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NEW YORKER

THE STORIES BEHIND BRIAN GRIFFIN'S PORTRAITS OF SEVENTIES  
AND EIGHTIES ROCK STARS

By Hua Hsu, October 24, 2017



In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, the British photographer Brian Griffin became a sought-after star in two seemingly disparate fields: business and rock music. His style suited both clienteles well. His portraits were heavy on contrast, all murky shadows and overwhelming columns of light, strange props, surreal situations, and the stoic, unfazed look on a subject's face. He brought a bit of whimsy to management journals and corporate brochures, rendering stoic, Thatcher-era captains of industry as characters in a noir film. The rest of Griffin's time was occupied by a different challenge: how to turn seemingly mythological figures, like Elvis Costello or Iggy Pop, back into everyday people.

"Pop" collects Griffin's innovative work for music magazines and record labels from the late seventies through the mid-eighties. The punk explosion had shown the music business that experimentation and rebellion could be profitable, so it was a fruitful time for a young photographer to be shooting musicians. While the book is filled with familiar stars, like Devo, the Clash, and Kate Bush, it is also a story of Griffin's early-career resourcefulness. He wasn't quite sure what he was doing, so he experimented freely with lighting and exposures, what people would do when given simple props, how they looked raising their hands at unnatural angles or staring off just past the camera. Sometimes, this meant not even focussing on a star's face: the album cover for Joe Jackson's "Look Sharp," for example, just features a shaft of light

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illuminating the singer's famed, white winkle-picker shoes. Jackson, who would have preferred a photo of his face, never worked with Griffin again, despite the album's huge success.

Griffin's tricks gave his images a spooky, often surreal vibe. (And sometimes, he reveals, these were just tricks for helping a boring, up-and-coming band project icon-ready confidence.) As someone who has spent hours staring at album covers, I was fascinated to hear Griffin's stories of what was happening just outside the frame. Iggy Pop tried to intimidate him by bringing a bucket, putting it at Griffin's feet, pulling out his penis and urinating into it. Siouxsie Sioux never said a word to him throughout their entire session. While shooting Sarah Brightman, Griffin remembers that they kept getting interrupted: "We had to keep stopping as Andrew Lloyd Webber kept ringing up because he was in love with her." There's a photo of the Queen guitarist Brian May, and he's looking away from the camera. Instead of showing his face, the portrait is shot from the side, a glorious poof of curly hair exploding from his slouched frame. It looks phallic, which was the intention. "I asked him to turn his head away from me, and there it was, a penis! So I based that shot on a penis, which I always thought guitars, especially lead guitars, were an extension of anyway," Griffin says.

Griffin's most famous photo ended up bridging the divide between the working world and rock music. His cover for Depeche Mode's album "A Broken Frame," from 1982, shows a woman cutting grain in an East Anglian field. Having grown up in the Black Country, in the dying days of industrial England, Griffin never lost his admiration for the toiling classes. The image for "A Broken Frame" is meant to resemble a romantic painting, a mixture of man-made lighting, endless fields, and the foreboding, gray clouds. At the center of it all: an anonymous woman, scythe held against the sky, who seems more heroic than any rock star or stock trader.