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## BOB KING

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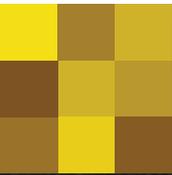
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Portrait of Bob King by Bruce Usher, copyright 2016.



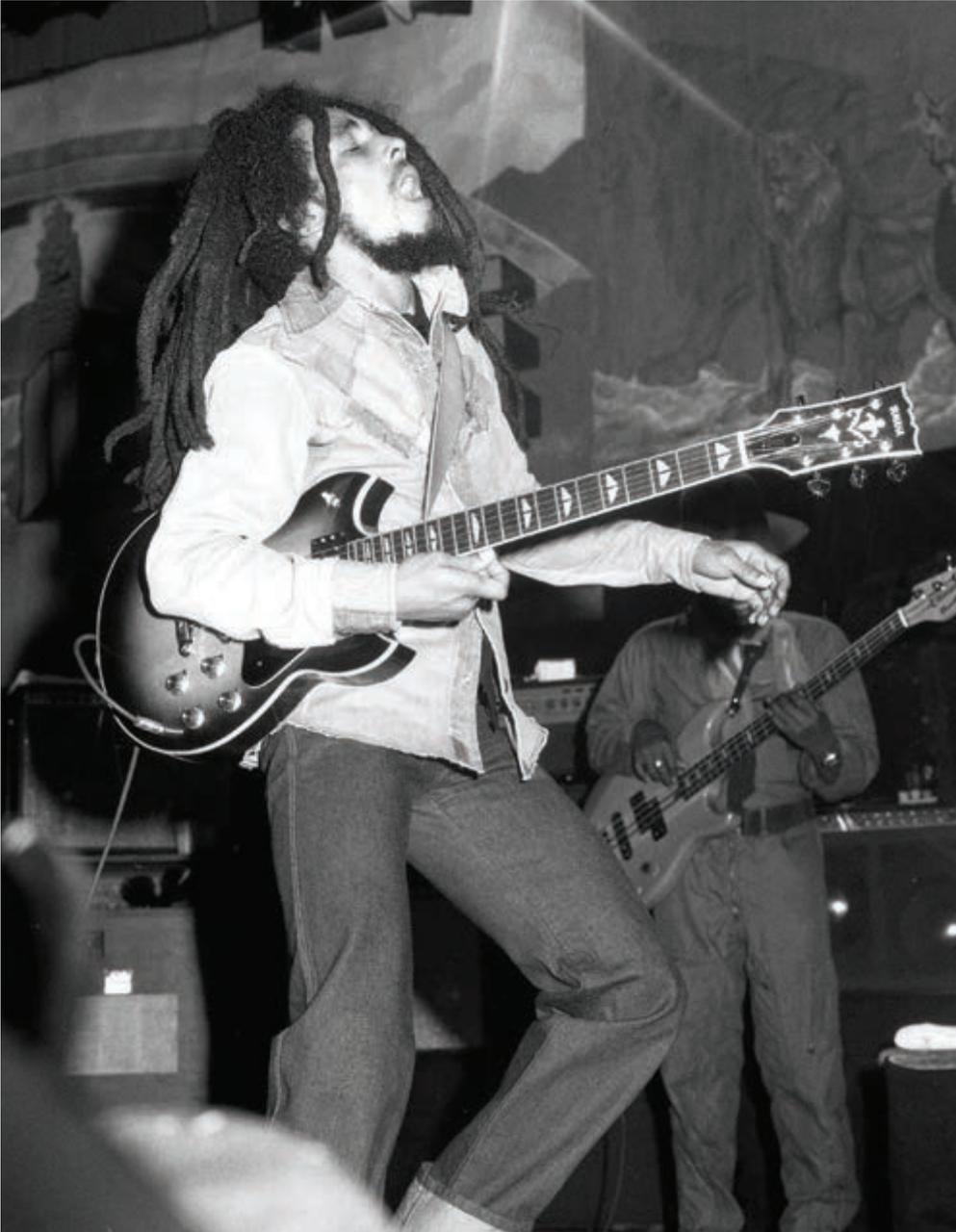
# KING OF ROCK



## Bob King

Well known in the photo industry, Bob King has been photographing rock concerts and musicians for over 50 years. His remarkable career is celebrated in a new book and, in this interview, he talks to Bruce Usher about how it all started and relates some of his many experiences along the way.

