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Close-up with Pioneering Rock Music Photographer Bob Gruen

The legendary rock music photographer talks about why he’s more active than ever, the high school field trip that changed his life and his relationship with Lennon

September 18, 2015, [Craig Barboza](#)
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When Bob Gruen started taking pictures of rock musicians five decades ago, there was no rock media, or even a nationally distributed journal dedicated to the music. “I didn’t have any role models because the job description ‘rock photographer’ didn’t exist,” Gruen says. “Now I understand you can study it in college.”

It would be hard to find a better teacher than Gruen. His work, after all, is a vivid scrapbook of rock ‘n’ roll history in all its messy complexity and magnificence. Pleasant and easygoing with a large nest of curly hair, he is a natural storyteller, capable of rattling off arcane facts about bands or describing the births of various movements as well as memorable tours, performances and the scene inside CBGB.



Bob Gruen with Debbie Harry and Chris Stein of Blondie at Gruen’s ‘The 40th Anniversary Of Blondie’ exhibition at Chelsea Hotel Storefront Gallery in 2014 in New York City (Photo: Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images)

Throughout his illustrious career, Gruen has been seemingly everywhere at once, snapping thousands upon thousands of photos, many of which are encrusted in rock lore. There’s his famous shot of John Lennon, arms crossed in a sleeveless New York City T-shirt, which has been likened to music’s *Mona Lisa*. There’s Led Zeppelin seen posing with their plane in a moment that came to define the big shows and bigger paydays of the 1970s. There’s Debbie Harry emerging unscathed from a car wreck on Sixth Avenue, her guitar case protruding from an open trunk. (Harry, best known as the frontwoman of Blondie, wrote the introduction to Gruen’s 2011 retrospective art book *Rock Seen* that includes 500 of his favorite shots.)

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Bob Gruen attending his 'Dee Dee Ramone Exhibition' at Hotel Chelsea Storefront Gallery in 2014 in New York City (Photo: Mireya Acierito/Getty Images)

But more and more now, the camera is pointed at Gruen, who still lives in an apartment-studio that he shares with his wife, Elizabeth, a paper and metal artist, in the West Village. In July, the Clocktower restaurant in the historic Metropolitan Life Building hosted a reception for Gruen to celebrate a permanent display of his work inside the billiard room and earlier this month he traveled to Liverpool, where the Beatles Story Museum opened a new exhibit of photos by Gruen, who was Lennon's and Yoko Ono's personal photographer for years. He's also released two books this year (*See Hear Yoko* and a limited edition reissue of *The Clash: Photographs by Bob Gruen*), with more in the works including an expanded edition of *John Lennon: The New York Years*, which Abrams is publishing in October to coincide with the singer's 75th birthday.

Not that Gruen, 69, is purely focused on the old days. Several nights a week, you can still find him buzzing around New York City clubs with his camera. "I like to learn from the past and look to the future but live in the present," he says. These are edited excerpts from our conversation.

You seem busier than ever and just as passionate about photography now as when you started.

One of my secrets of success is I don't like to watch television. I find it really boring to sit at home and watch TV. I want to go out and see things – exciting things – instead of just hear about them. In fact, I like to be the one who *tells* people about them, which is why I take pictures to show what's going on. And I try to take pictures that show more than just the facts. I like to show the feelings of what's going on.

How are you able to do that?

By getting the right moment. You know you have to be in the right place at the right time but then you have to do the right thing and I think partly I'm able to do that with music because I'm a fan. I have a feel for when the right time is. You have to know when the climax moment is, when the guy's really emoting.



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Gruen shooting a concert (Photo: Courtesy of Bob Gruen)

When people dream of becoming a rock music photographer, they picture free, all-access badges, heavy drinking and dubious behavior on the road. What is the reality?

