

# All-access pass to history

**Hanging with music's greats yielded some revealing photos, now in L.A.**

By STEVE HOCHMAN  
Special to The Times

**N**EAL PRESTON returned to his Hollywood Hills home after a short Las Vegas visit recently and was dismayed at what he found. The narrow, winding road leading to his driveway was clogged with five SUVs, several vans and sundry other vehicles — a convoy of paparazzi and press waiting (in vain, it turned out) for an arrival by tabloid mainstay Anna Nicole Smith. Preston's neighbor, who had just experienced the joy of the arrival of a new daughter and the crushing loss of her adult son in an unbelievable span of a few hours.

Preston was not just annoyed at his inconvenience, but livid about the attempted intrusion into Smith's grief.

"I don't understand that cult of celebrity," he says, with a tone of heavy, earnest sadness. Preston, a convivial 54-year-old with salt-and-pepper hair and beard, tells this story over spring rolls and noodles at a Thai restaurant on Sunset Boulevard next-door to a photo gallery where he has just examined some shots of stars in other private moments: Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page in a dressing room, head back as he gulps from a bottle of Jack Daniel's while singer Robert Plant is seen looking on as they prepare for a 1975 concert; Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks, caught in 1982 at her Venice home, laughing beneath a top hat yet somehow fragile; a shot from behind Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra onstage in Oakland, Sinatra playfully reaching to goose Deano — a private moment in a public place, visible only to the photographer.

The photographer who captured these moments? Preston himself. The gallery is the Morrison Hotel, located on a stretch of Sunset Boulevard, heavy with guitar stores and other rock sites and co-owned by veteran rock photographer Henry Diltz. The white-walled, skylit room will host a rare show featuring Preston's work opening to the public this weekend.

But Preston sees no inconsistency between holding pride over his work and disgust over the pursuit of Smith and other celebrities. The latter is an invasion. His has been by invitation. For more than 30 years, Preston has been among an elite handful of rock photographers, confidant-with-a-lens to the top figures in music including Freddie Mercury, Bruce Springsteen and Beck.



**UNGUARDED:** Neal Preston's camera witnesses Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page drinking from a bottle of Jack Daniel's backstage at a 1975 concert in Indianapolis. Mutual respect was key to access.

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The New York native's life as a photographer, which started when he was still in high school, has parallels to Cameron Crowe's life as a young music journalist as depicted in the latter's largely autobiographical movie, "Almost Famous" — In fact, Preston's life is incorporated into the movie, as he and Crowe have been best friends since starting to work together as teenagers for Rolling Stone in the early '70s.

"The girl in 'Almost Famous' who got traded for a six-pack was a girlfriend of mine," he says. As such, his distress over the current celebrity overkill is both personal and professional.

"It turned a corner somewhere and I'm not sure when that was," he says. "These days, I don't personally know a publicist or artist, rarely is it not set



**PHOTOS:** For 30-plus years, Neal Preston has been a confidant-with-a-lens to music figures. His pictures are at the Morrison Hotel.

up as an adversarial relationship going in."

Magazines have become more interested in fashion-style shoots rather than real behind-the-scenes explorations. The paparazzi have brought a bounty-hunter mentality to the field. And while the proliferation of reality TV, cellphone cameras and such outlets as YouTube have to some thinking "democratized" media, very little of it rises to the standards of either art or journalism. Which stands taller, a candid and intimate 1980 Preston close-up of Mercury applying

eyeliner before a show or Kevin Federline's home video of now-separated wife Britney Spears belching and babbling loopy about time travel?

"It can't be done anymore," Preston says of the work done by such veterans as himself, Diltz and John Marshall. "Really there is just a handful of people who have done this kind of thing, done it well and been under the radar. I don't like to call it lost, because it wasn't lost. But because of factors that have come into the cult of celebrity you can't get anything like this anymore."

But there's plenty of interest in what has been done like this. Morrison Hotel opened in the summer, branching off from the nearby Mr. Musiched rock memorabilia gallery and store to join Morrison Hotel outlets in Manhattan and La Jolla. Featuring the work of Preston, Diltz, Marshall, Herb Greene and others, the store, co-owner Sam Milgrom says, has found growing interest in the expected baby boomer crowd, as well as some Gen Xers who are starting to settle into full-on adulthood.

