

Peter Simon's Through the Lens

Photographer Peter Simon, who's shot some of the most celebrated men, women and events of the Baby Boomer era, should have known better than to entrust his creative legacy to a format that makes infomercials look exciting. Sitting in his photo-filled Martha's Vineyard gallery, covering his nearly bald pate with a knit Rasta cap, Simon narrates the story of his life in a monotone as flat as the table at which he's hawking his coffeetable book, "I and Eye." Yawn. Unless one already were aware of Simon's fine body of work and fascinating backstory, the two-disc DVD, "**Peter Simon's Through the Lens: Celebrating 50 Years of Personalized Photojournalism**," might come off as world-class ego trip and excuse for name-dropping. The first thing to know about Simon is that his father — who died early, but not before he introduced his son to photography — co-founded the book publishing firm, Simon & Schuster. His position and connections ensured a life of privilege, culture and access for siblings Peter, Lucy, Joanna and, as is evidenced here, the highly photogenic Carly Simon. Portraits of Carly and then-husband James Taylor are sprinkled through the presentation. At the same time as Simon was attending East Coast prep schools and photographing antiwar activists at Boston University, he also was opening doors to people who would allow to shoot photos for fun *and* profit. These included editors at Rolling Stone magazine, who provided access to artists that had yet to reach their commercial zenith. There's hardly a Boomer icon that Simon didn't shoot in the mid-1960s, often while sharing the stage with them. While some of these early photographs are still in demand, Simon continues to make money by capturing some of the same performers in their dotage. Anyone who's followed the popular-music scene over the last 50 years will recognize many of the 300 photographs included in "Through the Lens."

Simon didn't limit himself to photographing the leading lights of the '60s. When he went through his changes, the pictures did, too. For years, he lived among other rich hippies on communes throughout New England, favoring those with a clothing-optional policy. From here, he would seek enlightenment in the company of spiritual leader Ram Dass, a former Harvard prof who famously dropped acid with Timothy Leary. In the 1970s, Simon used his art successfully to promote Jamaican reggae and its leading practitioners in the U.S. As anyone born after the nation's bicentennial can attest, there's nothing quite so tedious as listening to their parents and friends describe how they lived in the '60s and how cool it was to starve on communes or panhandle for money to buy inebriants. "Through the Lens" suffers from Simon's many anecdotes of the period and photos of naked hippies with goats. The first disc ends with more anecdotes about life on the Vineyard and rubbing shoulders with its celebrity community, from the Kennedys, Clintons and Walter Cronkite, to John Belushi, Larry David and Mia Farrow. The second disc is far less celebrity-centric and, by extension, more compelling. Instead, the photos and narration are more issue-oriented and journalistic, with stops in Jamaica, the Occupy protests, Shea Stadium and places where the disparity between wealth and poverty, blight and beauty, collide. Much of the scenic photography is nothing short of spectacular. Funded by a Kickstarter campaign, "Through the Lens" suffers from name-dropping, celebrity worship and Simon's own charisma deficiency. The photos, though, are well worth the effort it might take to peruse them. — *Gary Dretzka*

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