three minute walk from her New Bond Street Office. She talks to her models as though they were partners.

**MJ:** Why did you start Dreams?

**Debbie:** Because when I was a model myself, it was very difficult. There were a lot of rip offs, and I wanted to do something about it.

**MJ:** Any other reasons?

**Debbie:** Because I'm black and I saw there was a target market. There's a market for

a negative approach is Rhoda Lagunju. Twenty years old and very dark, Rhoda stands 5'11", and although of Nigerian origin, was born in England, and is thoroughly Anglicised right down to her accent. She started modelling when she was 15, and has worked on TV commercials for Nigerian TV, various videos, and abroad had worked the fashion shows in Paris and Italy.

She also points out that running the agency is a twenty-four hour job. 'I'm always working: even when I'm going out, I'm constantly looking out for possible assignments'. Her scouting brings in various assignments which most model agencies miss. She has supplied models for functions, hostesses, all sorts of PR work, including the Islington Chamber of

Commerce. 'I let them know where I draw the line and if they go over it, I don't bother to contact them. They have to be professional. If you're asking professional fees, you have to look professional. Some girls think they're being ripped off by paying for their portfolios, but the charges I make, don't cover costs. Last year I lost £5,000 just on pictures, keeping my books up to date.'

**MJ:** Do you see yourself as a model or specifically as a black model?

**Rhoda:** I see myself as an international model (again the familiar stress).

**MJ:** Do you think modelling is harder for black girls?

**Rhoda:** Yes, but I prefer it like that. It's difficult for everyone. It's a struggle; life is a struggle. My mother told me if you have to struggle for something, you appreciate it more when you get it.

This is a refreshingly positive attitude. In fact, the thing one notices most about all the blacks in the modelling business is their total lack of blaming white society or 'racism' for the difficulties they encounter.

This is in stark contrast to certain politicised blacks who never seem to stop complaining about it. It could be that the modelling business is naturally more cosmopolitan and therefore less bigoted. Or it could be that to make it in such an admittedly tough business demands character, drive and personality.

This is something all those I spoke to unquestionably have.

They know there is nothing to be gained by blaming other people for their own shortcomings or lack of success.

Rhoda, for instance doesn't have one agent. 'I'm with four or five agencies, but I manage myself.'

**MJ:** Why?

**Rhoda:** It's better like that; I get more work by myself.

**MJ:** Where do you feel modelling is leading?

**Rhoda:** I don't know. I think it's cynical. Fashion is cynical.

**MJ:** What do you want to do when you leave modelling?

**Rhoda:** I'd like to go into acting.

She has studied drama and performing arts, and has an 'O' level in dance. Yet another string to her bow is that she does social work when she's not modelling, looking after disadvantaged children.

Clearly she is a girl who believes in giving it her all.

## MONIQUE

Monique Clarke is 22 and has been with Dreams for two years. Born in England, she grew up in Jamaica and Florida. Like many models, she would like to go into acting eventually. She also has her feet planted firmly on the ground in another respect;

she is studying footwear technology.

**MJ:** How does England compare with Jamaica?

**Monique:** There's a lot of work in Jamaica. Here the market is small for black models.

She says there is no competition for 'exotic' looks because the industry is scared of it. Monique certainly has an exotic look herself and is happy with it. She says she could get more work if she changed her nose ie had it narrowed, and lightened her skin, but she has no intention of looking like a female Michael Jackson.

'I like modelling, but I don't want it so bad, I'll do that'. Does she consider herself primarily a black model?

**Monique:** I don't consider myself stereotyped.

As well as modelling, Monique has worked in PR in Jamaica.

**Monique:** It's harder here; the best area of commercial modelling is fashion.

**MJ:** Do you like fashion?

**Monique:** I don't like it for my portfolios - I prefer things that will last.

## JACQUELINE

Jacqueline Sookai is 19 years old and unusually short for a model at 5'5", which makes catwalk impossible.

This is her first meeting with Dreams; she was actually introduced to Debbie through Model Journal. She is of Asian extraction, and although thoroughly Westernised in all other respects, she wears her hair long in the Oriental fashion. Has she done much modelling?

