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PROFILE

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ICONIC ROCK-AND-ROLL LENSMAN BARRIE WENTZELL

BY JOYCE SINGER-D'APRILE

During the revolutionary era of the sixties and seventies, the crème de la crème of the music business was immortalized in pictures by renowned rock-and-roll photographer Barrie Wentzell. A pictorial historian and trusted friend of many of the biggest stars in the rock-and-roll universe, his iconic celebrity images of musicians such as Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and Tina Turner have been showcased everywhere from the Art Gallery of Ontario to the Louvre in Paris. They have also graced books, albums, CDs and DVDs.

Behind each of the photos in this article there's a great story! Visit photolife.com to learn more!

"There was a renaissance at the end of the 20th century," Wentzell says. "Rock and roll was like a positive-bomb explosion! It was a very creative time, and a lot of good came out of that period—the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Save the Earth, Save the Whales...it all started back then, and some are still ongoing. They were probably started by people just sitting around a table, from all different cultures, listening to music, exploring what we had in common, rather than what we had in difference."

Based in Toronto for the past 32 years, he was instantly drawn here during a one-week visit because, he says, "Canada was like England before Maggie Thatcher came into power, more peaceful, more democratic." Wentzell was born in a mining town in northern England. After WWII his family moved to rural Kent, where he eventually attended the Maidstone Art School. Jobs in London followed, including Manhattan Displays and the Color Applications photo studio. In the early sixties, he was inspired and mentored by famed photojournalist Maurice Newcombe.

"I HAD A JOB IN A PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO WHERE THEY LET ME BORROW A LEICA 35-MM SPY CAMERA, WHICH FITS IN YOUR POCKET. SO I WAS GOING AROUND TRYING TO BE [HENRI] CARTIER-BRESSON, EUGENE SMITH AND PAUL STRAND," SAYS WENTZELL.

"I had a job in a photography studio where they let me borrow a Leica 35-mm spy camera, which fits in your pocket. So I was going around trying to be [Henri] Cartier-Bresson, Eugene Smith and Paul Strand," says Wentzell. "I must have been very shy because I found the camera a legitimate way to observe people. Back then you could do that. Rarely did you see anyone with a camera except maybe with the family Brownie. People didn't mind seeing you with a camera in pubs or even trains. I was learning the technique of photographing casually. That's how I learned how to do the intimate portraits."

Jimi Hendrix, 1969, his flat on Brook Street, Mayfair, London during an interview for *Melody Maker*.

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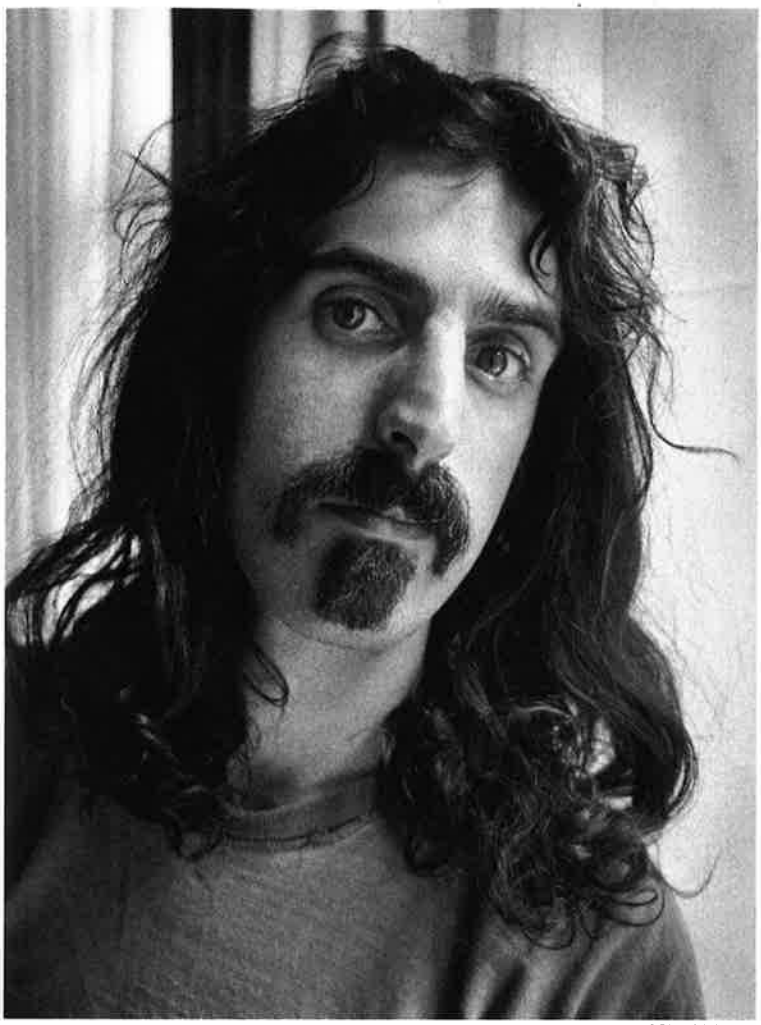
The Beatles, 1967, Brian Epstein's house, Belgravia, London.

