

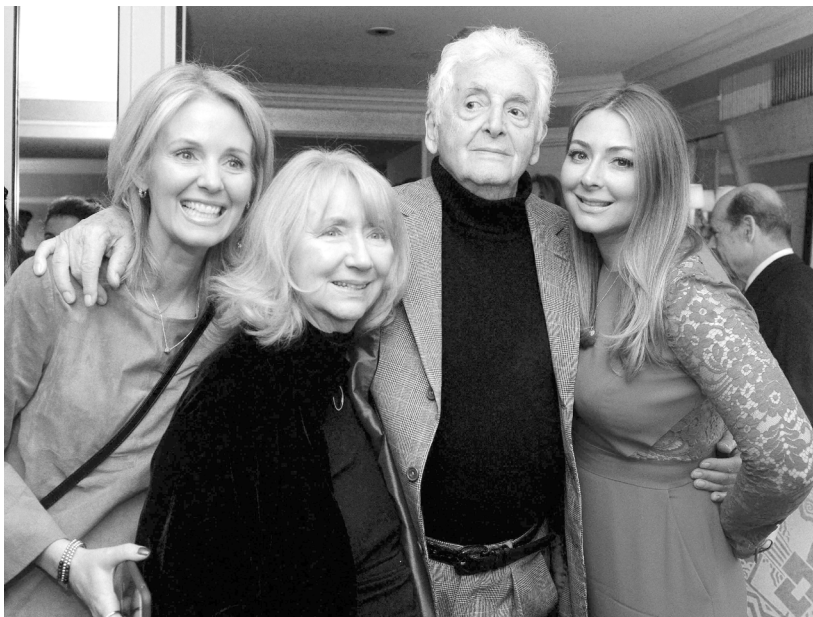
Harry Benson

PHOTOGRAPHER

AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

BY WHITNEY SCHOTT

As the 60th Anniversary of The Beatles coming to America, and appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, approaches in February, **PARK** Magazine's Whitney Schott sits down with the award-winning photojournalist who accompanied them on that journey, Harry Benson CBE.



Harry and Gigi with daughters Wendy & Tessa.

PHOTO BY JONATHAN DELANO



THE BEATLES FIRST APPEARANCE ON THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW, NEW YORK CITY, FEBRUARY 9, 1964

Beatlemania was spreading and this was to be their first appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show. The excitement started at breakfast time. My room was just down the hall, and I was having breakfast with the four of them in their suite at The Plaza Hotel. No one was eating much. Everyone was just talking about their performance, which would be broadcast live that evening. Outside, in the street, excited, hysterical young fans were waiting for us to leave for The Ed Sullivan Theatre. Police assigned to the hotel were busy wrestling with the young girls who were trying to climb up back stairways pretending to be hotel guests.

About 1:30pm, there was a band on my door. John came in and said they were going to the theater now and to stay close as I could or the police would cut me off. There was pandemonium trying to get to the car. In the car, we left the hotel, all four put their heads down while I took the photographs of the fans screaming and leaning on the back window. When we got to the CBS studio, it was chaos again. I jumped out first and John kept me next to him because the studio stage door opened and slammed like an elastic band so that no fans could push their way in.

After the rehearsal, we just stayed at the studio; it would have been too hectic to go back to the hotel. We sat around drinking Coca-Colas until they went on. As everyone knows, they were sensational. The frenzied audience with girls crying and screaming in mass hysteria drowned out their singing. This became the norm for all their appearances.



THE BEATLES, PILLOW FIGHT, PARIS, 1964

In early January, I had been given an assignment to go to Africa...and was all packed, ready to go...the phone rang...and the night editor said I was to go to Paris the next day to photograph a new group called The Beatles. I told him I was leaving for Africa on a major news story and didn't want to photograph a relatively unknown pop group. I hung up and thought that was that. A few minutes later, the phone went again, and the night editor said, "The editor says you are going to Paris." Unbeknownst to me at the time, that was my lucky day.

