

Neal Preston: Iconography

By Bija Gutoff

Neal Preston is to rock and roll what Norman Parkinson was to fashion or Richard Avedon to portraits. His photographs define the icons of the rock era. For 30 years Preston has toured with the likes of Led Zeppelin, The Who, Bruce Springsteen, Queen, and Billy Joel. He’s shot Fleetwood Mac, U2, David Bowie, and Madonna. His pictures have appeared on numerous Rolling Stone covers — not to mention Time and Newsweek — and are featured in his first-ever solo retrospective.

And that’s just the music photography, for which Preston is best known. He’s also a 25-year veteran of People magazine, contributing dozens of cover portraits of athletes and movie stars. He’s worked six Olympic Games for People, most recently shooting Sasha Cohen in Turin.



Bruce Springsteen on stage with Clarence Clemons. © Neal Preston

As if that weren’t enough to establish him as one of the leading celebrity photographers of his day, Preston has worked as the unit and special photographer on films including “Vanilla Sky,” “Elizabethtown,” and “Almost Famous” (which contains uncannily close echoes of his own life), capturing the still images essential to publicity and ad campaigns.

Still, Preston resists star billing. “For me,” he muses, “it was never about going backstage or hanging with celebrities or achieving fame. It was always about making pictures I think are beautiful. That’s what I love, and I’ve been very, very fortunate to be able to do it. But it’s not about me — it’s about the photos, and the people in the photos. Because when you start thinking you’re the fifth member of a four-man rock band, you’re in a lot of trouble.”

Mac-anchored Workflow

Preston’s first computer was a Mac. “It was the user-friendliness that attracted me initially,” he recalls. Now, a Power Mac G5 Dual anchors his office workflow and he’s a proficient user of Photoshop. “I use the Mac for all image manipulation and archiving,” he notes. “I’ve never done that on anything other than a Mac, and frankly, I can’t imagine using anything else.”

Though he still likes the look of film, his clients, he says, require digital. And even when he shoots on film, “my images are digitized before they go to press in a book, newspaper, or magazine.”

Mad Love

Since meeting Aperture at the Turin Olympics, the friendship has blossomed into a mad love affair. The story of Preston’s first date with Aperture reads like a classic when-you-find-your-soulmate-you’ll-know-it tale, wherein the reluctant suitor falls hard upon encountering the one who offers more than he ever dreamed possible.

Preston had spent just a few hours getting to know Aperture when, on assignment for People — and under a tight deadline — he snagged a coveted one-on-one session with Sasha Cohen. He would have only about 30 minutes to capture her silver medal mood. With his Nikon D2H in hand, Preston raced to Cohen’s hotel for the shoot. “I did the whole thing digitally,” he recounts. “Then I rushed back to the press center, where we had a G5 set up with Aperture. I said, ‘OK, let’s go for it.’”

“I downloaded the material from compact flash cards to Aperture. And it was amazing. I was able to edit the entire take, do all the color correcting, and play around with adjusting and enhancing the frames I liked. I converted some of them into black and white images. I did all the stuff I like to do with RAW files. Then I transmitted the images to the picture editor in New York.”

Preston marvels: “The entire process — from the time I met up with Sasha to using Aperture to download, edit, correct, and transmit the images to getting the email that we’d met the deadline — took just two and a half hours.”

Gallery



Sasha Cohen in Torino, Italy, taken for People magazine, 2006. © Neal Preston

The Show

Neal Preston’s work is represented by the Morrison Hotel Gallery, the largest in the country specializing in fine art music photography. From May 12 to June 2, 2006, the New York gallery (it also has a branch in La Jolla, California) will be showing the first-ever retrospective of Preston’s rock and roll work. The signed and numbered archival-quality prints will feature great rock acts from Stevie Nicks to Bruce Springsteen.

While he’s thrilled about the show, Preston admits that choosing the images was a daunting task. For one thing, he says, “I have one of the largest wholly-owned archives of music photographs that were all taken by one person. There’s so much material, you don’t know where to begin. People may come to the show wanting to see pictures of their favorite band, but I can’t choose the photos based on what I think people want to see, because you can’t please everybody. The litmus test for me is, do I love the photo? Does it speak to me when I view it?”

Resources

Aperture

Apple Cinema Display: Pure Digital Clarity

Color Management with Mac OS X Tiger

30-inch Apple Cinema Display Productivity Benchmark

Apple Cinema Displays Technology Overview

Xserve Technology Overview

Seminars

Color Management with Mac OS X

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Creating a Monster

Since that experience, Preston says with a laugh, “I’ve been raving about Aperture all over L.A. Before, I made my selects using Nikon View, my adjustments in Photoshop, then I transmitted the pictures to my editor with Fetch. Instead, I did all that in Aperture.”

