

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
PHOTOGRAPHER AND WRITER

NEAL PRESTON

October 28, 2020

Host: Bryan Smith

Neal Preston (00:00:00):

The most famous photo I've ever shot easily, right now, is the one of Freddie, where he's bending back with all the Wembley Stadium in the background. Because Freddie Mercury is now the most famous guy who's ever lived on the planet. I mean, he's right up there. You got Jesus Christ, Socrates, Gangus Khan, whatever, Freddie Mercury- But that's become the photo. And that was actually the third frame I shot that day.

Bryan Smith (00:00:30):

Brian Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now, let's jump in.

Bryan Smith (00:00:48):

Neil Preston's on the show. Neil is one of the most important and iconic music photographers in the world. You may not have heard his name before now, but if you go to his website (prestonpictures.com) you'll see images that have been burned into your musical consciousness since you were a kid. I'm talking The Who, Led Zeppelin, Jimmy Hendrix, Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, Freddie Mercury, Queen, David Bowie, Frank Sinatra, U2, Heart, Mariah Carey, Dr. Dre, Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Nicks, The Sex Pistols, and Madonna, among others. These photos are not just one-offs. They're not lucky snapshots. They are the product of a photographer who knows that in order to capture the essence of a star, you have to embed yourself in their world.

Bryan Smith (00:01:33):

And that means not just showing up when the concert starts and shooting them onstage or backstage. It means going on tour with the band, driving on the same buses, flying on the same planes, staying at the same hotels, and being there to capture the shot that defines an era in music. Neil is a rare breed of photographer who has dedicated his life to the craft of a very specific and intimate form of photography; capturing images that create a sense of immortality for the icons many of us grew up looking up to revering, and even worshiping. Neil's book *Exhilarated and Exhausted* is available wherever you get books, and if you're a fan of rock music from any decade over the last 50 years, there's something in this book for you. I ordered it before the interview and read it cover to cover. It feels like it weighs about 10 pounds and it is a thing of beauty.

Bryan Smith (00:02:25):

His latest book *Queen, the Neil Preston Photographs* will be released on October 29th, just in time for the holidays. It's a collection of photographs of Queen on tour and in the studio, many of

which have never been seen, with writings by Brian May, Roger Taylor and Neil revealing stories behind the pictures. As you can probably imagine, after touring with bands like Led Zeppelin and Queen over the last 50 years, Neil has a lot of stories, some of which could be a bit salty for children's ears. So if you're listening within earshot of children, they may want to put on headphones for some of these stories, especially the one about the time he took Valium during the Led Zeppelin concert and had a run-in with John Bonham after the show; that one's a doozy. So, without further ado, let's jump into my chat with legendary photographer, Neil Preston.

Bryan Smith (00:03:13):
Neil Preston, welcome to the podcast.

Neal Preston (00:03:15):
Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Bryan Smith (00:03:18):
It's a real honor, and I know that when we were chatting to set up this interview, we discovered some mutual connections that mean that we have some things in common to talk about, one being that you are best friends with Cameron Crowe, right?

Neal Preston (00:03:33):
I am. I've known Cameron since he was 14 1/2 or 15.

Bryan Smith (00:03:39):
Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:03:40):
Something like that. All I know is he wasn't even old enough to have a learner's permit, much less a driver's license.

Bryan Smith (00:03:47):
And that's when he became the youngest writer for Rolling Stones?

Neal Preston (00:03:51):
Correct.

Bryan Smith (00:03:52):
Can you tell my listeners briefly how that meeting happened and how it turned into the friendship that it did?

Neal Preston (00:03:59):
Well, simply, I mean the- It's funny because I can recall almost everything that ever happened on every shoot I ever did, but when it comes to stuff like this, it's a little murky. Essentially... Well, let's see, I moved to LA in '71, a year after I graduated high school. So, I met Cameron

probably at the end of '72. My girlfriend at the time was a PR agent for rock bands and she brought home a copy of, what was then, an underground newspaper called the San Diego Door, kind of the San Diego- San Diego's version of the Village Voice, et cetera, et cetera. And she said, "Read this article," that- I don't remember who the article was about. And I said, "It's not bad." She said, "It was written by a kid who was 14." Which was then astounding, because it was really written well.

Neal Preston (00:04:55):

And I think that Cameron and I first actually met at a show either in Long Beach or in San Diego. And he writes the intro- Or the foreword of my book, and he tells the story of first meeting me. I was in the middle of shooting and I kind of blew him off because I was... I was working...

Bryan Smith (00:05:18):

In the zone, yeah.

Neal Preston (00:05:19):

But we became really friendly. I mean, he had my sense of humor exactly. And I'm five years older than he is, but it was- He was a peer, he was a brother and I started working on all his Rolling Stones interview pieces that he did. I'd go along as a photographer, I'd pick him up at the Greyhound station, downtown LA, 'cause he couldn't drive and we'd go the riot house. And he'd talked to Eric or Jeff Beck or Burton Cummings, Mark Ball, and everybody. And, as I like to say, we've been together ever since.

Bryan Smith (00:06:04):

That's awesome. The forward that he wrote for your book is just so- It really encapsulates a beautiful friendship, I think.

Neal Preston (00:06:12):

It makes me cry every time when he quotes the Pete Townsend stuff at the end of the piece. I mean, he knows me better than my blood sister knows me. So, that says it all. But it's- And we're closer than ever right now too, with everything that's going on.

Bryan Smith (00:06:31):

With that Broadway show that he wrote and that you shot, right?

Neal Preston (00:06:35):

Yeah. The- Well the Broadway show- This is the 20th anniversary of the release of the movie Almost Famous. And we had a lot of stuff planned regarding Almost Famous and the anniversary, where we had some photo exhibitions lined up, we were going to throw a big party for the cast at a gallery in New York and everything got blown off. But I've worked on all his movies since Almost Famous, and I worked on Roadies and we've always had a lot of irons in the fire together, now more than ever. So, it's unusual to have a good friend for a year, not to mention a best friend for 50 years or 49 or whatever it is.

Bryan Smith (00:07:23):

Well said. That is so true. Yeah, my connection to Cameron is, I was telling you briefly on our phone call before setting up this interview, that my dad introduced me to Cameron backstage at a Heart concert in the mid eighties.

Neal Preston (00:07:39):

Ah, right.

Bryan Smith (00:07:39):

And the way he introduced me, because my dad was the tour pilot for Heart...

Neal Preston (00:07:45):

Right, Greg.

Bryan Smith (00:07:45):

Yeah, Greg Smith.

Neal Preston (00:07:48):

Right.

Bryan Smith (00:07:49):

And he introduced me, he said, "Bryan, this is Mr. Crow, and he wrote Fast Times at Ridgemont High." And the way he did that is he went undercover as a high school student. And I was just, I think I was preteen or just early teens at that point, maybe 14 or 15.

Neal Preston (00:08:07):

Right in the demographics.

Bryan Smith (00:08:09):

And I was just- I had seen Fast Times at Ridgemont High, of course, and I'm looking at this iconic figure and I'm thinking: Wow. I was so impressed. And he's such a humble guy.

Neal Preston (00:08:21):

Yep, yep.

Bryan Smith (00:08:21):

Not someone you would look at and say that he emanates rock star vibes or something. He's just so humble and sweet.

Neal Preston (00:08:30):

No, no, he's- I like to say he and I were both normal. And one thing that's funny about Cameron is he's on TV a lot. So, people recognize him. People may know- I'm not famous, okay. I'm known to a little sliver of the rock and roll crowd, so to speak, but Cameron's a very famous writer/director. And if we're out somewhere to dinner, walking around, whatever, his fans will

slide up to him very timidly, "Mr. Crow...?" And he always wants to know what the fans think of everything he's done. What they're into, what they're not into. And some of the conversations I've heard him have with fans are just unbelievable. He loves that, but not because of the adulation, but because he treasures their input.

