



Daniel Kramer – behind the lens

AN ICONIC COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED POP ARTISTS OF OUR TIME, **CHARLES SAULEM** DISCOVERS DANIEL KRAMER'S TECHNIQUES AND THE STORIES BEHIND THE LENS



"I LIVE AND work in New York City," Daniel Kramer told me over the phone, fresh from another European exhibition of his classic shots. "Actually, I was born in Brooklyn and moved into Manhattan after serving in the US Army," he began reminiscing. "My father was an avid amateur movie-maker and I became, around age 12, fascinated by his 16mm Bolex camera. I still remember visiting a darkroom and seeing for the first time the magic of a white sheet of paper becoming a black and white print in the developing tray. To this day, when I print, I still greatly enjoy that moment of discovery when the image comes to life. This excitement and my desire to learn and know more about photography led me to the Brooklyn library where my teachers were the writers on the long shelf of photography books.

"My parents were quite supportive and allowed me to set up a makeshift darkroom in the kitchen after the family went to bed – it was all extremely basic but I was able to produce prints. I think I was 15 when a landlord, who knew I took pictures, asked me to photograph for evidence the damage his last tenant did to a vacated apartment. He paid me five dollars and I had a great time – I guess that was my first professional job."

Compulsory service in the Army called, but soon after that, although planning to go to law school, Daniel took a job as an assistant at the fashion studio of Allan and Diane Arbus, an experience that helped him find his own path in photography. Some of his time was spent developing film and making contact sheets for Diane, who was experimenting with her street pictures; this exposed him to a new and different way of seeing.

A second opportunity came about working as assistant to Philippe Halsman, a contemporary and friend of Salvador Dali and Albert Einstein. Halsman had fled Paris and the horrors of the Holocaust to go on and become recognised in 1958 as one of the "World's Ten Greatest Photographers" by *Popular Photography* magazine. "He was already one of the top magazine and celebrity photographers when I worked with him. He stressed the idea that although your technical skills are required, it's the thinking that counts – how you use the



Left page: On the *Bringing It All Back Home* album cover Kramer got the turning effect by making two exposures on one sheet of film – not by using a smear of Vaseline as some suspected.

Top right: Dylan wanted to wear his motorcycle T-shirt on this shoot. To balance the composition Kramer placed Dylan's road manager in the background. **Above:** Kramer accompanied Dylan to Philadelphia.

technique – I mean, you can learn to type, but that's not going to make you a great writer, is it?" Working with Halsman put Kramer in the world of Marilyn Monroe and President John Kennedy and his brothers and many of the celebrities of the time.

"When I opened my first studio and started shooting on my own I always used a wide range of cameras from 8x10 to 35mm including, for many, many years, the mini Olympus, which I always carried with me," Kramer insisted. "It's a great pocket camera and has backed me up a number of times. In fact, I'm recording this conversation with an Olympus Digital recorder," he went on to add.

Many photographers seem to have a career turning point; a moment when something ever so minor happens that has a huge effect for change. For the young Daniel Kramer, this happened when he chanced upon a TV appearance of a young singer he did not know who delivered a haunting ballad about a wanton slaying of a servant and the injustice of the court in not punishing the criminal. "It was the *Steve Allen Show* and the song was *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carol* and the singer's name was Bob Dylan." This performance touched Kramer deeply and triggered something in him. Despite being presented as just another pop singer, "there was something in the way Dylan delivered this song he wrote, and the poetry of what he was saying, that was quite remarkable, especially from a person so young".

Kramer told me he is still in awe of this performance after all these years. "I knew then I had to photograph him." Without hesitating or questioning he got on the phone straight away to locate Dylan's management office. After being continually turned down for months, eventually Dylan's manager agreed Kramer could photograph Bob for an hour the following week, in Woodstock, where Dylan was staying at the time. "I drove up there to make a portrait for my portfolio but we seemed to hit it off and the one-hour session turned into a half-day of shooting. When Bob saw the pictures a few weeks later he invited me to accompany him to his upcoming concert in Philadelphia, and this kind of intermittent shooting went on for about a year. I photographed his concerts, recording sessions and off-time and eventually published a book about that experience with my text and 140 pictures, the first major work about Bob Dylan."