What really proved time-saving was the actual editing. As Preston puts it, “When you’re using Aperture and you have this truly amazing 30-inch Cinema Display, it’s so easy. You mark your selects with the star system. You can look at all your selects and you can see the whole RAW take at the bottom of your screen. It’s really fantastic.”

Preston sums it up: “Apple has created a monster! Now I don’t want to live without Aperture. I believe in it totally.” The program instantly became indispensable to his daily tasks. “When I came home from Italy,” he remembers, “I had so much to do. I had to answer photo requests from magazines, digitize and edit some old photos, go through my archives for a client. Now I’m doing all that with Aperture — it’s the only thing I use.”



High Praise

“That’s high praise,” confesses Preston, “from someone who for years swore he was not put on earth to move pixels around on a screen.” The difference with Aperture, he says, is that it mimics the way he’s used to working. For an old-school guy, the familiar visual metaphor is priceless.

“I’m used to nice, big light tables where I can move around pages with chromes and edit transparencies,” says Preston. “And using Aperture is, digitally speaking, very close to that experience. It’s an invaluable tool.”

Aperture relieves the pressure of a slew of projects by helping Preston get work out the door. “I’m contributing some photos to a book on Springsteen,” he says. “I had to edit a lot of digital material that the picture editors picked out. Sometimes I get these kind of projects every day, and the editing process is so much faster with Aperture.”

The Photographer as Director

Of course, it’s not technology but artistry that propels a photographer to the top ranks. And over the course of 30-plus years, Preston has learned how to get even the most skittish rock legend, celebrity athlete, or movie star to reveal something real to his lens. “I’m outgoing so people tend to be comfortable around me,” says Preston. “Also, some photographers aren’t used to directing people. I never had a problem with that.”

To get a good photo, Preston believes, it’s essential to take charge. “It’s like a dance where I’m leading and you’re following,” he reflects. “I can’t just stand there and say, ‘Now move!’ I’ve learned that my subjects want to make a good picture as much as I do. But they also want to be led down the road. They’re grateful when I do that. It’s a collaborative creative process between the photographer and the subject, and together we go somewhere that makes a beautiful picture.”

Preston does have one firm rule: Never show a subject a bad Polaroid — especially not as the first picture he or she sees. While he snaps Polaroids only to check technical specs like lighting and contrast, he’s careful to show just the good ones. “Whatever trepidation the subject may have about doing a photo shoot is washed away the first time they see a great Polaroid and realize you know what you’re doing. That kicks the door open.”

Shooting Concerts

Preston has spent much of his career on the road, shooting images that keep the heart-thumping highs of a rock concert reverberating for years. “Doing really beautiful performance work is not easy,” he confesses. “There are so many things that can fail. And it can be difficult to make your photos look different from other people’s.”

For this photographer, who got an almost unbelievably early start doing concert photography while still in high school and who never received formal training, his success in preserving stage highlights is “a gift from above.” As for style, he says, “I tend to shoot with a very romantic look. A lot of my best work is against black. I like a clean photo. I want to get a good look at someone, and I don’t want a lot of extraneous stuff in the frame.”

Moreover, adds the one-time guitar player (Preston had a band in junior high school, though he admits he never surpassed the talent plateau he reached at age 16), “I have a love for music — and that helps me capture certain moments.”

Tools of the Trade

Hardware

- ▶ Power Mac G5 Dual
- ▶ 30-inch Apple Cinema Display
- ▶ iMac
- ▶ 12-inch PowerBook
- ▶ LaCie and Passport external hard drives
- ▶ LaCie DVD burner
- ▶ Lexar jump drives
- ▶ Lexar CF Cards
- ▶ iPod

Software

- ▶ Aperture
- ▶ Adobe Photoshop CS
- ▶ Digital Film Tools plugins
- ▶ Photobyte
- ▶ Graphic Converter
- ▶ Microsoft Office
- ▶ iTunes

Cameras

- ▶ Nikon D2H high-speed digital camera
- ▶ Nikon D2X digital camera, rented when larger digital files are needed
- ▶ Nikon F5 film camera
- ▶ Nikon F4 film camera, dedicated for use with Jacobson sound blimps.
- ▶ Hasselblad X-Pan
- ▶ Mamiya RZ Pro
- ▶ Kodak Easy Share 550 point-and-shoot digital camera

Printers and Scanners

- ▶ Canon I-9900
- ▶ Canon I-80 portable printer
- ▶ Nikon Super Cool Scan 8000 ED

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