

Police, camera, action!

Andy Summers will be familiar to most as the guitarist from rock band The Police, but he's also an accomplished photographer. David Corfield goes behind the public image to review a rather intriguing back catalogue of images...

IT'S A RATHER AMUSING VISION, AND I just can't help myself. The thought of Andy Summers dashing off stage after a sell-out Police gig to dev his HP5s is one that leaves me smirking by the front desk of the hotel I'm meeting him in. Perhaps not the right time to be having such thoughts, as the concierge looks me up and down and asks me for the assumed name he's staying under.

Er...' I reply (nobody told me about this). 'Perhaps a Mr Reinhard?' the bellboy offers, helpfully... 'Yes, that's him!' I take a chance. And like the proverbial American Express commercial – 'that will do nicely Sir' – I am ushered towards the express lift and delivered with a whoosh to Room 303 of the Covent Garden Hotel (and it's the most expensive room in the place, at £1,000 a night in case you're wondering).

The door swings opens to reveal Andy Summers, Leica in one hand, instruction book in the other. I walk in and perch my bum on the edge of a large sofa. Fender and Gibson guitars litter the floor...

'I was bored yesterday, so walked up Tottenham Court Road to buy myself this M8. Fancied giving it a go. What do you think?' Summers asks me, genuinely interested in my reaction. The camera is tossed towards me and, mercifully, I catch it.

Only a week previously I'd picked up my own Leica, an MP (tested in this issue on page

36) and immediately realised what these little cameras can do to open doors. Summers spots mine and almost straight away his barriers come down. The arrogant rock star is replaced instead by a photographer with a genuine interest in recording the world around him.

Of course, the world of Andy Summers and the world of David Corfield are planets apart. The trouble with being so successful is that you stop being just a person and instead become an investment, and protected as such.

Below Life on the road for The Police was hardly what you would call dull. For Summers (seen on the right) a camera was never far away to record the sights



© Andy Summers

'That's why I love using the Leicas,' Summers enthuses. 'It gives me the excuse to go out and be unnoticed. I love the photography of people like Weegee, Cartier-Bresson, and Doisneau, because they operated on the street, and for me I love nothing more than putting on a big hat, a long coat and venturing out into the night with a camera. Incognito. Just me and a Leica. It's like creeping about. Quite subversive really.'

The Police have just finished a sell-out worldwide reunion tour, and Summers has documented the whole event, as he has the band's entire history. Which is why I'm here, to talk to him about his book *I'll be Watching You* that chronicles the band's heyday from 1980 to 1983. It's a visual mish-mash of contact sheets, strips of film and written recollections. Revealing images of naked girls draped over guitars, paparazzi thrusting flashguns and zoom lenses through smoked windows of limos, Sting with five Nikon F2s hung around his neck... Summers has had the ultimate backstage pass, and leafing through his book the world of rock and roll and the excesses that

go with it have been recorded with an almost detached view. The way a documentary photographer would go about his craft. Summers is flattered when I point this out.

'I never set out to become a photographer. It was always music for me. But when I had a bit of money in late '79 I bought myself a Nikon SLR from B&H in New York and started to take photography more seriously. I have never been formally taught as a photographer – I believe that you've either got it or you haven't – but I sought opinions from photographer friends and made all the classic mistakes, and learned from them.

'It was all a lark in the early days,' he recalls, 'and the other members of the band were cool with me hanging around with a camera. We were all very visually aware and so photography came easy to us.

'When I was a kid I watched films by Antonioni, Fellini and Bergman and it was a big emotional experience for me. There was always a lust for all that black & white style and the camera was a way for me to get back in touch with that formative period. I knew

Right Fans gather for a record signing at a record store in Austin, Texas, 1980. At the time this kind of adulation was commonplace. A 35mm wideangle Summicron on a Leica recorded the chaos

Below Guitars? Check. Suitcases? Check. Cameras? Check. Naked groupie? Er, check. A surreal study of excess on the road, recorded in bare detail. Literally





I would never be a film-maker so photography seemed the best way forward for me.'

You might be forgiven for thinking that taking pictures would be Summers's way of relaxing after a gruelling concert or an intense recording session. Not a bit of it. 'I have always found photography a completely intense experience,' he chastises me. 'To say it is relaxing is horribly trite. I've been witness to some crazy stuff and because I was a part of all that hype I've had double the intensity. I couldn't walk away from it – it followed me!'

I ask Summers how he worked as a photographer. Did he have a darkroom with him on the road? A load of three-gallon tanks of dev just off stage, perhaps? He laughs. 'Maybe I am old fashioned, but I loved that big Christmas feeling when I got to develop all my films in one go. I never had the time to develop each film straight away so they would just get stored in a suitcase for when I got back home. This was never a professional career for me, remember, so I never had a client breathing down my neck screaming for his pictures. But

that's not to say it was a hobby for me either. I throw myself full on into what I do and any media I get involved with I tend to get completely absorbed by it and have to be the best I can be at it. It's like that with photography. I'd get back from a tour completely jetlagged and the next day I'd wake up and the whole intense thing would start again, this time with my films.'

Digital doesn't sit comfortably on Summers's shoulders. He's giving it a go but judging from the pile of unopened Delta 3200 on the floor he's a long way from being convinced it's the future. 'There is always a spirit of experimentation with photography. You never completely settle on one particular way of working, I don't think.

'I'm not happy with digital. I think it's been forced upon us. I shot this tour digitally with Canon gear but I wasn't happy with it at all. I felt like I wasn't connected to my shots any more. Digital is so disposable and people seem to lose sight of composition and basic camera craft. They become result orientated and not

into the moment. Digital is information. Film is nature. It's the alchemy between light and silver that turns me on. That magic is not there for me with a microchip.'

The book is a large affair; a great blend of musings and memories. It's the ultimate family album of three blokes on the road and, for that, Summers has documented it well. I leave the hotel in reflective mood – sure he's richer than some third world countries and yes, he can afford to buy the latest gear at the drop of the hat. But for him – just like me and you – it's the pursuit of the elusive that money just can't buy. Like a guitar riff that doesn't quite hang together, Andy Summers has discovered that photography, as with music, is a mistress that never leaves you alone. **B&W**

