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His Photos Are Proof: He's With the Band

By ALEX WILLIAMS

ONE afternoon in June 1975, John Lennon got lost in the mammoth Westbeth artists' complex in Manhattan, looking for Bob Gruen's photo studio and apartment, after partying all weekend with Harry Nilsson.

"He was ringing doorbells," Mr. Gruen recalled. "Four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. Everyone in the building is an artist, so they were opening the door saying: 'Oh, my God, John Lennon! Let me show you my painting. Let me read you my poem.'" When he finally found the apartment, Mr. Gruen said, he told him, " 'Man, you've got some weird neighbors.' "

"I always figured if he could find it in that condition," Mr. Gruen added, "anyone could."

And everyone seemingly has. Since his days as a personal photographer for Mr. Lennon and Yoko Ono in the 1970s, Mr. Gruen has seen his cluttered loft serve as a clubhouse for countless rock legends: Joe Strummer of the Clash, David Johansen of the New York Dolls, and members of Blondie, to name a few. This unassuming behind-the-lens figure embedded himself with rock bands so deeply that in some cases he was regarded as a virtual member.

Along the way, Mr. Gruen, a self-taught photographer who spent much of his career as a freelancer hustling shots to *Rock Scene* and *Creem* magazines for as little as \$5 each, snapped some of rock's most iconic images. Perhaps most famous is that of Mr. Lennon, arms folded, standing in front of the skyline in his "New York City" T-shirt. That shot has become something of a rock 'n' roll Mona Lisa, knocked off on postcards and T-shirts around the world (sometimes with Popeye or Curly of the Three Stooges superimposed on Mr. Lennon's face — a true measure of its impact as a pop-culture totem).

"It's bootlegged as much as Marilyn and Elvis," Mr. Gruen said. "I would love someday to get a percentage — they're selling a lot of them." But he's not exactly talking to a lawyer. "People who bootleg and steal can steal anything," he added. "The fact that they steal mine over and over again I take as a compliment."

But lately, Mr. Gruen is getting his due in other ways. At 65, he finds himself the one in focus, for a change. Last month, Abrams published "*Rock Seen*," a retrospective art book featuring 500 of his photographs. He is the subject of a British television film, "*Rock 'N' Roll Exposed*," directed by Don Letts, the filmmaker and a member of *Big Audio Dynamite*. And, on a neighborly level, Marc Jacobs, an old friend, recently devoted the front of his Bleeker Street boutique to an elaborate installation celebrating Mr. Gruen's work (a teenager's mock bedroom, it featured a bed and television and walls covered floor-to-ceiling in Gruen photos).

"Bob Gruen was a part of the entire rock scene, as much as any band, really, because he was one of those guys that everybody really liked," Alice Cooper says in the Letts movie. "And he always seemed to get the money shot."

With his friendly manner, neatly cropped shock of silver hair and rubbery grin, Mr. Gruen seems like an unlikely figure to have growled with rock's lions. But his apartment tells a different story.

Scattered inside are 28 file cabinets filled with negatives and contact sheets, and on nearby shelves, a museum's worth of rock memorabilia. There are signed photos from Keith Richards and members of Led Zeppelin. One shelf holds a bugle that Mr. Gruen used to blow a cavalry charge to open shows in the Clash's famous 17-night run at Bonds International Casino in Times Square in 1981. ("People ask me what's the best show I've ever seen, and I include every show the Clash ever did.")

From the beginning, Mr. Gruen showed a knack for stumbling into music history. In the summer of 1965, he used his camera to wrangle a press pass into the Newport Folk Festival. That happened to be the *Dylan-goes-electric* show, one of the most dissected gigs in rock history. "It was chaos," he said, of the moment when Mr. Dylan shocked the folkies by plugging in a Stratocaster. "They didn't quite get it. Over the years thinking about it, what he was doing was making a statement that rock 'n' roll was the folk music of America."

The first gig he got paid for was less glamorous: Tommy James and the Shondells opening for Hubert Humphrey in a parking lot in Yonkers. But Mr. Gruen managed to hitch a ride back to the city with the band, and they became friends.

His knack for making friends came in handy in 1972, when he met Mr. Lennon and Ms. Ono at an Apollo Theater benefit. He talked his way backstage, and found himself in a scrum of fans snapping shots of the couple with Instamatics. Mr. Lennon remarked that so many fans took pictures, but he never saw any. "I said, 'I live around the corner,'" said Mr. Gruen. "Well, slip them under the door," said Mr. Lennon, who was

living in an apartment on Bank Street at the time.

“Years later when we were friends, Yoko mentioned that I was one of the few people who didn’t try to get something,” Mr. Gruen said. “I just gave them something.”

Before long, he became the go-to photographer whenever the couple wanted unguarded shots of them messing around at the piano with Mick Jagger, or nuzzling in bed with their new baby, Sean. “Bob understood what we were doing,” Ms. Ono said in an e-mail message. “He was interested in photographing John as he was, whether the photos would one day sell or not.

“The magazines and newspapers wanted the Beatle John’s photo,” she added. “Not photos of John living and working with me, his wife. That was embarrassing and boring to them.”

The T-shirt photo shoot didn’t seem particularly portentous, Mr. Gruen said. It was August 1974, and Mr. Lennon phoned while recording the “Walls and Bridges” album to say he needed some shots for the cover package. Mr. Gruen showed up at Mr. Lennon’s East 52nd Street apartment — this was during the couple’s separation — and started snapping the musician on the penthouse’s terrace. Then he noticed the skyline.

“Do you still have that T-shirt I gave you?” he asked Mr. Lennon. (Mr. Gruen had at least seven of the shirts, which he considered part of his uniform. He used to buy them in Times Square and cut off the sleeves with his Buck knife.) Mr. Lennon retrieved it from his bedroom, they shot a few rolls and the session was over.

The photo became famous only in 1980 when Mr. Gruen selected it to be displayed in the Central Park band shell for Mr. Lennon’s public memorial. Mr. Gruen thought it was the perfect image to reinforce Ms. Ono’s point that Mr. Lennon loved the city and that it bore no responsibility for his death. “Yoko always said, don’t blame New York for John’s death,” Mr. Gruen said. “John died in New York because he lived in New York.”

Mr. Gruen was devastated by Mr. Lennon’s death. Still, his career was flourishing on another front. He had become the rare holdover from the hippie era to be embraced by the emerging punk bands of the time. He became a fixture at CBGB, followed the Sex Pistols on their chaotic 1978 tour of the American South, and rode shotgun with the Clash through England and North America.

Despite the generation gap, punk didn’t seem all that different to him. “I like music that’s saying something,” he said. His camera focused on the intimate moments away from the stage: the sweat, the laughter, the tedium of life in a dressing room or on a tour bus.

Three decades later, not much has changed. Mr. Gruen still slips on his Beatle boots and hits rock clubs four or five nights a week, often with his wife, Elizabeth Gregory-Gruen, an artist and coat designer for Michael Kors.

“People ask me how do I get to be friends with musicians,” Mr. Gruen said. “How do you get to be friends with anybody?” He thinks about it for a moment. “Joe Franklin used to say, ‘It’s nice to be important, but it’s more important to be nice.’”