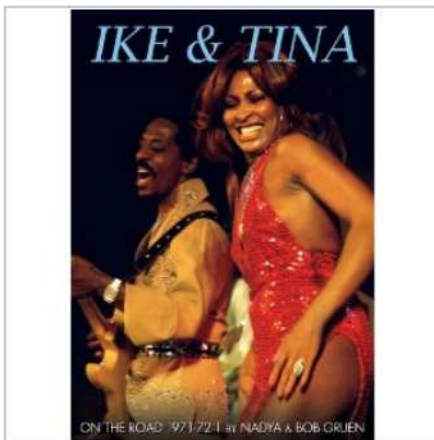


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**HUFF
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From Ike & Tina Turner, John Lennon and Led Zeppelin to The Clash, The Sex Pistols and Green Day: A Conversation with Bob Gruen

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A Conversation With NY Rock Photographer and Documentarian, Bob Gruen

Mike Ragogna: Bob Gruen, you've been documenting the careers of rockers such as New York Dolls, The Clash, Ramones, Patti Smith, Blondie, Led Zeppelin, The Who, David Bowie, Tina Turner, Elton John, Aerosmith, KISS, Alice Cooper, Green Day, and the list keeps going and going. And of course, you shot those really popular John Lennon photos, like...

Bob Gruen: ...the picture of John Lennon in a New York t-shirt.

MR: Right. What an amazing contribution to culture you've made. What do you think about that after all these years?

BG: Well, it's always surprised me that it is a part of culture. When I started out, rock 'n' roll was supposed to be a phase that would disappear. People were really down on that delinquent kind of music, that beat that made you feel sexy.

MR: Exactly. And it refused to die.

BG: It refused to die. I'll tell you, I went to a Neil Young concert the other night and I don't think there was anybody there under fifty.

MR: See now, that's pretty wild to me, because Neil Young is one of those artists that everybody in the world worships, kids--middle-agers--everybody.

BG: I think you had to be over fifty to be able to afford the tickets.

MR: There you go. I was pretty shocked by a ticket price the other day, where you'd get the whole package for twenty-two hundred dollars. You can buy a used car for that.

BG: For that kind of money, it should have air conditioning and a radio.

MR: Right? Bob, I want to ask you about your new project, *Ike & Tina On The Road 1971-1972*. You have a great quote. "The film, *What's Love Got To Do With It*, shows why Ike and Tina broke up, but *Ike & Tina On The Road 1971-1972* shows why Ike and Tina were together for twenty years before that." Can you go into some of your observations?

BG: Ike and Tina Turner were one of the hottest working couples in show business and they were absolutely amazing. I think that *What's Love Got To Do With It?* could also have been subtitled, "What happens to a good man who takes too many drugs." He kind of got wrapped up in cocaine and that makes a person violent and angry and Ike certainly became that. I think they broke up for very good reasons, but this one shows the fun they had together before that, how amazing they were live on stage. I think there's almost nineteen or twenty live songs in the video and also a lot of nice footage of Tina at home cooking dinner for her kids, Ike working with the musicians in the studio, Tina rehearsing with the kettles in the dressing room, and giving some interviews and talking about how she just wanted to write her own songs. It's a very interesting tape for kind of the peak of Ike and Tina Turner and the beginning of Tina Turner's career. It really shows where they came from.

MR: And even if you're not familiar with their catalog, everybody remembers their recordings of things like "River Deep, Mountain High," and "Proud Mary."

BG: And there's other things that they didn't show back then, like "I've Been Loving You Too Long," where Tina almost gives head to the microphone and it's a very sexy showstopping song--not something you could put on TV very often back then, but we've got it on video. There's a great scat-singing version of "I've Got Trouble" where there's a great call and response between Tina and Ike, and Ike just goes off on the lead guitar. Every friend of mine who saw it just was blown away and said they couldn't believe it. People don't know how well Ike could play and what a great musician he was.

MR: It's a shame how it all ended.

BG: He's not the first one to succumb to drug violence, but it is a tremendous shame because he had so much more to offer.

MR: In the day, how important were Ike and Tina to you?

