

Photographic Fun with the Fab Four

By [TOBIAS GREY](#)



Harry Benson

The famous Fab Four pillow fight photograph, shot at 3 a.m. in the Georges V hotel in Paris in 1964;

Harry Benson has shot presidents and prime ministers, all manner of conflicts and crises, but the photographs he will probably best be remembered for were of a rock 'n' roll band. "Some assignments I could go back and improve on," says the Glasgow-born snapper. "But that's not the case with the Beatles. When I photographed those lads having a pillow fight, it was something that could never again be duplicated or copied. A good photograph is a glimpse and gone forever."

Some 48 years have elapsed since that famous pillow fight and Mr. Benson is back in Paris, not very far from the Georges V Hotel, where he captured the Fab Four in their nocturnal horseplay. The 82-year-old photographer, dressed dapperly in a pinstriped summer suit and accompanied by Gigi, his wife of 44 years, has been signing copies of his new book "The Beatles: On the Road, 1964-1966," which is also the subject of an exhibition at the Brussels gallery of his German publisher, Taschen, until Aug. 26.

It is hard to countenance now, but when Mr. Benson was asked to shoot the Beatles in 1964, he agreed only with a great deal of reluctance. "I knew who they were, but I wasn't interested in following a rock 'n' roll group. I saw myself as a serious news photographer," Mr. Benson writes in the foreword of his new book. However, the moment he heard the Beatles sing the opening lines of their single "All My Loving" as they warmed up for a concert at Versailles, he quickly changed his mind.

The most extraordinary thing about Mr. Benson's black-and-white photographs of the Beatles, many of which have never been seen before, is just how intimate they are. The pictures of the pillow fight, for instance, perfectly capture how carefree and insouciant the band members were on their first trip to Paris. We see them shopping on the Champs Élysées or gathered in their hotel room, composing songs around a piano. One picture has a sleepy Ringo Starr leaning his head on manager Brian Epstein's shoulder.

"I look to photograph people as how they think they are and not how I think they are," says Mr. Benson, his Glaswegian accent unimpaired by nearly 50 years in New York. "Sometimes you let the person off the hook, whereas you could have moved in and got more of their personality when they were softening or experiencing a private moment. That was not the case with the Beatles. I knew straight away that I'd got something really good."

So too did his employer of the time, the British newspaper the Daily Express, which immediately decided that Mr. Benson should accompany the Beatles to the U.S., where they were due to appear on "The Ed Sullivan Show." Just as he had suggested the idea of a pillow fight, Mr. Benson's next trick was to introduce the Beatles to Cassius Clay, later Muhammad Ali, who was due to challenge Sonny Liston for the heavyweight crown in February 1964.

"When I got to my hotel room in the Deauville at Miami Beach, where the Beatles were also staying, I turned the TV on and there's Cassius Clay shouting 'I'm the most beautiful!'" says Mr. Benson. "I thought this might be a good picture to do with the Beatles. So I go and ask them, and they all say 'Sure,' except for John Lennon, who said something like 'No, he has a big mouth.'"

Lennon's fears were confirmed by Mr. Benson's photographs, which showed that the boxer did have a lot of fun at the Beatles's expense. "Afterward John, who was a fine man, told me 'You made us look like bloody fools,' and that it was my fault," says Mr. Benson. "But I couldn't have cared less. I never become friends with the people I photograph. I don't do it, because the problem in relationships like that is that they want to have an influence on you and your work. It's diminishing returns."

Paul McCartney gazing out of the window during filming for the Beatles's 1964 movie, 'A Hard Day's Night.'

Indeed, Mr. Benson is most appreciative of those subjects who make it easier for him to do his job. He has particularly fond memories of disgraced American President Richard Nixon. "He let me into [his estate] in San Clemente, [Calif.,] days after he got put out of office," recalls Mr. Benson. "It was not the happiest time for him and I thanked him for seeing me. I'll always remember Nixon's reply. He said: 'Harry, you've got to allow professional people to do their job.' "

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For Mr. Benson, who struggled as a student, his job has always been of huge importance to him, sometimes controversially so. As a photographer for Life magazine, for which he worked from 1968 until the publication closed in 2000, Mr. Benson was at Robert F. Kennedy's side when he was assassinated June 6, 1968. Without any hesitation, he took out his camera and photographed the dying New York senator. "I know other photographers who have said to me: 'How could you do it?'" says Mr. Benson. "But I was a news photographer and I was saying to myself basically: 'Mess up tomorrow, don't mess up now. This is it, this is what you came in the business for.' "

Though still active as a photojournalist, working for publications like Vanity Fair and Vice, Mr. Benson has spent the past few years burnishing his legacy with several coffee-table books, edited by his Texas-born wife. Last year, he published "Bobby Fischer by Harry Benson," about the gifted but unstable American chess champion, and a book of photographs about his adopted city, "New York, New York."

"I never turned any work down, because sometimes the most mediocre job turns into something interesting," he says. "If you start to be choosy, you go up and up until the only one you're photographing is the pope."



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