It was 3:00am after a concert at the Olympia in Paris in January 1964. They had so much pent-up energy after a performance, and they really couldn't go out because they would be mobbed. So we were sitting around talking and drinking. Their manager, Brian Epstein, burst into their suite at the George V Hotel to tell them, I Want to Hold Your Hand was number one on the American charts which meant they were going to America to be on the Ed Sullivan Show. That also meant I was going to America with them, and I was pleased. America had always fascinated me. Ever since I was a boy in Glasgow watching James Cagney gangster movies, I knew that was where I wanted to be.

QUEEN ELIZABETH WITH HER WELSH CORGIS

"I covered Queen Elizabeth all over the place. In Canada, in Paris, the Caribbean, around Britain and at Buckingham Palace," Benson recalls. "I was commissioned by Christopher Baker, Director of the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland, to take their official portrait of Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. The photo with the 'red box' filled with details of the day's world events. I was there waiting for her thinking what could I possibly have in common to talk about with the Queen... then she came in. She had a lot of dogs yapping around her, and I love dogs, too, so I asked, 'Ma'am, do you sleep with these dogs?' She looked at me with a grin and said, 'No, because they snore!' We both had a good laugh and that broke the ice," he said.



BARBRA STREISAND, CENTRAL PARK CONCERT, NEW YORK CITY, 1967

Fans flocked to "A Happening in Central Park," one of the first free concerts in New York's Sheep Meadow. People were mesmerized. After the concert, which was filmed for television, Barbra Streisand lived up to her legendary reputation as being difficult when she looked at me and shouted at the photographers to "get the f--- away" as she headed for her trailer.



ANDY WARHOL AND BIANCA JAGGER, THE FACTORY, NEW YORK CITY, 1977

I first met Andy Warhol when I came to New York in 1964 with the Beatles.

He was making one of his underground films, and I photographed some of his entourage at the Chelsea Hotel. I hadn't run into him in quite some time when Bianca Jagger suggested we have lunch at The Factory, Warhol's studio, which was as infamous as the artist, himself. We were joined by fellow artists Jamie Wyeth and Larry Rivers. "Andy took my photo that night too, but I have never been able to find it," says Benson.



ASK HARRY BENSON ABOUT HIS LIFE AND HE will tell you it's been extraordinary. "I wouldn't have wondered from photography. Photography got me around the world...meeting people...Even if I was a millionaire, I couldn't have had this life. You couldn't afford it!" he says in his distinctly Scottish brogue.

Vanity Fair, Town & Country, Time, Newsweek, People, Life & Paris Match

As a photojournalist for *LIFE* magazine from 1970-2000, his work has also appeared in such publications as *Vanity Fair*, *Town & Country*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People* and *Paris Match*. He has literally shot everyone and everything. From Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, (41 and 43), Clinton, and Obama, to Senator Bobby Kennedy - the night he was assassinated. Then there have been all the actors, models, athletes, socialites, and musicians he has photographed -- including The Beatles, with whom he

arrived in America on assignment in 1964. Benson's honors include a Commander of the Order of the British Empire appointed by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace in 2009; letters from universities such as The Photographic Society and International Center of Photography. A documentary *HARRY BENSON, SHOOT FIRST* which chronicles his 70-year career was released by Magnolia Pictures in 2016. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Benson says he was basically self-taught. Inspired by his father -- a zoologist who founded the Calderpark Zoo and loved photography, he took up photography because he was good at art. "At school, I wasn't a good student, but I was good at art. I was good at art, but not great at art. Good, but not good enough. Photography was a natural way. I studied photography by looking at photographs and basically taking over a camera. A camera will do what you tell it to do," he says.

He went to work for a local newspaper, *Hamilt-*



MICHAEL JACKSON

"Like a lot of people, I was allowed into his bedroom. And at the entrance to Michael's bedroom there's a little boy and girl --like a Boy Scout and a Girl Scout, outside his bedroom door. He knew what I wanted for LIFE magazine, He knew I wanted to get as close to him as possible and he knew he was going to have to show me something. I was not just going to accept something dopey. I want to see something special. Otherwise, why would the magazine give you five or six pages? I didn't show him I was excited about it because if they see you're excited they think they've given you something and you're done. If you don't show them you're excited, they may give you something more. He gave me "Bubbles" his monkey. Michael was eccentric. He showed me everything I wanted to see...and he danced for me...on the bed and around the house."