BG: Oh, well, it was the first band that I ever traveled with. I was a big fan and I went to see them a couple of times and like the second or third time, I brought my camera and took pictures and I got one really great picture that's kind of a multiple image because at the end of the show, Tina would dance off the stage with a strobe light flashing. I opened the camera to "one second" to see how it would work, and I got like five different images in the one picture and you just see the different faces and the motion and the excitement that is Tina Turner. I brought the pictures with me a couple days later when we went to see another Ike and Tina show. I brought them with me to show my friends, and at the end of the show, the dressing rooms were outside in trailers, so Ike was walking from one dressing room to another and one of my friends saw Ike. He said, "Hey, show Ike the pictures," and he stopped and he turned around and goes, "What pictures?" I said, "Well I have these pictures" and I showed them to him and he loved the pictures and he took me into the dressing room and showed them to Tina and she liked them, and pretty soon after that, I started coming to travel and come on the road with them. He liked the fact that I had a video camera. It was a very primitive, early kind of video. It was actually a reel-to-reel tape recorder before we had cassettes. You'd have to thread the tape through the machine and it only shot in black and white and mono and it wasn't very good in low light, but it made a record of what you were seeing and the beauty of it was that we could record a show and then go into the dressing room of the hotel and then play it right back. Unlike film, you didn't have to develop it, and it show up a couple of days later or whatever. You'd just see the show right away. Tina really liked the fact that she could work out the routines with the Ikettes while it was still fresh in their minds and the band really enjoyed seeing it, so I started traveling with them quite a bit. I'm glad we have these tapes now so that we've finally edited it together into something to share with the fans.

MR: Bob, you and your wife Nadya worked together.

BG: Oh yeah, yeah. We have a couple videos out with the same company with the New York Dolls. There's one called *All Dolled Up* and the other one is *Lookin' Fine on Television*. They came out pretty well, too.

MR: David Johansen is another one of those characters where when he was "Buster Poindexter," it was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, where's Davids Jo?" He's a great entertainer.

BG: Yeah, well, Buster was a good break for him, getting back into the blues and the lounge act. But the New York Dolls were absolutely outrageous. It was one of those perfect marriages where you get the right guys together in the right group and it just works and they know how to work together. They certainly broke boundaries. Some people think they were in some way transvestites or kind of dressed like girls, but actually they dressed up like dolls because they wanted girls to play with them! They knew that girls liked to play with dolls, so that's why they dressed up like that.

MR: Never heard that before.

BG: You don't really think of it like that, but that's the truth. They had more groupies than any other band they worked with. Some of the guys may have thought they might have been a little funny, but the girls knew who they were.

MR: Nice. Hey, I also wanted to throw out there, Blondie. They had a tight association with you.

BG: Debbie Harry's one of the most beautiful women in the world. As soon as I saw her, I knew I wanted to work with her, and the rest of the group was really great. They wrote great songs, they had some really huge hits, they were one of the first bands to come out of CBGB's that really crossed over into the mainstream. Debbie's a New Jersey girl, she's a great rock 'n' roll spirit, and just good fun to be with.

MR: Look at some of your other associations—David Bowie, Elton John... It's like you were there during all the major rock moments.

BG: I do get around!

MR: I've been told ninety percent of a good shot comes from how the photographer is viewing what he or she is shooting. Behind the lens, what is the experience for you?

BG: I've been the guy who was standing in front of the stage sometimes, and I realized that we all take different pictures. We might be looking at the same thing, but every photographer has a different sense of timing, a different sense of composition, a different angle and different lenses and equipment so the pictures always come out different. Most of the time, the composition is always different, so it depends on what you're looking at. I was always into the rock 'n' roll. I feel it, it's part of my life. I feel the beat, I feel the music, and I think that's helped me get pictures that express that, that really show me what's going on. Then I get the feeling of what's going on, not just the facts.

MR: "Not just the facts, but the feeling." Beautifully said. Bob, what are some of your favorite photos that you've taken over the years?

