

ROCK N YOGA



Talking yoga with Mick Rock, the man who shot the seventies. *By David Holzer*

Legendary rock and roll photographer Mick Rock is not someone you'd immediately think of as a yogi.

With his shades and rocker's tousled coiffure, he still looks every inch the seventies glam rocker who only comes out at night. It even seems like he's wearing lipstick all the time. Although he's lived in and around New York since the late-70s, Rock's accent remains a splendidly louché camp drawl and very London.

Mick Rock made his name – and, yes, that is his real name – in the early seventies, taking iconic photos of David Bowie, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, Syd Barrett and Queen when they were at their most gloriously glam, outrageous, decadent and calculatedly androgynous. He went on to shoot countless rock and rollers, including punk pioneers The Ramones, the Sex Pistols and Blondie in all their torn, tattered and, in the case of Debbie Harry, sexy glory. His classic work has been exhibited in some of the world's most respected art galleries and museums, reproduced as limited edition prints and collected in sumptuous coffee table art books, including a co-signed book with Bowie just before he died. His most recent book is *Transformer*, celebrating the 45th anniversary of the Lou Reed album with Rock's classic cover, limited to 2,000 numbered copies and co-signed by Lou Reed himself.

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A long-running exhibition of Mick Rock's work at Paul Allen's Museum of Pop in Seattle runs until March 2018. After that it will tour museums and cultural centres in the USA. He also has a big exhibition at the Photo Museum Cuatro Caminos in Mexico City in 2018, the biggest and most significant photo museum in South America. This will also be a touring exhibition.

Today, Mick Rock is still going strong. He continues to be the photographer of choice for a certain kind of hip rock and roller, working with the likes of The YeahYeahYeahs,

Father John Misty, Janelle Monae and Queens of the Stone Age. In September 2017, he shot Gucci's Cruise 2018 campaign which featured 'real people' wearing the fashion brand's eccentrically colourful clothes. Although the images inevitably conjure up memories of his classic seventies work, they're also effortlessly contemporary.

For the Gucci campaign, he was asked to do 21 photographic set-ups in three days. Given that he doesn't start shooting before noon, this was a demanding schedule. But, as he explains, “in between each shot, I did a headstand and power breathing, and pumped it with some mantra. These will get me through anything and keep me regenerating.”

Fortifying altered states with yoga

Although he is routinely called 'The Man Who Shot the Seventies', he was very much a child of the sixties. So how did he get into yoga?

“It all started with Transcendental Meditation (TM) when I was at Cambridge in the late-sixties,” he says. “LSD opened up my third eye and led my generation to Eastern wisdom, and I was curious. We all were. TM was the first thing, back in 1968. You paid whatever you could afford for your mantra. I gave two English pounds. I note that they charge a lot more these days! I've used this mantra ever since and never externalised it. Very easy to use, very powerful.”

And the yoga? “I got into Hatha yoga in 1970. I'd just taken the photos for Syd

Barrett's *Madcap Laughs* – his first solo album after leaving Pink Floyd – and was experimenting with fasting and sleep deprivation – systematically disorientating my senses à la Rimbaud, if you will. Someone told me about this lady in Notting Hill Gate, London, who taught Hatha and I decided to try it. I went and immediately got a feeling from yoga. The altered states I'd gotten into through opening up my third eye with acid had become part of me, and yoga fortified all this. Since then, I've never stopped. I don't think I've ever done a photographic session without standing on my head for at least 10 minutes beforehand. A little bit of whirling also adds another flavour of awareness and wellbeing.”

His headstands are impressive. “I started doing them very quickly. I could stand in the middle of the room on my head within a month of starting Hatha. Apart from anything else, standing on my head just about every day for nearly 50 years has given me an incredibly strong heart muscle. Which may have helped save my life after my heart attacks and the bypass. Actually, when the initial parts of the documentary about me – *SHOT! The Psycho-Spiritual Mantra of Rock* – were being shot in 2012, I was waiting for a kidney transplant. It took until 2016 to complete the doc. I insisted on a lot of changes! I'm doing fine now, and I put that down to my regimen. My latest cardio and kidney checkups are totally positive.”