In a fortuitous moment in 1965, he spotted a young Diana Ross of the Supremes in a pub at the BBC TV studios, as she was being interviewed for *Melody Maker*, Britain's top music magazine. He politely got her permission to take some photographs, and afterwards the journalist suggested he submit a picture to *Melody Maker*. The photograph landed on the front page, and a week later he was hired on a freelance basis. Wentzell's career was officially launched. Eventually he became their exclusive chief photographer, accompanying their journalists to celebrity interviews.

"THOSE YEARS WERE INTERESTING BECAUSE OF THE INTERVIEWS WE DID WITH PEOPLE LIKE FRANK ZAPPA, WHO MIGHT PHONE UP AND SAY 'I'M IN TOWN. COME ON OVER AND LISTEN TO MY NEW ALBUM.' AND WE'D HAVE SOME INTERESTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHANGING THE WORLD."

"Those years were interesting because of the interviews we did with people like Frank Zappa, who might phone up and say 'I'm in town. Come on over and listen to my new album.' And we'd have some interesting conversations about changing the world. The same with John Lennon, he'd say something and then Yoko would say, 'Yeah, but…' and we'd all chip in with our comments," Wentzell reminisces. "It was an arts lab of thought. It's what Pete Townshend was all about when he was telling me the story about what he was going to do with this thing called 'Tommy.'"

Growing up in the fifties, he recalls that there was no immediate news. "You had to go to the cinema every week to see the *Pathé News* of what happened three weeks ago. And then there was *Look* magazine, with [W. Eugene] Smith's photographs and the whole fantastic story. You could step right into that world, wow! You read it, and you were there, which appealed to me."



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Frank Zappa, 1969, hotel room, London.

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John & Yoko Flag, 1971, Tittenhurst Park, Ascott, Buckinghamshire.

The Who, 1969, Melody Maker Awards, unknown hotel in London.

"So I brought that into *Melody Maker*. I had nobody to follow into the business because rock-and-roll photography hadn't been visualized or invented yet," he says, "There were only press pictures and staged pictures, nothing immediate." Self-taught, Wentzell studied the stylized works of Al Wertheimer, who photographed Elvis, and William Claxton, who photographed Chet Baker. "I started off doing a photojournalistic style, just photographing people in casual situations, looking really relaxed. I wanted to get the story. Going along with the *Melody Maker* journalists suddenly it was an open door, and I'm meeting Clapton, Jagger, Elton, the Who, the Kinks and the Beatles, and the articles would be illustrated by my pictures. For the 10 years I was there, it was half party, half work. We discovered artists and put them on the front page. It was like the Internet of the day."

In the early days, Wentzell used Pentax Spotmatic cameras with three standard lenses. "I had a 28 mm, which was an f/3.5, which is about a stop lower than it should have been. It didn't give as much light as it should have because a lot of those early gigs had very little lighting. I also had a 55 mm f/2.8 and a 105 mm f/2.8," he says.

In another stroke of luck, to solve the issue of speeding up the film because there wasn't enough light, Wentzell had heard about a developer from the United States called Acufine, which boosted Kodak Tri-X 400 ASA film up to about a 1000 ASA. So he was able to get an extra stop or two in the camera when others couldn't.

At the gigs, Barrie learned to wait, be almost invisible and not get in the way. He says, "Portraits were a bit different. With a lot of them, I used my 28-mm lens for headshots,

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Leonard Cohen, 1974, Belgravia, London.