BG: Certainly the Tina Turner picture is a great one; it really captures all the energy. John Lennon wearing the New York t-shirt. It's probably the most popular picture of John Lennon, which is pretty amazing considering how many pictures were taken of him. But my personal favorite with him would be at the statue of liberty because I think that has a lot more meaning, and I think it's kind of important because it's all about personal freedom. I think that John Lennon represents personal freedom for a lot of people similar to the way the statue of liberty does. Also, certainly, the picture of Led Zeppelin in front of the airplane; it kind of shows the decadence and the over-the-top feeling of the seventies. Here they are, barely wearing their shirts, their shirts are wide open, and they've got their own airplane. That's quite a lot of success. There's a great picture of The Clash, a live one, that really captures the power and the energy of The Clash. I'm one of the people that feel like The Clash was one of the only bands that really mattered. Nowadays, I like to work with Green Day and a couple of the newer groups. I think Green Day really captures the energy and the spirit of rock 'n' roll and really carries it forward.

MR: What's going on with Billy Joe?

BG: Well, I hope he's feeling better. I've been in touch with him a little bit, he says he's getting better and feeling better. Drugs are something that a lot of people fall into because it has nothing to do with your intelligence and your ability to live. Drugs have a life of their own and they really kind of take hold. I'm glad he had the sense to get out of it when he could. He's recovering and he'll come

back twice as strong, I'm sure.

MR: Yeah. Hey, what was your relationship with The Ramones like?

BG: Well, Joey's a sweetheart. Joey loves the whole world and that's why the whole world loves Joey. He was really great to get along with. Dee Dee, there's a good and a bad Dee Dee and you don't know if you're talking to Good Dee Dee or Bad Dee Dee, and with Bad Dee Dee, you'd better look out. You don't want to be around on those days. Johnny was always pretty straight up. He's not your typical rock 'n' roller; he was a kind of conservative republican as far as politics went, he wasn't ashamed of saying that, and he had a real vision for the band. Johnny's the one who came up with the look of the band and the sound, that they were straight ahead. My wife and I were talking about it last night that The Ramones were just the greatest minimal perfect rock 'n' roll band, but I don't think I've ever seen an interview. It's not like they really get involved and say anything. We saw another band on TV the other night and we said, "Have you ever seen The Ramones actually talking about anything?" No, they just get on stage, they play the song as fast as they can, they lock in and shock everybody and they keep their private opinions to themselves. They're just great people. We had a lot of fun hanging out with them, especially Joey.

MR: Very cool.

BG: Yeah, it's kind of funny, because Marky Ramone is quite an entrepreneur these days. He's going into the food business; he's got a line of spaghetti sauces, he's got a truck that sells fried chicken on the street at different events, he goes on the road as a DJ, and he's got a couple of books out. The band broke up, but he's still going on pretty strong.

MR: Go Marky! One other thing I want to point out, in addition to you being a photographer, is you've used that as the basis for many books, like last year's *Rock Seen*.

BG: Yeah, my new book is *Rock Seen*, "S-E-E-N," like the things that I've seen. It's kind of a play on words because I did a lot of work in the seventies for a magazine called *Rock Scene*, where they covered the whole scene, and it wasn't just live acts on stage but people at home, people on tour... We went to the parties, we covered everybody. I think that was what helped to give me access to the backstage and other activities besides the live show. I'm really proud of the book; there's an amazing collection of over five hundred pictures of mine in there and I probably have enough to do another book, actually. It's almost unheard of for a rock 'n' roll photo book to go to second printing, but we went into second printing last summer. It's so exciting. Everybody that's looked at it keeps telling me how amazing the book is so I'm very proud of it.

MR: Yeah, I was going to ask if there had been multiple printings.

BG: It's still kind of rare for a photo book to be sold that much.

MR: Your eye is amazing, sir.

BG: I like to get out and about and not just read about things. I like to be there.

MR: You capture the real person, the home body, in every shot.

BG: I do like to cover the whole scene and show more than just a guy with a microphone. I like to give people some insight into what's going on.

MR: Yeah, like you did with Ike and Tina Turner. You were going for the real people.