**Jacqueline:** I started at 16, but it hasn't been continual.

**MJ:** What have you done so far?

**Jacqueline:** I've done a lot of work for Asian magazines and some fashion shows as a freelance.

**MJ:** What sort of work do you prefer?

**Jacqueline:** I do more facial modelling because I'm only 5'5", and because I have a good face - mostly photographic work.

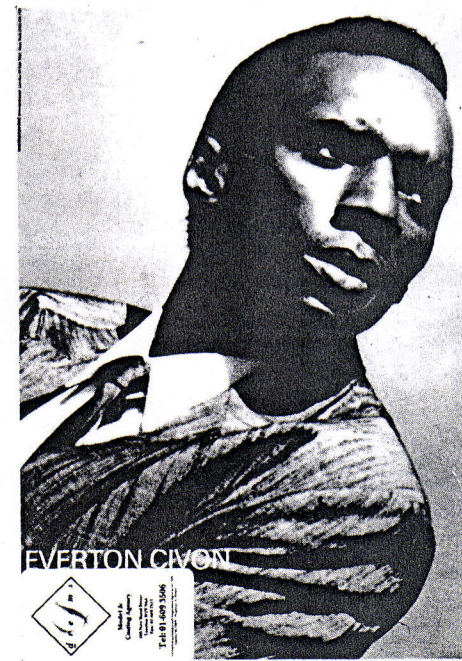
**MJ:** Where do you want to go in modelling?

**Jacqueline:** Right to the top.

She admits to being very ambitious, and regards black modelling as elitist.

'You see the same girls all the time' (referring to magazines and black magazines). Monique agrees with this, but they also agree that the top black models have paid their dues and are entitled to reap the rewards, although it does seem unfair to those struggling to make a name.

When she isn't modelling, Jacqueline works as her boyfriend's secretary - he owns a night club. But she would eventually like to go into acting.



Top right:  
Monique  
Jacqueline  
Everton



She insists she is first and foremost a models' agent - not a black models' agent - and, started when people kept ringing her up at home. When she started Dreams, she also ran a grooming school and a photo studio, but packed it in because she was doing all the ground-work and people were going off to other agencies. 'It's a cut-throat market'.

**MJ:** We hear a lot about agents and phoney agents ripping off models. You're saying models rip off agents too?

**Debbie:** A lot of models are very unprofessional. They don't keep in touch; they don't keep their portfolios up to date, and they double-cross you.

**MJ:** You mean they work for other agencies? I thought this was taken for granted.

**Debbie:** I don't mind them working for other agencies as long as they let me know what they're doing. Clients also approach girls direct and they take work without using me. They think they're being clever, but they never get paid the proper rate - and I nearly always find out. There aren't many secrets in this industry because it's so tight.

**MJ:** Do you ever fire models?

Interestingly, Debbie echoes the same criticisms other agents make about black models; that magazines in particular, only use 'ugly' black girls and token blacks. 'They put in blacks just to make up the numbers'.

**MJ:** What problems have you personally experienced on account of being black and a woman?

**Debbie:** Being black, none whatsoever. A lot of people have given me 100% backing.

**MJ:** Being a woman? She says sometimes clients would like to mix business with pleasure, but she never does.

This isn't what I meant, but I suppose it's only natural. She insists she has never been patronised or treated as an inferior on account of her sex, which may indicate a lack of male chauvinism in the modelling business, but probably has a lot to do with her being who and what she is - a former model, someone who knows the tricks of the trade and an extremely capable businesswoman.

## RHODA

From a model's viewpoint things look a little different. One girl who has no time for



# and Agents

by Alexander Baron

by Yolanda Hester

For a black model trying to get signed on by a London agency the words 'we already have enough black girls on our books' are all too common. A friend of mine was once told by an agent that when Tatter put a black model on the cover that that particular issue sold less than any other. And that is one of the many reasons why agents prefer to limit the amount of black models on their books; there simply isn't a great deal of work for black models. In the US the atmosphere for black models is less restricting giving in to many factors.



Model:  
Karen  
Alexander

The first and most important reason is historical. Blacks have been in America for many years and within that time have been able to contribute a great deal to American society, socially and economically. Economically speaking, Black Americans have a high purchasing power. Therefore advertisers cannot over look this market.

