If All Else Fails, Make Them Jump

Neal Preston is the most assigned photographer in *People* magazine's history. I was *Us Weekly*'s photo director for 10 years. We recently sat down for a chat. Pull up a chair; this could take a while. **BY BRITTAIN STONE**

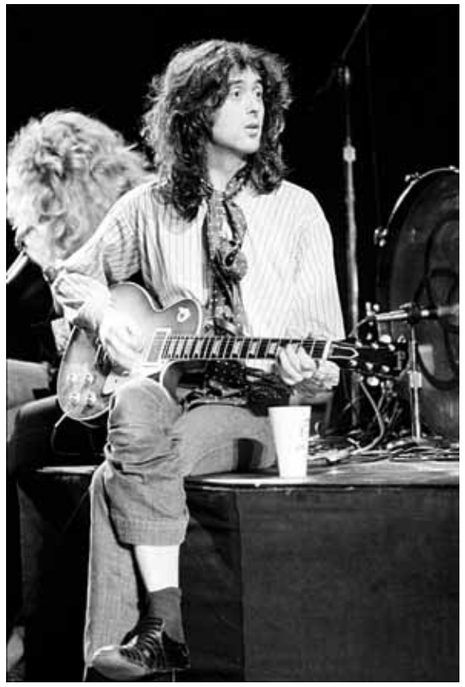
Will Smith takes a break during a taping of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* at Sunset Gowers Studios in Hollywood, 1990.

For a decade, Neal Preston and I fought on opposite sides of the cold war between *People* magazine and *Us Weekly*. When *American Photo* asked me to interview him, I jumped at the chance to compare notes with a fellow athlete from the full-contact sport of celebrity photography. Read on for tales of serendipity and sleaze, of celebrities behaving badly and of deadlines that'll cut you for looking at them sideways. And of the kind of career that, in the age of TMZ, they just don't make anymore.

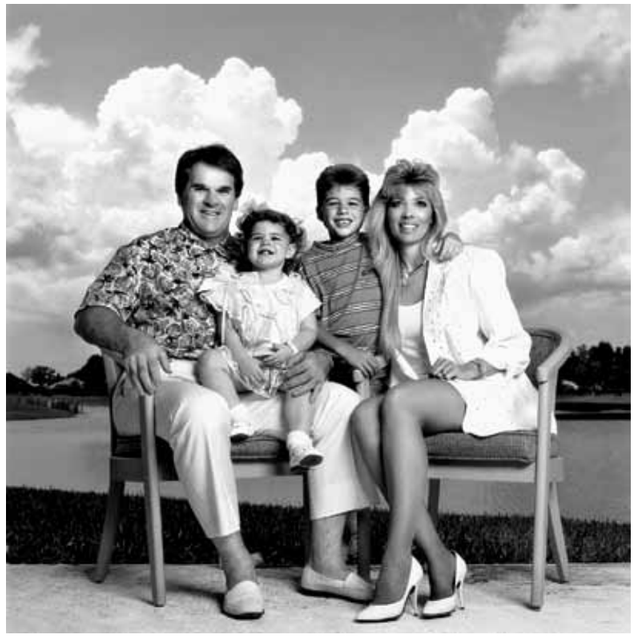
Stone: How did you get started with *People*?
Preston: In 1975 I was working as Led Zeppelin's tour photographer. The band's publicist asked me to shoot some photos of Jimmy Page for *People* magazine. It was new; I'd only seen one or two issues. I went up to Jimmy's room and shot some pictures of him—not the usual hero/rock god photos, but him looking through his closet, picking out what he was going to wear. *People* ran the story and the closer was a candid shot of Jimmy during rehearsal, sitting on Bonzo's drum riser, and his pant leg had risen up over his ankle so you could see his bare leg. I thought it was pretty cheeseball, but that was exactly what the magazine wanted. I was mortified when it came out. That was my introduction into the world of *People* magazine.
Stone: The magazine was mostly black and white at that point?
Preston: It was all black and white, apart from the cover. *People* appealed to me because it had been conceived as the natural successor to *Life* magazine. I was a big news junkie, and shooting for any Time Life publication would have been a dream come true for me. I had exclusively been shooting rock and roll, but some very fortunate and amazing things happened. I had been chasing Ken Regan, trying to get a spot at his photo agency, Camera 5—whose credit I constantly saw in the news magazines I aspired to work for—and he'd taken me on. At the time I was living in this place near Mulholland Drive with a little deck that overlooked a small canyon. Sitting on the deck one evening I noticed a bizarre circular cloud that looked like a big smoke ring someone had puffed up there. It was so weird I took a picture of it. The next day I got a phone call from Holly Holden, a West Coast picture editor at *People*, who was a good friend of Ken's. She asked if I'd photographed that weird cloud. I told her yes, and she said *Time* was looking for photos of it. Turns out it was the contrail from an ICBM missile test launch. I grabbed the roll of film and raced it over to Holly, who sent it to *Time* magazine in New York. And they ran a shot! After that Holly and I became friends, and she gave me my first *People* assignment: to shoot Bob Welch, who had been the guitar player in Fleetwood Mac before Lindsey Buckingham. We went and shot some pictures of him out at Mick Fleetwood's house. But what really made things happen for me was my relationship with MC Marden. At the time, she was the number two person in *People*'s photo department in New York under Mary Dunn. MC assigned me to photograph Stevie Nicks when her solo record came out in '81. It was a pretty magical shoot. After MC checked out the proofs she called me and said, "I can tell this girl had the best time shooting this." MC (along with Holly Holden and Maddy Miller) championed me for a lot of jobs. When Mary Dunn left, MC took over the top spot and our relationship really hit its stride.

