

# MEET BOB GRUEN: BUGLE PLAYER FOR THE CLASH AND PHOTOGRAPHER OF ROCK ROYALTY

By Joseph Gentile

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The Clash, 1979

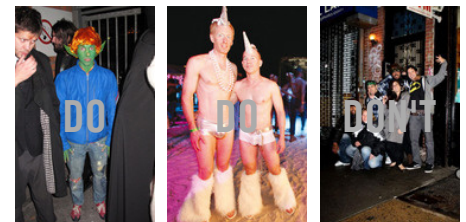
The most important thing about Bob Gruen is that he played bugle for the Clash. The second is that he shot a bunch of the most iconic rock and roll photos of the 20th century. John Lennon hired him as his personal photographer in the 70s, which resulted in that picture of **Lennon in the New York City shirt** that your dad probably has framed somewhere. He also took the picture of **Sid Vicious bleeding from a cut up chest** that you probably have unframed somewhere, and on one special night in 1975 he took a picture of **Mick Jagger's giant penis**.

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## DOS & DON'TS





Bob Dylan, 1975

Gruen got into music photography in the mid-60s while living in Greenwich Village. He befriended bands that were part of the burgeoning folk scene at that time like the Lovin' Spoonful and the Magicians, and in 1965 shot his first concert—Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival. Soon after Ike Turner personally selected Gruen to photograph Tina Turner, and from there his career exploded. Bob photographed rock and roll gods like the Stones, Bowie, and Zeppelin in their prime, but it was through his gig as John and Yoko's photographer that he became involved with a group of mascara'd gentlemen who called themselves the New York Dolls.

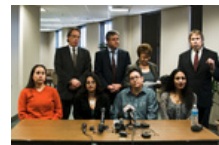
Bob was the first photojournalist to document the Dolls in any real way. He took some of the earliest pictures of the band, and in 1973 went along with them on a West Coast tour. Now, Gruen is getting ready to release a documentary about that tour from the video he shot while on the road with them called *New York Dolls, All Dolled Out*. I called up Bob because I am jealous of his life and wanted to hear all about it.



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*New York Dolls on the Real Don Steele Show , 1973*

**VICE: How did you first meet the New York Dolls?**

**Bob:** John Lennon was working with the Elephant's Memory band, and they were managed by the same company as the New York Dolls. So I was bringing pictures to their office when one of the guys was like, "You have to see this other band we manage."

I went down to the Mercer Arts Center and was totally blown away. Over the next few weeks I took pictures and made some videos of them. We worked together for the next couple of years—they're like family.



*New York Dolls at Mercer Arts Center, 1972*

**What was the first live show you saw like?**

It was one of the most wild, chaotic performances I've ever seen. They played what's called the Oscar Wilde room, where one wall almost has like bleacher seating. People were surrounding them so the band was kind of in the middle of the crowd, just jumping around, playing chaotic, wild music—fast and wild versions of rhythm and blues.

**Was it shocking to see a bunch of hairy rockers in drag?**

Well, let me address that. First of all, the Dolls are not in drag. Being in drag is not shocking in New York City. The Dolls are some of the most macho guys I've ever met. They might have bought some of their clothes in the women's section of the store, but if they were wearing dresses, they weren't women's dresses—they were men's dresses. And really, they never wore dresses except for one show, which was at a cross-dressing sort of club.

See, they wore makeup, but not in a transvestite kind of way. That's partly why they're called the Dolls. They dressed like dolls. They wore rouge on their cheeks and bright frilly clothes. It was more a matter of trying to look like dolls because girls like to play with dolls. The New York Dolls were a bunch of macho guys who wanted girls to play with them.



New York Dolls, 1974

**The documentary has a lot of scenes with people staring at them in disbelief. Did people ever try to fight the band?**

Probably. They did attract quite a bit of attention. A lot of men were afraid of that kind of look. Whenever they went on stage people would jump up and bang into each other—one half would be running to the stage and the other half was running out of the theater. In the early 70s dressing like a woman was illegal and something that a lot of people were frightened by.

**What was David Johansen [lead vocals] like at the time?**

David was pretty over the top. As an example, I remember there was a bit of controversy because David Bowie had said that he was bisexual, and that quote went around the world. They interviewed David Johansen: "Well, are you bisexual?" And David Johansen said, "No, I'm trisexual. I'll try anything once." It was an idea of freedom and rebellion, of doing what you want.