During the turn of the century, Black American entertainers found social acceptance and success abroad particularly in Paris. Jazz, tap dancing and the blues were well loved and considered chic in the Paris of the 1920s and 30s. This brought about the glamorisation of Black Americans. This select group of jazz

musicians, dancers, performers and blues singers... 'pseudo parisiens' were dressed up, made up and well-known. This social acceptance did not transcend the borders of the US where racial tensions were still rather high but eventually America would catch on. Instead America suffered the depression in the 1930s the war in the 1940s and the rock and roll craze of the 1950s. It wasn't until the 1960s when Black Americans became a voice and a bid one at that.

The 60s were a time for care-free attitudes, love and peace for everyone. Many revolutions were taking place. Two of the most important were the civil rights movement and the wo-

mens movement. Blacks and women were standing up for what they thought was fair. Women became more career orientated which meant that they were at home less and in the office more therefore they now had to face new problems. Publications were formed for this new group of women. One such magazine was Essence which is geared to the professional black women. This magazine was one of the many aspects of the 1960s and 70s that helped launch a wave of black entrepreneurship. In order to relate to it's audience Essence needed black models, black writers, black photographers and advertisements geared to blacks.

Black professionals were easy enough to find, capital wasn't. This is where advertising and public support played key roles. During the 1960s and 70s blacks had high positions in many bid companies but now it was time to go it alone. Lockhart and \*Petus a black advertising agency in New York was established. Black modelling agencies such as Bethan were created. Organisations geared to black professionals were formed such as The National Association of Black Journalist. Now because of this new medium black fashion designers were confident enough to go public.

This new movement helped black models establish and make a name for themselves. One of the first black models to make it big in the US was Naomi Sims who now has her own cosmetic line. Another well-known model is Beverly Johnson who was the first black model to be on the cover of the American Vogue. Other famous faces are Karen Alexander, Gail O'Neil, Kara Johnson and the newest of the group Sebastian.

Another important reason why black models are more successful in the US is that America is such a melting pot, made up of so many mixtures of races and nationalities that Americans idea of beauty varies greatly. □

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## EVERTON

Everton Lawrence is 23 and looks like a dancer. He says he has done some acting, but has studied acting in the US and Canada.

Rather surprisingly, all he has been offered here is catwalk, even though he has graced the front cover of 'Class', an upmarket American black fashion magazine. Everton doesn't look the pushy type but says: 'I've known Debbie 2 months. When I came here, I went to every agency in London and was turned down by every one.'

**MJ:** Every one? Including black agencies?  
He nods.

**Everton:** All the places I tried had two or three black guys. They on too'. It's always exactly the same. After a while it begins to sound like a broken record.

He also point out, 'It isn't what you know, it's who you know', -a truism which can be applied to acting, music, writing and many related fields.

**MJ:** Is it more difficult being black?

**Everton:** You get stereotyped. They don't judge you as a person, but mostly they haven't got the time.

**MJ:** What do you do to counteract this?

**Everton:** You have to be patient, persistent and confident. I like it to be a little

bit of a struggle; it helps you appreciate it (mimicking Rhoda) - but only a bit - not too much.

If Everton doesn't succeed, it won't be through faint heartedness.

Though they all - models and agents - have numerous criticisms, they realise that in an imperfect world, whether you're black or white, nothing comes easy. Nothing worthwhile.

Not everyone can make it big or see their name in lights, but all those I spoke to for this article are definitely going to give it their best shot, which is all anyone can do.



## LOFTUS BURTON

Loftus Burton admits to being 39 years old and has been in and around the modelling business for 16 years. He sees his involvement first as a model then as a model agent as a logical development from his early beginnings as an actor. His career in acting is to say the least impressive. He began with the Royal Shakespeare Company and since then has appeared in such diverse productions as the BBC's Anthony and Cleopatra, the American TV series Space 1999, the Bill and the futuristic thriller Rollerball with James Caan. He has also appeared in numerous commercials and advertisements as an actor and a model though probably the zenith of his career was playing Jesus. Well you can't get much higher than that!

'Apparently I'm a big star in Nigeria' he laughs referring to his appearing in advertisements for Cussons Imperial Leather!