I SAID, "I WANT TO SHOOT YOU BY CANDLELIGHT. TWO ROLLS, NO ASSISTANTS." SHE WAS JUST BUZZED ENOUGH TO SAY YES.

Stone: When I was running the photo department at *Us*, I used to tell young photographers: I'm old, you don't want to know me; you want to know my junior staff, the people assigning the small pictures. That relationship is going to be much more important to you. Get to know the people who are going to be around when I'm gone. If your work is great, I'm going to see it anyway.
Preston: After MC took over, I started doing 50, 60, 70 shoot days a year for *People*. One year I did 80. It was a perfect match: *People* wanted photographers they could count on to get the goods, who could roll with the punches and work



Left, Jimmy Page at rehearsal in Minneapolis, 1975, one of Preston's first photos in *People*. Opposite, clockwise from top: Sly Stone in a not-so *People*-like pose, Los Angeles, 1979. George Clooney and Kelly Preston, Los Angeles, 1989. Pete Rose and family, Boca Raton, FL, 1991.



well with the writers. That was huge. The picture and editorial departments back in New York didn't always agree on things, so it was extremely important that the photogs and reporters out in the field work as a team to figure out the best ways to approach each story. Athletes, rock stars, TV and movie stars, authors, regular folk, I shot it all. We did the first *People* stories on Tom Cruise, Will Smith, J. Lo, Charlize Theron, everyone.

Stone: It was a new kind of editorial photography. It wasn't about being iconic and brooding and artsy, but being accessible and humanizing. Did they give you guidelines for achieving that?

Preston: There are rules you have to follow. And they haven't changed much. The big one was the "home take." You shoot in their homes and get family members. That intimacy was part of what the magazine was all about. *People* didn't want anything that looked like a staged portrait or an album cover. If you can't get family, get significant others. If you can't get significant others, get pets. If all else fails, make them jump up in the air.

Stone: But ideally you get that kitchen shot.

Preston: Exactly. And a lot of times that was a dealbreaker for the magazine. If the subject wasn't going to allow us into their home, they damn well better give us exclusive access to something else. Some celebs refused, and those stories were almost always killed. And sometimes it would be up to me to convince a subject to let us in. I shot a piece on Shannen Doherty at the height of her bad-girl mode. I shot the cover at a studio, then we took some other photos in Orange County, but she wouldn't let us shoot in her house. After we wrapped I took her for drinks to the Rainbow Bar & Grill, which is this big rock-star hangout around the corner from her house. A few cocktails later, I looked at her and said, "I want to shoot you by candlelight, two rolls, no assistants." Apparently she was just buzzed enough to say yes, and off we went. That was a coup for the magazine. And that speaks to the power of building a relationship with the subject you're shooting. If you have a big ego or you're a hothead or you act like you're more important than they are, forget it. It's very different now, of course. This is before the publicists had all the power.

Stone: Any other rules of engagement?

Preston: There were little things like no guns, no cigarettes. More important was the guidance I'd get from MC. She had these buzz phrases that I'd keep in mind. One was "surprise the reader." Another one I still think of on every shoot day is "sometimes a photo of someone's back is far more interesting than their front." She first said that after I got a shot of Bono walking away from the camera and hadn't gotten his face. And there was one very hard rule: you had to send in the whole take from a shoot. That was a big one.

Stone: They didn't want you editing.

