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# HARRY BENSON GETS THE PICTURE

—INTERVIEW BY REUEL GOLDEN

I WAS BORN IN GLASGOW, but grew up on the outskirts. My father was a zoologist, he founded Glasgow Zoo, wrote articles, and was also a keen photographer. School was fine up until the age of six, but then it became a problem. Education was big in Scotland, but apart from history and art, I was stupid, and left school at 11. My ambition was to play goalkeeper for Scotland. I had a few trials for teams in Glasgow, but I never progressed beyond a certain standard. There are parallels between photography and goalkeeping: you are on your own, you can't mess up, and need to make quick decisions. Playing sports gave me physical confidence, the other footballers were minor's sons, tough kids, and I learnt to look after myself.

When I was around 15, my father bought me a camera, but it didn't change my life. In fact, I pawned it in order to buy a jacket that was being displayed as "the new Robert Mitchum" look. There was a terrible scene with my father that night. We did have a darkroom in the house, and in time I caught the photography bug. I started shooting Catholic weddings all over the Glasgow area. They were hard, the people were poor, you couldn't re-shoot, but weddings taught me discipline, and invaluable people skills.

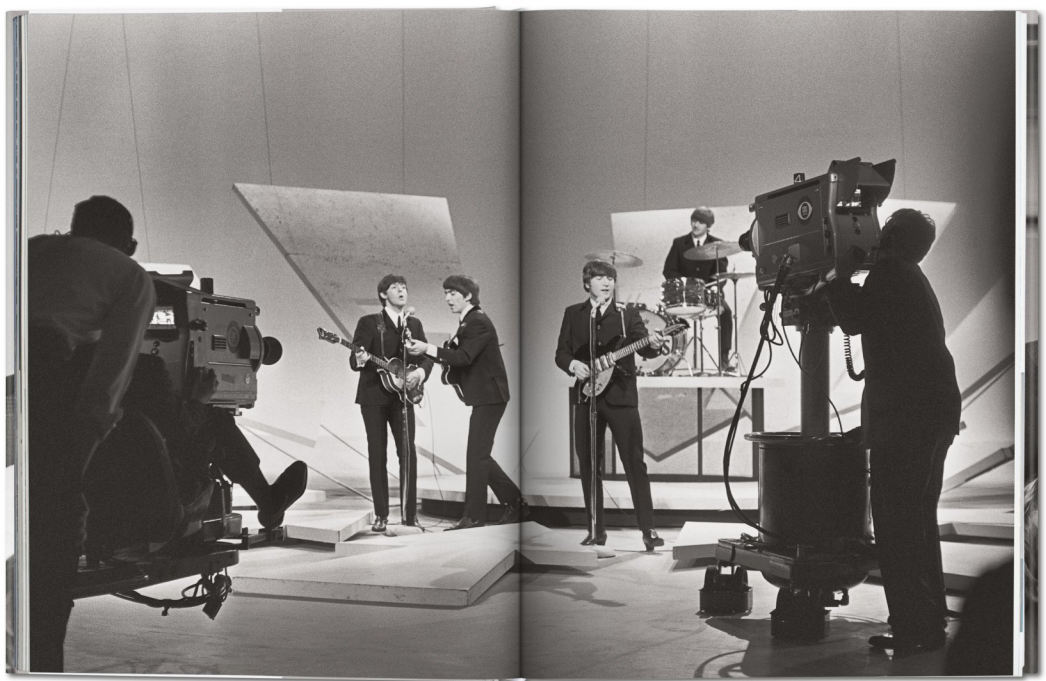
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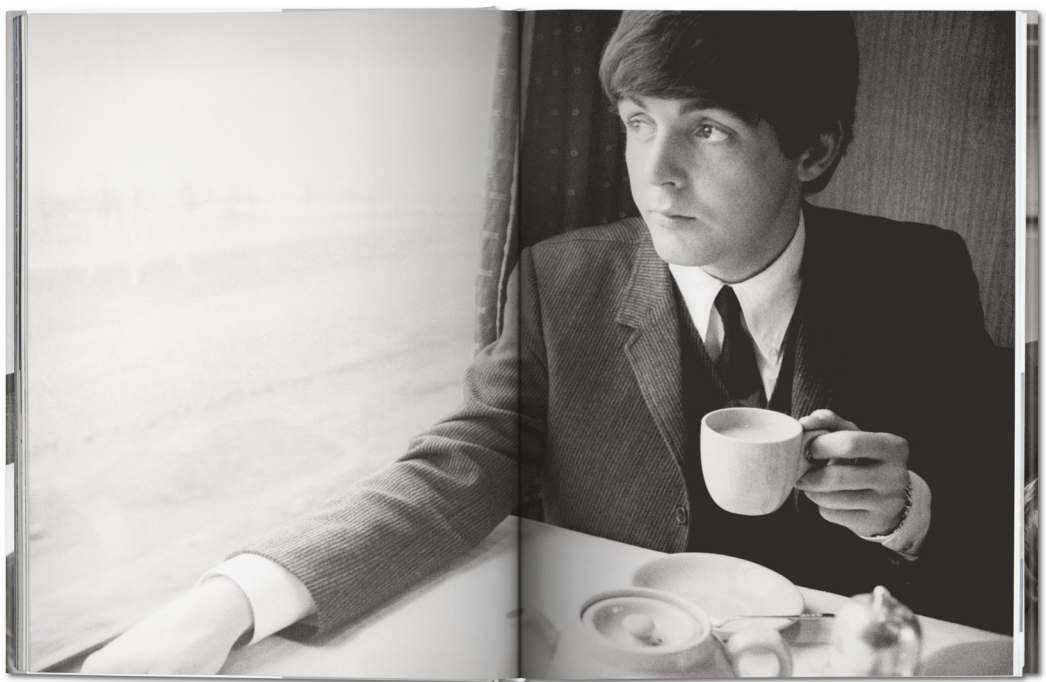
For about a year, I worked for a photo agency on the banks of Loch Lomond, before I got my first big break, working as a staff photographer for the *Hamilton Advertiser*, then Scotland's biggest weekly newspaper. I travelled all over Lancashire mainly by bus photographing women's charities, fetes, sports and so on. It was very hard work, but I knew it was my way out. I was the rat let out of its cage. I must have made over 10 trips down to London, taking the overnight train, in order to show my portfolio to Fleet Street picture editors. Fleet Street was the centre of the newspaper industry, and I was ambitious to make it there. I was constantly rejected until one assistant photo editor, Freddie Wackett at the *Daily Sketch*, called me up for a job in 1959. There had been a murder in East Kilbride on a golf course—it turned out to be the work of a serial killer called Peter Manuel and I was lucky enough to get a good close-up photograph of the murder scene, while the rest of the photographers had been kept about 150 yards

