

## Neal Preston about his life

### “YOU HAVE THE WORLD’S GREATEST JOB”

I’ve heard that said a lot and the older I get, the more I hear it. For a long time I never believed it – I was too busy working. But “running around shooting rock stars” is both a gross simplification and an exact description of how I’ve spent the lion’s share of my past 35 to 40 years. I have a room in my house with nothing in it but file cabinets – 31 of them, in fact. Each cabinet has four drawers; each drawer is crammed with Pendaflex folders holding proof sheets, negatives, and transparencies. That’s 124 file cabinet drawers, every one of them bursting at the seams. I have come to realize that it’s not only my body of work; it’s physical proof that I do have “the world’s greatest job.”

### ON THE ROAD

I’m not sure if it’s still around, but there used to be a motel in Salina, Kansas, that was adjacent to the railroad tracks. During one summer in the late 1970s I rolled into Salina as a passenger on REO Speedwagon’s tour bus after God knows how many hours of being awake – chemically induced awake time, of course – with eye-blazing, head-pounding pain, and a Fort Knox-level sinus blockage being the Maraschino cherry on the hangover sundae special. Time to off-load the bus, roll into my room, grab whatever tiny little piece of “drapery” that’s left in the room (I never understood why all the world’s cheap motels have the thinnest material that they use for drapes, and this stuff rips and shreds as if the atmosphere was made up of oxygen and X-Acto knife blades) and try to cover up every square inch of the “window” (an ancient piece of filthy glass in a frame) before turning on the air conditioner (which hasn’t had a can of Freon, or any servicing at all, since its installation) in a hopeless attempt to cool the room down to at least 90 degrees. And just when I manage to get to the point (a half-dozen aspirins later) where MAYBE I can get some sleep, here comes the Super Chief, 30 shiny railroad cars long, rolling down the tracks with a roar so deafening that my ears want to hemorrhage, and close enough to my room that I can physically spit on it as it streaks by – at least, I could if the window would actually open.

Not all traveling I’ve done with bands has been as difficult – sometimes it’s five-star hotels with a private jet. And sometimes you can go on the road and never have to check out of your hotel. With Led Zeppelin, we’d “base” out of one city for a week or two, since our gigs would be either in the base city, or cities nearby. We’d stay in the Plaza Hotel in New York City, and if our gig one night was in, let’s say, Montreal, the whole tour party would meet in the Oyster Bar at about 5 p.m., then get into the limos that would take us, with full police escort in tow, to our tour plane (the Starship in ’75, the Caesar’s Chariot in ’77) which would fly us to Montreal. After arriving in Montreal about 7:15 p.m., we’d limo to the gig, and when the show was over, do the reverse. We’d be back at the Oyster Bar by 1:00 a.m. – but unlike the band, my work for the night was not finished.

There was usually about an hour of free time between when we’d get back to the hotel and when the band would need the limos to take them wherever they wanted to hang for the evening. During this hour I would be given the use of one limo for one purpose only: to run

me to the photo lab that was processing my film. All of my shot film would have to be put in bags along with processing instructions for the lab guys. I'd prepare the bags as quickly as possible, jump in the limo, dump the film into the lab's night-drop slot, and go right back to the hotel. The next morning at about 11:00 a.m. I'd get a huge package back from the lab containing all my developed film, and six copies of every black and white contact sheet. One copy was for each band member, one copy was for Peter Grant (Zeppelin's manager) and one for me. I'd personally leave an envelope with each recipient's personal security guard – and always wondered (even to this day) if any band members ever looked at the damn things. At this point I'd attempt to get a bit of rest, while drowning in a virtual sea of yellow Kodak boxes, Nikon cameras, lab receipts and slide projector trays. Then there were the dozens, if not hundreds, of old hotel phone messages: "Call Rosemary! I met you at the hotel in Chicago! I was the girl with the platform sneakers," and the, "You don't know me, but my name's Kristin and is there any way that you can give something to Jimmy for me," and, of course, the "Call Joe at Rolling Stone. We don't like the photos you sent – need to see more." It never ended. I probably averaged 60 minutes of sleep per night.