Preston: Absolutely not. Holding film back would get you fired immediately. I didn't have a problem with them getting all the film. But there were a few times when I'd open up the magazine and be shocked at what they decided to run. The one that really stuck in my craw was when I shot Sinead O'Connor for the 25 Most Intriguing People spread in 1990. Sinead is a tortured artist. She's not a happy-go-lucky girl. She frowned her way through the whole shoot. And you can only shoot what you're given. Two weeks later I see the issue and there's a big double-page shot of her smiling. The trouble was, it was so out of focus you could barely tell it was her. It was a burn shot—I probably shot it while I was loading the cameras.

Stone: But they needed the smile.

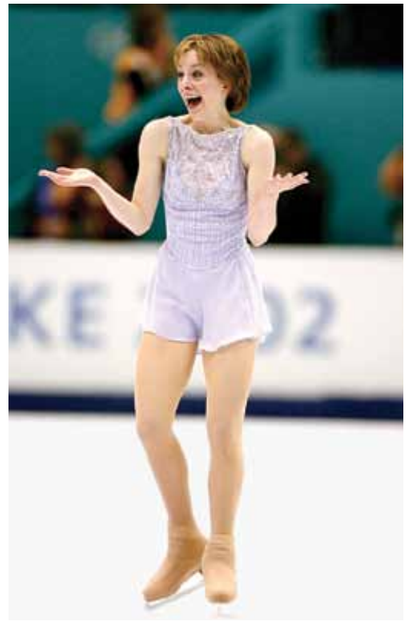
Preston: That was one where I was quite vociferous in my disagreement.

Stone: What's the craziest thing that ever happened on a shoot?

Preston: I got assigned to shoot Sly Stone during one of his his many comebacks. He's living in a small apartment on top of his manager's garage in Mandeville Canyon. I wanted to do a "magic hour" shot of him as the sun was going down. So I get to his house and I'm waiting. Sly was notorious for never being on time for anything—interviews, concerts, it didn't matter. An hour goes by, two hours, two and a half. I'm figuring it's not going to happen when one of his guys comes to me and says, "Sly's on the phone, he wants to talk to you." I take the phone and Sly starts talking, but I can tell he's right on the other side of the door I'm standing a foot away from. I can hear him through the phone in one ear and through the door in the other. He says, "Hey man, it's Sly. I'll be ready in ten minutes." I managed to keep a straight face. Finally he comes out of his room, dressed in army fatigues top to bottom, and says, "OK, where do you want to shoot?" I said, "I've got this spot picked out up on Mulholland." He says, "No problem, man, but I gotta do one little errand first. We'll take your car. It's right around the corner." We end up driving from Mandeville Canyon to the corner of La Brea and Washington, at least 12 miles. While we're on the freeway, he whips out a case and starts smoking crack in my car.

Stone: Oh dear.

Preston: We end up going to the house of some freaky ex-marine, who insists he has to face the window of any room he's in. They both start just smoking a huge amount of crack. And Sly's got this big knife, he's playacting and taking little nicks out of his neck. I shot a roll of him that day just to humor him. It took three shoot days to do that story, and I think I only shot seven rolls the whole time. But we got the picture and the magazine loved it. As a thank you after the piece ran, Sly invited me and my girlfriend and the writer, David Sheff, and his wife to dinner at a super-expensive restaurant. We show up and... no Sly. We wait over an hour and finally order food because we're



Clockwise from top left: Frank Zappa at home with Bird Reynolds, Hollywood Hills, 1979. The fateful ICBM contrail, Hollywood Hills. Stevie Nicks in her kitchen, Venice, CA, 1981. Traci Lords in her front yard, Sherman Oaks, CA, 1993. Sarah Hughes looks at her coach seconds after completing her gold medal-winning routine at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, 2002. Jon Bon Jovi shooting the video for "Blaze of Glory," Moab, UT, 1990.

starving. Sly shows up two hours late, orders three triple White Russians, and downs them all in about 30 seconds. That's nine shots of vodka and nine shots of Kahlúa. After about a minute of small talk, he says, "I've got to run to the restroom." And that's the last we ever saw of him.

Stone: I imagine you traveled a lot for the mag.

Preston: Constantly. But it was second nature to me. I traveled a lot as a kid because of my dad's job. *People* knew I would leave town at the drop of a hat. Go to Japan with Michael Jackson? OK. Go to London and shoot George Michael? No problem. Go to Sacramento and shoot a raisin farmer? I'm on it.

Stone: With 10 cases of equipment.

Preston: The equipment wasn't the issue; it was pretty much packed at all times. The real stress came from the magazine's weekly schedule. Making the deadlines was sacrosanct. After every shoot I'd have to get the raw film on the next plane to New York. A courier would pick the film up at JFK and get it to the Time Life lab. By far my most important piece of equipment was my copy of the O.A.G. [Official Airline Guide] Pocket Flight Guide, which lists flight schedules around the world.

