



A LIFE BEHIND THE LENS

ICONIC ROCK PHOTOGRAPHER
NEAL PRESTON ON MUSIC AND
THE MEANING BEHIND HIS ART

BY C. MOON REED PHOTOGRAPHY ANTHONY MAIR



Stevie Nicks is his muse, so you know he has good taste. And he toured with Led Zeppelin, The Who, Queen and Bruce Springsteen, so you know he's seen it all. Perhaps it will come as a surprise then, that *People's* most-assigned photojournalist would experience love at first sight.

Neal Preston, the god of rock 'n' roll photographers, fell in love with the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino the day it opened. He worked that first weekend shooting the resort's first concerts, nearly 20 years ago, and from those first moments he knew it was where he wanted his photos displayed. The feeling was mutual.

Today, Preston's photos—an extensive and exquisite visual catalog of musical greatness—are everywhere: in the sports lounge; on the video screen behind the reception desk; on the gallery wall across from Hart & Huntington tattoos; on elevator landings; and in hotel rooms. There are about 70 in all. “It's starting to be a little too much for me and my own good,” Preston jokes, and then adds, “I'm proud to have my stuff here.”

So when Preston wanted to celebrate his 60th birthday on June 22 he naturally chose the Hard Rock Hotel for his party. (He also spent his 50th birthday at the Hard Rock Hotel, and was there to see The Who the weekend bassist John Entwistle died.) On the occasion of this milestone, *Hard Rock Hotel* magazine visited Preston in the Sex & Pistols suite to chat about his life behind the lens.

How does it feel to have been shooting for more than 40 years?

The people in my generation are now the elder statesmen of all of this, which is why everybody who's ever been in the record business is now doing a documentary or writing a book. When you've been in the business as long as I have, since I was 17, you're accepted without trying. I mean, I've been around longer than most musicians. [Laughs.]

Do you still shoot film?

Whenever possible. I don't like the way digital looks. I think people are pleasantly surprised [by film], especially women. There's a different quality, it's not so uber sharp. It's more pleasing for people's complexions.

Why do viewers get so passionate about your photography?

I always tell people, “It's not

me you're impressed with; it's the people in my photos. I just press the button.” There's a voracious appetite that the public has for anything that reeks of “behind the scenes” or “what really happened.” I like to call it, “Everyone wants to touch the guy who touched the guy.”

Who's *your* favorite band?

My favorite band right now is The Cramps.



Two of Neal Preston's front-men favorites, Freddie Mercury (top, in 1978) and Iggy Pop (in studio, circa 1975), and leading lady Stevie Nicks (opposite page, during a music-video shoot in Hollywood in 1982).





From Neal Preston's 1977 studio session in Hollywood with KISS.

I once told Pete Townshend that I wasn't listening to anything recorded after 1972. He said, "You're out of your mind." I have since come around a little bit.

What bands do you like post-1972?

I have pretty eclectic tastes. It's more of what I don't like. I don't like hip-hop, and I don't like jazz. Everything else is fair game. I have lots of little guilty pleasures, which I won't share with you. [Laughs]. The Who and The Beatles are my favorites. I tend toward straight-ahead rock, the older stuff. I've gotten into Pink Floyd lately.

Who do you like photographing now, other than Stevie Nicks?

I've started doing a lot of glamour photography—shooting women just because I love doing it. I don't have any pet projects that I've shot for years and not told anyone. You know some photographers: *I've never showed this to anyone but I've shot people with bangnails for the last 40 years.* I'm a straight-ahead commercial photographer. No gerbils with whips and chains.

Would those be mini whips?

Tiny little nipple clamps. [Laughs.] Well, we are in the Sex & Pistols Suite.

There are bands you love and bands you love to photograph. Is there any overlap?

There is some overlap. The single greatest guy to photograph is Pete Townshend. Jimmy Page is a very close second. Normally, one has nothing to do with the other. If you go to a Who concert or you do a session with Jimmy Page and you don't come away with something great, then you have no talent.

Of all your photos on display in the Hard Rock Hotel, what's your favorite?

I love the three pictures of Michael Jackson playing basketball as a kid. They're in the new sportsbook lounge. The one of Led Zeppelin with the dry ice is my single favorite one.

Is there a story behind that photo?

I remember taking this photo, which is unusual because I've taken so many photos I don't remember everything. [Page] caught my eye, right after he took a drag on a cigarette. He came walking over to me, and I thought, "Why is Jimmy Page about to talk to me during a show? Am I fired?" He comes over and he points to the front row and he goes [Preston dons a British accent], "Is that the tour doctor over there?" We had a doctor on the road with us in '77—Dr. Larry. He had a bag of goodies all the time. Jimmy looks and he sees Dr. Larry surrounded by five hot girls. And he says to me, "Is that the doctor? Is that the doctor down there?" I go, "Yeah, Jimmy, that's the doctor. Is everything all right?" And he says, "Fuck me, he pulls more birds than anybody in this fucking band." Then he walks away and does a searing guitar solo. People love hearing the stories behind a lot of this. It never fails to amaze me. I'm too close to it.

What do you find meaningful as a photographer?

I'm in a good position because I have a legacy. Some of these photos mean a lot to certain people—fans. I'm proud of the fact that when I'm gone, this is the stuff that lives on. It's a big job, managing those files, taking care of them, protecting them and ensuring that they remain in good shape. A lot of my negatives are in a little funky condition. If I had it all to do over again, I would never have hired so many different darkroom people or used so many different labs. I would have made sure they took care of the analog material, because some of it's filthy and scratched, which is what happens when you've been printing negatives for 40 years. The more they're handled, the worse shape they get into.

