

THE CANNY AND ELOQUENT MR. BENSON

By John Loring
Photographs courtesy of Harry Benson

*"I've seen the work of all the great photographers of the world.
Yours, Harry, leaves such an impression. It's a little magic."*

— Federico Fellini

Over the past six decades, innumerable celebrities immediately recognizable on the world stage – from the King of Pop to the Queen of England – were photographed in their moments of fame or infamy by Harry Benson, the legendary, Glasgow-born photojournalist.

No American president from Eisenhower on has been left out of the roster that includes Winston Churchill and the Beatles, Leonid Brezhnev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Bobby Kennedy and the Shah of Iran, Judy Garland and Elizabeth Taylor, Andy Warhol and Andrew Wyeth, Clint Eastwood and Brad Pitt, Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King, Jr., O.J. Simpson and Bobby Fischer, Greta Garbo and Frank Sinatra, Sophia Loren and Dolly Parton, Joe Namath and Margaret Thatcher, Truman Capote and Oprah Winfrey. The list is as diverse as it is endless.

"He has created more eloquent portraits of personalities than imaginable," Alfred Eisenstaedt noted.

Benson was there when the Berlin Wall went up and there when it came down. He was there when his friend Bobby Kennedy was assassinated and photographed for four days in the midst of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles. He photographed Queen Elizabeth II dressed as a coal miner and Brooke Shields dressed as a clown.



▲ Andy Warhol and Bianca Jagger, The Factory, New York City, 1977



▲ Michael Jackson, Neverland, California, 1997. The King of Pop in repose on his throne in his bedroom.



▲ Queen Elizabeth II at Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh, Scotland, 2010. The Queen was posing for her portrait, which was to hang in the Scottish Parliament.

He was the only photographer the reclusive Bobby Fischer allowed with him during the month of his historic chess match in Iceland in 1972 against Russian grand master Boris Spassky, and the only photographer Michael Jackson allowed in his private quarters at "Neverland."

"He invariably extracts a person's soul in a single image, subtly cultivating a subject's character without the subject even knowing it," noted Barbara Baker Burrows, his picture editor at *LIFE* magazine, where Benson was under contract for 30 years.

David Schonauer, the former editor of *American Photo* magazine, puts it bluntly: "He knows when to stand back from a subject, and when to move in. And when he moves in, it's for the kill."

Said his good friend Truman Capote, "Harry, don't tell Cartier-Bresson, or Penn, or Avedon, or Scavullo or the sweet departed spirit of Sir Cecil Beaton, but you are my favorite photographer."

Benson and his photo-savvy wife and unflappable collaborator, Gigi, recently returned to their Palm Beach County winter home from a European book tour in support of the sumptuously produced new volume *The Beatles on the Road 1964-1966*. The book documents the years Benson spent with the "Fab Four." (It, of course, includes Benson's favorite and most-celebrated photograph of a pillow fight the Beatles had in their room at the George V Hotel in Paris in 1964 in one of their rare unguarded moments before they forever changed the course of popular culture.)



▲ Kate Moss, backstage at Vivienne Westwood fashion show, Paris, 1993



▲ Jessye Norman performing on stage with famed conductor Seiji Ozawa, Lincoln Center, NYC, 1985.
"I like the intensity and urgency of the moment."

For his distinguished – and often astonishing – contributions to photography, Queen Elizabeth named him Commander of the British Empire in her 2009 New Year's Honours, thus adding a "CBE" to his name. To commemorate her first 60 years on the throne, the Scottish Parliament invited Benson to make a portrait of the queen in Holyrood Palace, her official residence as Queen of Scotland where she spends one week every summer. There he reminded her of the photo he made of her a half-century earlier at the opening a new coal mine in Scotland. "I'm afraid that mine was a disaster – no coal!" she quietly pointed out, but it cleared the air, and the rather wistful portrait he shot shows a startlingly unexpected, intimate and reflective mood that speaks

volumes of the subject's daunting adventure in her unique and ultimately unenviable all-too-public life. All has in no way been palaces and pop stars – the Robert Kennedy assassination for starters. Benson was in the room with President Richard Nixon when he resigned, on the civil rights Meredith March with Martin Luther King Jr., next to Coretta Scott King at her husband's funeral, on undercover maneuvers with the IRA in Northern Ireland and on assignment for wars in Somalia, Bosnia and Afghanistan as well as the Gulf War in Saudi Arabia. Ivor Davis, the West Coast correspondent for London's Daily Express, which was Benson's original home base, recalled the terrible Watts Riots in the



▲ Jack Nicholson, Billings, Montana, 1975, while filming *The Missouri Breaks*. "Jack was sitting in the front seat of a car while I was in the back. When he turned around I took this series of photographs."