**MJ:** You say starting a model agency was a logical development in your career. Can you explain?

**Loftus:** I started Omnibus a youth organisation and it developed from that. Omnibus he says began as a project designed to keep young people off the streets and help them develop singing, dancing and drama talents.

**MJ:** Is it still going?

**Loftus:** Oh yes it's still running and very successful. The organisation's patrons include jazz singer Cleo Lane and former Wimbledon champion Arthur Ashe. The local authority and the police became involved with the organisation it now has charitable status.

**MJ:** Is Omnibus a black organisation?

'No' he says and stresses that both Omnibus and the Loftus Burton Agency have always striven to be accepted as mainstream.

**Loftus:** The modelling agency started as a fluke growing out of the wealth of talent Omnibus generated.

**MJ:** Turning now to the agency and the modelling business in general has being

black been a disadvantage? Like all the others Loftus is reluctant to use the word 'racism'.

**Loftus:** With me being black people thought the agency was a black agency. It got to the point where I had to get rid of a lot of black models because the agency was getting a reputation of supplying only blacks.

**MJ:** That must have been difficult. What is the scene like now?

**Loftus:** Nowadays I like to concentrate on a smaller team of people. I like to develop a rapport.

**MJ:** You're not interested in fly-by-nights?

**Loftus:** No. I want people with potential and commitment. I'd like to develop peoples' talents so that ten or fifteen years from now I've still got the same people with me.

**MJ:** How has the business changed from a black point of view since you started?

**Loftus:** When I started with the Royal Shakespeare Company I wasn't allowed to do a third year.

**MJ:** Because you were black?

**Loftus:** Yes. That was made clear to me at the start. I was told there just wasn't enough work for black actors.

Not content simply to complain about this state of affairs, Loftus became involved in several pressure groups to campaign for more work for blacks including successfully lobbying Equity. He does admit though that he personally has been lucky both as an actor and as a model. He has he says never stopped working; this is a claim a lot of white actors and models cannot make. Does he feel that blacks are stereotyped?

**Loftus:** In Britain definitely.

He challenges me to name a black actor or model who is a household name. I reply Eddie Murphy, Bill Cosby. 'Sydney Poitier' he chips in. I nod.

**Loftus:** They're all American; now name one British black.

I struggle.

**Loftus:** You see. In Britain blacks are allowed to be singers, dancers, comedians but

never actors. The man in the street might just put a name to Norman Beaton. As well as stereotyping he sees the modelling business in particular as elitist. This is particularly true of blacks.

The older generation of Caribbean immigrants he points out are notoriously conservative. Were and still are. He refers specifically to the middle class blacks.

**Loftus:** It wasn't just the middle class aspirations. They wanted their children to enter the respectable professions, to be doctors and lawyers. Black models of my generation went through hell.

He says if you were black and wanted to be an actor or a model you were either a poseur or a poof. (Clearly stereotyping is not all one sided).

Loftus shares Debbie Hillaire's criticism of many models as unprofessional. He stresses that models who work for his agency must dress impeccably and be prompt. Nothing puts a client off like a model who turns up half an hour late looking like he or she has been sleeping rough he says. Paradoxically he feels modelling is also very elitist though there is a lot less snobbery these days. Having a prestige Kings Road address comes over a lot better with clients than one in Ladbroke Grove or Harlesden High Street (where he is now based).

Models are also very bitchy according to Loftus and male models are even bitchier than the girls. Where does he think the business is heading both for black models and for models in general?

**Loftus:** I think it will be very interesting to see what happens come 1992.

This is a very interesting point which no one else has made so far.

**MJ:** Can you be more specific?

**Loftus:** A lot of young people are not prepared for Europe. You can already see the first signs of panic. But the Europeans ARE prepared for England.

He feels blacks fare better in Europe.

**Loftus:** In Britain they have one or two black girls on the catwalk because it's fashionable but in Europe they are accepted as ordinary models. The unwillingness or inability of the English speaking model to learn another language is going to count against her (or him). English models are not prepared to make the sacrifices necessary in order to get the work. All the same he views the future with optimism rather than despair.

Life has been good to Loftus Burton; a combination of hard work and good fortune has seen to that. But the modelling business he says oversaturated which will make a lot of models tougher in the future. So if the going gets tough the tough had better get going. And when they do Loftus Burton will be right up there with the leaders.