away. It was because I arrived late on my Vespa and the police had gone. The *Daily Sketch* eventually took me on, and I became their Scotland photographer. In some ways it was the best time of my life. I eventually got a car. I was earning a decent wage, and I had a foot in the door. I was a mean son of a bitch, I didn't just want to beat my competitors, I wanted to kill them. My mentality was no matter how dull the assignment, I would get a good picture, maybe a great one.

I then moved down to London, still working for the *Daily Sketch*, where I copied very well with daily pressure. In 1958, I moved to the *Daily Express*. The legendary Lord Beaverbrook, a very important mentor to me, owned it, and in those days it was a great newspaper. I photographed Royals, politicians, movie stars in London, but I was also sent abroad on assignments. You had to get the picture, otherwise you could get a call from the old man at 11:30pm, saying that *The Daily Mail* or *The Daily Mirror* had scooped us with a better photograph. You never wanted that to happen. The big advantage I had over the other photographers is that I didn't see it as a 9-5 job, which probably didn't make me popular with the other photographers. I was basically a tenacious loser. I would go with a reporter, but they would only be thinking about themselves, and they could be a nuisance, especially when they made things up from their hotel room. I was then expected to get a photograph of whatever story they had invented. My salary was 35 pounds a week, but the money you made was on your expenses. It was standard Fleet Street practice, but if they wanted to fire you, then they would go through your expense reports.

I was leaving on a plane in the morning for an assignment in Africa—I already had all my shots—when I got a call from the photo editor on January 14, 1964 telling me that I had to go to Paris with The Beatles, who would be performing at the Olympia Theatre for a few weeks. I explained to the photo editor that it was impossible since I was scheduled to go to Africa. Of course 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. The phone rang again and it's the photo editor: "the editor says you're going to Paris." I was not happy about it, but







"One could hardly believe the speed with which they became famous. In the beginning of 1963 they were the darlings of Merseyside. By October, they were famous all over Britain. A year later, soon after their appearance in the United States, they were probably the most famous people in the English-speaking world." — MAUREEN CLEAVE. "THE JOHN LENNON I KNEW". THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 2000

„Das Tempo, in dem sie berühmt wurden, war kaum zu glauben. Anfang 1963 waren sie die Lieblinge von Merseyside. Im Oktober waren sie schon in ganz England berühmt. Ein Jahr später, kurz nach ihren Auftritten in den USA, waren sie vermutlich die bekanntesten Menschen der englischsprachigen Welt.“ — MAUREEN CLEAVE. „THE JOHN LENNON I KNEW“. THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 2000

« La rapidité de leur célébrité était incroyable. Début 1963, ils étaient les chouchous de Merseyside. En octobre, ils étaient connus dans tout le Royaume-Uni. Un an plus tard, peu après leur arrivée aux États-Unis, ils étaient sans doute les personnes les plus célèbres de tout le monde anglophone. » — MAUREEN CLEAVE. « THE JOHN LENNON I KNEW ». THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 2000