▲ IRA soldiers on maneuvers, Northern Ireland, 1985. "When asked what they would do if they actually saw Prince Charles rather than someone wearing a Prince Charles mask, the soldier in the mask immediately fell to his knees as the others pointed guns at his head."

summer of 1964, "I picked Harry up at the Los Angeles airport. Although it was almost sundown, Harry insisted on heading straight to where the action was. It was a war zone, surrealist scene: shops were raging infernos; looters ran wild in the streets – snipers were all over the place firing at anyone and anything that moved. Harry had to make a picture. I was crawling on my hands and knees. Gunfire came from rooftops, smashing into the sidewalk and shop windows. But Harry must have thought he was encased in bulletproof armor from head to toe. It was as though he'd gone mad. He was exhilarated. Harry delivered and his London editor was thrilled."

"I'm a photographer," Benson explains. "Thinking doesn't get you there. I'm watching – recording. I don't want to know much. It's how you're going to move that's what you think of. I do the opposite of the expected. I'm there to get in and get out – not to meet people and come home wagging my tail. Fleet Street (London's home of the *Daily Express*) was tough. You didn't want Lord Beaverbrook (owner of the *Daily Express*) to see the first edition and see you'd missed it."

"The exciting thing was the unexpected of the newspapers. You wake up in the morning, and you don't know where you'll be that night, but wherever I am the one thing I must do – I must tell the truth."



▲ Then-Governor and Mrs. William J. Clinton, the Governor's Mansion, Little Rock, Ark. 1992. "I like the fact that they are not quite kissing. I think it makes the photograph more interesting."

◀ President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan, The White House, 1985. "This photograph was on the cover of *Vanity Fair* on what was planned as the last issue of the magazine because newsstand sales were down, but when this issue sold out, the magazine was saved. I put on a Sinatra tape of Mrs. Reagan's favorite song, 'Nancy with the Laughing Face' and the President and Mrs. Reagan began to dance. It was all done in less than five minutes."

"I'm not there for a photo essay but for a moment that's there and then gone forever. It's so important to report the facts as they happen."

"You see, I liked Bobby Kennedy; but, when he was shot, that was what I was there for – to take pictures. It was for history," he explains.

"One of the worst things is to be too respectful and put your own feelings and prejudices into it – put them in the way – just get close and photograph what you see. Photojournalism is no team sport. It's lonely out there where they're all fighters and there are no team players. 'Get close' – that basically is your job. They're your subjects. Every assignment can be a good picture, and there can be a great picture. You have to stick around and be prepared when the moment comes. You don't want poses; everything has to move quickly."



- ▲ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Canton, Mississippi, 1966. "During the James Meredith March we had just been teargassed and Dr. King was making an impassioned speech for non-violent protests for the Civil Rights Movement."
- President John Kennedy and President Charles de Gaulle riding in an open car amid the pomp and circumstance of the horseguard, Paris, France, 1961. "It was on this trip that President Kennedy said he was the man who accompanied Jackie Kennedy to Paris."

"How do you get a response from your subjects? Well, I recall Lord Beaverbrook meeting with Douglas Clarke, who was his political editor and was not getting through to the president of a new African Republic. 'I've tried flowers to his wife,' Clarke explained, 'chocolates – none of it works.' 'Have you tried flattery?' Beaverbrook asked. 'Heap it on with a shove! That works!' Beaverbrook was the best! Only the best could have sent me to America with the Beatles!"

Flattery, wit, persistence, wile, timing – all have been used to describe the inimitable Benson style that has brought home the near countless incisive and memorable images of breaking news for more than 60 years.

When asked whom he would still like to photograph, Benson replies, "Putin! He's the only one that stays on. He doesn't just fly through like a comet and then he's gone like a Sarkozy. But I don't want to have dinner with him first." [EZE](#)