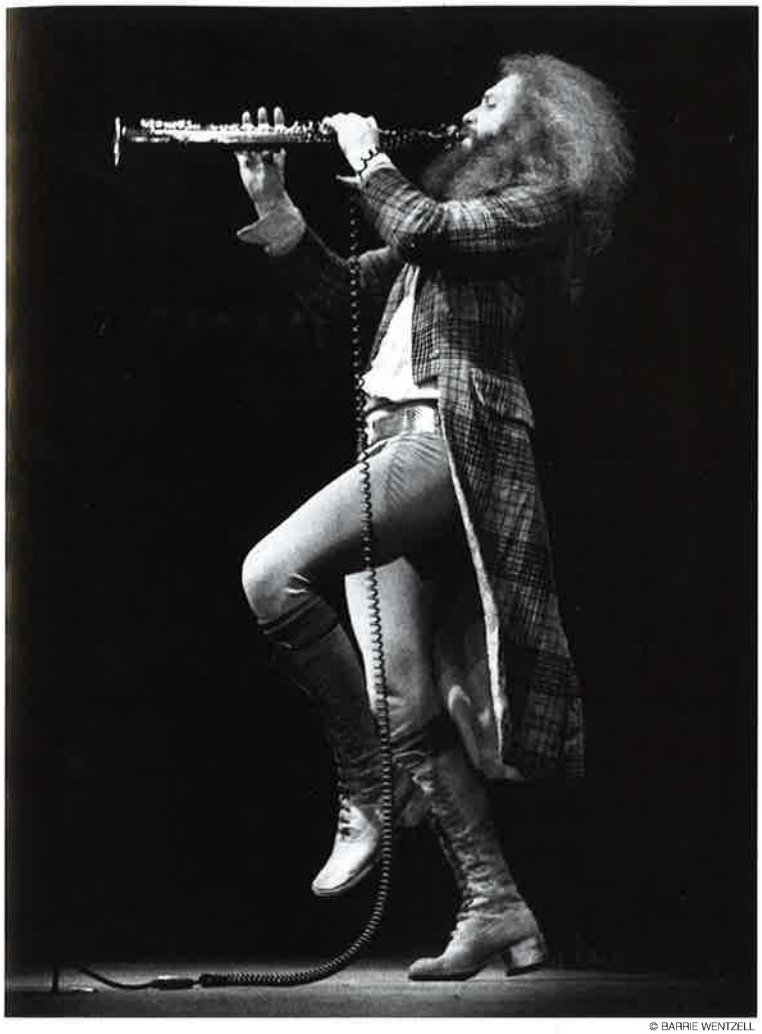
as the subjects were usually less than 3 ½ feet away. It could be Pete Townshend or Jimi Hendrix, but you forget who they are, because if you focus on the eyes, everything else is okay because the eyes really are the windows of the soul. In the interplay, you're looking for something you don't quite know, to get that person expressing in mutual agreement."

"Recently I was showing Ian Anderson [from Jethro Tull] the contact sheets from some of their old gigs," he says. "As Ian was looking at the progression of pictures I'd taken of his performance, he told me that he'd used these pictures as references to how he appeared on stage, and he learned from it. He could clearly see the feedback between himself as the artist and me as the photographer."

"SO I BROUGHT THAT INTO *MELODY MAKER*. I HAD NOBODY TO FOLLOW INTO THE BUSINESS BECAUSE ROCK-AND-ROLL PHOTOGRAPHY HADN'T BEEN VISUALIZED OR INVENTED YET," HE SAYS, "THERE WERE ONLY PRESS PICTURES AND STAGED PICTURES, NOTHING IMMEDIATE."

Wentzell says that nowadays artists or their representatives generally demand complete control. He'd heard about a photo shoot where there were three different photographers taking individual pictures of the band members, which were ultimately Photoshopped together. "It's really weird, but that's how they wanted to be represented. The world we're in now, photography has been democratized. Everybody now has a cellphone, and there are thousands of people taking pictures at a concert. It's homogenized."

"With old film, with old cameras, every photographer would have an identity," he says. "The whole chemical process, the choice of the camera, the lens, the film, the variance



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Ian Anderson, 1973, Wembley Arena, London.

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Elton John, 1972, his home, Berkshire, England.

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The Kinks, 1968, Hampstead Heath, North London.

of lighting, the individual being photographed, and all the darkroom stuff to the final print was a long journey. And you'd never know until a couple of days later if it worked or not. Nowadays people don't know what's a good picture or a bad picture."

Currently Wentzell is researching and restoring his pictures from fifty and sixty years ago in preparation for a major project close to his heart: "While I'm not really shooting pictures any more…I'm working on a book. I'm fed up with being part of everyone else's book, nice though it is. I've begun turning down some requests for pictures because I want to use them in my own book. I shot a lot of stuff back in the day… and recently people are inquiring, for instance, about the Hawkwind sessions. So I've been finding all these negs…and it's like a mnemonic: it takes you back to when everyone was alive…young and just starting out."

"WITH OLD FILM, WITH OLD CAMERAS, EVERY PHOTOGRAPHER WOULD HAVE AN IDENTITY."

Wentzell is currently focused on learning how to finesse his new Nikon digital camera. "It fits all the old lenses, and it's almost back to what an old camera was—if they'd have actually left the camera as what it was—with a digiback, that's all you need. The transition from analogue to digital…I'm still working in both camps now. But with digital, archiving is very chancy. If your computer crashes, you've got nothing except pixels in space, which are gone. Unless you back them up, and even then…because for me it's about having the brilliant physical product of the negatives, and, of course, the final archival fibre-based, silver-gelatin, museum-quality print," he says.

For a shoot with Deep Purple's Ritchie Blackmore, he found himself in a difficult situation with a strobe light, so he decided to go "1/8 of a second, full aperture" and loved

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Diana Ross, 1965, BBC Studios, London.

the results. Evidently Blackmore was delighted too, as Wentzell was contacted to provide the photo for a recent DVD. "When a certain shot comes together, it gives you a buzz. Then it's on to the next project," Wentzell says. "It's all about finding your bliss, so get on with the gig—and have fun!"

To learn more and see other examples of Barrie Wentzell's work, visit barriewentzell.com.

Ritchie Blackmore, 1970, Plumpton Festival, Surrey.

Johnny Cash, 1968, hotel room, London.

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