

LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER HARRY BENSON



Which Beatle got the most fan mail, the truth behind that pillow fight picture and photographing John Lennon's killer.

We meet the legendary photographer Harry Benson to celebrate the release of his new book with TASCHEN.

What was it like the first time you met the Beatles? Were they welcoming from the beginning?

Yes they were very friendly, right from the start. I think they realised something like this had never happened before. It was all new for everyone involved. I was with my mate, writer Victor Davies and we were quite a lot older than them, so I think they were happy to have us around.

Did they realise how famous they were going to be?

No, they didn't have a clue. They talked about how long they might last, they reckoned the longest they could survive was 15 months. John and Paul talked about writing songs for other artists, for West End shows. They were all making plans for what they would do after the band. George was talking about being a classic guitarist. And Ringo wanted to open a hair salon. They had no idea of the hysteria about to begin. But then we watched Beatlemania arrive and I think they started to realise.

What's your fondest memory of being on tour?

Well, the pillow fight that they had is my favourite of all the pictures I've taken. The day I suggested it they really didn't want to do it, John said they'd look stupid and childish. But a couple of days later it happened naturally and I was there to capture it. So the memory behind that picture is my favourite. There was so much energy, it's unusual but it all comes through in the picture. I'm pretty sure Mozart and Handel had pillow fights back in their day, when they were 20. So why shouldn't the Beatles?

Tell me a tour story not many people know?

Ahh, Victor Davies and I had been with the Beatles a while, and we were in Chicago. There was a new Playboy club opening that night, so we decided to go. It was very formal, luckily we were always in shirts and jackets, you should always wear a shirt – it makes you stand out from the crowd. I think wearing a shirt and jacket has saved my life on a couple of occasions. Anyway, we got given a golden key when we got into the club so everything was free. We later found out it was because they thought Vic was Brian Epstein, the Beatles

manager. We didn't correct them, we just ran out at the end of the night before any questions could be asked.

Who got the most fan mail?

Well, would you believe that Ringo got the most, and Paul got the least. Paul used to get so annoyed about his pile being small.

Did they get on all the time? They were 20-year-old Liverpudlians, away from home, were there any fractions?

Yes, there were some fights. But I am a photographer and if I heard anything I never repeated it, because they'd know it only could've come from me. I'm only interested in photography, nothing else.

Did you ever see the Beatles doing drugs?

I never saw anything... honestly! Never backstage after a show, never at the late night parties. I'm sure it went on but hand on heart I never saw anything. It was the 60's so everything was changing, we were just lucky to be a part of the phenomenon.

Tell us about the book (The Beatles On The Road, by Harry Benson) you're releasing with TASCHEN? How did it come about?

They came to me, and then my wife got the book together. We opened my archives to TASHCEN and catalogued all the hundreds of pictures that hadn't seen the light of day. I'm pleased with the finished result. I think the Beatles are the best composers of the last Century. It's debatable, but it's what I think.

Did you keep any photographs private, or did you hand everything over to TASCHEN?

I handed every single photo over to them; I didn't keep anything for myself. My business is to show everything.

You've photographed every US president from Eisenhower to Barack Obama, Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, The Queen, Muhammad Ali... have you ever been star struck?

This is a great question. But no, I was never star struck because I never became part of them. I was always aware that people were basically talking to me for who I represented, that I was there because they respected the newspaper. Sure, you feel really privileged to be the one in the company of the president, and that is historic, but I didn't get star struck. And I think they knew if they stepped out of line, I'd photograph them.

You're the only photographer who carried on shooting when JFK was assassinated- getting a now famous picture of Ethel Kennedy screaming at you. Did that feel like you were overstepping the mark?

Put it this way, I had dinner with Ethel and Kerry about six weeks ago, and they know exactly who I am. I was there at the death of a husband and a father. I am doing a job and they knew how much I respected their family. Mind you, when something like that is going on it's not three cheers for the photographer.

You visited John Lennon's killer, Mark David Chapman, in prison to photograph him. How did that feel?

I went to the prison; he looked smart, like he'd been preparing for our visit for a while. He apologised for killing my friend and I took his picture. It was melancholy. He'll be in that prison for the rest of his life, but he's a madman.

Was it sad for you to leave the Beatles and go back to covering other events?

Let me tell you, when *The Daily Express* first told me I was being sent to photograph The Beatles I was horrified. I was a professional war photographer and they were a pop band. But I had the best ride of my life, we had such access, you wouldn't get that these days. We had freedom to take pictures of whatever we wanted. When we left them it wasn't the same. I don't like the way photography is now, its always digital. I used to get back after the gigs and develop the photos in my hotel bathroom with Vic holding a towel up at the window. It's not like that anymore.

Do you always work alone?

I like to work alone, I did work with Vic on many occasions but lots of reporters don't leave their hotel room. I had to be in the thick of it all, in the field. The writers can pick up from the wires, after the events, but a photographer doesn't have that luxury. I have to be in the middle of it all. I don't get lonely, I'm too busy. It's not a team sport, I'm like a spider, working alone.

You travel all over the world and have a fantastic career - do you ever return to little old Bonny Scotland?

I like to go back to Glasgow. I've got the gist of it up there so I want to get back to it. I like to see old friends, and I enjoy going to my favourite restaurant for fish and chips.