“PEOPLE LOVE FLATTERY”



TRUMAN CAPOTE AND LEE RADZIWELL AT HIS BLACK AND WHITE BALL, THE PLAZA HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY, 1966

Everyone wanted to be invited to what is still being called the "party of the century." It was the hottest ticket in town. It is said that those who were excluded lied, saying they were out of town, rather than admit they weren't invited. It seemed everyone who was there was famous for one reason or another. The party was given in honor of Kay Graham, owner of the WASHINGTON POST, and for the detectives who broke the murder case Capote wrote about in his groundbreaking non-fiction novel, IN COLD BLOOD. Truman was on top of the world. "He was one of the funniest people I've ever been with. He was crushed when they cut him off. He cried with me... and cried. He knew that was going to happen, but he said, "I didn't mean it."

ton Advertiser, moving on to the *Daily Sketch* after his exclusive interviews in prison with Scottish mass murderer Peter Manuel. By 1959, he was working for Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, and the rest is history. "The thing about photojournalism," he says, "is that your situation changes every day. Things can change and you have to be quick enough to see it changing and I photographed everything...marching with Dr. Martin Luther King...the Watts Riots... Princess Di and Charles gettin' married...I would photograph anything and would do any story."

There were some challenges. "When someone would say, 'Oh, I've got a person, a wonderful person, you're gonna love them'...I knew I had a problem. Someone who knows how to manipulate you,"

he says. "But when they would say someone was terrible, a nasty piece of work, they were fine. People don't tell you accurately what others are like. You have to find out for yourself. And even then, it doesn't really throw me off because that is what I'm expecting...But one thing I did learn quickly is flattery. People love flattery. So, put it on with a shovel. Tell them how great they are. People love flattery. No matter who they are. Then you're on a good level to tell them, I want you to jump into a bath...with a dog or something," he laughs.

The Beatles

One example was when Benson first photographed The Beatles. It was January 1964 and their

manager, Brian Epstein, had just told them their hit single, *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, had gone to number one on the U.S charts. "I went to pick them up. They were prepared to go out on the street, and I said, 'no, I want you here.' I had heard them talking about a pillow fight they had had a few nights before, so I suggested it. I thought it would make a good photo to celebrate. And John Lennon said, "You know, that is stupid. You're gonna make us look stupid and silly. We don't want to look stupid." And the rest agreed, and then he slipped away. And the others, Paul and Ringo, stayed, and then John comes up behind them and banged them in the head with the pillow," he laughs. "It was great, and I got my photo."

