

May 10, 2009

HABITATS | THE WEST VILLAGE

Peace, Quiet and Pajama-Clad Jazz

By STEPHEN P. WILLIAMS

FRANKIE FOYE styles hair for a living, traveling to studios and locations around the world to make models look just right in fashion advertisements for such clients as Bergdorf Goodman and Victoria's Secret.

Since she spends so many days working with big crews in noisy photography studios filled with blaring music and inordinate demands, she has made her large one-bedroom apartment in the West Village a serene, private sanctuary.

"I hardly ever have people over," Ms. Foye said recently, as light poured into her living room and kitchen from the three huge windows.

She doesn't want any bad energy messing up the carefully curated mood of the high-ceilinged rooms. "I love living alone," Ms. Foye said.

Despite her penchant for quiet, she sometimes colors and cuts the locks of very good friends, or very interesting people, at home. In one corner of her eat-in kitchen, with its ancient painted cabinets and original hinges and door pulls, a chair sits in front of a tall custom-made mirror.

"This is the salon," she said. "Debbie Harry has had her hair done here. Molly Sims. Jennifer Nettles, the singer from Sugarland. Another singer named Patty Griffin."

Ms. Foye, who changed her name from Mary Ellen to Frankie years ago, just because it sounded right, grew up far from New York, and celebrities, in Manchester, N.H.

She was the last of seven children, raised by her father after her mother died.

"I'm third-generation Black Irish in America, and my father even had a trace of a brogue," she said.

After high school, she studied hairstyling in Manchester, and found she had a real talent for the trade. Seeking to live in the broader world, she got a job at a high-end salon on Newberry Street in Boston. It was boring.

"One day I walked by another salon with amazingly high-energy music blaring, and the people looked like they were having a good time and I thought, 'Wow, a black salon,'" Ms. Foye said.

She got a job there, and learned a whole new approach to hair, using heat styling and chemical processes and treatments popular in the early 1980s. It was a wild period in Boston, with Tina Turner opening a concert for Bob Marley and the punk movement raging in Kenmore Square.

"I made a lot of money and had a lot more fun," she said. "The salon was open till 10 or 11 at night."

She had been studying French, so she went to Paris on vacation to practice her tenses, and ended up staying for three years. "I lived in an amazing room in a women's boarding house in the Ninth Arrondissement," she said.

She studied painting and worked as an artist's model and traded haircuts for meals with students at La Varenne culinary school.

After three years, she returned to the United States and made her way to Florida, where she styled hair, partied, went to the beach and drove a white 1964 Mustang she named Edelweiss. After three years, she drove Edelweiss to Los Angeles and started working for fashion photographers and celebrities.

Of course, after another three years she decided to move again, this time to New York. After a stint with roommates on the Avenue of the Americas, she found a two-room apartment with two fireplaces on the third floor of an old carriage house on Bethune Street. She kicks herself now for not buying the place when it was offered to her for \$125,000. But the idea of being the owner of her own home "was beyond my comprehension," she said.

Ms. Foye settled into life as a hairstylist for fashion photographers, traveling the world and also putting in time in New York studios. She became friendly with the owner of a problem-solving business called Your Neighborhood Office on Bleecker Street, who told her about a fantastic place for rent nearby.

"The guts of the place were phenomenal," she said. "Huge windows, lots of closets, wood floor, high ceilings, an archway into the kitchen. The building was owned by a little old lady and so well maintained by her."

Ms. Foye won't say what she pays for the apartment, but Michelle Barshay of Barshay Brokerage, which specializes in the West Village, says that today a walk-up apartment like Ms. Foye's might go for \$2,600 to \$2,900 a month.

Defying all her peripatetic leanings, Ms. Foye has lived there for more than 13 years.

To warm up the living room, which receives cold northern light, she painted the walls a color called straw by Benjamin Moore. The flat, barely perceptible ceiling molding, with its scalloped edges, was painted a stony green color made by Donald Kaufman, as was the carved wood fireplace.

A large dark hutch between two windows holds white pottery, Moroccan tea glasses and other treasures. Two nubby 1950s flea market chairs face a Housing Works couch topped with a paisley throw.

The effect is calm, if somewhat moody.

"If the apartment had southern light, I wouldn't use these colors," Ms. Foye said. "I love the interplay of light and dark, shadows and sun here."

Many of the furnishings, including several of the large oil portraits of women that hang in the kitchen, a lovely oval lamp, a wicker bench and lots of books, are discarded treasures she found on the street, sometimes while returning from late-night visits to a jazz club called Smalls.

“If I can’t sleep, I just put my coat over my pajamas and head down there for the jam sessions that go until 4, sometimes 8 a.m. Amazing. I love it.”

She also used to find great stuff in neighborhood shops, like the old antique kimono store, now lost to the high rents paid by sellers of high fashion.

“How much more retail do we need?” said Ms. Foye, while at the same time acknowledging that fashion is what pays her bills.

She laments that she hasn’t found any great lamps or artwork on the street in quite some time.

“Less interesting people live here these days,” she said, “so there is much less interesting trash. Everyone has new stuff now.”