Well, it's very low budget [laughs], but a lot of fun. I traveled around the world, met lots of great people. It's long hours and you don't get paid much so I very often had to work quite a few jobs. I would do more than one job a day: often four or five. I'd do a trade shot for a record company in the afternoon then go to some press parties and take pictures there, maybe go to a concert at Madison Square Garden, if I was lucky enough to get hired, then go down to Max's and CBGB's to cover more events. And when I got home at 3 or 4 in the morning I'd have to develop the film because you're always in a rush. There's always a deadline. Nowadays, you don't have to develop film but you have to have the pictures out immediately.

Your first published photo was of a burning building that made the front page of your local paper, *The Great Neck Record*. Growing up on Long Island, you used to take photos of school football games and local events. Did you ever consider a career as a news photographer?

I had kind of dreams of working for the *New York Times* until a high school field trip. We went to the *Times*' headquarters and I slipped away while everyone was having lunch and went into the darkroom where I met a guy who was printing photographs. He told me he had been an elevator operator for 13 years, was now in the darkroom for about five, and was hoping that in another three or four years he might get to be a photographer. So at that point I gave up on the idea of trying to work for the *New York Times* and I just went out on my own and I've been working freelance ever since.

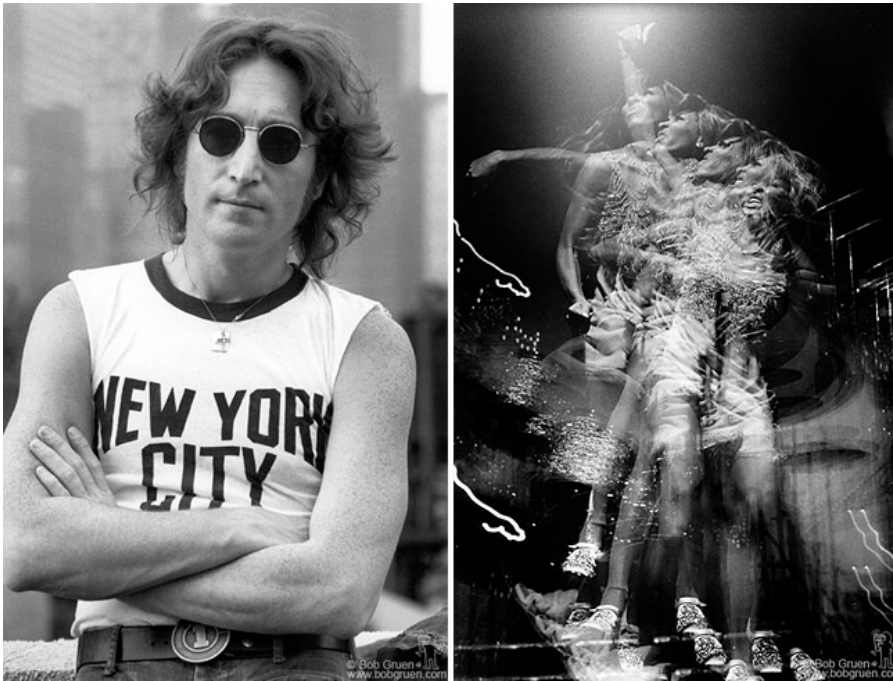
How did you get started?

In the late '60s I was living with a rock 'n' roll band called Glitterhouse whose claim to fame is that they did the title song for *Barbarella*. I was taking their pictures because they were friends of mine and photography was my hobby. When Glitterhouse got signed, the record company liked my pictures and used them. Then a renowned producer on the *Barbarella* soundtrack, Bob Crewe, did their debut album, *Color Blind*, and the record company hired me to take more photos. The jobs started snowballing from there.

What was that like?

I began meeting more and more people. In 1970, I was lucky to meet Ike and Tina Turner. I took a really good picture of Tina in the Bronx, a live shot, and I actually went to Baltimore to show it to Ike, and he liked it a lot. He said, "What are you doing tomorrow?" I said, "I don't know, why?" He said, "Come out to L.A. I want you to take some more pictures" and I ended up very spur of the moment going out to L.A. with them, spending a week out there. One of those afternoons I spent with Tina I got a picture while she was shopping at the supermarket that became my first album cover, *'Nuff Said*.