Across town, another rock-oriented gallery has just opened as well.

The Musician Photo Gallery in Venice grew out of increased interest in rock-related work exhibited at the Duncan Miller Gallery, says Daniel Miller, owner of both.

As to why this sort of work is not being found to the same extent in today's pop culture, Miller says to follow the money:

"Back then there was a level of respect for the photographer and the band," he says.

As an example, he cites Joel Brodsky, one of a dozen photographers being featured in the just-mounted exhibit concentrating on classic shots of Rolling Stones singer Mick Jagger and the late Doors frontman Jim Morrison. Brodsky, Miller says, tells of a session with a very inebriated Morrison that resulted in an iconic shot of the shirtless singer that has graced several posthumous album covers — all done with no handlers, no publicists, not even a driver on hand. And no tabloid shots of the stumbling star.

"These guys held on to the [embarrassing] stuff," Miller says. "They had a reverence for the bands. Today it's about the money. Today you'd sell the shots to the National Enquirer. You take a picture of Madonna doing something dumb, and it's \$50,000 in your pocket."

Danny Goldberg, who in the '70s was Led Zeppelin's publicist and arranged the relationship with Preston, agrees that the mutual respect was key to the access.

"Neal would show Jimmy Page the slides, and Jimmy would eliminate the ones he hated — it had to do with crows' feet and belly," says Goldberg, who went on to manage artists including Bonnie Raitt and Nirvana, served as the head of Atlantic Records, Warner Bros. Records and the Air America radio



**THAT'S BOSS:** For this shot of Bruce Springsteen at London's Wembley Stadium in 1985, Neal Preston mounted a camera on a pole and triggered a shutter release button on a wire.

network, and now has the new Gold Village Entertainment management company with clients including Steve Earle, Allison Moorer and Ben Lee.

"It was conditional access even then," Goldberg says. "Access was subject to the band having veto power. But they didn't abuse it. They liked him. He was able to get the pictures taken without being intrusive. It just seemed a good idea to get Zeppelin's image out there."

**T**HOSE practices are not over. Veteran publicist Mitch Schneider cites current and former clients who have routinely granted access to top and trusted photographers and encouraged them to take a documentary-style approach, including Aerosmith, Tom Petty, Depeche Mode and Velvet Revolver. The issue may be more of exposure for the images. In the '60s and '70s, top culture magazines from Life to Rolling Stone had wide readership, as well as a strong emphasis on such photo-documentation.

"When I first got in the business, feature stories in Rolling Stone would run six or seven pages," Schneider says. "Now a cover feature might be three pages. So the opportunity for creative photography is limited."

For Preston, each photo is a feature story in itself.

As he looks at the display at Morrison Hotel, the tales flow freely.

A shot of Springsteen on-



**FLEETING IMAGE:** Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks is reflected in mirrors in her Venice home in 1982.

stage at the massive Wembley Stadium in London, the crowd behind him, came not from spontaneous luck, he says, but from careful observation and planning, watching the Boss' performance night after night, then mounting a camera on a pole at just the right spot, camping out under the stage with a shutter release button on a wire and waiting for the exact right moment. The photo, he says, remains one of Springsteen's personal favorites.

And the bigger picture, so to speak?

"Brian May [Queen's guitarist] told me I really captured the time," Preston says. "In a weird way, I don't need to be told that. I know when I've captured it. I know when I've done the job. What I do

## Rock photography

### Morrison Hotel Gallery

What: The work of Neal Preston

Where: 7517 W. Sunset Blvd., Hollywood

When: Opens Saturday, Hours 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sundays. Ends Nov. 26.

Info: (323) 874-2068

### Musician Photo Gallery

What: "Jagger & Morrison," featuring the work of Richard Aaron, Joel Brodsky, Robbie Freeman, Lynn Goldsmith, Elliott Landy, Gered Markowitz, George Rose, Ethan Russell, Peter Simon, Baron Wolman and Michael Zagaris

Where: 10959-A Venice Blvd., Los Angeles

When: Hours 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays. Opening reception, 7 p.m. Friday. Ends Dec. 30.

Info: (310) 838-2441; [www.musicianphotogallery.com](http://www.musicianphotogallery.com)

know is that putting this show together has been oddly work-intensive — more than I imagined. But people derive an insane amount of pleasure from having this stuff on the wall."

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