During this period the protest singer from the New York coffee houses had become a fully fledged, international, electric rock star as Kramer photographed and captured this change on film.



Top left: Janis Joplin recording in New York in 1968.
Top right: Heavyweight champion Joe Frazier with his trainer.

Above: Exhausted assistants Arline Kramer and Jeremy Ross at Toiyabe Range.

When Kramer was asked to shoot the album cover for *Bringing It All Back Home*, he sought to devise something special and built a rig that he mounted in front of his 4x5" view camera that allowed him to 'turn' the room but keep the image of Dylan sharp and steady in the centre of the picture, unlike stroboscope where a bright light makes a moving object appear stationary.

This cover was nominated in 1965 for a Grammy in photography and later put on *Rolling Stone's* list of the greatest covers of all time and selected last year for inclusion in the book *A Century of Colour Photography* by Pamela Roberts. "The woman in the red dress in the background is not Dylan in drag as some have thought but Sally Grossman, his manager's wife," Kramer says.

Kramer sights empathy as the most important feeling a photographer can have for his/her subject from the start. Despite his work with Dylan, producing many iconic photographs and producing some landmark works of the 1960s, he remembers the time as if it happened yesterday. Indeed he

A portrait of the bohemian Janis Joplin, wearing her signature style of velvet and lots of jewellery



A candid take of **Mario Puzo** – after much persuasion Kramer managed to get the best-selling writer and author of the *Godfather* series to pose for him, the pictures were used in magazines worldwide and made cover on *New York Magazine*



approached photographing Bob Dylan in the same way he approaches all his subjects – without any formula at all. "If I have a style it is to respond to my subject. The photography starts the second I start talking to that person." Again, he reiterated this point. The whole technique, approach and execution are based on his relationship with his subject. As Daniel's reputation grew, so did the demand for magazine and book covers of his portraits of personalities like Paul Newman, Janis Joplin, and his intense and revealing sessions with heavyweight champion boxer Joe Frazier. He finds the advent of digital photography a stimulating and exciting time to be working in photography, on the edge of a brand-new era.

Although deeply entrenched in his digital work, Kramer still goes into the darkroom to make silver gelatin prints of all of his black and white work. "For me the key thing is to be flexible, because I see photography as a life of adventure. If you don't take chances, you don't get anything. Again, it's the thinking that counts – and how through the camera you can translate what's there into a finished print. When I teach classes, I tell my students to hold on to this idea of it all being an adventure and to be prepared for everything and anything."

Everything, he insists, springs from the relationship between photographer and subject. With Mario Puzo (seen above), the

photography was not about lenses, aperture and cameras as much as it was getting the rapport right with the subject.

The other vital element of his success he attributes to his wife and working partner, Arline. "We were once on an assignment to go to Washington to photograph the incoming members of Ronald Reagan's economic team for a *Fortune* magazine cover. Five minutes after I started shooting, a message came that the President wanted his team immediately for a meeting, and I had only shot part of one roll. As they started to leave Arline explained to the Secretary of the Treasury that it would be prudent to make a few more exposures on another camera body in case of mechanical or processing problems. When she was politely told there really was no time, she quickly explained the importance of a *Fortune* cover and that success or failure could hang on just another minute or two. She prevailed and we made a few more exposures, we took a few more frames and a shot on that roll made the *Fortune* cover."

Aside from everything else a photographer has on his plate, Kramer currently exhibits and does limited-edition prints of his most well-known images. His status and techniques have without doubt made a huge impact on a certain kind of photography and have become a standard to which a good deal of modern work can be compared.