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## Features

Soroff On



### Peter Simon - Flash Back

A shutterbug shares outtakes from his storied career.

Jonathan Soroff



Photo Credit: Robert Bellisle

Martha's Vineyard-based photographer Peter Simon, 66, recently released a DVD, *Through the Lens*, chronicling his 50-year career. Raised in New York, he's the son of the founder of publishing giant Simon and Schuster, while one of his three sisters, Carly, has enjoyed an illustrious career as a singer-songwriter. He's worked as a photojournalist, covering everything from the free-love movement of the '60s to reggae concerts to Mets' games, and has authored numerous books in addition to a popular series of calendars. He and his wife, Ronni, live on Martha's Vineyard, where they operate the Simon Gallery. A retrospective of his iconic rock-'n'-roll photography can currently be seen at the John Varvatos boutique in Copley Place.

#### JONATHAN SOROFF: FAVORITE IMAGE OF YOURS?

**Peter Simon:** There are two that I'd mention. One was taken in Washington, D.C., in 1969 of a whole crowd of people demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. It's called "D.C. Mobilization Day," and there's a big crowd, with the Washington Monument in the background and big cumulus clouds that look quite ominous. It was very surreal. We were all students, and we were terrified of having to fight this war. Our lives were at stake. So politically, that's my favorite. Then, there's the other phase of my work that really began when I moved full time to Martha's Vineyard. It's a photograph of a long and winding road with wisteria arched over it, called "Wisteria Road." It's hand-colored by my wife, Ronni. It's extremely pastoral. You just want to walk down this road forever.

#### ONE THING ALL GREAT PHOTOS HAVE IN COMMON?

On my DVD, I mention 10, but I can summarize by saying technically you want it to be well-focused, well-exposed and well-composed. You want it to tell a story. You want it to have a point of view. You want to show something that people might not have seen before, and you want a timeless quality, so that in 50 years, the picture will still have lasting interest or value.

#### WHAT'S THE HARDEST THING TO SHOOT?

A baseball game. It might sound stupid, but I covered the Mets for a number of years, and it's just impossible to know where the ball's going to go. You wind up taking a lot of pictures of batters swinging or pitchers throwing, and there's nothing special about that, so you just have to hope that something great like a collision or someone stealing third is going to happen. It's utterly unpredictable.

#### EVER MAKE THE ROOKIE MISTAKES OF FORGETTING TO TAKE OFF THE LENS CAP OR PUT IN FILM OR A MEDIA CARD?

Well, I learned an object lesson from my father, who was an amateur photographer. He loved photography, and he had the occasion to film Albert Einstein once. When he got back home, he opened his camera, and he'd forgotten to put in film. That taught me to be really careful. But one time, I went to Montreal to photograph a folk concert with Buffy Sainte-Marie and Arlo Guthrie and Gordon Lightfoot and Neil Young. I put all my film in the pocket of my sports jacket. We stopped at a Howard Johnson's on the Mass. Pike on our way back, and I left the jacket there. I never saw the jacket or the film again.

#### IS USING A CAMERA A WAY OF DISTANCING YOURSELF FROM WHATEVER YOU'RE SHOOTING?

For me, the camera does not take me away from what's going on. I'm sure it's different for other people, but I've always felt that the camera brings me into an experience even more, because I examine it more, observe it more.

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**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE PEOPLE PHOTOGRAPHING THEMSELVES?**

The camera does so much for you now. But when I teach, one of the things I emphasize is to get rid of distracting things in the background or irrelevant bits of the image. You don't want an Exit sign behind you. You also need good lighting. I emphasize using back-lighting, if you can.

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT APPS LIKE INSTAGRAM AND CAMERA PLUS THAT SORT OF TAKE THE SKILL OUT OF TAKING A PHOTO?**

Well, I tend to take those pictures less seriously. It may be digitally interesting, but photographs that are highly manipulated are just sort of visual clutter, because we're bombarded by so much imagery. Of course, I manipulate images, but I try to keep it to a minimum.

**SO HAS PHOTOGRAPHY JUST GOTTEN TOO EASY?**

Well, if I were just starting out, I'd probably give up, because the playing field is so much more even. All the skills I learned back in the '60s—how to print, how to compose, how to slowly get the angle, how to work my way to the front of the crowd—all these things anyone can do now. I'm lucky that I have a tremendous body of work that I can look back on. If I were just starting out now, it would be scary. Everything is just done for you.

**BEST WAY TO CLEAN A CAMERA LENS?**

[Laughs] I'm so bad about that! I know you're supposed to have a really soft cloth and liquid lens cleaner, but I never have that, so I use things like paper towel and Windex. I'm not particularly good at maintaining my equipment. I leave lens caps off, and I get my camera full of sand at the beach. I've ruined a bunch with salt water. And yet I'm a very fastidious person. It's strange. But I also don't use expensive equipment.

**DO YOU LIKE SEEING PHOTOS OF YOURSELF?**

It's funny. There was one in The Globe last week, and I didn't think I looked great. As I age, I don't expect to look as good as I did when I was younger, but I was never a terribly good-looking person to begin with. My wife has said to me on many occasions, "I didn't marry you for your looks."

**IS EYESIGHT YOUR KEENEST SENSE?**

It's the one I've developed the most. But hearing is huge, too, because I'm a music fanatic. I have ringing in the ears from all the concerts and DJing at clubs. I used to spin dance music in the '70s and '80s, and I didn't know not to expose my ears to loud sound. I've had ringing in my ears since the late '80s. It's awful.

**BEST CONCERT YOU EVER WENT TO?**

The one that stands out in my mind is when Carly [Simon] and James [Taylor] reunited on the Vineyard in '95. It was called Livestock '95, and it raised money for the Ag Hall. They were both at the top of their form, and it was very emotional because they sang together for the first time since their marriage broke up. It was just a magical night.

**WHAT GENRE OF MUSIC DO YOU FIND YOURSELF LISTENING TO THE MOST?**

I've become a little fanatical about my music library. I've got 1800 songs on my iPhone, and it's sort of like my own private radio station. Largely, it's folk rock, exemplified by the Byrds or Jackson Browne or Dylan. That's my favorite ilk, but the Grateful Dead is certainly up there, and Sarah McLachlan is really high up. So it's a mix.

**HARDEST MUSICIAN TO PHOTOGRAPH?**

Well, the Grateful Dead hated to pose. They were hard to get a group shot of, although they were really great and easy to shoot onstage.

**ANYONE WHO INTIMIDATED YOU?**

I'd say Dylan. He's not a particularly warm and friendly guy. He's a little prickly. I don't think he likes to be photographed.

**IS THERE A MODEL OR SUBJECT YOU'D NEVER WORK WITH AGAIN?**

[Laughs] Yeah, my sister. I'm just kidding, but it's tough to work with someone you're related to. But I've never really had a disastrous experience with someone treating me like a piece of crap.

**ANYONE YOU'D WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH BUT HAVEN'T?**

Well, I've always wanted to do the Obamas, especially on the beach on Martha's Vineyard.

**WHERE'S YOUR FAVORITE SPOT TO SHOOT ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD?**

I'd say the town of Menemsha. Of course, there are the Gay Head cliffs, which are so magnificent, you just can't go wrong. I take a lot of my students up there, around the point on Moshup Beach, and I never fail to come up with a great shot. But the town of Menemsha I find there's just so much to do: the boats, the buoys, the lobster pots, the fishing boats, the people fishing off the pier, the sunsets, the beach grass, the dunes...So many textures, reflections in the water, I just go bananas there.



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