

FortCollinsCameraClub2009PresentationCSUFortCollinsTextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Presentation- Fort Collins Camera Club 11/10/09

Rock and roll has always been an alluring and inspiring brand of music for me. But more than just a brand of music, it's a whole culture in itself and being a rock and roll photographer gets you right in the thick of it. I did my first concert photo shoot for a Fort Collins newspaper in 1988 and since then have photographed hundreds of performers in all kinds of different situations.

I started with film- learning to conserve and focus because of the nature of the process- but eventually turned to digital photography more for the lesser expense than anything else. Digital photography allowed for a much wider range of photo options and the ability to check out the frames before turning them, if ever, into prints. It changed how I size up shots and expanded the variety of what I am trying to go for in a particular shoot. It's fun, easy and immediate.

I'm not a technical photographer- just about anyone can tell you much more about different kinds of cameras and what you can do with them than I can. I am more of an "activist" kind of photographer. Just give me a camera- just about any camera- and an event to cover and I will start thinking about how I can capture a presentable image no matter what the equipment is. I am not a fan of bells and whistles, but of the situations themselves and my aim is to come away from a shoot with images that reflect what was going on. I have always thought to myself that I am not particularly a great photographer, but I get myself into some great situations.

There are some rules to concert photography. Generally, once you have been credentialed to photograph a show, you are allowed or escorted into the security pit right at the very front of the stage. "Three songs, no flash" is the basic, but that can change depending on the show and who is on duty in the pit. An uninformed security boss may kick everybody out early. But that is one of the unspoken rules I'll pass on- don't argue with security. Their ears are stuffed, they have only limited information and it's their job to watch the crowd, not to argue with you. In fact they are there in some cases to protect you. One time, at a Red Hot Chili Peppers show, a security guy told me just moments before the start of the

show that he would protect me. I thought he was joking, but only seconds after the Chili Peppers came on stage, a body was hurtling at me out of the crowd feet first. The guard caught the crowd surfer just in time.

It helps to know a little something about the structure of pop music and pop showmanship in order to increase your chances of getting a good shot. The best shot of a singer, for instance, is not particularly when he is singing, especially not in the body of the song. Most pop music is structured with a verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus kind of set-up. The best time to catch a vocalist is right at the end of a chorus, when they are pulling away from the mike. That's when you can get a sense of the vocalist at work, but without that mike blocking half their face. The best time to catch an instrumentalist is just about any time the vocalist is not singing. The best lighting is usually toward the very beginning of a song and during the choruses. The lighting almost always changes when the band hits the bridge part, then reverts when the next verse starts.

It is also helpful to observe the habits of the performers. Three songs sometimes isn't very long, but even so, a little observation may tell you that a particular musician favors a particular side of the stage, or that they hold the mike in a particular way which may limit which angles you pursue. For quick moving subjects- like the king himself, Mick Jagger- it often works to find a space on the stage to narrow in on and wait for the performer to come into the space, rather than try to follow them with your eye and lens. For shooting most guitarists, you want to angle in from stage right. If they are right-handed, they will hold their guitar angled to the right and if you are going to capture a decent portrait, you will want to include as much of their guitar in the shot as you can. Angling in from stage left often gets you the back of the guitar, no strings and no fingers.

So how do you get to be a credentialed photographer? The trick at this point of the game- in the brave new world of electronic media- is to get a gig, some kind of publication or web site that will use your stuff. One way of doing that is to create your own outlet. The trouble here is that everybody else can do the same thing, so, unfortunately, this is not a friendly time in rock and roll history for photographers. Everybody has a camera now, everybody is a photographer and everybody can publish their stuff online. Getting your foot in the door with a more traditional outlet- a newspaper or a magazine- is still an important step to getting credentials.

A lot of the work I've done over the years has been arranged through the publicists for the producing concert promotion company- they present lists to the bands who say yes or no just prior to the show. Better than that is to do some research and go directly to the publicist for the bands. However, it seems the best contacts still seem to be record companies, who have a lot at stake in getting their artist into the public eye. Having a real gig creates the credibility that may get you that photo pass.

However, thanks to the proliferation of electronic technology, I have seen an increase in the number of concert photographers in recent years- and a corresponding deterioration in the attitude of publicists. As they have been apparently inundated with a new mass media- with emphasis on the "mass"- they have grown somewhat cynical and cold. Publicists aren't what they used to be- some even seem to be "anti-publicists"- but you will have to deal with them anyhow.

Tom Petty (Red Rocks)- Tom Petty has been my favorite photo subject, hands down. He was my first successful shoot back in 1988 and in the years since I have known him to be very accomodating to the photogs- striking convincing rock and roll poses.

Erykah Badu (Coors Amphitheatre)- One of my very favorite of my digital shots- lots of color, close-in proximity. I like how her right eye and hand/fingers work together to emphasize the tilting head.

Jet (Ogden Theatre)- I like this shot of Jet because to me it is just a great rock and roll image- strong lights smearing the darkness of the theater, the guitarist perched on the drum stand, the bassist in motion.

Gwar (City Lights Pavilion)- One of my very favorite contemporary acts. But you have to watch out- part of Gwar's show is shooting dyed water at the audience and they don't mind hitting the photogs while they're at it.