Bryan Smith (00:09:26):

Yeah. He's just genuinely interested in connecting with his fans and his crowd.

Neal Preston (00:09:32):

And he's a fan, and- Which is part of what Almost Famous is about it's- There's that- Well, you're familiar with the movie, but there's that speech that Fairuza gives towards the end of the movie, she's talking to Billy Crudo and she says, "Do you have any idea what it means to love a band or a piece of music so much that it hurts?" And it's one of my favorite lines he's ever written. And we're fans of who we're fans of. I mean, if I looked outside and Pete Townsend was walking down the street, I'd be off with these headphones and out the door, I'm not kidding. My friends know I'm not kidding. So, we're fans.

Bryan Smith (00:10:15):

Yeah. That's an interesting- You talk a little bit about that in your book, which I read cover to cover by the way this week, I got it in the mail on Monday.

Neal Preston (00:10:26):

That would be called, Neil Preston Exhilarated and Exhausted.

Bryan Smith (00:10:29):

Exactly. Neil Preston Exhilarated and Exhausted. And I'm going to put a link to the book in my show notes, as well as pre-order of your Queen book, which we'll talk about in the interview as well.

Neal Preston (00:10:40):

Great.

Bryan Smith (00:10:41):

One thing I did notice in your introduction was hero worship. You talked about motivation for getting into rock and roll and how your father, and the work that he did and your backstage experience on Broadway, really paved the way for you vocationally in terms of where your comfort zone is. Can you tell us more about that?

Neal Preston (00:11:03):

Absolutely. Well, my dad was a very big deal in the Broadway musical theater world. He was the original stage manager for the King and I, My Fair Lady, Camelot, Fiddler on the Roof, a bunch of others I'm forgetting. So, my fondest and warmest, cuddliest memories of being a kid are when I was old enough to get on the subway and Forest Hills and go into Manhattan and visit my dad's theater on a Saturday, in between the matinee and the evening show. And he used to

take me in a Horn and Hardart automat where, no one will remember this, but you used to put a couple of quarters in this little thing and you'd pull out a sandwich. It was revolutionary, was probably built in the twenties, but we used to go there.

Neal Preston (00:11:54):

And then I used to stand in the wings next to him as he called lighting cues. As early as I could remember, I used to do that. So- And my dad would, every time I'd come to the theater, he'd always introduce me again to all the stage hands, all the actors. He'd take me downstairs where all the chorus girls were getting made up and everything, which a 13 year old boy will find intoxicating to say the least, probably why I love girls with a lot of makeup. But it was home, and being backstage with my dad and any theater was home. And to this day, it's not because of who I am or what I do or anything, but I always feel more at home when I'm backstage at any venue, whether it's a 300 seat club or 300,000 people on a farm somewhere, it's just that's what I grew up around.

Bryan Smith (00:12:58):

It's an interesting dynamic that early childhood experiences and exposures to those types of things can be formative. And the choices that you make.

Neal Preston (00:13:09):

Well, it's always about mommy and daddy. I was talking about this last night with a good friend of mine, it all goes back to mommy and daddy. But I didn't realize probably until I wrote that piece for the book, how much that affected me and how ingrained in me lighting became; theatrical lighting and performance and emotion. And I have a saying, I talk about photography, "It's not the motion, it's the emotion that counts."

Bryan Smith (00:13:43):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:13:44):

And it's funny, because as I wrote the stuff for my book, all that came flooding back to me- I thought that picking out the pictures for the book was going to be easy, and writing it was going to be the tough part for that. Boy did I have it upside down. I mean, the words came out of me like one of those fire hydrants in the middle of the summer in New York city, they'd knock over and starts gushing out water. The words came out of me like that. And picking the photos after three days, I sent a hard drive to my picture editor, I said, "You do it. I can't look."

Bryan Smith (00:14:17):

Yeah. I would describe this as, when you first see it and you feel it, the weight of the book, Exhilarated and Exhausted, it's a coffee table book, which is normally a book that you don't read cover to cover. You pick it up, if you're sitting there with friends and you may flip through it. And to be honest, most people don't look at coffee table books very often. And they're more decoration.

Neal Preston (00:14:38):
Exactly.

Neal Preston (00:14:38):
But this one, substantively I found just fascinating because you're going into, you're really doing a deep dive into your own psychology and also dispelling a lot of myths about people. What people think about what your job probably entails.

Neal Preston (00:14:57):
That's exactly. You hit the nail on the head. And I thank you for that because the whole book project was an exercise in me wanting to tell the story of my job. Not about me, nobody cares where I was born or what I did, you're there, blah, blah, blah. But I wanted it to be about my job, because people think I have the glamour job of the 20th/21st century, and not so much. It's stressful. The travel will kill you if everything else doesn't, the deadlines are sacrosanct and never end. Your job might just start when the show's over. I mean, it's all that stuff. And I wanted it to be funny. I wanted it to have my kind of snarky sense of humor, which I most definitely have.

Neal Preston (00:15:46):
And there's things that people never think about: Don't bring your girlfriend on stage, or your significant other, or your wife or your brother or anybody. Have your laminate clearly in view, because you cannot argue with a part-time wrestler at UCLA who is doing security when The Who are playing ten and a half feet away from you. And my favorite line is, "When the crew loads out after the show, get out of their way. You do not want to be impaled by a forklift, because you're trying to impress some girl from Memphis you'll never see again." And I speak from experience about that. Well, I speak from experience about everything in the book is exactly what goes through my mind, what happens when you have a job like mine.

Bryan Smith (00:16:35):
Yeah, it definitely dispels the myth of the glamorous lifestyle of being on the road with bands.

Neal Preston (00:16:41):
Not that there's not some glamor involved.

Bryan Smith (00:16:44):
Yeah, well if you're flying on a private jet with Led Zepplin, I would imagine that there's some degree of glamor that's going to rub off on you. And you have this access that is just stunning in terms of the personalities that you're hanging out with.

Neal Preston (00:16:58):
Yeah. Well, this is true, but I've done a lot of interviews where almost to a man everyone's asked me, "So, you have a lot of fun *wink, wink* with Led Zeppelin?" And I always have to tell them the same thing: If you're using the word fun as a euphemism for sex and drugs, I had far more "fun" with REO Speedwagon, it's true. Or Foreigner, or Heart for that matter or...

Bryan Smith (00:17:32):
Right. Can you tell us briefly about the infamous time that John Bonam-

Neal Preston (00:17:38):
Ugh.

Bryan Smith (00:17:38):
-Insisted that you do something that you didn't want to do and then they took action?

Neal Preston (00:17:43):
Yeah, I'll tell that story. There's no secrets here. That was, I remember- It's so funny that I remember all of this like it was yesterday. We had done a one-off show in St. Louis, because Robert had been sick for the original scheduled date. So after we finished the leg of the tour, we had to do this one-off in St. Louis. So we flew on the plane from Newark to St. Louis, landed, did the show, all I wanted to do was sleep. I mean, I've been on the road for four and a half weeks with them at this point, averaging maybe 77 minutes of sleep a night for various reasons, kids. And so, during the first encore, I dropped one 10 milligram Valium, in the limo on the way the airport a second one. And as I went up the steps and put my camera bag down, I took a third one. 30 milligrams of Valium coursing through my veins.

Neal Preston (00:18:42):
I get up, I get a little something like a Coke and a little something to eat. And now it's hit me now. Move, really woozy, and I've got my area on the couch set out. And all of a sudden, a very drunk John Bonham comes up to me and says, "Let's see your knob." Is this a family channel? Or can I use...?

Bryan Smith (00:19:07):
Oh, yeah, you can use profanity.

