



THE CLIMB INTERVIEW

KATY DARTFORD TALKS TO

LYNN HILL

It was one of the defining moments in climbing history, and it was achieved by a woman. In September 1993, over four days, Lynn Hill completed what had once been thought impossible: a free ascent of *The Nose* on El Capitan. Already five-times winner of the Arco Rock Master, and the first woman to climb 8b+ (*Masse Critique* at Cimai in France in 1991) her success in the male-dominated world of late twentieth century climbing made her a role model whose appeal extends far beyond the boundaries of the sport. In 1994 she upped the ante, by becoming the first person to free climb *The Nose* in a single 24 hour period. For five years, her free version of this iconic climb remained unrepeated despite attempts by some of the best big wall climbers in the world, eventually succumbing to Scott Backes in 1998 after 261 days of effort. Now a mother and retired from the pro scene, does climbing still provide the intoxicating mixture of rebellion, creativity, and athleticism that it once did for Lynn Hill?



What exactly does it mean to be a 'retired pro climber', as you now call yourself?

I'm retired in the sense that I don't do competitions. I don't feel that as a fifty year old woman and mother it's fair to call myself a professional climber, in light of the young people who climb every day and train really hard. That doesn't really describe my life. I still love to climb and I'm not retired as a climber. I love everything I've always loved about climbing; I'm only 'retired' in the sense that I'm not really motivated or in the same mindset as the young professional climbers of today.

How do you continue to earn a living within the climbing industry?

I've tried to develop other skills in addition to being a climber, because you can't get paid to go out and climb in a vacuum. You have to share your climbing in some way, so I've developed writing and filmmaking skills. For the film of *The Nose* I produced, directed, and starred in it. I think there are a lot of different ways I can share my experiences, and I'm working on one of those things at the moment - something I've been thinking about for 30 years. It's a film that tells the story of climbing. It's called *Climbing Free*, like my book, but it's not an autobiography, but about approaches to climbing. I hope this new film will contribute to the sport of climbing for everyone from beginners to people who have been climbing for longer than me. Design is another thing I really enjoy, and I am designing structures for kids to climb, including outdoor climbing parks where I actually incorporate free-standing play structures. But day to day I make a living as an ambassador for Patagonia and Petzl, and through giving lectures around the world.

As a mother do you sometimes struggle to find time to climb?

Being a single mother is different to being a mother. It's obviously a big change of lifestyle; mums tend to be more immediately engaged with their babies especially if they breast feed, which I totally believe in. As a mother, climbing has never been my number one priority. My son is now eight, and I think it's really important to give him the time he needs for his own development. But this certainly doesn't mean you have to give up climbing. I also have to make a living for us, but I don't believe in working as much as modern society demands. The idea is balance. I enjoy being a mother, I enjoy sharing my life and

nurturing my child, and it means I'm not training very much - but it does mean I appreciate the time I do get to climb.

Does parenthood change the way you climb? Do you become less bold? Or less likely to go on expeditions to the mountains?

I think that happened before I had a child because I wanted to have a child. I made a decision not to go into the high mountains because I figured if I did, I might not survive to actually have a child. As a parent you don't want to take as many risks. I think about how traumatic it would be if I wasn't there. You can get a disease or die in car accident, but as a choice I'm not going to do a certain type of climbing as I think it's risky, and I don't want to subject my son to that.

Why did you choose to live in Boulder, Colorado?

Boulder has a magnetic pull as there's a very strong community of climbers there. It's not actually that big, and you can see people you know on the street. I find that refreshing. I don't want to just be an anonymous person, somewhere where everyone ignores each other. I like the fact people in Boulder appreciate good food, a good quality of life, and they care about the things I care about. People don't want to just buy the cheapest product - they'll pay five cents more if it's not full of chemicals. I think you should use your money wisely. There is a camaraderie among people in Boulder, and there's the proximity to the mountains of course.

What do you see as the most significant moments in your climbing life?