INTERVIEW BY BRUCE USHER



**B**ob King is a rock music photographer. A 300+ pages book of his life's work has just been published simultaneously in the UK, USA, Germany, New Zealand and Australia. But what most people don't know is that Bob had a secret life... the life of a travel photographer, partnering the prolific writer and music historian, Glenn A. Baker.

In Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, team Baker-&King pull up opposite an ornate building and before their guide can get the words "stop" or "don't" out, Bob has taken ten images of the building. Unfortunately for him, it's the HQ for the

paramilitary. The front gate swings open and a uniformed guy with a red beret waves them in. "Oh, shit, what have we done now?" murmurs Baker as Bob quickly whips out the roll of film in the camera, drops in a blank roll and fast forwards it a few frames. They explain that they aren't spies and then Bob says "Look", opens up the back of the camera and pulls out the

■ **Bob King placed himself in a prime position for capturing Bob Marley.**

“Bob's success, in a way, has been because he always knew where not to be, as much as where to be.” – Glenn A. Baker

film, "See, no problem". And the red beret lets them go.

On another occasion in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a Saracen armoured personnel carrier drives past, Bob picks up the camera and snaps off a frame. One of the soldiers saw him, shouts "Hey, you" and starts to chase them.

"So what do you do when you're being chased?" asks Glenn A. Baker. "You just run, and we did with these police chasing us. We were much younger then... and faster."

### Early Days

In the beginning there was the darkroom at Marsden High School and the Kodak lecture service which visited to teach the basics of black and white photography. Bob started photographing the school's swimming and athletics carnivals then, a few years later at the YMCA's junior camera club in the city, he met Phillip Morris (who also became a professional photographer) and Glen Ritchie. They'd go to concerts together.

"I shot the Rolling Stones, P.J. Proby, The Animals and The Yardbirds with Jimmy Page on lead guitar," Bob recalls. "We'd just walk up to the front and take photos."

By then Bob was working at Kodak's head office in Sydney, and had just bought a Kodak Retina Reflex 4 outfit, with 135mm, 50mm and 28mm lenses.

From 1967, compulsory National Service occupied Bob for the next two years. After basic training, he wanted to stay in photography so he asked for a posting in survey or public relations, but ended up in the artillery as an intelligence officer, working at a listening post around the perimeter of the Nui Dat base in Vietnam. Upon arrival at Nui Dat, the sergeant ticking off the new arrivals said, "Gunner King, you worked for Kodak, we want you to process our films".

In a corner of the recreation room was where the darkroom was going, handily located just near the bar. Bob started running a dice game called 'Crown And Anchor' and, including the funds from the black and white film processing, it was six months before he needed to draw on his army pay.

Bob's mother worked at the Australian Forces Overseas fund which garnered donations from Australian companies to help the military. Bob wrote to her about the photography equipment that was badly needed and this came to the attention of the Major General who was running the fund.

"The long and the short of it," Bob says, "is that the Major General turned up at the base and I told him what we were after. A few weeks later \$3000

■  
Metallica's  
James Hetfield.

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Angus Young  
lets fly at an early  
AC/DC concert  
in the 1970s.  
Right: Elvis Costello.



worth of photographic equipment arrived – enlargers, processing tanks, trays, everything. Bob was able to distribute some of the equipment to other units because they had been sending their personal films for processing at a local village called Bariea. Later they found out that Bariea was half run by the Viet Cong.

The intelligence officers who flew in small reconnaissance aircraft came to Bob with their film and he made 8x10-inch prints for them to examine.

“I flew with them a few times. It was quite hair-raising and, on one trip, we were fired at.”

While on leave in Singapore Bob King bought his first Nikon camera, an F 35mm SLR with a 21mm wide-angle lens and a 200mm telephoto.

### Pay Days

In May 1972 Bob started working in sales at Kayell Photographics, then located in the Sydney CBD. Shortly after, he sold Darryl Braithwaite a camera. Sherbet was off to the UK and Darryl gave him tickets to an up-coming show.

