



LIFE
Behind
THE
Camera

TEXT: COCO MARETT

PORTRAIT: CAROL CHAN

IMAGES: TERRY O'NEILL COURTESY OF PICTURE THIS GALLERY, HONG KONG

The Peninsula magazine spends an afternoon with one of the greatest photographic documenters of the 20th Century, Terry O'Neill.

It was 6:00am on March 29th, 1977 at the Beverly Hills Hotel pool where Faye Dunaway, dressed in a silk robe and high heels, sat in a daze with a pot of tea and the Oscar she had won just hours earlier for her role in 'Network'.

"I wanted to capture that dazed look, because the next day they're dazed. They realise that they've got the world in their hands – their screen value has gone from US\$100,000 to \$5 million and they now have the pick of every script. I wanted to capture that; I like capturing moments like these because they tell a story," says Terry O'Neill, the man behind the iconic photo of Dunaway and thousands more images featuring silver screen legends of the 20th Century – from Frank Sinatra to Brigitte Bardot and Audrey Hepburn to Sean Connery – at their most candid, perhaps even their most human moments.

I asked O'Neill what the secret was to capturing those perfect moments on film. He responded with, "You just have to be there, innit?"

Upon meeting O'Neill, it is easy to see how he was able to take such raw and honest images of even the shyest of subjects. He is warm, inviting and genuinely interested in people – at times I began to wonder whether I was interviewing him or vice versa.

On top of that, he is kind, with not a harsh word to say about anyone, not even the notoriously hot-tempered Naomi Campbell – "she's a really great girl," he says, with emphasis on 'really' – and not even the ever controversial, late Amy Winehouse. "I met Amy whilst photographing Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday. I wanted to get a picture of everyone who sang for him at that concert. Amy had just come out of rehab in a London clinic; she came and sang then went straight back to the clinic. She was fantastic. Truly a talented musician."

O'Neill's modesty is a humbling reprieve from the current state of the entertainment world – where a song becomes 'old' or 'outdated' within weeks – the photographer still looks upon work he did 50 years ago with so much pride and tells the stories behind them with unbridled passion.

I catch myself smiling as he walks me through his exhibition 'Terry O'Neill: Icons' at Picture This Gallery in Hong Kong, patiently telling me how he met each subject and telling anecdotes from his experiences with them. We pause next to a photograph of Frank Sinatra, strutting down a boardwalk in Miami with his entourage in tow.



Frank Sinatra boardwalk (1968)





Audrey Hepburn with dove, St Tropez (1966)



Roger Moore (Late 1970s)



Nelson Mandela (2008)

“I met [Frank] through Ava Gardner. He was great to me. We were friends for 30 odd years and I could go anywhere with him, and do anything. He paid me the greatest compliment of all and that was that he left me alone, he just let me shoot,” O’Neill recalls fondly. “Frank was the biggest personality of them all. Anywhere we went he made it his kind of town. I used to be with him during the days before his shows and he would work with the orchestra – I could see him building a mood and the day of the show there was this feeling of amazing adrenaline. He was an incredible artist; there will never be another Sinatra.”

A sigh, a moment of silence, and we move on to the next frame.

“That’s Kate Moss when she was perhaps 17.” We are looking at a black and white portrait of a young, fresh-faced Moss in a fishnet bodysuit. “Elle magazine was testing her and asked me if I could take a few frames to see what she was like.”

O’Neill was the first to photograph the likes of Moss, The Beatles and Mick Jagger before anyone really knew who they were. As a teen, he had hopes of being a big-time jazz drummer in the United States and landed a job at the British Airways photographic unit to get himself across the Atlantic. “I had three days off in New York, then three days off in London,” he recalls. The turning point for O’Neill was when he unknowingly snapped a photo of Rad Butler – Britain’s Home Secretary at the time – asleep amongst a group of African Chiefs at Heathrow airport. “A reporter from The Daily Sketch saw me and gave the picture to his editor; that was the start of everything.

It was a kind of calm before the storm for O’Neill, who became the youngest dispatch photographer on Fleet Street. “My editor said to me ‘I’ve got you here because we think pop music is going to be big, there’s a new band called The Beatles and I want you to photograph them down at Abbey Road Studios’. No-one knew who they were at the time,” he recalls. “Most of the photographers then were 35 or older, and I was 20 years old. They didn’t want to call up some old guy and have to explain who the band was. I got on with the bands, and a young person who could get young people into a newspaper became very important at that time.”

Once O’Neill’s images were published, his career snowballed. Andrew Loog Oldham, the manager of The Rolling Stones, personally called him to shoot the band and before long, he was a regular at the Ad Lib Club in Leicester Square hanging out with both The Stones and The Beatles.

“We used to sit and talk about what we would do when it was all over. Most of us thought that this was going to last for just one or two years and then it would be over. We used to laugh at the idea of Mick [Jagger] singing at 40. None of us thought it would last and of course, it did,” O’Neill remembers. “After a couple of years I left the newspaper and went to Hollywood where I met all the big stars like Fred Astaire and Shirley Maclaine, and all they wanted to do was talk about The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. That’s when I realised this was for real!”

He looks at me and smiles, “I’ve had a great life.”



Kate Moss (1993)