Persons of interest

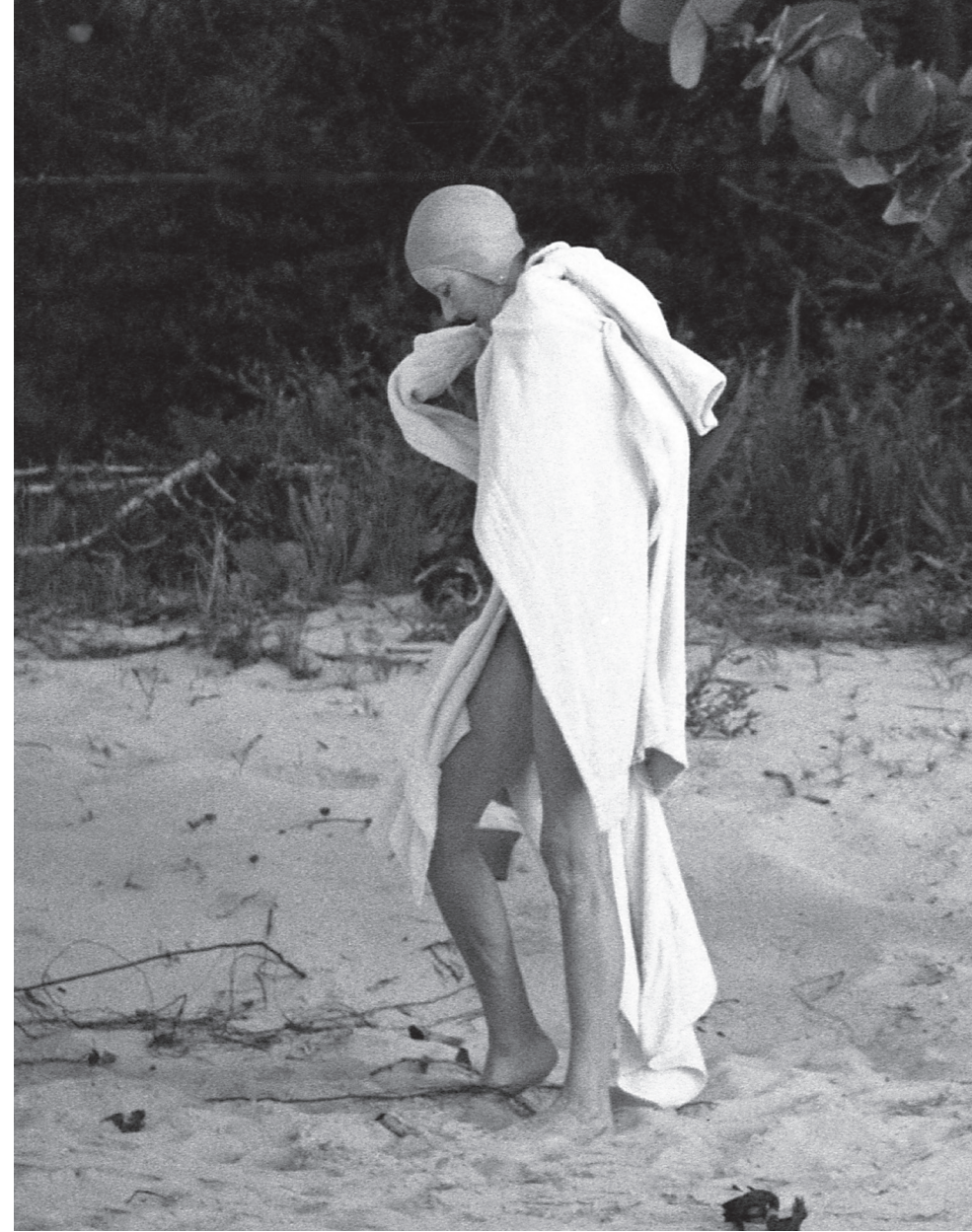
“EVEN IF I WAS A MILLIONAIRE, I COULDN'T HAVE HAD THIS LIFE.”



RFK Assassination RFK Floor- 1 @Harry Benson 1968 LG



President Clinton's Kiss @Harry Benson 1993 PP



Greta Garbo @Harry Benson



USA for Africa Life cover @Harry Benson



Ali Hits George @Harry Benson 1964

Benson met his wife Gigi “while traveling to Houston, Texas, on assignment with Prince Philip who went there to see the Space Center,” says Gigi Benson. Her parents were invited to a gala reception for the prince and brought her along. She was in college at the time at the University of Texas. Harry then invited her to attend a Barbra Streisand concert. “The first concert in Central Park,” according to Gigi, “We sat in the front row.” Once they were married, she didn’t really travel on shoots with Harry. “The wife doesn’t go,” she says. Gigi serves as the archivist for Benson’s work and editor of his books, including “The BEATLES on the ROAD 1964-1966” (Taschen, 2012) and *HARRY BENSON: Persons of Interest* (powerHouse Books, 2017). Benson’s latest book, *PAUL*, featuring photographs of the legendary Beatle, Paul McCartney, was published in 2022.

The author of twenty-one books, Benson is working on a new one and has enough content for several more. “Our daughters, Wendy and Tessa, would

say Harry was always getting up from the dinner table to get on a plane to go someplace far away that we couldn’t even spell!” says Gigi, noting a camera bag on the chair next to him.

A retrospective of Benson’s work, *A MOMENT IN TIME: ICONIC IMAGES BY HARRY BENSON*, an embodiment of some of the most significant moments captured in the 20th and 21st centuries, was shown this summer at the Southampton Arts Center on Long Island, curated by Sally Martin Katz. There, Harry spoke about his life’s work and told some wonderful anecdotes about the photographs on view. The 60th anniversary of the Beatles coming to America, and appearing on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” will take place on February 7th and 9th, 2024, respectively. Benson plans to release some limited edition prints to commemorate that extraordinary time. **P**

HarryBenson.com



Jackie Ski Mask @Harry Benson



Halston Spandex #2 @Harry Benson