

Let it Rock, Mick!

He is one of the best pop photographers in the world and his name is programm: Rock. Mick Rock.

Interview by Marc Hairapetian

Marc Hairapetian: You said that you like the design of the Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf book more than as the english version. Why is the english edition smaller than the german?

Mick Rock: Of course the UK/US imprints are the original versions.....But my new friend Oliver Schwarzkopf had more vision than the original publisher and wanted to do something really special, bless him...So he made it bigger, better paper, hardback, slipcase. It's also in German and English. So for me this is now the definitive version..the one I love best. He showed me great respect and he will now do all my future books in Germany. In the case of the Rocky Horror book to be published this autumn in Germany, he initiated the deal and will do the worldwide printing for all imprints. That's how much I respect the quality of his work and the integrity of his philosophy. He will of course aqalso be publishing the German edition of my collaboration with David Bowie 'Moonage Daydream' in April 2006.

MaHa: Did you enjoy your visit to Berlin? You like the todays music scene here?

Mick Rock: I had a lot of fun on both my visits to Berlin this year and will be coming back on a regular basis in the future. It's certainly a very young, creative and energetic spirit here. I would love to shoot some of the German acts. we are just starting to explore those possibilities. Already I understand JFK's declaration: "Ich bin ein Berliner"....

MaHa: Do you think it could give a better name for a pop photographer than Mick Rock?

Mick Rock: Well, that's just the way it happened. It's not really my doing...of course my mother always calls me Michael. She views the Mick Rock moniker with some suspicion given the craziness of my youth (and I can't really blame her...)

MaHa: The title of your book is "Blood & Glitter". Where is the poetry in it...? Or is "Blood & Glitter" the best description for the glam rock time? What's about sex and drugs?

Mick Rock: It is from my experience. Certainly I bled for the madness of my youth, and I have many friends from that period who died of drugs, Aids or cancer etc who are mostly in the book....Freddie Mercury, Mick Ronson, Phil Lynott, Rory Gallagher Stiv Bators (of the Dead Boys), 3 of the Ramones, Brian Connolly of the Sweet, Johnny Thunders etc of the Dolls, the 'glam' makeup artiste Pierre Laroche, Bill Gibb the fashion designer and many more. And of course my dear friend Syd Barrett from the earliest days left the game early and never came back...Then 8 1/2 years ago it all finally caught up with me and I nearly died before I had quadruple bypass heart surgery. Even David finally had to deal with a heart operation last year, albeit of a more minor nature than my own problem.....So yes, there was a lot of bleeding went on amongst the Glitter...I've been lucky and am getting a second bite of the magic apple....I do a lot of Kundalini Yoga, massages twice a week, acupuncture, brain machines, meditation, floatation tanks...I've switched my addictions.. My doctor tells me I have the cardio-vascular system of a 35 year old (which I clearly am not). But I'm also having a

lot of fun with a lot of the new rock n rollers. Check out www.mindecka.com to see short video clips of me working with Razorlight, the Killers, The Raveonettes, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs etc. Sex and drugs..well that's for you to figure out...I can't tell you everything....

MaHa: Do you know why glam was so bisexual?

Mick Rock: Glam was androgynous and was a reflection of the most adventurous spirits of that period. Remember that Aids didn't kick in until 1983/84. We all thought we were sexual revolutionaries. The thing was to test the boundaries of our sexuality, to explore all the forbidden fruits. The fact is there was a lot more heterosexual activity than people maybe realise. If you wanted to get near the hottest and hippest girls on that scene, you needed to look pretty and femme. A little makeup was de rigueur for the boys.....

MaHa: You wrote that glam was "The tale of two cities: London & New York" Which was more important?

Mick Rock: They were equally important. For me glam and punk were two sides of the same coin. A lot of the spirit came from New York (cf Iggy, Lou Reed, The Dolls, Andy Warhol, the original New York punk scene), but it probably manifested it's fullest flowering in London (cf Bowie, Roxy Music, Queen, Rocky Horror, The Sex Pistols, Biba's store etc, plus of course Iggy, Lou Reed and Johnny Thunders spent a lot of time in London).

MaHa: When did you decide to become a photographer? Did you have other professional plans or dreams?