In the competition days it was winning at Arco, because the Rock Master competition is the Wimbledon of climbing. Then obviously *The Nose* was meaningful, as it's one of the most historic routes in the world. It's so beautiful, and involves lots of different climbing styles and I like the ingenuity you need to climb it. To be a woman in the male-dominated sport of climbing and especially with the history Yosemite, it was meaningful. Years ago I read a quote in Galen Rowell's book *The Vertical World Of Yosemite* that said 'women are conspicuously absent from the stories of this book, I make no apologies, because there were simply no women doing major first ascents in the formative years of Yosemite.' But my feeling was how do you start to get ▶

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'I RESPECTED WOMEN LIKE BEVERLY JOHNSON, WHO COMPLETED A TEN DAY SOLO ASCENT OF *DIHEDRAL WALL* IN 1978. SHE WAS A ROLE MODEL OF MINE, BUT SHE WASN'T IN GALEN ROWELL'S BOOK *THE VERTICAL WORLD OF YOSEMITE*. WOMEN NEED ROLE MODELS. BEVERLY'S CLIMB WAS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MOTIVATIONS FOR ME ON *THE NOSE*, AND I WAS ABLE TO TRY HARDER THAN I EVER HAD BEFORE.'



THIS PAGE: Lynn Hill in her preferred element, climbing free high on *The Nose* (5.13+) on El Capitan on her historic first free ascent of North America's most famous climb in 1993. HEINZ ZAK

FACING PAGE: Lynn Hill pulling around the lip of the notorious 'Great Roof' pitch of *The Nose*. The extremely thin seam in the back of the roof has since repulsed attempts by many of the world's best big wall free climbers. HEINZ ZAK

LYNN HILL WILL BE SPEAKING AT THIS YEAR'S KENDAL MOUNTAIN FESTIVAL: VISIT MOUNTAINFEST.CO.UK FOR MORE DETAILS AND TO BOOK TICKETS.

there unless you have examples of women pushing themselves? So I respected women like Beverly Johnson who completed a ten day solo ascent of the Dihedral wall in 1978. She was a role model of mine, and I don't think she was in that book. Women need role models. Beverly's climb was one of the most powerful motivations for me on *The Nose*, and I was able to try harder than I ever had before.

What do you think of the current women's climbing scene right now, and which women impress you the most today?

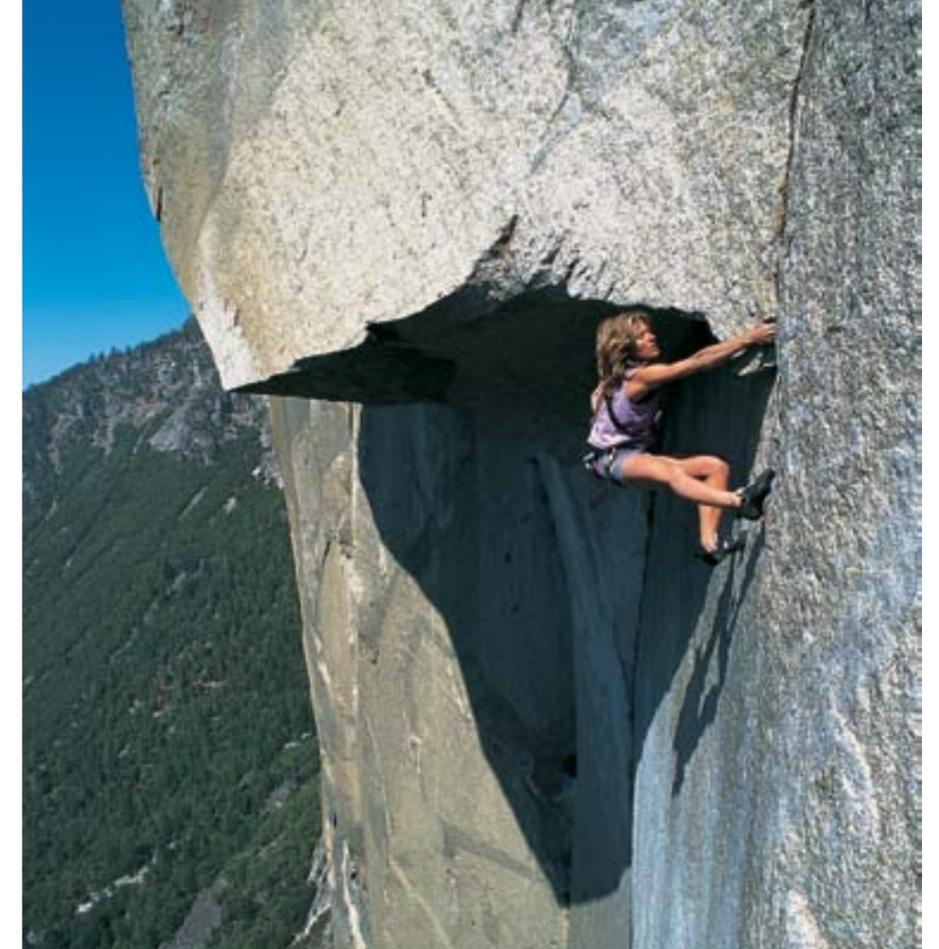
Well I just saw Nina Caprez, and she's got ideas to go to a lot of different places. She wants to go to Patagonia and do a scary sport route. She has a good attitude and wants to push herself in all domains. Martina Cufar is also like that. She is Slovenian and has that hardcore 'try try try' attitude. I actually went climbing recently with Anna Stöhr who is Austrian, and Juliane Wurm who's German. Anna is a bouldering champion and they were amazing to climb with. They have so much power. Anna has back muscles I've never seen on a woman before! They've definitely gone up a level. I couldn't keep up with them, but I went trad climbing with them and they didn't understand crack climbing at all, so they just needed to spend time doing it. But it wasn't their interest because climbing has become very specialised - and they are very good at powerful, short boulder problems. They are not interested in anything like the *The Nose* which takes many hours of effort and has many different psychological challenges. I like the part of trad climbing that taught me to dig deep and find a solution, no matter how hard it looks.