Captured by Robots (Aggie Theatre)- One of my favorite photo shoots at the Aggie- because this performer was certifiably wild and crazy. I couldn't have gotten this photo without using a flash. But I got permission from the performer first.

John Kay (Budweiser Events Center)- UNSUCCESSFUL PORTRAIT 1: This shot of John Kay has several problems. First of all, Kay's black shirt creates a big hole in the center of the picture- and I have cut off his left hand and most of the guitar neck!!

Reverend Horton Heat (Mishawaka Amphitheatre)- UNSUCCESSFUL PORTRAIT 2: This shot is much better than the Kay shot thanks to a lot of color in his costume and guitar. But that left hand is cut off again!!

Sarah McLachlan (Budwesier Events Center)- SUCCESSFUL PORTRAIT 1: This portrait is successful because it includes not only both of her hands, but also her clothing. The back lighting works well in this case too.

Alice Cooper (Budweiser Events Center)- SUCCESSFUL PORTRAIT 2: I like this portrait because it reveals a lot more about the performer- his scary costume and gloves- than just a close up face shot, which would be scary to begin with.

Ian Anderson (Paramount Theatre)- This portrait works because it shows Anderson with his instrument, his clothing and is pulled back enough to capture the spray of lights above him.

Newsboys (Budweiser Events Center)- This shot kind of broke the rules. The concert rule of thumb for credentialed photogs has been "first three songs, no flash." But this image came after doing the shoot and I was standing behind the audience. When I saw the raised arms in the audience, I couldn't resist.

subdudes (Starlight)- Another shot that would not have been successful without flash. Nightclub shows are notorious for having really unfriendly lighting for photography. I like the arms reaching up out of the crowd- a cool random element.

Rush (Red Rocks)- Not every shot has to be a close up. I enjoy trying to capture images that include the whole band and their surroundings- which at Red Rocks is worth including. Sometimes its a particular challenge to get all the band members' faces in the same angle.- not such a problem with Rush.

Umphey's McGee (Aggie Theatre)- Some bands make the visual part of their show about the lights and effects, not about the band members.

Jo Dee Messina (Budweiser Events Center)- This speaks to the advantage of sequential shooting. I had the thing whirling and caught this really dramatic moment in a series of several shots.

Doug Kershaw (Avogadro's Number)- This was the result of just watching for opportunities. The area public radio station- KRFC- did a mid-week, mid-day session with Kershaw. I sat right in the front row, at a real decent angle, no problem- and had lunch too.

Nawang Khechog (KRFC Studio)- Keeping an eye on music schedules results in opportunities. I saw that Khechog was doing KRFC's Live at Lunch and received permission to photograph him in the studio during the sound check.

Kansas (Taste of Colorado)- Having a camera on hand helps. After my own group's performance at the Taste of Colorado, I strolled over and photographed Kansas on the main stage. I like the composition here- even the microphone fits in.

NewWestFest: Street Drummers- Having a camera on hand helped snag this shot of a street procession during NewWestFest. The drummer in the foreground is Gregory Long, also known as Gayan.

Motley Crue: Photographer Corps (Budweiser Events Center)- Rock photogs from all over the region gathered for Motley Crue's show at the BEC. I saw a photo op while everyone was waiting to go in and lined them up for a rare group portrait.

Dwarves: Mohawk in Crowd (Aggie Theatre)- Sometimes the crowd is as photogenic as the bands- like this silhouetted mohawk at the Aggie during a set by punk band the Dwarves.

Slick Machine (Mishawaka Amphitheatre)- Local hero bands can make for entertaining photos- like this one of Slick.

12 Cents for Marvin (Civic Center Park)- Another local hero band image- the theremin player for 12 Cents for Marvin.

Hooee and Dooee (Fort Collins basement)- Crazy looking musicians like these are playing in basement jam spaces all over the country.

Devo (Coors Amphitheatre)- This speaks to the marvels of modern technology. I took this photo of Devo in their "flower pot hats" from half way back in the amphitheatre- just let the zoom/auto-focus do its thing.

Mars Volta (Fillmore Auditorium)- A happy mistake. One of the very first digital shots I attempted, with a camera that shut down after eight frames. As blurry and frenetic as this is, it reflects the Mars Volta's music pretty well.

Lamb of God (City Lights Pavilion)- A random flash at the climax of a hardcore festival resulted in this cool action shot.

Robert Redford (Old Town Square)- OK, this isn't concert oriented. But again, speaks to watching out for opportunites. Redford came to Old Town Square to campaign for Ken Salazar and caused quite a stir- especially among the females attending the event.

Dalai Lama (Great Stupa of Dharmakaya)- It was a cold, windy morning the day the Dalai Lama came to bless the Stupa in Red Feather Lakes. This shot was taken from only a few feet away, when the Dalai Lama, surrounded by attendants and security, arrived for the event.

Barack Obama (CSU Oval)- I'm proud of this shot. It was my last credentialed shoot for a Fort Collins newspaper. Obama came to CSU only 8 days before the election and was at the top of his game. I was aiming at getting his hands and the American flag into the shot. Since this, all of my work has appeared online.