Neal Preston (00:19:09):
He said, "Let's see your fucking knob." And woozy Neal kind of laughed nervously, because I mean, there was a reason that Bonham, his nickname was the beast. Nicest guy, country gentlemen when he was sober, however, 180 degrees when he wasn't. So, I kind of laugh nervously, which I think enraged him. And he said, "I said, let's see your fucking knob." And all of a sudden three of our security guys, all of whom were off duty (New York city cops by the way and packing, not that that mattered) decided to wrestle me to the ground and de-pants me, take off every piece of clothing. And this was not a fight I was going to win sober, these are three cops, essentially. And as I wrote the book, the thing I remember was looking up from the ground to see a somewhat amused Jimmy Page looking at me, clearly not impressed with what he was seeing. Now that's a \$20 million lawsuit.

Bryan Smith (00:20:17):
Yeah, no kidding. That's a crime now, probably.

Neal Preston (00:20:20):

Well, it was a crime then, but you don't want to get- You can't act like you're the fifth member of the band, and I write that in the book. It just doesn't work. And if you do act like you're the fifth member of Zeplin or The Beatles, or the 32nd member of Earth Wind and Fire, or whatever, the thing you're going to get slipped under your hotel room door is not the rooming list for tomorrow night's hotel, it's going to be your one way ticket home. And I was 22 or 23 when I started working for Zeplin. So, you keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut in situations like that. And that's what lets you keep your job. You have to deliver the goods, of course. And I like to always say that my job is to really be invisible. Nobody bats an eyelash if the drum roadie walks into the dressing room, or the guitar roadie- Yes, I know roadie's a dated of word, but so be it. And no one should bat an eyelash when the photographer walks in. And the irony of it is to become invisible you must be invisible at all times, that's how it works.

Bryan Smith (00:21:34):

You're just ubiquitous. You're a fixture.

Neal Preston (00:21:36):

Well, you become a part of the fabric of the tour. And every rock tour has its own personality, which is different than the sum of the parts. I mean, with Zeplin, we had six very, very strong personalities that I had to deal with: four band members, Peter Grant our manager, and Richard Cole or tour manager. And the personality of a rock tour can turn on a dime. I don't care if it's The Stones, The Who, Emerson Lake and Palmer, you name it; due to a bad review, a bad concert review, what the band feels is a bad show, the drummer got the clap from the guitar player's wife, I mean all kinds of- An interview they feel they were misquoted. Anything can happen. So part of my job, over and above what I do with my cameras, is having to kind of take the temperature of the tour every so often, because it affects people's moods. But the good thing is it's like the weather in Hawaii, it'll rain at one o'clock, but by two o'clock it'll be sunny.

Bryan Smith (00:22:54):

So, the business of photography, Neal, I'm curious about the dynamic, the business dynamic where you are on tour with a band. Are you an employee of the band? Do your photos- Are they are the property of the band? Are they- Can you sell the photos separately? How did that work?

Neal Preston (00:23:12):

Uh, generally there are a few artists I've worked with who would only do what's called a buyout, where they pay you more money than you would normally get paid and they own everything. You turn it over, the copyright and everything. Whitney was one of those people, Neil Diamond.

Bryan Smith (00:23:30):

Whitney Houston and Neil Diamond?

Neal Preston (00:23:31):

Yeah, Neil's got an awesome archive, 'cause he owns every photo probably that he ever had taken of himself. But aside from them, and I know there's more people that do that, now, I would get paid a weekly salary from Zeplin, I own all the photos. Queen, we co-own the photos together. We did a deal way back when, and... All the times I've been on the road with a band for magazines, whether it be Time or Newsweek or People, that's all my stuff. I own everything. So essentially 99% of everything I've shot I own.

Bryan Smith (00:24:13):

Oh, that's nice. And did you make that decision early on in your career consciously, or did it just kind of unfold like that?

Neal Preston (00:24:21):

It kind of unfolded like that. Um, in 1977- So I'd been in the business what eight years or so? I thought to myself: I don't want to be 45 years old waiting for The Rolling Stones to go on tour. So, I used to see this agency, Credit Camera Five, which was a big New York picture agency owned by one of my dearest friends in the world, may he rest in peace, Ken Regan. And I called Ken cold one day and said, "I want to join Camera Five." Because I considered myself a photo journalist at heart. And it just so happened that one of the Camera Five guys in LA was unhappy. And I hooked up with Ken, and Ken became my big brother for... 'Till the day he died, but I learned, kind of everything I know about the magazine business I learned from Ken. And he was a very important mentor and friend. And if I talk about him a little more, I'm going to burst into tears. But I mean, a lot of it I picked up along the way. It was fairly obvious, it's like, if you're a musician don't sell your publishing until it's worth so much money, it doesn't matter. And you'll take the money and run. If you're a photographer, don't sell your copyright. I figured it out early on.

Bryan Smith (00:25:51):

Yeah. That's interesting.

Neal Preston (00:25:54):

And they don't teach that stuff in college, as far as I know. I didn't go to college. I was accepted to three of them and almost went to Philadelphia College of Art, but decided not to because I was already working and I'd already been published, and I was junior in high school when I first got published. So, I walked into my mom and dad's bedroom one day on a Sunday and I said, "Okay, I'll go pick up the Sunday times and the dry cleaning, not gonna go to college, and I'll get the lots of bagels." And I kinda tried to slip them a knuckle ball and they were strangely okay with it because I had already, they could see some of the fruits of my labor starting to happen.

Bryan Smith (00:26:39):

So has the business of photography become more challenging with the advent of everyone having a pretty high quality camera in their phone all the time, the ubiquity of photographs online, that type of thing?

Neal Preston (00:26:54):

Well, that's a hardware issue. What really changed the business of photography more than anything was not having a camera in your pocket, it's how photographs are delivered to clients and transmitted. Back in the old days, when I'd shoot something for Rolling Stone or whomever, Time, Newsweek. I had a time-life contract for 20 years, but you'd send in all the film and they'd have to process in New York, and they'd all be like slides or black and white and proof sheets. And then when you get this stuff back and syndicate the material you'd make prints for all your agents. And you're constantly making duplicate prints, duplicate slides, et cetera, et cetera. Now it's just transmit. And that- Sorry, that really changed the business more than anything.

Neal Preston (00:27:48):

The first people to embrace digital photography were really the sports photographers and then the paparazzi. And I've shot six Olympics, and I remember the first time I ever used digital equipment was in Salt Lake, 2002. If I'm not mistaken. And I hated- I still hate digital again, but that's a whole nother movie. But that's what really changed the business of photography is the way the material was delivered. And now that the pure proliferation of photographs everywhere is both a curse and a blessing. I mean, there are some extremely talented people out there that you would never know about if you didn't happen upon their photography. How do you happen upon that though? You have to be out there looking for it. I mean, it's everywhere.

Bryan Smith (00:28:45):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:28:46):

And I also have to say, one thing that changed the business was the rise of Getty. And please use this in a trailer, but Getty is the devil!

Bryan Smith (00:28:59):

{laughs} Okay.

Neal Preston (00:28:59):

Getty is the devil, complete with the horns and a triton.

Bryan Smith (00:29:03):

Alright. Why is that?

Neal Preston (00:29:04):

Because they bought up all these little picture agencies to gain market share, and they sell photos for \$5, and they steal photos. And I don't care if they're- I welcome their legal department to come after me. They sell stuff that they don't have the rights to sell, and they have a virtual monopoly. I used to be with Corvus, which was owned by Bill Gates, they were the big rival to Getty. Getty's strength was in advertising photography and Corvus, his strength was in the editorial, because Bill Gates had bought what was then called the Batman archives, which in fact was the photo collection of UPI, United Press International. And all the ship was sitting in a

warehouse in North Hollywood and he bought it all and started a picture I'd see named Corvus, that he sold to the Chinese about six, seven years ago.