Being on tour isn't as glamorous as most people think. Not only isn't it glamorous, it's frequently boring and always exhausting. Hotel, gig, backstage, limo, gig, limo, backstage, hotel, gig, hotel, plane, gig, gig, gig. Everything looks the same. All the dressing rooms in all the hockey rinks and sports arenas that have ever been built in the entire world look the same. The groupies, and the insides of their cars, all look the same. The security guys at gigs all look the same and act the same. All the catered gig food looks the same, tastes the same and is even colored the same (a sort of lifeless burnt sienna, charred gray) – and that's the edible food. I have eaten enough over-cooked hamburgers and day-old pizza to last a hundred lifetimes. I've also probably spent more on hotel room service than all my home mortgages put together. Touring can also be highly stressful. Every tour I've ever been on has had its own distinct personality. Sometimes it's all peace and love, but in a flash it can turn dark and nasty. The drama can be palpable, exacerbated by lack of sleep, bad audiences, and bad drugs. There's more drama on one Rolling Stones tour than in a dozen Martin Scorsese films. And it doesn't matter if it's a Stones tour or a Bay City Rollers tour – they're all stressful. Trust me on this one: three weeks on the road with Wham! was the most depressing 21 days of my life.

## **ACCESS IS EVERYTHING**

Access is the hard currency of my job. It is as essential a tool as any camera or lens. Once you have access, you must nurture it and treat it with utmost respect or you can kiss it – along with your ass – goodbye. There's no question that back in the day, access to the people I photographed was much more freely given (and, in fact, taken for granted). Cameron Crowe and I spent pretty much as long as we wanted on tour with bands such as the Allman Brothers and the Eagles just to complete one piece for Rolling Stone. After the first couple of gigs the publicity person from the record label went right back to Macon, or Los Angeles; there was no earthly reason for him to stay on the road with us. It was a complete 180 from what goes on now. I'm very fortunate that since I have a couple of years under my belt, I'm one of a select few that usually do an end run around the rules. These days, if you need to take a leak backstage they slap a non-disclosure agreement in front of you – oh and by the way, leave your camera in the car!

## THE UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS

Sometimes those unforgettable moments happen when you least expect them to. Jimmy Page swigging the Jack Daniel's bottle. Elton John fainting on stage at his piano and being carried off by his crew. Sinatra goosing Dean Martin on stage in Oakland. Marvin Gaye literally tearing his living room apart before my shoot because he was positive there was half a joint somewhere in the couch ... or under the rug? Sometimes the "moment" is more of a mini-movie in my brain.

## ONE OF MY FAVORITES

I watched Burt Bacharach stroll into Capitol Records' Studio A in Hollywood. He looked like he had just stepped out of the pages of People Magazine in 1983 – suntanned, sweater tied around his neck, gleaming white teeth and fresh off the tennis court – the whole faux deal. All that was missing was Angie Dickinson on his arm. Burt beelined it to the control room and hugged and kissed every single person like he was on the receiving line at his own Bar Mitzvah. In my estimation Burt was one hundred percent bogus. And then something happened. He strode out into the main room where his musicians were seated, rolled up his sleeves, looked at the sheet music and became an entirely different guy – the uber-professional conductor/arranger, effortlessly leading the orchestra and rewriting what the strings were playing while gently cajoling the vocalist (Ron Isley) into killer take after killer take. The "People Magazine Burt" was nowhere in sight. The spirit of Leonard Bernstein and Toscanini had invaded his body. It was an unbelievable thing to witness.

By nature I'm a photojournalist. That's the way my photographic DNA is wired. I've done countless portraits and set-up shots in photo studios, and in every kind of "controlled" location imaginable, but my real love is photojournalism. Grab a camera and just shoot. Don't augment the light, don't pose the subject, and in fact don't even acknowledge that I'm in the room. Just let me remain invisible and be a fly on the wall so I can blend into the background and lay in wait for the magic to happen.

Of course, the real payoff for me is to have been able to observe some of the most talented musicians the world has ever known just create. Watching Lindsey Buckingham work the mixing board in his control room for two-straight days, or Stevie Nicks writing song lyrics by her fireplace at 3:00 a.m., or Pete Townshend rehearsing with a blood-soaked towel wrapped around his right hand, or Bruce Springsteen singing to a group of the Chilean "Mothers of the Disappeared" at an Amnesty International show in Mendoza, Argentina – those moments and a thousand others were exhilarating to see.

It doesn't get any better than that.

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