Johnny Thunders, 1975

**And Johnny Thunders [guitar]? He had quite a reputation.**

Well, Johnny was a pretty tough character. He taught himself guitar, which is why he had such a unique style. He didn't sound like anybody else because he didn't learn from anybody else. Something that people don't realize is that that he was a very intelligent guy.

**Near the end of the documentary there's a scene where the band says that they'll always stay together. What does that mean to you now?**

Well, when you're young you always think there's a bright future. In the case of the Dolls, alcohol and drugs kind of split them up. Arthur became uncommunicative and unable to function due to alcohol. Johnny and Jerry got deeply into heroin. You can't really work with people who are in that state of mind, and they basically quit the band in order to go get high. David didn't want to live like that so he went on to have a solo career.

**Do you think David was more career minded?**

David lived a very rock and roll lifestyle, too. He just didn't get as hooked on the drugs as Johnny and Jerry. To their credit, Johnny and Jerry went on to have successful solo careers, just with more problems. David didn't want those problems—like having to worry about where to get drugs before a gig and traveling with people who have drugs.



*The Clash, 1976*

**Your relationship with the Dolls enabled you to see the Clash at the beginning of their career, right?**

Malcolm McLaren came to New York after the Dolls had been dropped by their management. He had a set of clothes for them to wear. He kind of pulled the band back together and got Johnny and Jerry cleaned up for a short time so they could play his gigs and wear his clothes. I became friendly with Malcolm, and when I went to England his was one of the only two phone numbers I had.

I didn't know that a punk scene was developing over there because it was very small. Malcolm brought me to a place called Club Louise, which was where the nucleus of what would become punk was hanging out every night. The first night there I met Siouxsie Sioux, Sue Catowman, Billy Idol, the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and people who were there with them.



Sid Vicious, 1978

**During the Sex Pistols' American tour, you took that iconic picture of Sid Vicious with his chest all cut up and bleeding. What was going on there?**

A bizarre incident led up to that. There was a girl at the front of the stage who called Sid down to her. He went over to her and leaned down and she punched him in the nose. He came up with blood dripping down his nose and a big smile on his face. Having worked with Alice Cooper and KISS before, when I saw him come up with a smile I thought he had a blood capsule. Then I realized it was real. He was spitting some of the blood at the girl and she was wiping it off and throwing it back at him. When the bloody nose started to dry up he went over to the amplifier, took a beer bottle off the top of it, smashed it, and cut his chest. He cut himself once or twice and a roadie managed to jump out and grab his hand and said, "Sid, what are you doing?" He paused and had sort of an *oh, I'm sorry* kind of expression. He dropped the beer bottle and went back to play. Then the band started yelling that they couldn't hear him, and it was because he actually turned his amp off when he hit it with a beer bottle.

So, it was kind of chaotic. You never knew what to expect. He was one wild guy. Always caught up in the moment.



Sid Vicious, 1978

### There's a lot of myths surrounding Sid Vicious. What did you think of him as a person?

Sid was a nice guy, actually. The Sid I knew, he was a good actor playing the vicious part. He wasn't mean inherently. He wasn't a very good bass player either—by his own admission. That's not him playing bass on the Sex Pistols records or even his own records, but Malcolm thought he was good on stage. He didn't grow up to be a musician. He grew up to be Sid Vicious.

### Is it true that you were briefly the bugle player for the Clash?

I learned how to play trumpet when I was a kid, and I learned bugle calls when I was in the Boy Scouts. One day I went to Paul Simonon's [bass player for the Clash] house to get a ride to the show. I noticed a bugle was sitting there and, as I do from time to time, I picked it up and started to blow on it. He came over and said, "Wow, you can play the bugle?!" I said, "Yeah, actually, it's not very hard if you know the basics." So he said, "Well, we want someone to open the show with a call to arms—a charge." I said, "That's easy, I can do it."

It was really great fun because it was the only time I was in a band, and it was for one of the greatest bands. I often take pictures of bands in the dressing room and when we're done they'll say, "OK, only the band in the dressing room." But that time they said, "OK, we're going to talk about your part," and suddenly I was in the band. I did it in England a couple of times and here in New York at Bonds. It was one of the biggest thrills I ever had, aside from being a photographer.

**New York Dolls, *All Dolled Up*, will be released on January 14, 2014 through MVD.**

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By Joseph Gentile | Nov 26 2013

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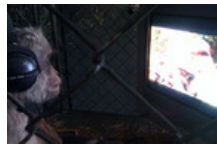
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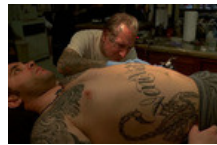
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