“Otherwise I wouldn’t have gone,” Bob says candidly. “Wouldn’t have gone if you had paid me... they were considered a teenybopper’s band.” But he did go and then, a couple of weeks later, they asked him back to a concert at the Hordern Pavilion in Sydney.

“I was back stage showing Roger Davies – their manager – these earlier shots and he says, ‘We want these’. And it clicked. I was starting to make money.”

Then *Ram* and *Juke* – new music magazines – appeared and Bob began doing a lot of concert photography for them as well as the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone*. He would come home from a concert, process the film immediately

and then print three sets of prints. He tried to give each of the magazines different images. In the late 1970s he was paid \$5.00 for an 8x10-inch print.

“I picked up a copy of *Juke* once and saw that they’d republished a shot they had run six months earlier. ‘You didn’t pay me for that,’ I said. ‘We’ve already paid you for it,’ was the reply. ‘But that was six months ago and now you’ve used it again!’ It was very hard for them to come around to the idea of paying a re-use fee.”

### The Glenn A. Baker Experience

It’s December 1975 at Victoria Park in Sydney. On the bill are Sherbet, Split Enz, Kevin Borich and Ol’ 55. The Ol’ 55 bass player gets electrocuted on stage and knocked out. On the following Monday morning, the telephone rings at Kayell Photographics and an excitable voice asks, “Is that Bob King?” Bob says yes and then a volley of words flies down the line. It was Glenn A. Baker, then Ol’ 55’s manager, who wanted to know if Bob had any shots of the bass player lying on his back so he could send them to the newspapers. Bob didn’t, but the two have been friends ever since.

Glenn worked for the Government department that put the Double J radio station together and had been a record importer. In the mid-1980s he was the editor of the *Countdown* magazine... and this was Bob King’s introduction to editorial travel photography.

Someone from Garuda Airlines rang *Countdown* magazine and wanted to talk to Glenn about a feature he had recently written about Bali. They said it was the best thing they had ever read on Bali and asked Glenn whether he was interested in a six-week assignment, travelling around Indonesia, writing similar pieces about other locations.