Stone: We did a lot of overnight courier planes too. It was almost acrobatic back then. You're not just chasing the story and getting the work done; you're physically getting the film where it needs to go.

Preston: When Prince opened his *Purple Rain* tour in Detroit, the magazine was closing the next day, so they booked a Learjet solely to bring the film to New York. If they wanted a piece bad enough and the deadline was close, that's what they would do.

Stone: It's just insane how much energy went into moving photos around the country back then.

Preston: When Michael Jackson was on the *Bad* tour in Tokyo, *People* sent me and writer Todd Gold to do a cover. I had proposed shooting Michael in the Ginza at night with all the crazy colored neon lights in the background, and he had agreed. Todd and I took a cab to the street corner I'd chosen, and it's just normal people walking around. It's perfect. A van pulls up, right on time, and Michael gets out. I'm about to start shooting when thousands of fans come pouring out of a subway station like zombies in a bad horror flick. It was pandemonium, and we couldn't get the photo we wanted. Michael wouldn't do a face-to-face interview either. They told Todd to write questions on a piece of paper and Michael would answer them. A day later Todd knocks on my door, shaking. "Look at this." Michael had hand-written this unbelievable Rorschach test of a letter saying "I've been bleeding for a long time now," and "I was sent forth for the world for the children." It was surreal. Todd faxed it to New York and they wanted to reprint it on the cover, but they needed the original. So they put me on the next Tokyo–New York plane with the letter and my film so I could hand-deliver it all to MC. They weren't taking any chances.

Stone: Since the '90s and the '00s, there's been a constant wail about lack of access and how controlled everything is. Your photos are a reminder that it wasn't always this way. In particular, shoot negotiations seem to have gotten a lot more complicated. They want to negotiate for what photographer we're going to use; you even end up battling it out over who's going to do hair and makeup. They want to control everything.

Preston: When I started working for *People*, they would never allow any money to be spent on hair,

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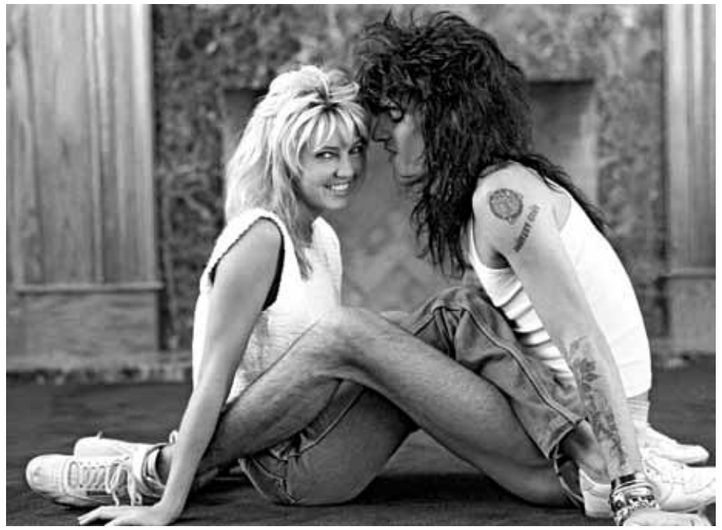
> "THE ORIGINAL IDEA OF *PEOPLE* WAS THAT IT WASN'T A GLAMOUR MAGAZINE. IT WAS A REALITY MAGAZINE."



Below: Heather Locklear and Tommy Lee, San Fernando Valley, CA, 1986. Above, from top: Bono's back, Zuma Beach, Mailbu, CA, 1985; Michael Jackson after kicking off his *Bad* world tour in Tokyo, Japan, 1987. Opposite: Elizabeth Taylor and Stevie Wonder at the Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., 1986.

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makeup, wardrobe, styling. That bit us in the butt many times, we'd get to a girl's house and everything in her closet would be black.

Stone: The one thing you can't shoot.

Preston: Exactly. And the original idea of *People* was that it wasn't a glamour magazine. It was a reality magazine. We wanted to photograph people in their natural habitat.

Stone: The negotiations always push you toward glamour. It's maddening. You can easily lose control of the whole thing. A $10,000 picture becomes a $25,000 picture because of course you need a DJ, and we can only have food from this particular caterer, and we have to shoot at Pier 59.

Preston: And the hypocrisy is that when you shoot a AAA-level movie star now, these publicists tell you what to do, where to do it, how to do it and how you can use the pictures after they run. They're ridiculous agreements, outright copyright grabs. Then 10 minutes later they trot the same celebrity out at an award show and there's 200 paparazzi shooting them picking their nose.