When you were living the rock and roll



lifestyle to the hilt, were you still doing yoga? “I was. As I said, I’ve never stopped. Even when I’d stay up for two or three days doing coke or speed and stand on my head for extended periods of time, up to an hour on occasion, yoga would bring me down, and TM would help.”

Despite the yoga, his dedication to chain smoking, doing coke, not eating and staying up for days on end caught up with him. In 1996, when he was only in his late forties, he had a series of heart attacks and quadruple bypass heart surgery. It was time to clean up his act. As he says, “Laying on the bed in hospital, realising that this was the end game to where my lifestyle of 20 years had led me, did it for me. Once you go through that level of pain, there’s no looking back.”

Recovery and Kundalini yoga

When he was recovering, he began doing gentle Hatha yoga again. A little over a year into sobriety and recovery, Lou Reed mentioned Kundalini yoga to him. He checked out Kundalini Yoga East at 873 Broadway in New York and has been practicing it every day since.

Why Kundalini? “It totally works. What

are you going to say? It’s not a bullshit rap. It’s not theoretical. You don’t have to start as a believer or be a follower of Yogi Bhaian to get the benefits, even though I do like his teachings and methodology and in truth I nowadays regard my spiritual beliefs as fundamentally Sikhism. All I really know is the Kundalini kriyas and postures, meditation, chanting and breathing techniques enable me to easily access an altered state in a non-chemical way. I just go into the Kundalini space. My brain, my being transforms. Although Kundalini is now my favourite form of practice - I do it every single day wherever I am in the world without fail - my basic belief is that all yoga practices bring great benefit. They all work in their separate ways.”

Do you go to classes regularly? “Not as much as I’d love to. I had more time when I’d blown out my career. Now I’m so much busier, it’s harder. But I still like to go. You get an added feeling. One of my teachers is a recovering alcoholic, a bit of a psychedelic freak from the seventies so we’ve got that in common. And I do believe that if you go to the yoga studio that’s most convenient for you, you’ll practice regularly. If you’ve got to go out of your way to practice, you may not



maintain momentum. Yoga is a way of life. Once a week isn’t enough.”

What about your self-practice? “I use the floor area at my home to do a 75-minute yoga routine. I start with meditation, stand on my head for about 10 minutes and then go through various postures. I finish with chanting mantras I’ve learned over the past 18 or so years I’ve been practicing Kundalini. I chant every day, including the prosperity chant ‘Har Har Har Har Gobinday’ for 11 minutes, as well as ‘Gobinday Mukanday’ which eliminates karmic blocks and past errors, balances brain hemispheres, purifies the magnetic field and brings compassion and patience. When I’m travelling, I fit in as much yoga as I can.”

And is it possible to sum up what yoga means to you after a lifetime of practicing? “I believe it’s helped my career and constantly fuelled my visual appetite. I’d say that it certainly helped save my life and, since 1996, keep me sober. I’m still an addict but I’m an alternative addict, you could say. No chemicals. Although I am addicted to massage, acupuncture, Kundalini chanting, chiropractic and light and sound machines for meditation. These are all part of my creative awareness programme. But practicing gets me through anything. It’s like a masterdrug that works on your body chemistry. Standing on my head, power breathing, whirling and all the other things I do take me to where I need to be. Back into that altered state.”

In this day and age, when yoga perhaps emphasises the shiny happy physical side of the practice a little too much, it’s a joy to hear a maverick like Mick Rock say “Yoga is a way of life. I don’t feel I’m ‘me’ until I do my practice”. Many of us fell in love with yoga because it’s a natural, non-chemical way to enter the altered state he talks about and tap into our creativity. We know where he’s coming from. 🙏

David Holzer teaches yoga for writing. Find out more about what he does at: yogawriters.org