BG: The Ike and Tina video is really fun and it's really interesting and it's footage that nobody else has or would have because with the videotape, you were able to spend a lot of time. It was a rather low budget—they were like ten dollars for a roll for half an hour, which, shooting film, would be hundreds of dollars. So on practically no budget, we were able to spend a lot of time with them because we're friends. They got very used to us being around with the camera, so we got a lot of very intimate footage. I'm glad we were finally able to edit it together and make this Ike and Tina video DVD available.

MR: Bob, what advice do you have for new musical artists?

BG: Well it's different nowadays from when I was shooting in the seventies and eighties, where a band could play in a club and get local support. There are so many bands nowadays, but I think the idea is still the same; play as often as you can, try and be as good as you can every night, and just keep meeting more and more people and entertaining. Try and communicate with the audience. I think that most bands that people really like are bands that communicate with the audience. A lot of bands rehearse their songs and they think it's important that you do the song perfectly, but when you're standing in the audience, you want somebody to talk to. You want somebody to relate to. It's more than just doing the songs perfectly. It's all about communication. A few of the bands I like, from Tina Turner to Green Day, come out there and actually talk to the audience and relate to them in that moment, in that night, and not just do the same rehearsed set all the time.

MR: Beautiful. What advice do you have for new photographers?

BG: So many people are taking pictures nowadays because it's gotten so much easier. Every cell phone has a camera that works amazingly well, but I would tell people to take a lot of pictures. If you take a lot of pictures, you're bound to get a couple of good ones and if you just show the good ones, people think you're good. That's all you need is a couple of good pictures to show what's going on. I think one of my pet peeves is people who go out and take two hundred pictures at a party or an event or something and then they put all the pictures up online somewhere and you have to sort through and you can't find any good ones. One of the secrets to my success was that I was good at editing. All the professional photographers take a few hundred pictures when they go somewhere and then they edit it down. You just get two or three great ones and people get the idea, "Wow, that's an amazing moment!" rather than having to sort through a hundred and fifty pictures trying to find that moment. So I think people should take a lot of pictures and just show the good ones.

MR: When you're editing, that process, it can be a little bit of a bear.

BG: Well, you take a lot of pictures and you look at them. But to me, the ones that stand out are the ones that capture a feeling. You know it when you see it, and you know when something's kind of stiff and it just shows the facts, like what color shirt somebody's

wearing, the way they're holding the mic. And then you get to that show that just captures what was going on, it just captures the excitement and the energy, and that's the one you should pick, in my opinion.

MR: By the way, I want to thank you personally for a couple of your projects, the first one being *The Sex Pistols: Chaos*, from 1990. Loved it.

BG: Oh, yeah. I put that out in England in the late eighties, a whole collection of my Sex Pistols pictures. I met Malcolm McLaren when he was working with the New York Dolls and then when I went to England, Malcolm was basically the only phone number I had. The punk movement was just breaking out and he introduced me to The Sex Pistols and The Clash and Siouxsie Sioux and the Banshees and Billy Idol and all these kids hanging out in a club in London in 1976. I became a big fan. I went on The Sex Pistols tour, I go on down the Atlantic just to see the opening show and I was saying goodbye to Malcolm saying, "I hope you're going to have a great time and it's too bad I can't come along," and he said, "Well, we're only allowed twelve on the bus." Then he counted up and he said, "Well, we only have eleven, Bob, why don't you get on?" Next thing I know, I was going across America with The Sex Pistols. It was kind of a wild week.

MR: And speaking of a wild week, when I went to your place for Suzi Quatro shots way back when, you were working on *Crossfire Hurricane*, The Rolling Stones book.

BG: Oh, *Crossfire Hurricane*, yeah. That was a limited edition book I did for Genesis publications. I did two books for them. I did the John Lennon book and *Crossfire Hurricane*. *Crossfire Hurricane* actually sold out within a couple of months. It's a really amazing book and hopefully soon, I'll be able to do another more popular book that's not such a limited edition. **Crossfire Hurricane** comes up on eBay every once in a while, but it's pretty expensive.

MR: I've actually tried to buy it once, but I can't pay that kind of money.

BG: Yeah, it goes for a few hundred dollars now on eBay.

MR: Bob, this has been great, talking to you after all of these years. Absolutely, all the best.

BG: Well, thank you, thank you very much.

Transcribed by Galen Hawthorne

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