Do you feel that many women today are drawn away from trad climbing by the greater convenience, safety, and faster rewards of sport climbing and bouldering?

For the modern generation there are a lot of very strong, exceptional women in all domains and trad is seeing a resurgence. If you've sport climbed for a while and you've mastered the techniques, you can get on harder trad climbs. And then by adding more adventurous elements - going to places in the middle of nowhere where there is no access to helicopter rescue - changes the game a lot. I think women want to challenge themselves in different ways. I see a lot of European climbers coming to America to learn crack climbing so they can do first ascents all over the world.

What do women need to climb at their best?

Women just need to believe in themselves. As a general rule I think a lot of women don't really push themselves, as it's not part of our culture to be tough. Women have a certain role in society and men would like it to stay like that way. Women have been encouraged not to be as strong as they can be because of that. It undermines all that underlying motivation. Who knows if its biological, but I think women often sell themselves short of what they can do as they don't have examples of



people who say, 'yeah its hard, but I see the solution and I'm going to do it. I can do it.'

Do you feel women's climbing has enough support from the sport's various organisations?

No, I don't think they do. We are still used primarily because we are attractive and help sell products in a certain clichéd way. I don't think women's true attributes have been promoted in the right way. Very few companies really understand that, and that's why the culture is a little bit behind. Women are not paid the same either, but nobody talks about that.

What wisdom have you gained in your career?

I would say one the main things I've learnt about is the importance of motivation. Always ask why you are doing it. If it's for a sincerely positive reason, like a beautiful route or you want to challenge yourself, that's okay. Even if you don't succeed, you actually gain a lot by working towards it. It's empowering and that attitude can drive you to further achievements. But if you're doing it for recognition, for money, or to impress your boyfriend or parents or other people, then it's not a good reason at all.

Where does your motivation come from?

I've always been a self-motivated person. I think in order to grow you need to push yourself outside your comfort zone. Climbing is my time to check in with me, see how I'm dealing with challenge and not selling myself short by saying 'I can't do that.' If you fail or succeed you can always think about it

later and learn from it.

What's your current training regime?

I just go climbing. Sometimes I'm not able to because I usually is I drop Owen off at school, and then I have six hours before I pick him up and we do an activity. Six hours is not a lot of time to climb and to work on other things, so I often go to the climbing gym instead of going outdoors. To climb outside on a beautiful day is great, but it's not very efficient. So I often climb in the gym, and I cross-country ski in the winter for aerobic fitness. I find that more enjoyable than running as its engaging and it's a lot better for you as it uses your upper body and lower body, without stressing my knees. I don't want to wear my body out. I ran one marathon in my life and that was enough. So my training is activity-based, and takes place when I have time.

Do you have any projects at the moment?

I just love to stay healthy, and the secret to longevity and climbing well is not to get injured and to listen to your body. If anything I'm an under-trainer, rather than an over-trainer. But being consistent is important; I've been climbing so long that my body knows how to climb, and if I'm not training or climbing enough to keep my body in shape I could probably do a move that's a little bit too powerful and hurts one of the weak links in the chain, like the shoulder or fingers. So I just try to be consistent, and to have fun. ■