John Lennon in 1974, Tina Turner in 1970 (Photos: Courtesy of Bob Gruen)

What other album covers have you shot?

I've taken many, most notably John Lennon's *Walls & Bridges* and the New York Dolls' *In Too Much Too Soon*.

When you were coming up, not many magazines were covering rock music. Then by the early '70s, you had *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* and *Rock Scene*. Your photo credits have appeared in all three publications.

I used to work quite a bit for *Rock Scene* magazine. Lisa Robinson was the editor and she arranged to get me a lot of photo passes that really helped my career in the '70s. We covered the whole scene – instead of just an interview with a musician and a picture of them with the microphone or something. In *Rock Scene* we showed bands on the road, in the dressing rooms and at the concerts, the after-parties, hanging out downtown.

Many of your photos ended up pinned to teenagers' bedroom walls. Why do you think kids liked to stare at them?

[My photos] bring the excitement of rock 'n' roll to people. To me, rock 'n' roll is about freedom. It's about the freedom to express yourself very loudly and when people see the photos they see people expressing themselves like that. Certain people have been inspired by [the imagery] of rock 'n' roll. Both Tommy Hilfger and later John Varvatos have done books of their rock 'n' roll inspirations and both of them used quite a few of my photos. I've been told that my picture of Led Zeppelin in front of their airplane at Teterboro Airport inspired people. A number of rock 'n' rollers have told me that they saw that picture and wanted to be able to go around with their shirt open and own their own airplane. [laughs] David Bryan from Bon Jovi told me that and he actually did go and get a plane. He's one of the ones that succeeded!



The Clash in 1979 (Photo: Courtesy of Bob Gruen)

When you weren't boarding private planes with heavy-metal gods, you were covering emerging new wave and punk bands. In 1977, how did you end up on tour with the Sex Pistols, whom you photographed for a *Rolling Stone* cover?

I was working a lot with the New York Dolls and toward the end of their career Malcolm McLaren [the Sex Pistols manager and a London clothes boutique owner] came to New York, hoping the Dolls would wear some of his clothes. When he found out they'd broken up, Malcolm kind of regrouped them and got a couple of shows together. A year and half later, I went to England for the first time and Malcolm was the only one I knew. He took me down to a place called Club Louise, where I met the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Susie and the Banshees, Billy Idol, Caroline Coon, John Savage, basically the whole group that became the core of the English punk scene. That was when Glen Matlock was in the Sex Pistols. I took a number of pictures, and when I came back the following year Sid (Vicious) was in the band. Malcolm had me come with them to Luxembourg, where I got to know Sid better.

Then you spent a lot of time with the Sex Pistols in the U.S.

The Sex Pistols were originally scheduled to come to New York [in 1977] to play *Saturday Night Live*, before going to go on a tour across the South. For some reason, Sid seemed to have visa problems, which held up their arrival, and they didn't make it to New York. So I went to Atlanta for their first show and I only brought my camera because I was expecting to come home in the morning, but as they were getting on their bus, I said to Malcolm, "Well, so long. Too bad I can't come along with you. I'm sure you're going to have a wonderful time." And he said, "Well, you can't come, Bob, because we're only allowed 12 on the bus. And there's the band and the guards and the assistant and me — well, that's only 11, Bob. Why don't you get on the bus?" So I ended up on a bus across America. I woke up in San Francisco 10 days later. [laughs] I didn't really see the Sex Pistols live in Europe but I saw all the shows they did in America and it was one of those live shots that *Rolling Stone* ended up using.

Years ago, you were a regular at landmark clubs like CBGB and Max's Kansas City. Do you ever get nostalgic for the 1970's New York rock scene?