Bryan Smith (00:29:59):

Oh, wow.

Neal Preston (00:30:00):

Yeah, to a Chinese media conglomerate. But Getty- Well I know- So a friend of mine in London, who's a photographer, I'm not gonna name any names, but he was with an agency that migrated their stuff over to Getty when Getty bought them out. And he said, "The first sales report I got from Getty, they had sold more pictures than I had ever sold through the old agency in a month. The check they sent me was less than any check I had gotten from the old agency." I rest my case. They are the devil and they should be ashamed of themselves. And I hope they go out of business.

Bryan Smith (00:30:39):

So, do you find, though...

Neal Preston (00:30:41):

I really feel- Sorry.

Bryan Smith (00:30:44):

So, pre-COVID -and I know COVID has changed the business for who knows how long- but-

Neal Preston (00:30:50):

It's the business. This cramps my style, baby.

Bryan Smith (00:30:55):

Right. For listeners, he's putting on a mask there, but- So, pre-COVID was there still a demand for your caliber of photography and presence on tours? Like Rolling Stones tours and ACDC and all these big acts that have huge arena tour?

Neal Preston (00:31:13):

Yeah. Uh, yes. The answer is yes, of course. The bean counters run the world.

Bryan Smith (00:31:20):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:31:20):

And the bean counters don't like to have someone on the road for three weeks. They like to have someone around for 30 seconds. I mean, I turned down a lot of stuff because I'm not going to work for free. I mean, The Rolling Stones don't pay anybody. I turned down The Rolling Stones Steel Wheels, because the tour account said, "We'll pay a film processing, travel PD, which is per diem, and we'll kick you back some photos to syndicate. And I said, "How about my

fee?" And he said, "Well, we'll pay the film processing, travel expenses, kick you back some photos to syndicate." I said, "How about my fee?" Said, "Well, we don't pay photographers." I said, "Well, I gotta turn that deal down." Coincidentally, three weeks later, I had a shoot, a Rolling Stone magazine cover of The Stones, who had won the reader's poll or something for best live act a year. And I saw the PR girl and I said, "Thank you for recommending me, but I had to turn the deal down. I'm sure I'm not the first person who's turned it down." And she said, "Yeah, you are."

Bryan Smith (00:32:29):
Whoa.

Neal Preston (00:32:30):
And I said, "Well, I'm in good company then."

Bryan Smith (00:32:33):
Yeah. Well, I think that-

Neal Preston (00:32:36):
True story.

Bryan Smith (00:32:37):
-What you've demonstrated, Neal, over last 50 years is that, the importance of embedding yourself with the band to be able to get those candid shots. Because you were there during these very intimate, vulnerable moments that somebody who's a contract photographer, just who is in the city, that the concert is playing in. And, "Hey, can you come in for an hour and shoot." You're not going to get this level of photography unless you're there with the band almost 24/7.

Neal Preston (00:33:06):
Highly unlikely. And I'm not going to say all those guys are hacks, because they're not all hacks. And there's some really talented guys and girls, of course, I've used the term guys universally, but when it comes to- I will say, when it comes to live performance photography, pretty much the best around. And I would not say that about me in any other context. And I know it's just for whatever reason, it's in my DNA. And the only other photographer whose live stuff looks like mine, and he's a friend of mine, is Ethan Russell, who is an incredibly, I mean, I still- When I see his name come up on my phone I still get nervous. I mean, he's one of my idols. But he's a friend and his stuff reminds me of mine. And that's, I don't know, it's just the way I shoot has a certain look to it. I tend to like dramatic silhouetted things. I mean, anyone can plot their iPhone and then go in the pit and shoot a picture of so-and-so at the mic and have it tack-sharp and perfectly exposed. You can do it. My dog can do it pretty much. Just put his paws on the phone. But it's...

Bryan Smith (00:34:23):

There's a quote in your book and I want to read it to the listeners, because I think it encapsulates what you just said there really well, you say shooting live music, "Performances is something few photographers do really well. I just happened to discover one day that I was pretty good at it. You can't teach it. You can't learn it. You just do it. One part love of photography. One part love of music. One part love of theater and theatrical lighting. One part hero worship. One part timing. And 95 parts instinct." I just thought that was a great quote.

Neal Preston (00:34:58):

Yeah. Well, I like that quote too, and I can't believe I wrote it, but it's really true.

Bryan Smith (00:35:04):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:35:05):

Cause it's all those things, but- And timing in life, time is almost everything. As I like to say: Give me the gorgeous girl on Monday, she hates your guts. You meet her on Thursday, let's go to Mexico together. And instinct, it's in your DNA. I mean, when you're around very, very, very talented -or maybe not so talented- artists, when you're around artists they do what they do. And if I'm there to document what they do, then I have to be able to do that the way I do it without impinging on their space and their creativity. So, my personality allows me. I pretty much can get along with anybody, and I'm a fan. I'm a fan of music. I'm not necessarily a fan of every band I've ever worked for, but I just knew from day one it felt normal being around those people,

Bryan Smith (00:36:04):

As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes. And for many of them, we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place: our newsletter! You can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists and resources to help you on your journey. Now, back to the interview.

Bryan Smith (00:36:30):

talking about instincts, Neal, the rooftop shoot of Stevie Nicks, which is documented in your book, seems to be a perfect example of your instincts. Where you're working with a very precarious situation on the edge of this building and a six foot, or six story fall, if something goes wrong. But also you're taking the wind. And this situation that other photographers may think is just, we need to scrap this thing and this isn't gonna work, and you turn it into this really iconic shoot. So, how do you think photographers who are just starting out and they want to work in this space, train themselves to be instinctive? Is it something that you can learn or is it just something that you are born with?

Neal Preston (00:37:17):

Well, it's probably somewhat of a combination of both those things, but I think that it's probably weighted more towards something you're born with. I mean, it's when you have a job like I have, when you're a photographer, you have to always ask you- Every every day is a different shoot.

Every day it's another chance to start your life again, whatever we want to say. But what's the assignment. What's the end use? What am I going for? Are we trying to get a live album cover? Are we trying to get a magazine cover, or blah, blah, blah? So that's always gotta be number one in your thinking. When I'm given an assignment, the first thing that comes to my mind, and the first question I always ask, always, is: What's my deadline? Because deadlines are sacrosanct and I might need every bit of that week or so until I have to turn the finished product.

Neal Preston (00:38:12):

And there's perseverance involved. In the book there's the story about following Sly Stone around like eight days or something, shooting seven rolls of film. I can shoot seven rolls of film in the time it takes to say seven rolls of film. But, especially when you shoot for magazines- There's a word you don't hear that often, magazines. When I stopped and looked at Newsweek was like 12 pages. But you've got to deliver the goods and you know instinctively when you've kind of got it. It's in the can and the rest is gravy, let's take it another step further. And Steve is the kind of person that will always say, "Let's shoot some more, let's shoot some more, let's shoot some more." The only bad thing I'll ever say about Stevie, who's a friend of mine, I love her to death, is: You walk in her closet and there's so much stuff there and she'll say, "Well, what do you think about this? What do you think about this? This looks great."

Neal Preston (00:39:15):

And that'll go on for five hours and- But that's her. But she'll always want to go the extra mile and she's the most creative person I know. And so shooting with her is just so much fun. And sometimes things don't work out, like the Motley Crew shoot on the glacier that I wrote about. Good idea on paper, not such a good idea when you're in the chopper and the pilot says, "Oh, it's going to be minus 14." Well, I haven't fucking thought of that. I mean, I don't know why I didn't think of that, but I took one Polaroid and pulled it out of the film holder and it cracked into an icicle.

Bryan Smith (00:39:59):

Right.