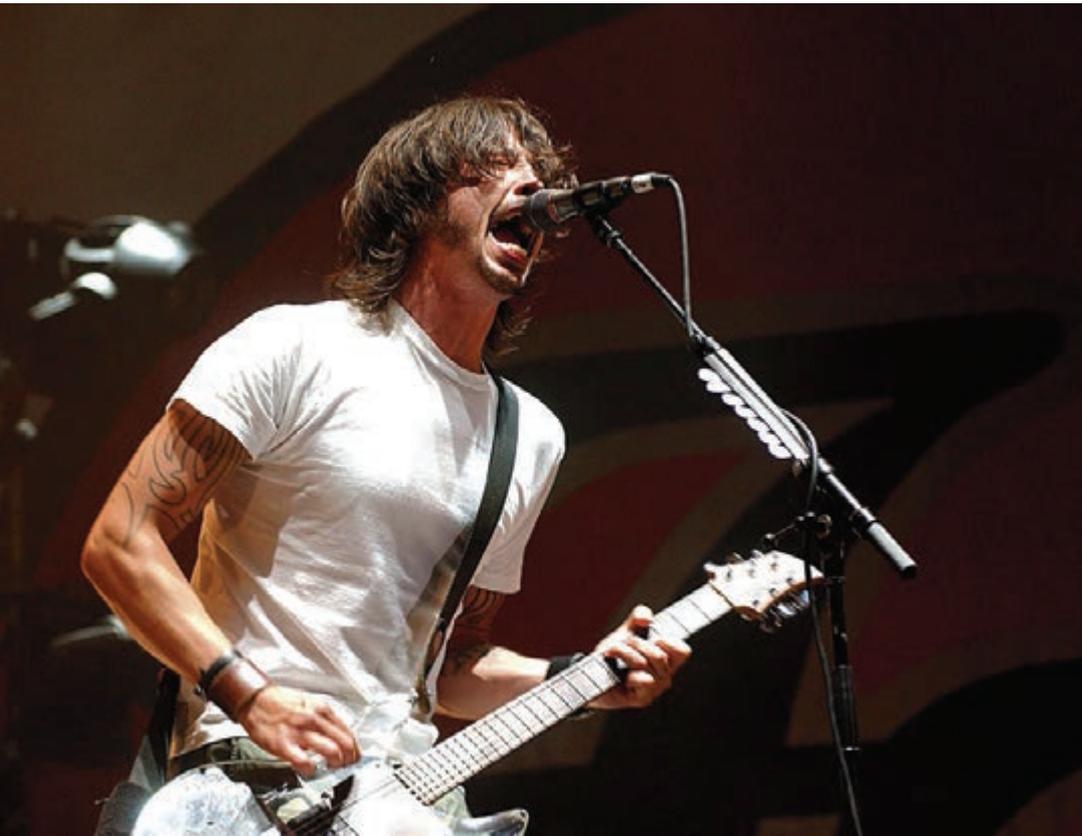


Photography by Bob King, copyright, 2016.



PROFILE  
BOB KING





“Yes, I can do that,” Glenn remembers saying, “but can I take my photographer?”

“They asked me if he had done any travel photography before. I said, ‘No, but then I haven’t done any travel writing before either. They still sent these two complete unknowns off all around Indonesia.’”

Bob adds that he may have underquoted at \$800 a week, because the client thought it was a bit low and asked, “What’s this guy like if he’s only charging \$800 a week?” Glenn shot back, “If he can photograph Freddy Mercury prancing up and down the stage, surely he can do a few mountains and trees that don’t move.”

When the pair got back, *The Good Weekend* magazine ran Glenn’s first serious travel piece along with Bob’s images.

“We hit it off from that first trip,” says Glenn. “I started to get seriously into travel writing, and this was in the day when an airline would give you another ticket – generally in the pointy end – so you could take along a photographer. This lasted for about 20 years and in that time we probably did 30 countries together.”

“Bob’s a genial gentleman and a fine photographer,” comments Glenn. “I would send stories off to magazines with his images and they would always go ‘Wow!’ Bob liked people and children, and he could photograph them. People felt

comfortable with him... with his long red hair and his smile. His images were not what everyone else in travel photography was doing. They really exemplified what was going on in the areas we were travelling through.”

“There was one other travel writer who got into Vietnam when it opened up for tourism,” Glenn recalls. “But we were really the first ones and we cleaned up. In April 1990 the Russians turned off the money tap, so they opened up for tourism as a new source of income.

“Flying up to Hanoi from Ho Chi Minh City, I remember Bob saying, ‘This is something I shouldn’t be doing. This is the old soldier in me... you never went to Hanoi. Well, you couldn’t go to Hanoi!’

“I think we climbed through the wire to get into Bob’s old army base at Nui Dat. It was an emotional experience for him and I just stood back and gave him his space. He showed me some stains on a rock and he said, ‘This is where I had my darkroom.

“He’s never been convincing as paparazzi – he’d rather let something go than lose his dignity.”

■  
Above: Foo Fighters’ Dave Grohl.  
Left top: Silverchair’s Daniel Johns.  
Left bottom: Cold Chisel.

These stains are where I used to pour out my old chemicals and, over there, see that mountain? That’s where I used to go as a forward scout. I would sit there and play The Who’s song, *I can see for miles...* and miles and miles’.

“That was a powerful thing for Bob to do. I opposed the war and marched in the moratorium so it was odd that we got on so well... he would go off every year and do the Anzac Day march. Funnily enough, though, in recent years I’ve done the march too. I used to comper concerts for the forces overseas so they invited me.”

### New Band On The Block

Bob toured with Mick Jagger and The Rolling Stones in 1988... but only for a few nights until fellow rock photographer, Tony Mott, returned and reclaimed his gig. However, he toured with AC/DC twice, Bon Jovi and many others over the years.

In 1977 he was at a little club in Parramatta, taking some portraits and in the other corner was a film crew from the ABC doing a segment on a new band called Midnight Oil.

“I’d never heard of them and they played there that night. I only took three rolls of film, but I sell a lot of those images these days.”

Bob was the only photographer in the country to photograph Barbara Streisand at her two shows each in Melbourne and Sydney.