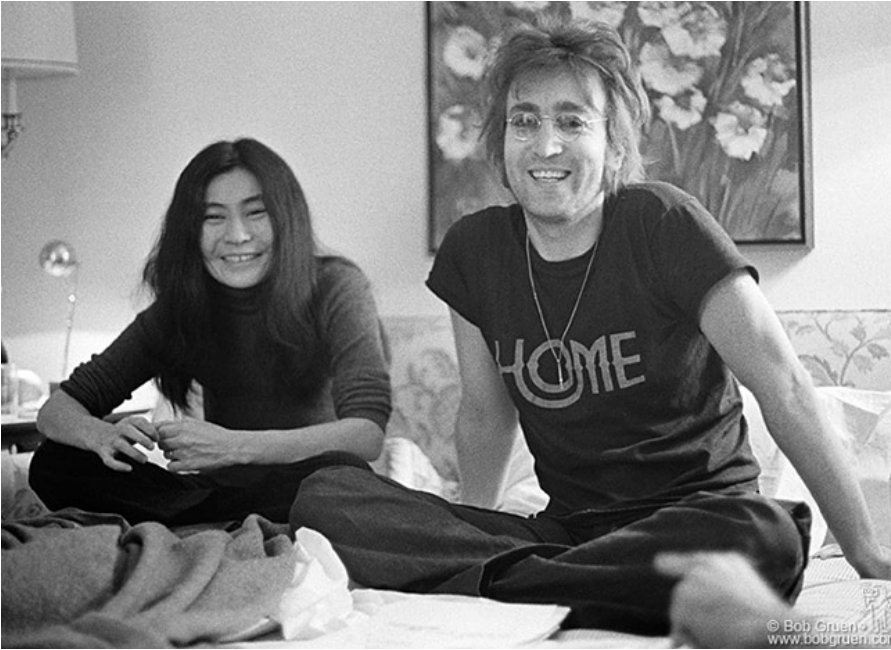
I don't get nostalgic. Once I've done something, I don't want to go back and do it over and over and over again. I always like to see something new and something interesting.

So where are you hanging out these days?

I like the clubs on the East Side: Bowery Electric or the new club Berlin. Jesse Malin keeps coming up with new places. I don't get out to Brooklyn too often but sometimes I'll go to the McCarren Pool or the Music Hall of Williamsburg, where I was recently, when the Strypes were playing out there.

You're turning 70 in a few weeks. Tell us about your last birthday party. I heard you had some special guests.

My birthday parties are always good but last year was amazing. Alice Cooper came and sang "18" and Billie Joe Armstrong sang "Sheena is a Punk Rocker" and 300 of my closest friends had a great time.



John Lennon and Yoko Ono Lennon in 1972 (Photo: Courtesy of Bob Gruen)

I read that your loft in the West Village has served as “a clubhouse to countless rock legends.” Over the years, you developed close relationships with many of your subjects, John Lennon in particular. Looking back, what kind of influence did Lennon have on you?

Well, the same kind of influence he had on everyone. He was an amazing guy, struggling to control his emotions, struggling to live a peaceful life, and encouraging everybody else to do the same. I admired him a lot before I met him and when I met him he was everything I expected him to be: very natural and very funny, very perceptive and a great guy to hang out with. I always felt lucky, every time I saw him. Even as our relationship grew more personal and more casual, I always felt lucky to be able to spend any time at all with him.

Favorite Lennon memory?

Well, I don't really make lists because I have a number of favorite memories. Certainly standing 10 feet away from him when he was singing *Imagine* on stage at Madison Square Garden was a very exciting moment, but so was going to the Statue of Liberty with him one afternoon [to take a picture that dramatized his deportation case].

What's the one piece of advice you give to aspiring photographers?

If you take a lot of pictures you're bound to get some good ones and if you just show the good ones people will think you're good.

And in your work, are you aiming for a preconceived idea of your subjects or are you looking to discover something about them?

I try to capture their personality. I don't try to expose something that they don't want to show, or a hidden part of their personality. I capture them as they are. My favorite compliment is when they ask for a copy of the photo to give to their mother — and I've gotten that compliment from people as diverse as Bo Diddley and Lou Reed. [laughs] Because then I know that's how they want to be seen and I know I've done my job right.

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