Neal Preston (00:39:59):

So, you gotta come up with something else. And just when you think you've seen it all you find out you haven't. And I pretty much have seen it all, but there'll be a pothole somewhere down the road.

Bryan Smith (00:40:16):

So currently, and I know I'm jumping around a little bit here, but currently is your equipment, your go-to equipment mainly digital, or are you still shooting film?

Neal Preston (00:40:27):

It's mainly digital. Well, and I'll tell you why. Magazines have all gone digital. The first magazine to go fully digital, by the way, was Sports Illustrated, because they realized that, I think they put the magazine to bed on Tuesday mornings or Wednesday mornings, I don't recall. But they

figured that they realized they could get extra days worth of coverage in the magazine. For instance, they could get Monday night football in. As opposed to having all the Sunday/Monday night film come in and having to soup it in the Time-Life lab and the magazines already gone to press. So they've, all the magazines are digital. And now the movie studios- When I work on Cameron's movies, they're not set up for a film workflow anymore.

Bryan Smith (00:41:17):
Right.

Neal Preston (00:41:17):
They're only set up for digital workflows. So, in the old days, for instance on Vanilla Sky, I'd have a dozen proof sheets made of every roll of black and white. And a step for me, a step for Tom Cruise, a step for Cameron, the producers, blah, blah, blah. Now, albeit the actors do all their kills and approvals and everything on secure websites. So, the studios are not set up for a film workflow. They used to develop the film, cut the film into strips, and then with a little calligraphy pen, we'd write on each strip of negatives, the name of the production, production number, and photographer.

Bryan Smith (00:42:03):
Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:42:05):
But the last movie I was able to shoot film on was Elizabethtown, I think, which was '06- Or was it the zoo? We Bought a Zoo, I think I had a shoot, did- I don't remember, but it's back there back inside. I mean, I'll back up with film here and there. I mean, I'll bust out my X-band or something, but it throws all the production people into a tizzy, because they don't know: Where are we going to get it processed? What are we going to do? I don't like the way digital pictures look. I think they look too- Well my friend Woody has a saying: They look brittle. They're so sharp. They look like they could snap into. And I fully agree with him, not to mention the fact there's so many bells and whistles on those stupid things, which you pay for, that I'll never use much less the people out there, so...

Bryan Smith (00:42:56):
Yeah, one thing I noticed, I found some old negatives from 30 years ago and I got them developed. There's only one place in town that even does it anymore. And I took those negatives in thinking: Oh, this is an old point and shoot camera, it's it's not going to be high quality. And I was blown away at the resolution, the crispness, how great these images were from 30 years ago.

Neal Preston (00:43:18):
Yeah. I mean, now that you can scan negatives, I mean, let's just say the first part of my career, maybe not every photo was perfectly exposed, but through the wonders of scanning I could take a neg that's three and a half stops underexposed. And all of a sudden it's like having this weird

time capsule that all of a sudden Janis Joplin's up on your screen. And it's like, I've never seen that photo because it was never printable.

Bryan Smith (00:43:46):

And so new technology is allowing you to kind of revive those old negatives that were-

Neal Preston (00:43:51):

Scanning, scanning, yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:43:53):

So, one of my listeners has a question for you about lens choice.

Neal Preston (00:43:57):

Lay it on me.

Bryan Smith (00:43:58):

So, do you have a go-to either telephoto, or prime lens or both that you take with you that's just kind of like something that you know is going to be a sure thing when you're shooting music photography?

Neal Preston (00:44:11):

Yeah. 70 to 200 zoom, 200F2 and a 328.

Bryan Smith (00:44:18):

Okay.

Neal Preston (00:44:19):

So the 200 to 300, obviously being primes, 70 to 200 is their long- Is their medium- Is Nikon's medium zoom, but you know, I've got them all. I've got the 14 to 24, and the 24 to 70, and the 24, and the 50, and the 35, and the 20, and the 14 full-frame fisheye, blah, blah, blah.

Bryan Smith (00:44:46):

Right.

Neal Preston (00:44:47):

But if it had to be two lenses, and only two lenses, with a gun to my head, it'd be the 70 to 200 and probably 24, maybe. It's hard to say.

Bryan Smith (00:45:01):

Almost wide angle?

Neal Preston (00:45:03):

Oh no, 24 is wide angle alright.

Bryan Smith (00:45:06):

Yeah, okay, yeah.

Neal Preston (00:45:06):

It depends on the job, the end use, the venue, blah, blah, blah. But it's a good question though. So, whoever asked that, thank you.

Bryan Smith (00:45:16):

That was Tyler Blair who asked that question.

Neal Preston (00:45:19):

Tyler, alright!

Bryan Smith (00:45:19):

Yeah. So, another question from a listener, Sanela asked -and let me pull this up and make sure I'm asking it correctly-

Neal Preston (00:45:28):

By the way, I love questions from people, from listeners.

Bryan Smith (00:45:32):

Oh yeah. Yeah, I love it too. It kind of makes it a community.

Neal Preston (00:45:36):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:45:37):

What is his most, what is your most, memorable image captured and why?

Neal Preston (00:45:42):

Well, memorable to me versus memorable to the world are two very different things, but I'm going to assume he means memorable to the world. The most famous photo I've ever shot, easily right now, is the one of Freddy where he's bending back with all the Wembley stadium in the background. Because Freddie Mercury is now the most famous guy who's ever lived on the planet. I mean, he's right up there- You got Jesus Christ, Socrates, Genghis Khan, whatever, Freddie Mercury. But that's become *the* photo. And I know it's a strong image.

Bryan Smith (00:46:21):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:46:21):

And believe me, I've shot enough weak images to know. And that was actually the third frame I shot that day.

Bryan Smith (00:46:29):

That was not the- That's not the Live Aid image, that's a year after Live Aid, right?

Neal Preston (00:46:35):

No, it's the year after Live Aid, correct.

Bryan Smith (00:46:36):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:46:37):

Yeah. It's very mistakenly called Live Aid sometimes. But then there's the famous shot of Jimmy drinking the Jack Daniels, and the shot of Robert holding the white dove, which I'm sure was a pigeon, really.

Bryan Smith (00:46:51):

Right.

Neal Preston (00:46:51):

And those are iconic. The world may not- And I could care less if people know who shot it, but if they know the photo, that means I've done my job. The photos that I've shot that mean a lot to me, there's a Led Zeppelin one with the dry ice on the stage, and I'm shooting from Jimmy's side of the stage. And I always used to hide behind Peter Grant, because he was massive so it was good to, you know, kind of hide behind him. And they were playing No Quarter, which has a big piano intro, and Robert sings a verse, I think, before Jimmy comes in. And I shoot this picture, and I remember it was a thirtieth of two eighths -don't ask me how I remember- and Jimmy's dragging on a cigarette and he's looking right at me.

Neal Preston (00:47:40):

And I'm shooting with a 35, so I'm maybe 20 feet from him. And he's looking right at me, and he comes over to say something to me. It's usually not a good thing when the main guy in the biggest band in the world wants to have a chat with you during the show, okay? So, I was standing there and he's like this and he says, "Is that the tour doctor in the front row?" We had a tour doctor on the road with us, Dr. Larry, there's a picture in the book and table of contents where he's opening his bag. 'Cause there were a lot of interesting things in Dr. Larry's bag.

Bryan Smith (00:48:17):

I saw the bag, yeah. A lot of pills.

Neal Preston (00:48:20):

And I looked and I said, "Yeah Jimmy, that's Dr. Larry." And Jimmy goes, "Fuck me. He pulls more birds than anyone in this band." And then he goes back out on stage and plays the most searing guitar solo, standing right in front of Dr. Larry. You know, that's a moment I will never forget. And a few others.

Bryan Smith (00:48:43):

Oh yeah. Well, that question was from sunny LA form.