“I got to the Cricket Ground and the stage was 20 feet off the ground. Her manager asks [Bob puts on his best American drawl] ‘Where are you going to stand, Baaarb?’ I say, ‘Down there in front of the stage and looking up.’ He said, ‘But you’ll be in the way of the audience!’ So I said, ‘I’ll crouch down on the grass.’ But she’ll see you. ‘OK, where do you want me?’ On the sound desk!”

Consequently, Bob used a 400mm lens in Sydney and had to go to a 600mm in Melbourne. As the film came out of the camera, it went straight into the PR’s pocket. He later asked the manager if he could have one or two shots for his portfolio. No was the blunt answer.

“The 80-200mm f2.8 zoom has been my stock lens since the word go,” Bob says. “I got my first one in the 1970s. I have a 1.4x converter for it which doesn’t seem to have much drop off. I also use a 24-70mm and borrow a 200-500mm zoom when it’s needed. Plus a 10.5mm fish-eye for the full stage pics. You’re there for such a short time now – three songs – and that’s been around since the late 1980s. These days there are so many shooters. Go to the Big Day Out now and you’ll see 50 or so photographers shooting the main act. A lot

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of them are bloggers. Back in the day there would have been half a dozen of us."

### Concert Notes

A rock concert is a challenging environment for photographers and Bob King has had his fair share of interesting encounters. At an Elvis Costello concert he was being pushed and jostled by audience members close to the stage. He turned around to protest and Elvis stopped the concert, thinking that it was Bob who had started the melee.

He got kicked out of a Roy Orbison concert. The tour manager asked Bob and another photographer if they wanted to get photographs of a sheriff presenting a warrant back stage. Apparently Roy still owed money to a promoter in Queensland from a previous tour.

"The door opened and out popped Roy and the manager. Flash, flash, flash, and they ran downstairs to the venue. The show started and then, half-way through the second song, we got ejected! The local tour manager thought this would be a great photo for the press, but it was Roy Orbison's manager who came down and ejected us.

"On U2's first Australian tour Bono came out onstage and his fly was undone. It took me a couple of songs to motion to him, and then he pulled it up. Later on, in the dressing room, the band came in and he made beeline for me, gave me a big hug and thanked me."

### The Book

Around six years ago Bob approached publisher New Holland about doing a book. Initially they weren't very interested, but they already published a lot of his images in the Michael Hutchence book by Richard Simkins. After the company was purchased by its then general manager, Bob was contacted again and his book project

▲ Above: Divinyl's Chrissy Amphlett. Left, clockwise from top: David Bowie, Bette Midler, Bo Diddley, Stevie Nicks, Bob Dylan.

“...Bob was at a little club in Parramatta, taking some portraits and in the other corner was a film crew from the ABC doing a segment on a new band called Midnight Oil.

got the green light. Titled *The Bob King Collection*, the book runs to over 300 pages, but this still involved a substantial edit.

"I did two culls and gave them a memory stick with 6000 images on it, and they have ended up using around 600 images. A lot of the published shots are not my favourites, but I'm happy that they have done this because it's a different eye and they've picked artists that I wouldn't.

"Initially, I was a bit disappointed about the lack of the Australian acts, but they explained that they wanted to get it out overseas and not make it too Australian. Glenn has written the words."

Glenn comments, "Bob's success, in a way, has been because he always knew where not to be, as much as where to be. He's quiet and gentle, and was never strutting or tossing himself around. People felt comfortable with him.

"John Farnham, at the peak of his powers, would walk out on the stage and the first words he would say were, 'Hello, Bob'.

"Even though he hasn't sold himself to an extent that's worked for him, I've known many a photographer who haven't lasted a year or two. They piss everybody off, argue with publicists and managers and, after a while, they don't get invited back. Well, Bob's been invited to everything for 50 years. It's been a hell of a career. The right place at the right time.

"He's never been convincing as paparazzi – he'd rather let something go than lose his dignity. At times he has been treated rather poorly by publicists – as they can do with everybody – and I would say, 'Let's go to war on this, Bob'. And Bob would reply, 'Let it go'.

"Maybe that's how you survive for 50 years in this industry."



The Bob King Collection is out now, published by New Holland and priced at \$100.