Stone: And a lot of paparazzi don't sign those agreements, so the center of the celebrity photo market has gravitated toward them. Which has led to celebrities' being hounded all the time.

Preston: Sooner or later, someone in L.A. is going to get run over and killed by one of these guys.

Marvin Gaye at home in Los Angeles, from one of his last major photo shoots, 1982.

Left: Shannen Doherty by candlelight at home in West Hollywood, CA, 1993: two rolls, no assistants. Opposite: Axl Rose and then-wife Erin Everly, at their condo in West Hollywood, 1990.

They're driving 75 miles an hour down Sunset. This one guy was driving a big black Suburban, and he's doing about 55 on Beverly Drive and passes me on the right so close you couldn't have blown smoke between us. Then he whips into a handicap parking spot, jumps out, runs around his car, reaches into the passenger seat. I'm sure he's an undercover cop and he's about to pull out an Uzi or a Glock. But no, he comes up with a camera with a big zoom and starts sprinting up the street. Leaves his car running in a handicap spot because Kim Kardashian is at Jamba Juice.

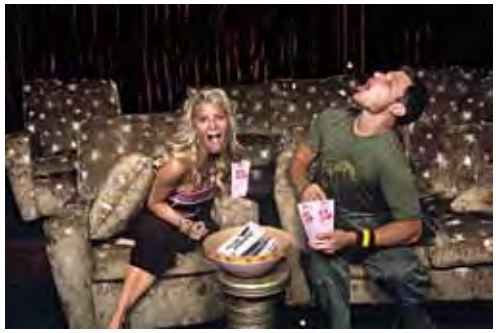
Stone: But as things got more controlled, that's where the heat went. And consumers are used to getting that kind of information all the time. Forget the weekly cycle; it's daily, hourly, minute to minute. For years I waited for the point where the fascination would let up, where readers would start to get a little jaded to it, but it's been the opposite. Getting more didn't make consumers jaded, it made them hungrier.

Preston: Hey, if God ordained that pictures of marbles would be as valuable as pictures of Brad Pitt, these guys would be at Toys "R" Us. They're not photographers any more than my dog is.

Stone: Do you think the mass market end of celebrity photography is crowding out high-end work?

Preston: I think calling it photography is being kind. It creates a pandemonium upon itself. It's a voracious beast that keeps eating away at whatever

good will celebrities have left.
Stone: It does seem like celebrity photography has gone from scandalous and rare pictures to a daily dose of celebrities shopping, walking down the street and getting coffee. There's been this tremendous push toward the mundane. But in a strange way, it's what *People* magazine used to do—take us inside celebrities' lives.
Preston: Yeah, but they're not



Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey in their screening room at home in Calabasas, CA, 2003.

interesting photos. They're not surprising the reader. They're boring.
Stone: You might think they're boring, but people want them. Celebrities have become part of their daily lives and identity.
Preston: But it's completely superficial.
Stone: That's what's so interesting about it.
Preston: There's nothing interesting about Jennifer Love Hewitt with her hair in a pony tail and big sunglasses, in a T-shirt and jeans coming out of a Starbucks. Those photos don't tell any sort of story at all. Zero.
Stone: I think there's a fascination with that mundanity that sometimes supersedes the beautifully made image of Beyoncé. It's doing something different. It allows people to identify with the celebrity. I don't endorse or not endorse it, it's just a fact of our culture. These photos wouldn't be worth so much if they weren't desired.
Preston: Photographically, they do nothing to advance our art. All these paparazzi are hoping for is the big photo, the "get" photo. Anna Nicole on the gurney. Justin Bieber making out with someone. That's why they are as aggressive as they are.
Stone: Sure. But not all paparazzi are bottom-feeders. I've worked with a lot of really talented, motivated guys. That said, paparazzi agencies profit from scandal, so they tend to chase it. But let's be fair, when a big celebrity dies, you instantly make a bundle on syndication, right? Isn't that making money off tragedy?
Preston: In 28 years shooting for *People*, not once did I pick a story based on potential syndication. I've spent a lifetime building this archive, entirely with the consent of the people I'm shooting. I had the opportunity to do these shoots because I worked hard and was respectful. And there are photos in my archive that I won't sell, because it wouldn't be right. When celebrities die, people react, and photos help them remember that person and process that emotion. When Michael Jackson died, you could cut to a live camera in Nairobi and people were bawling their eyes out. I'd like to think that my photos make people happier rather than sadder in those moments. I've always said that everyone in my files is going to die; it's just a matter of if I beat them to it. **AP**

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