What gives you pleasure?

Letting people look at photos that they've never seen before, of which I have a lot. It gives me pleasure giving people pleasure. I know

what it means to be a fan. And I just love when people go, “Oh my God, I’ve never seen that photo of Stevie before,” or “I’ve never seen that photo of Steven Tyler before.”

When I see these rare old photos, it’s like going back in time and bringing back a new artifact.

It’s a time capsule. Every once in a while, I’ll come across some negatives that I’ve never printed or never scanned because they were just old and poorly processed, and I didn’t know what I was doing when I was 18. Now, through the wonders of technology, we can scan those frames, and I can bring something to life that even I’ve never seen. That photo of Janis Joplin [Preston says while pointing to his iPad] had to be rescued from an insanely filthy negative. God knows what I was using for chemicals back then.

Shoe polish?

Yeah! We always used to joke that

when you soup film you’re not supposed to do it in soup. It almost seems like I was. But bringing stuff to life that even I’ve never seen is a blast.

So now, part of your job is curator?

Definitely. It wasn’t designed that way, it just kind of happened. There are 24 legal-size four-door file cabinets in my house that require constant attention. It’s worse than having a dog kennel.

You’ve done so many shoots over the years. Did you ever photograph The Beatles?

No, that’s a little before my time. I shot Paul individually, George individually and Ringo individually. Never photographed John, never met John. One of my big regrets is that I never got to meet John Lennon. Maybe I’ll see him up there.

So, ironically, of all the concert photography and musicians you’ve

shot, you did not get to meet your favorite?

Pete Townshend, yes. John Lennon, no. If it wasn’t for John Lennon, we wouldn’t be here. God knows what I’d be doing as a career. But that fateful night in 1964, when they were on Ed Sullivan, that’s the nuclear bomb that changed my life.

Did you get that new *Yellow Submarine* album? They just remastered it.

No. That’s one of the worst Beatles albums. Give me *Rubber Soul* or *Revolver* or something like that. I got very into [The Who’s] *Quadrophenia* box set. I tend to go back to the stuff that I know and love. I don’t give new music a chance that often. But I’m the last one to talk—what I like is what I like.

Neal Preston’s photography is available for purchase in the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino gift shop.



More classic moments from the Neal Preston collection (opposite page from top): Clarence Clemons and Bruce Springsteen backstage at the Los Angeles Coliseum, 1985; Chaka Khan at the beach, circa 1975. (This page) Madonna in a Miami dressing room, 1985; Red Hot Chili Peppers backstage at the Warfield Theatre in San Francisco, 1980; Elton John at the Los Angeles Forum, 1974; and Marvin Gaye in his parents’ house in L.A., 1982.

PRESTON PERSPECTIVE FROM HIS BEST FRIEND, CAMERON CROWE

Neal Preston and Cameron Crowe met backstage at a Yes concert when they were about 20 and 14, respectively. That meeting sparked a lifelong personal friendship and professional partnership—from divvying up writing and photography duties for Rolling Stone magazine articles to, more recently, Preston shooting the stills for Crowe’s movies. In Vegas for Preston’s birthday party, Crowe discusses his deep appreciation for his best friend’s photography.

Neal never alters his flavor for any artist. He’s this completely entertaining guy who loves music, who contributes to the vibe of whoever he’s photographing. So there’s an insider’s look that he’s always given because they like the ingredient that he brings to music and to the experience of the human theater. He immediately joins the circus, and the circus is part of him and he’s part of the circus, and that’s what you’re seeing in his photos. There’s an ingredient of escapade that comes with Neal when you invite him on a tour. Neal is part of the carnival, and he’s also the chronicler of the carnival. He’s partially the clown and partially the hardest working guy on the tour.

I always loved being in a team with Neal. He was the journalist that didn’t have a pen—he had his photos. And I was the one with the pen. But together we would analyze everything. It’s just great to have a gunslinger partner when doing a story.

The reason why Neal’s photos still matter is their authenticity. There’s forever a quest of authenticity. Neal’s photos—and a lot of the stories that we did in the day—really were about documenting a time before it all got over-branded. It sure is nice to have a document of that time, and that is why people beat a path to your door to look at these photos. They’re snapshots from the museum of authenticity.

I feel a complete lack of jadedness. When I see Neal’s stuff, it’s like I see somebody that really fucking loved being there and couldn’t believe how much fun it was to actually find somebody who would even pay you to do it—because we would do it for free. We would definitely do it for free and did a lot of the time.

He took a picture of Marvin Gaye that to me tells the guy’s whole life story in one look. It ended up being the cover of *Rolling Stone* for the “Death of Marvin” issue, sadly. I think that Marvin died about nine months after he took the picture. From all the research, Marvin Gaye was an extremely shy guy. And he was in the house where he would later die in the living room, the house that he bought for his parents. It was just a random photo session for *People*, and Marvin Gaye didn’t do that many. Neal goes in for a tight shot of him, and it’s really powerful. I think a lot of people would [prefer] that Jimmy Page/Jack Daniel’s shot, which is amazing. And I remember being in the hallway when Neal was taking the photo and thinking, “That is fucking classic.” But the Marvin Gaye shot is the one for me.

—C. Moon Reed