Mick Rock: I studied modern languages and literature at Cambridge University (I speak a little German, although my French is more fluent). My earliest obsessions were crazy poets: Byron, Shelley, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, Goethe, Kleist etc. That's what I wanted: to live the life of a deranged bohemian spirit and regurgitate poetic works. I thought I might be a lyricist. As a boy at school I loved Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Keith Richards and the Velvet Underground. Then one day I took an acid trip and picked up a camera and became fascinated with faces. And it all took on a life of its own....I saw a lot of my early subjects like Syd, David, Lou, Iggy and Freddie etc as the crazy poets of my time....

MaHa: Do you have any idols in your profession? Who influenced you in your work?

Mick Rock: I certainly wasn't interested in photographers in the early days. None were as exciting as the rockers. Later, a few years into the game, I came to admire Man Ray, Horst, George Hurrell and of course Hemut Newton...but only Man Ray's spirit of constant play and innovation did I really relate to (plus he had the same initials as me, MR....). And Andy Warhol, the great modern master, whose most significant art was totally based in photography.....I was never knowingly influenced by any one directly in my work stylistically, although the spirits of Andy and Man Ray certainly hovered around me at times. I am a creature of the music business, not the photography business. The music is what inspired me to explore and play and produce. Certainly the idea of being dubbed a 'fashion' or 'art' photographer didn't turn me on.....

MaHa: You wrote: "The only way to really prepare for sessions is to first build your internal focus. You have to prepare like a fighter. A Camera is a wonderful ally" What kind of cameras do you use? And why?

Mick Rock: The very earliest stuff (ie Syd Barrett etc) was shot on a battered 2nd hand 35mm Pentax, which I bought for 30 pounds from a friend. Then a wealthy friend loaned me a Nikormatt and later let me keep it ("you use it more than I ever did"). All the early Ziggy Stardust, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed etc pics were shot on that. Then I got hold of a Hasselblad. The first pics I shot on that were the Bowie 'Saxophone' images, then Queen, Roxy Music etc. That became my all time fave camera, although I still used the Nikormatt a lot especially for the 'live' pics I continued to shoot throughout the 70s. But for the controlled sessions which became more and more the staple of my work it was and continues to be the Hasselblad. Canon gave me a high megapixel digital camera a couple of years ago and that's become my other staple. I get a different kind of feel with it, plus I love the immediate access to the imagery.....;

MaHa: Which music from all stars you photographed do you like most?

Mick Rock: That's too hard...I could name so many. Certainly David and Lou and Iggy rank right up there....

MaHa: What is your favourite band of the sixties/seventies/eighties/nineties/now?

Mick Rock: I don't really have favorite bands...It all depends on the mood of the day and on the particular recording. If you squeezed me hard on the right day I might come up with the Stones, Velvet Underground, the Spiders from Mars, the Stooges, the Wailers, U2, the Smiths, Pearl Jam, the Marilyn Manson Band, The Kills, Razorlight etc...But that's always subject to change. And doesn't include solo performers since they weren't included in your question. I really like a lot of different music.....

MaHa: When you took the pictures of Debbie Harry put you a Marilyn Monroe style in the focus? Who is the greater singer Debbie or Madonna?

Mick Rock: Well, that's not a serious question now, is it? I don't think there's any comparison. If you're talking about business and marketing (or dancing) I have to give Madonna a big nod. But if you're talking about voice, music, image...the divine Ms Deborah's just the best. No female rocker (of course Madonna is not really a rocker anyway) ever came close to the photogeneity of Debbie. And look how terrific the Blondie music still sounds after all these years. You should check out my book 'Picture This: Debbie Harry and Blondie" (published in the UK and US by Sanctuary Publications). It is of course basically a photo book, but I also wrote 15,000 words for it. That'll tell you in depth how high my opinion of Debbie is.....

MaHa: Are you also interested in classic music? Would you like to photograph a conductor?

Mick Rock: Yes, that would be a fascinating exercise. I could probably come up with a whole different kind of imagery for a conductor. But the odds on anyone asking me are probably less than zero. I would probably scare them.....

MaHa: Bowies Ziggy Stardust and "Space Odity" were influenced by Stanley Kubricks "2001 - A Space Odyssey" and "A Clockwork Orange". You love these films too. Did you ever met Stanley Kubrick? What did he think about your work? And what do you think about his films? Do you know what he thought about glam, pop and punk?

