

# The Art of the Photograph

*This month featuring* **Pete Millson**



*Amy Winehouse. Photograph © Pete Millson*

I sometimes notice a similarity between photographers and private detectives, such as Poirot, Columbo, or Miss Marple, or secret agents like Jason Bourne. TV and film often show moments where an agent sits in a café or bar, observing everything around them in great detail. Photographers share a similar habit of observing and absorbing their surroundings, though hopefully for different reasons.

Talking with photographer Pete Millson in a café in Bridport, Dorset, he mentions how he is constantly, though not always consciously, noticing his surroundings. 'If something visually strikes me, I have

to stop and go back to see what it is that I'm being drawn to.' He then has to 'reverse engineer' the moment to piece it back together. He smiles, relating a story of how he explained this to a detective inspector once, who laughingly told him, "You're just paranoid".

But citing an interview with a *National Geographic* photographer, he describes how you have to learn to return to that one split second that captured your imagination. For most people, he says, inertia means they will just walk on. But for people like Pete, that moment is golden and might produce an iconic photograph.



*Oliver Land. Photograph © Pete Millson*

This doesn't mean that he is only interested in the unusual things that appear out of nowhere. As a portrait photographer, he is searching for dignity. 'What I love about a good portrait is that it's a dignified record of a person who actually existed.' Explaining that he is constantly trying to improve his photography, he talks about those who believe they cannot be photographed—they say the camera doesn't like them. 'The question to ask is who was the photographer,' he says. Pointing at the table, he explains. 'A photograph is not something that that cup could do; it's down to the people.'

Although there was always an Instamatic lying around when he was young, the first time a friend gave him a 'second-hand, proper camera', he was amazed. 'I just kept staring at it,' he says. He then began studying the work of photographers like Anton Corbijn and Henri Cartier-Bresson, trying to imitate their techniques. Corbijn's work inspired him so much that he wanted to produce what he recalls as 'vital' and 'credible' work—striving to create a 'Kapow! sort of photograph.'

*'The real job is to let somebody's actual life happen'*

He put together a portfolio of photographs of friends and eventually got a job with the *New Musical Express* (NME). 'I must have caught them on a quiet day,' he laughs. But the freelance 'bits and bobs' led him to a three-year spell at a local paper in Islington, where he learned how to take photographs in a wide range of challenging situations. He followed that with a five-year job photographing musicians as diverse as Bob Geldof, Keith Richards, Siouxsie Sioux, Charlotte Church and Amy Winehouse for a *Guardian* feature on musicians' record collections. The list of people he photographed is huge but he remembers how the approach was a great way to get subjects into the right frame of mind. 'Because these, often famous, people were being asked about the very thing they loved, rather than some tittle tattle, they totally opened up.'

The experience led to more press shots for record labels as well as cover photographs for albums, something he still does with as much immersion as he did in the early days with the NME. The difference now, he points out, is that there is little record label work; today, he mainly works directly for the bands. 'I'm still championing the artist,' he says. 'I try and persuade people that you've got to spend some money on photography, you don't want to look like a Muppet.'



Molly Bruce. Photograph © Pete Millson

Pete's 'other hat' is that he is a musician, singer-songwriter, and music mixer. He is quick to point out that stardom is not his thing. He likes to be what he calls 'five-foot outside the spotlight'. So when it comes to either helping musicians with their sound or their look, his experience is enormous and it's likely his ego isn't going to get in the way of the end goal.

Meeting and photographing many famous people can be enlightening, especially in developing a philosophy of life and understanding that there is reality in each subject. Pete's experience has allowed him to understand that vulnerability and fallibility are present in everyone, regardless of their status in life. 'I'm just trying to say that person X, who's struggling with the shitology of life, I still can see the dignity there. And person Y, who's got a million dollars and a stylist, I can still see a person there as well. I'm after things that look great, but not at the expense of it not being a real person.'

But how has his photography evolved over the years? Experience has helped him develop his instincts. He knows what he likes and what he doesn't like, something he calls his 'artistic prejudices.' He explains that a photographer has to take account of the atmosphere





*Bernard Butler. Photograph © Pete Millson*

around them. 'My empirical research tells me that if you pay attention to the vibe in the room, you sort of know when to hit the button. It's a kind of psychological gate. But it's not like you get it right 100% of the time; it's more that you get as close as you can.' He explains that part of a good portrait photographer's armoury is that you're ten steps ahead of your sitter. 'The real job is to let somebody's actual life happen.'

Somehow, we arrive at the inevitable question about the future for creatives and how to handle AI in photography. 'It's easy to answer that one,' says Pete. 'It doesn't really matter whether you use a pencil, a biro, a camera, or a block of stone; it's about the person and their journey through life. If they use, say, the medium of photography, they can express it through that.'

And what about AI? 'If AI does it for you, you're welcome to it' he says. 'If, by pulling a lever and having something generated, you're happy with it, photography is not for you. Because an artist will always go, "wait, there's something wrong with this". Art is not about a destination; it's about a journey. And AI is all about a destination. AI is all about the end result.'

Is AI wrecking the art world? 'Numbnuts are always knacker things for people, aren't they? It's just that the numbnuts are in charge of the world now, so you just live with it.'

Pete also recognises the need for us to be more honest in our assessment of what is presented to us. 'I guess, in the times we're living in, a really positive thing to say is that people are learning to be more fair. We're all gradually learning to offend people less. But there's a lot to be said for saying "that is a pile of shit, and that's really good"'. It doesn't matter if you offend the person who took the pile of shit; it's still a pile of shit. And if it's AI that's a pile of shit, then it's a pile of shit! We need to get our opinions nice and strong again, because otherwise you have homogenised general art, which is what AI creates, homogenised generalness. So be nice to people, respect people but don't start making everything great.'

I recount a story about how a winning image at the Sony World Photography Awards a few years ago turned out to be AI-generated. 'It's quite hard to keep an eye on excellence,' he says. 'Because everything's pretty good now. You get your iPhone out of your pocket and the shot is pretty good. So, is pretty good good enough?' Of course not. When it comes to the journey that is art, most artists would start again if they thought their work was just 'pretty good.'

*To learn more about Pete Millson or to contact him visit:  
[www.petemillsonphotographer.uk](http://www.petemillsonphotographer.uk).*