



# HISTORY MAKER

Harry Benson HonFRPS has captured some of the most memorable images of modern times... but it could all have been so different, discovers Damien Love

**ANDY WARHOL  
AND BIANCA  
JAGGER**  
The Factory, New  
York City, 1977

'I was doing a story on Bianca for *Life*, and we went to the Factory for lunch. I never did see

the pictures that Warhol took – I'd love to. I don't know if I'm in them. Mind you, he did take an awful lot of shit. But this never happened any other time in my life, I've never

had two negatives like this: in one, Andy's in focus and Bianca's out of focus; in the next, it's swapped. I only noticed this a few years ago. I couldn't repeat that in 100 years.'



**JACK NICHOLSON  
Montana, 1975**

'He was making *The Missouri Breaks*, with Marlon Brando. This was a day off, going out for lunch. I'm on the car's back seat, the lighting was fine, and I just kept taking pictures. Nicholson's a

clever man: he went through his repertoire of expressions: the teeth, the smile, the sneer. He's giving me my job. Any one of them I could use singly as a portrait, but then I looked and thought: Nine Jacks!

**T**o get as close as you can,' says Harry Benson. 'That's the business we're in. But, at the same time, I only get close so far with people. I don't like to get too chummy. So, if they stepped out of line, I would take the picture – like, whoever said I was a friend? I'm there to do a job.'

This combination of spur-of-the-moment intimacy and critical distance is one of the defining qualities of Benson's photography, along with a master's eye for images that tell a

story. His best work offers the chance to experience a privileged moment, even if – as in his harrowing sequence depicting the assassination of Robert F Kennedy – it is a moment of horror.

Working for publications ranging from *Life* to *Vanity Fair*, Benson's skill got him close to many of the most significant figures of the past seven decades – shapers of world politics and world culture. Now 86, and made an Honorary Society Fellow in 2009, he has photographed every US president since Eisenhower, and celebrities from the young Beatles to Amy Winehouse.

Meanwhile, his photojournalist's nose found him on the ground at history's

flashpoints: marching with Martin Luther King; invited on IRA manoeuvres; documenting conflicts in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

It's all a long way from where he began, on the streets of Glasgow, where he was born in 1929. He bought his first box camera at 15 and started teaching himself. 'But I wasn't putting everything into it,' he says. 'I'd rather have played football for Rangers; I'd have given my soul to play for them.'

Following RAF service – 'I tried to join the camp photographic club; they turned me down' – he worked as a wedding photographer in small-town Scotland, an experience he still



**FACT FILE**  
Glasgow-born photojournalist Harry Benson HonFRPS has won numerous prestigious awards, and his work continues to be widely exhibited and published

**BEATLES'  
PILLOW FIGHT  
George V Hotel,  
Paris, 1964**

'I was working at *The Daily Express* and they phoned and said, "We'd like you to go to Paris with The Beatles tomorrow." I talked them out of it, because I was going to Uganda for a big story. Five minutes later, they rang back:

"The editor says you're going to Paris." But when they started playing the first Paris gig – "Close your eyes and I'll kiss you..." – I thought, "Christ, I'm on the right story." This was in their room, three in the morning. Brian Epstein comes in and says: "We're No.1 in America." They were very happy.

Paul had mentioned two nights before they'd had a pillow fight, and I thought, that's a good picture. But when I suggested it, John said: "No. We've got to be more mature; it's childish." And they all agreed. Then Paul was lying drinking brandy, and John hits him on the head with a pillow. That started it off!





**TEAR-GASSING OF CIVIL RIGHTS MARCHERS (LEFT)**  
Canton, Mississippi, 1966

'I like the action in this. Other pictures I've taken of tear-gassing have been from a distance; here, I was in the middle of it. Martin Luther King is somewhere in that group. The highway patrol are cracking heads; the guy on the right just got smashed in the face. I started running, a young patrolman had his baton up, but he didn't hit me, just gave me a slap on the ass. Next morning, I told an FBI man: "Y'know, these cops aren't all bad." He said: "Don't kid yourself. He knew you're an alien. You're British. If he touches you, that brings us into it. Otherwise, you'd have had your head bandaged right now."