Neal Preston (00:48:46):

Thanks sunny!

Bryan Smith (00:48:47):

Yeah. So, the iconic images that I really gravitate toward, the Sid Vicious shot taken three hours before The Sex Pistols broke up.

Neal Preston (00:48:59):

Yep.

Bryan Smith (00:48:59):

I mean, you can just see, well you see exactly why-

Neal Preston (00:49:02):

You can see why.

Bryan Smith (00:49:04):

-this is not going to last. This is not a long-term situation.

Neal Preston (00:49:09):

No, this is not a healthy guy in any way shape or form. It's funny, you know what, kids -when I say kids, well, millennials, whatever- love that photo, they love it. They loved the track marks. They loved the bandages. They loved the goober that's on the base guitar.

Bryan Smith (00:49:30):

I think it shows what punk rock was to a lot of people back then and what it represented in its worst form, in terms of- Not the music part of it, but just the attitude and the addiction issues and kind of the "fuck it" sort of approach to life.

Neal Preston (00:49:50):

Right, right. However, there was no redeemable musical value in any of it, if you asked me. I never underst- I mean, I remember shooting that night, Winterland, and what I remember most is the kids spitting on the band and the band spitting on the kids.

Bryan Smith (00:50:10):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:50:11):

Okay. Now, The Ramones went to my high school, seven years after I graduated, I was never into punk. I happened to be on Google earth last week and I saw that they've changed the name

of the street in front of Forest Hills High from 112th street to Ramone's Way. Oh my God, I wanna fucking kill myself.

Bryan Smith (00:50:35):
Well it's, yeah, it's...

Neal Preston (00:50:38):
I don't get it, I just don't get punk. I never did.

Bryan Smith (00:50:41):
I never really was into punk. I came into my musical consciousness probably more, late seventies/early eighties in sort of the Rush and Yes type of vibe.

Neal Preston (00:50:52):
Really, that late? 'Cause Yes, I remember seeing them in '70 or '71.

Bryan Smith (00:50:58):
Yeah, I got into kind of- I mean for-

Neal Preston (00:51:00):
You're a [intelligible] guy.

Bryan Smith (00:51:03):
Yeah, yeah. And I was really into classic rock in the eighties, after they had already become less relevant, these bands, but-

Neal Preston (00:51:12):
You ever see Emerson, Lake & Palmer?

Bryan Smith (00:51:12):
Not much, I saw them at The Gorge when Ken Kinnear, I think that's one of the shows that he gave me backstage, or a guest pass.

Neal Preston (00:51:23):
He snuck you in, let's just say.

Bryan Smith (00:51:23):
Yeah, yeah. But, yeah, I saw that band.

Neal Preston (00:51:27):
Because Keith and Greg were pretty close friends of mine and I thought they were amazing, myself. I mean, I was with them- I remember they had the tour of the orchestra in '77. Well, they had to play without the orchestra after a couple of weeks, because the rehearsal fees, 'cause the musician's union were so exorbitant that they couldn't afford to keep the orchestra. And I-

And Keith used to travel on his own bus, Greg was on his own bus, and Carl was on his own bus. And I remember being with Greg the day that Stewart, their manager, said, "You've got to give up the orchestra." And I helped them come up with a set list that they could do as a three-piece without having to rehearse. And he actually used a couple of my suggestions.

Bryan Smith (00:52:18):
That's awesome.

Neal Preston (00:52:18):
And told me the others sucked, but...

Bryan Smith (00:52:23):
When you shot the Jimmy Hendrix show, very early in your career you had the opportunity to shoot that, did you know how special he was back then? Or was it just another job for you? What were you thinking about Jimmy Hendrix?

Neal Preston (00:52:37):
Well... It's a good question, actually. In my high school Jimmy was a big deal. I mean, I knew Jimmy was a big deal, but if I'm not mistaken his record came out right around the time of Disraeli Gears, the Cream record. So it was always like, are you into Jimmy Hendrix experience or Cream?

Bryan Smith (00:52:59):
You had to choose.

Neal Preston (00:52:59):
Then it became, are you into Jeff Beck the Truth album, or the first Zeppelin album? And I was usually the guy that was into the English blues bands and also the San Francisco bands- Not The Dead. The Dead are more of the devil than Getty, by the way. But, the Airplane, I was a big Jefferson Airplane and The Doors, so- But no, I knew Jimmy was a big deal, but what I remember mostly from that night was that the McCoy's opened for Jimmy. And I happened to be in the McCoy's dressing room after their set, and Rick Derringer was changing and he took his jeans off and he had pink fishnet underwear on. And for years I thought that all rock stars wore pink fishnet underwear.

Bryan Smith (00:53:55):
So, tell me about The Dead. What is it about The Dead that makes them the equivalent of Getty, in terms of the evil scale?

Neal Preston (00:54:01):
Oh god, where do I begin? It's not even worth the bandwidth here. They're just, they're boring. They're boring as hell. They're boring as- You want to hear some bad harmony, listen to any live Grateful Dead- I mean, I- On Sirius XM somehow I got sucked into listening to a live.. What was... { sings } "Come join uncle Tom's band..." What's the song?

Bryan Smith (00:54:25):

Yeah, Uncle Tom's Band. Or- Uncle John's band! Not Uncle Tom's.

Neal Preston (00:54:25):

Well, Bob Weir was singing in the key of K and everyone else, I mean, it was horrific. You could pick 20 random people off the street and have better harmony.

Bryan Smith (00:54:41):

I agree with you there.

Neal Preston (00:54:44):

And the 29 hour versions of whatever. I mean, I used to smoke bowls of hash and fall asleep on the lobby- On the floor of the lobby of the Fillmore East during the Grateful Dead show.

Bryan Smith (00:54:57):

I found the same Sirius XM channel, a Grateful Dead channel, and I was playing that for my wife, 'cause I went to a Dead show and I do have some Dead albums. And I was playing this 1990s show where Jerry Garcia was singing some song and they were trying to sing harmony, as they always do.

Neal Preston (00:55:13):

Ugh.

Bryan Smith (00:55:13):

And my wife was horrified by how off- I mean, when you try to convince somebody who does not like the Grateful Dead that they're a good band, it's a very tough sell.

Neal Preston (00:55:25):

No, yeah. That's never a battle you're gonna win ever, ever, ever. And I remember, when I still lived in New York, I was still in high school and I met this girl. God, I don't know if she's still alive. Alice Polaski. And Alice Polaski, her claim to fame was she had dated Mickey Hart. And, "Who's Mickey Hart?" She's said, "Well, he's one of the two drummers of the Grateful Dead." And I thought: Oh, that's cool. Then I heard the Grateful Dead. And I thought it wasn't so cool, and I didn't see her anymore. But no, they're frighteningly boring. I just alienated a whole bunch of people, I know, but-

Bryan Smith (00:56:02):

No! I I think it's a divisive band, because either you love them or you, I think, feel the way you do, which is there's no redeeming, nothing musically redeeming about what they do.

Neal Preston (00:56:14):

Ugh.

Bryan Smith (00:56:14):
But I think-

Neal Preston (00:56:15):
Not to mention the fact that, don't go to a Dead show and drink out of anything that you didn't actually open yourself.

Bryan Smith (00:56:24):
I think it's a community of people, and I think it's more of, almost like a philosophy more than it is a band.

Neal Preston (00:56:33):
Yeah. So is communist China.

Bryan Smith (00:56:36):
So, now one of the-

Neal Preston (00:56:39):
Not to bring politics into it...

Bryan Smith (00:56:39):
Another striking thing about your book is that you tell this story about the first time that you shot Bob Dylan, and that was at this party that you were hired to cover, and you hated shooting parties and still do, it sounds like.

Neal Preston (00:56:58):
I'm the worst party photographer ever.