Mick Rock: I never met him and since he never gave any public statements about his likes and dislikes it's probably impossible to know what he felt. But certainly David and I were great admirers of his work, and he certainly had a significant influence on glam and punk sensibilities. David always used the Beethoven/Wendy Carlos music from "A Clockwork Orange" to introduce all his Ziggy performances.

MaHa: Where all pop stars also narcissistic people when they had to pose for the camera as they are on stage?

Mick Rock: I think you have to be somewhat narcissistic to enjoy all that attention and adulation and to keep seeing your photo all over the media. I mean a photographer is asking them to cooperate in the exploration of their image. Certainly all the prime glam performers, David, Freddie, Bryan Ferry and to a lesser degree Lou and Iggy did enjoy looking at photos of themselves. But then that's also part of their job so they need to enjoy to some degree. Imagine if they didn't...Plus they were all very pretty or fascinating to look at in their youth.....

MaHa: David Bowie has written your forward. Are you still in contact with him?

Mick Rock: Yes. Not like the old days when the chemicals were flying around and we had the time to hang out and stay up all night. But we still do projects with the old photos (for instance he wrote 15,000 words for our Ziggy Stardust book collaboration 'Moonage Daydream' and co-signed the limited edition version of 2,500 copies and we split the royalties 50:50 on all versions), and occasionally we have done new photos. But we are both very busy and there's only so much time for socialising at this stage of the game.....

MaHa: Why do you compare him with Johnny Rotten?

Mick Rock: The red hair, the joy in subverting the status quo, the powers of articulation, the intelligence, their profound influence on post modern culture. I give you two quotes from 'Blood & Glitter'; one from me: "Look at the hair colour. Johnny Rotten was basically Ziggy Stardust with a very bad attitude. They both loved to get people at it." And one from David: "Ziggy Stardust had a mutant bastard offspring and his name was Johnny Rotten."

MaHa: You said: "Bowie was Glam`s Messiah, Bolan was its John the Baptist." And who was God?

Mick Rock: You better answer that....I can only answer for the men who came to earth. The God issue is a completely separate issue and if you can answer it let me know.....

MaHa: A song from Blondie is called: "Die young, stay pretty" Isn't it strange for you that a lot of people you worked with are dead now?

Mick Rock: Yeah, it certainly is a little strange...all those who died on the rock n roll front lines.....What's even stranger is that David, Lou and Iggy (and maybe myself) are still alive and

thriving. Given their lives of extreme experimentation, they have all certainly defied all the laws of gravity. And then there's Keith Richards.....

MaHa: Whats your philopsophy?

Mick Rock: Another Big Question. There's a lot to be said for doing great work right up to the end. In all the mythology of excess of that period and beyond, the main thing to remember is all the great, durable, groundbreaking work that was produced..... In my more mature years I find there's also a lot to be said for 'do as you would be done by'.....

MaHa: What are your next plans?

Mick Rock: Besides all the books and exhibitions (there will be one next Spring in Berlin to coincide with the publication of 'Moonage Dasydream') and new sessions, there is also a feature-length 'Mick Rock' documentary in the works which will probably see the light of cinema and TV screens in late 2006 or early 2007. After that I'll do the one feature/story movie that I really want to make...but that's for later discussion.....

MaHa: I have a poll in my Spirit-A Smile in the Storm-Magazine where I ask artists about their 20 favourite films. Could you name it to me?

Mick Rock: Favorite this or that questions are always hard to answer, but I'll try.....In no particular order:

The Maltese Falcon, Lawrence of Arabia, Apocalypse Now (the original release edit, not the longer reedited version, which is somewhat self-indulgent), The Lady from Shanghai, Orson Welles' Othello, Clockwork Orange, The Scarlet Pimpernel (Lesley Howard), Raging Bull, A Tale of Two Cities (Ronald Coleman), L'Ascenseur pour L'Echafaud (Louis Malle, dir.), Out of the Past, The Postman Always Rings Twice (John Garfield), The Godfather, Viva Zapata, Notorious, Persona, The Big Sleep (Bogart), Unforgiven (Clint Eastwood), The Fallen Sparrow (Garfield), Goodfellas, The Innocents.....

Wel, there's 21 by my count and there are quite a few others on the tip of my brain (The Man Who Would Be King, Casino, The Outlaw Josey Wales, Body and Soul, To Have and Have Not, The Virgin Spring, Orson Welles' The Trial etc etc) but I have to stop somewhere, so this will do for tonight.....