Bryan Smith (00:57:00):
But you're shooting as people are leaving the party, and you shoot a picture of Bob Dylan, and you're self-conscious about it. Can you tell listeners about what happened there?

Neal Preston (00:57:11):
Yeah. Well first, well, my partner Andy Kent and I had to cover this, it was a Rod Stewart press party. And at one point the girl from [intelligible] said, "Okay, what do you need to be outside?" 'Cause there were a lot of famous people there and one inside. So I said, "Stand there, alright? I'll go outside." And this is before there used to be gaggles of paparazzi everywhere. So, the first people who leave are Paul and Linda. And Paul looks not very happy and Linda's giving me a nasty look, but eh, you know, it's Paul and Linda, he's been photographed 8 billion times.

Neal Preston (00:57:49):
And then Cher comes walking out, saying something to me, like "Get out of my way," or some- I don't remember. But then she had just started seeing Greg, and Greg was behind her and I thought: Oh, at least Greg knows me, and he'll smooth it out and everything. And then right

behind Greg is Bob and I take one picture of Bob and he says, "You're a leech! You leech! You're a leech!" And he's, Bob's got these steely little eyes and when they locked onto you it's petrifying. And he called me a leech. And I agreed with him.

Bryan Smith (00:58:24):
Yeah.

Neal Preston (00:58:24):
And it was the last, pretty much the last party I ever shot, Bob Dylan called me a leech. And- But when Bob talks people listen.

Bryan Smith (00:58:33):
And then- But what was also striking about that story is that, what happened after you were called a leech by Bob Dylan is you had access to Bob Dylan shows and backstage opportunities, but then there's this call from Tom Petty to shoot the Wilburys in the eighties. Can you tell us about that?

Neal Preston (00:58:53):
Yeah. And I love the chapter I wrote the book, because I was trying to come up with a new kind of lead and I said, "Oh, I'll just try and do the verbatim phone call from Mary Clauser," who worked for Tom.

Bryan Smith (00:59:06):
It's captivating.

Neal Preston (00:59:07):
And it's- I mean, obviously I didn't take notes during the original phone call, but I recreated it pretty much verbatim. I was sitting home one day and Mary calls and after the small talk said, "What are you doing?" I said "Nothing." She said, "Tom wants to know if you could come out, and he's doing some recording with some of his friends." I said, "Sure, what time and where?" And she said, "Hang on..." Blah, blah, blah. And comes back on and says, "Tom's on the other line. I'll have him call you in a couple of minutes." So I said, "Okay." I called my assistant, who luckily was available. And I said, "Just come over, we're going to have to go to Encino." And then the phone rings, I pick it up, "Hello?" And I hear, "Hey Neal, how you doing? It's Tom." With a southern drawl. I said, "Hey Tom..." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. "So, what's the address?" He goes, "Well, I'm not sure of the address, but you get on the 101, and you go past the 405, and take it to... Take it to... uh... talk to George!"

Neal Preston (01:00:12):
Then he hands the phone and this very distinctive Liverpudlian accent comes on, and then I immediately figured out it was George Harrison. I'd remember nothing about the rest of the phone call. And we ended up going out to Dave Stewart's house where they were recording, and it was me and my assistant at the time, one roadie, and five band members, and that was it. Bob and Tom, George and Jeff, and Roy Orbison. And I had met George once or twice before

that, but he took me in the other room and he said, "Okay now, we just need some quick group shots here and there." I wasn't supposed to be- One of the shots was supposed to be for a guitar endorsement or some kind of ad. But it was quick and the whole thing was going to be like a half an hour, 45 minutes. And he said, "Okay, when Bob's in the right mood, then we'll shoot it. I'll give you the sign when Bob's ready."

Bryan Smith (01:01:10):

So, George is on eggshells around him.

Neal Preston (01:01:14):

Yeah. And then Tom comes in, "Hey Neal, how you doing?" Big hug. And Tom says, "Okay, so when Bob is ready to-" You know, he's given me the exact same rap about. And I'm thinking: You're a Beetle, you're Tom Petty. Why are you on eggshells about Bob? And that's the way it was, because Bob is Bob.

Bryan Smith (01:01:37):

And ou had to, I mean, you had to navigate those types of personalities, your entire career in terms of almost being like a rockstar whisper.

Neal Preston (01:01:45):

Well, yeah, I mean- But again, my personality is one that is really not usually a problem. Bob was a little tough. The worst was Barbara Streisand, she fired me afterwards.

Bryan Smith (01:01:58):

Really?

Neal Preston (01:02:00):

Yeah...

Bryan Smith (01:02:01):

Why did she fire you?

Neal Preston (01:02:03):

It's not that she fired me, she just didn't hire me for the bigger gig that I was supposed to do after this rehearsal.

Bryan Smith (01:02:10):

Oh.

Neal Preston (01:02:10):

Because I gave her shit for making me stand in a camera- You know, you can only photograph one side of her face. I don't know if you're aware.

Bryan Smith (01:02:18):

I remember reading that.

Neal Preston (01:02:19):

And even if you watch the movie she's been in, certainly the ones she's directed, most of the shots are from the one side. You can't do a whole movie only shot from one side. But she did this dress rehearsal on the stage, I think in Culver City, and it was before one of her big comeback New Year's performances of Vegas. And so this would have been early December, and the label had hired me. I had a stand in back of these 20 rows of seats for friends and family on this side. And I was not liking what I was getting. So during the intermission, I go into her dressing room, and it's just her and Marty Erlichman, and I kind of took the piss out of her. I said, "Pretend that you're me, and I'm Barbara Streisand. I'm thinking that that might not be the best angle that I could maybe get better pictures from there, because of the light." And she looked at Martin and she looked at me and said, "Yeah... Yeah, right..." And then I was ushered out and never got hired for the big news. It's true!

Bryan Smith (01:03:26):

So, I know we're well past an hour now and I want to be respectful of your time. So, couple more questions...

Neal Preston (01:03:35):

Hey, it's a pandemic. I got nowhere to go!

Bryan Smith (01:03:40):

Okay.

Neal Preston (01:03:40):

No, great, a couple more.

Bryan Smith (01:03:40):

So, one thing I noticed in-

Neal Preston (01:03:44):

I don't tell that Streisand story that often, it's so good.

Bryan Smith (01:03:48):

That's good. That's a good one. So you talk about, there's a quote in your book where you say, and this is you quoting someone else about, "We're all circling the same drain." And you're talking about mortality, I think a little bit toward the end of the book. Do you look at photographs as a way of capturing forever and basically making the mortal immortal in some ways, taking these moments?

Neal Preston (01:04:16):

Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't have said it better myself. That's those are the things I can leave when I'm gone, when I'm dust. I had this weird epiphany one night, we were doing an exhibition

-I think it was maybe last year or the year before in Boston- and there were about 40 photographs up on the wall. And I thought, if each one of those photographs was shot, let's say at a 30th of a second, okay? Then 40 of them would have been 40 times a 30th of a second in real time, which would be one and a quarter seconds. And I thought, wow, a lifetime shooting pictures. And I've documented 1.2 five seconds.

Bryan Smith (01:05:00):
Yeah.

Neal Preston (01:05:02):
It's kind of a weird, strange way of looking at it. But I'm thrilled to be able to leave anything behind that people will remember. And I truly mean that, and I'm humbled by that. And I never dreamt that any of that would happen. But the day I heard the thing about the circling the drain, was I was having a really rough day. My friend had passed away and my dad had passed away. He lived to be 94 and had a great life, but I was having a rough day and I was talking to someone who said, "Don't forget, we're all circling the same drain." And it was, that seemed to have just the right amount of fatalism and whimsy and all of that stuff, because it's true. But I may not be here, but Freddie Mercury will live on. And it's great to be able to know that not my name, but the images will be enjoyed; hopefully enjoyed.

Bryan Smith (01:06:00):
For me the- I'm glad that you talked about this subject, because for me there's something comforting about capturing, not just an image, but an image that really captures the essence of a person and a moment, a really special moment. And that's what you've done for 50 years. And there some- That's why it's so comforting to take this book- And it's a tactile experience too, because it's so- It's glossy on some pages, and I think there might be some matte pages in there. It's like you're holding a piece of history, rock history, when you're looking at this book.

Neal Preston (01:06:33):
Yeah, well, that was the objective was to do a book that could be set apart from that big pile of rock books that people have in the corner of their living rooms. And to get my personality on the page, in pictures and words. And I figured if I can do that I've got something that can stand apart from everyone else's book. And I know I achieved it.

Bryan Smith (01:06:58):
Yeah, you absolutely did.

Neal Preston (01:07:00):
And plus it's 4.5 pounds, that's a lot of fucking paper.

Bryan Smith (01:07:06):
Substantial, for sure.

Neal Preston (01:07:06):

But I also, I love the cover photo because it doesn't have a rock star on it, and it's not Keith Moon's drum set by the way, it's Roger Taylor's. And then the shot on the back of Jimmy is- To the extent that I have any photographic style at all, that's my style. That kind of...

Bryan Smith (01:07:28):
The spotlight...

Neal Preston (01:07:30):
... Almost overly dramatic.

Bryan Smith (01:07:31):
The shadow...

Neal Preston (01:07:31):
Yeah. I mean, it's the romanticism of what I do.

Bryan Smith (01:07:38):
So, tell us about your next book, your Queen book that's going to come out in October.

Neal Preston (01:07:41):
The Queen book, it's called Queen: The Neal Preston Photographs. I wanted to call it something very different, but it wouldn't pass the sensors. And it's all, it's only my photos, a lot of stuff that hasn't been published before. Brian wrote a little something in the intro. Roger wrote something great, it's something like, "You know, we loved having Neil around..." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. "And I had to write this because he knows too much, and this will shut him up." Which is very Roger.

Bryan Smith (01:08:17):
Oh yeah.

Neal Preston (01:08:19):
But the book is going to have a lot of stuff that no one's ever seen. And I worked part of six tours with them and was on stage with them at Live Aid and et cetera, et cetera. It's the same publisher as my book, it's Reel Art Press. And it can be pre-ordered at www.reelartpress.com. That's R-E-E-L, as in movie reel, art press.com. And I think the pub date is October 29th, but Queen fans are- This is the heroin that they crave. Trust me on this one, so...

Bryan Smith (01:08:58):
It looks amazing.

Neal Preston (01:09:00):
It's exciting.

Bryan Smith (01:09:00):

I've seen the cover on Amazon.

Neal Preston (01:09:02):

You did see the cover?

Bryan Smith (01:09:02):

Yeah.

Neal Preston (01:09:03):

The cover doesn't have a rockstar on it either, so. It's funny, it's got that line of soldiers that- I got an email from a kid who is convinced that the third soldier from the left is his dad. Now, keep in mind I'm 300 yards away with a 400 doubler, but we're very excited about it. And it's- You can read- People can read more about it at queenonline.com, on the band's website. And me and Brian had been wanting to do something together for a long time, and this is a big deal for them. And especially for me.

Bryan Smith (01:09:42):

It's exciting for me too. I'm definitely gonna pre-order the book, and I look forward to receiving that in October.

Neal Preston (01:09:48):

And I wrote some good stuff for it too. As I say, I love writing.

Bryan Smith (01:09:52):

You have a knack for it.

Neal Preston (01:09:54):

Most of my close friends have all been writers in my life. And I didn't realize I was a frustrated writer.

Bryan Smith (01:10:02):

Well, you don't wright- It's not like a novel that you wrote in this book.

Neal Preston (01:10:06):

No, it's conversational.

Bryan Smith (01:10:08):

Yeah. It's very- What it does is it gives you a great sense of who you are with a combination of writing and photographs, but writing that describes the photographs that you're looking at.

Neal Preston (01:10:21):

Right. And what you go through making those photographs.

Bryan Smith (01:10:24):

Right. Quite a journey. And now the next question I have may or may not make it into the final episode here. We'll see. I'm curious if you have any memories of my dad, Greg Smith, when he flew for Heart or any other band.

Neal Preston (01:10:39):

Well, I remember him. Well, I remember Ken flying the airplane for awhile, and then- But I do remember Greg. I don't remember hanging out with him. I remember seeing him backstage at some shows. I mean, I did so many Heart shows, and I wish that I had more to say other than I remember him being a very, very sweet man.

Bryan Smith (01:10:58):

Thank you for saying that. I mean, he died pretty young, back in 2003, so...

Neal Preston (01:11:03):

Oh... I'm sorry.

Bryan Smith (01:11:04):

What I try to do is, because he was on the road so much touring with bands, not just Heart, but Neal Young, Joni Mitchell, Def Leppard, John Cougar Mellencamp. But he was gone a lot, and so didn't really get a chance to know him like a lot of kids get to know their fathers. And so through people like you or Howard Lease, or Ann and Nancy Wilson, after he died, I try to reach out to them and just see what I can find out about my dad, but...

Neal Preston (01:11:36):

I'll tell you what, next time I'm in LA at the office I'll try and go through the Heart file, which is about size of the empire state building, and see if I have any photos of him.

Bryan Smith (01:11:47):

Oh, that would be awesome.

Neal Preston (01:11:49):

Because there's a good chance I would have shot something.

Bryan Smith (01:11:54):

Oh yeah. He was there. I mean, he was always backstage and he would, sometimes he would-

Neal Preston (01:12:00):

I'd say it's probably 90/10 that I have something of him.

Bryan Smith (01:12:05):

Right. Yeah. One of the things he used to do, and this was a story that Ann and Nancy told me after he died, they sent an email through Carol Peters, their manager, but he used to hang out with Cameron in the plane or at the hangar during the concert and afterwards. Because they weren't always into the concert scene, Cameron really wasn't a partier, but...

Neal Preston (01:12:29):

Well, yeah. And he might've been married to Nancy, but that doesn't mean he's going to watch every song of every show, you know? I mean, if you're at every show every night, you're not going to watch every minute of every show, you're just not.

Bryan Smith (01:12:45):

Yeah. Well, Neal people can find you at prestonpictures.com?

Neal Preston (01:12:51):

Right. And there's a way to email me through the website. And I answer all emails to the best of my ability, sometimes long and voluminous, sometimes short and snarky. But, no, it's- People just ask me all kinds of stuff. And I love it because I know what it means to be a fan, so... You know, it's fine. And, again, Queen book, pub date is October 29, www.reelartpress.com to pre-order. And then the first book is Neal Preston Exhilarated and Exhausted, same publisher. I don't know if they're doing any bundles.

Bryan Smith (01:13:33):

Yeah. Just in time for the holidays, so that would be a great gift.

Neal Preston (01:13:37):

Or as we used to say "bendels." At any rate...

Bryan Smith (01:13:41):

Yeah. And I'll put your social media links on my show notes as well, so anybody who's interested in any of the things we talked about in this interview, links will be up on my website and I encourage everybody to go out and not just buy the Exhilarated and Exhausted book, but pre-ordered that Queen book because it just looks amazing.

Neal Preston (01:14:03):

It's gonna be great.

Bryan Smith (01:14:03):

Yeah. Thanks a lot, Neal, for your time.

Neal Preston (01:14:05):

Anytime. And goodbye world. And it's 111 degrees today here in the desert, so-

Bryan Smith (01:14:13):

Wow.

Neal Preston (01:14:15):

If you're sitting anywhere cooler than 111, I'm very jealous.

Bryan Smith (01:14:21):

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