**THE KNESSET (LEFT)**  
Israel, 1974

'The mural is [by Marc] Chagall: Moses with the Ten Commandments. This was only a few months before Nixon came out of office. You could feel it coming, the news was getting worse by the day. I liked Nixon. He let me in to San Clemente after he got kicked out of office and was in his obscurity in California. It's hard to be critical of someone that allows you to do your job.'

mentions as vital in honing his craft. 'Weddings: you take it very seriously. I used a V-N, a press camera, a plate camera, and had to become used to guessing distances on the spot. I don't look down on wedding photographers; it's a rough, tough job.'

All the while, he was trying to break into newspaper photography. He could not get a job with any of the Glasgow papers – 'I think because I was in a couple of fights' – but a four-year stint on the regional title *The Hamilton Advertiser*, along with regular trips south to punt himself around Fleet Street's picture desks, finally led to

work with *The Daily Sketch*. Moving to London in the early 1950s, he joined *The Daily Express* under its formidable owner Lord Beaverbrook, Churchill's right-hand man during the Second World War. Benson doesn't name other photographers as inspirations, but cites Beaverbrook as a major influence.

'I'll tell you one reason why: because I used to dress properly, and still do. With Lord Beaverbrook, you had to. And this is why I was able to get close in the White House. Photographers nowadays turn up as if they're here to fix the plumbing. I think: "I wouldn't let you in my house, let alone the



**MRS ROBERT KENNEDY**  
Los Angeles, 1968

'I was next to Bobby when he was shot. He was three yards in front of me, and that was Ethel screaming to let him have some air. We were walking through the kitchens of the Ambassador Hotel. I took this standing on a hot plate; someone threw me off. I landed on the floor about 15 inches from Bobby's head, which was gushing blood. I didn't back down. I couldn't turn my back on this. I knew Bobby was gone. I photographed it, I didn't stop. Someone I knew, I liked. I'm doing him at the worst time of his life: photographing his death. But I was a news photographer. I'd have felt worse if I hadn't done it. And I know, when I meet Bobby again, wherever it is, he'll understand.'

**PRESIDENTS  
JOHN F KENNEDY  
AND CHARLES  
DE GAULLE  
(BELOW)**

Paris, 1961  
'I was on the

Champs-Élysées,  
running towards the  
Arc de Triomphe,  
where Kennedy  
was due to lay a  
wreath. In a swish,  
they pass: Kennedy

in an open car with  
De Gaulle. I like the  
movement in it.  
It's an instant,  
but a photograph  
of an instant has  
to make sense.'



**MIA FARROW  
AND FRANK  
SINATRA (ABOVE)  
Truman Capote's  
Black and White  
Ball, New York  
City, 1966**

'They still say it  
was the greatest  
party New York  
has ever seen.

Everybody who  
was anybody  
went. People that  
weren't invited  
actually moved  
out of town.  
I knew Capote  
and he let  
me photograph,  
although that didn't  
worry me, because

I'd gatecrashed  
before. Sinatra  
turns up with the  
mask on, and  
somebody in the  
crowd shouted:  
"Hey, it's Frankie  
Batman!" Oh, he  
was pissed off.  
I was in black tie  
myself, of course.'

**SIR WINSTON  
CHURCHILL  
(RIGHT)**

Harrow School,  
England, 1964

'I photographed  
Churchill a few  
times on Fleet  
Street, but this is  
my favourite. He  
was visiting his old  
school. They were  
singing the school  
song, and put in a  
new verse for him.  
The pupils lined up,  
and I thought, "I  
hope he comes  
closer to them as  
the kids would give  
me an energy I can't  
get with him alone."  
This was [taken  
with] a wide-angled  
Rolleiflex – greatest  
camera ever.'



White House." I'm not joking. Dressing properly was like having another camera, another asset.'

It was while on the *Express* that he went, reluctantly, to Paris to photograph The Beatles, capturing the group as they transformed into a world phenomenon. It changed his life too. Travelling with the mop-tops on

their epochal 1964 trip to the USA, he adopted New York City as his home.

In selecting his best shots, Benson has sought to highlight the kind of photography that has meant most to him. 'Sure, I could show you work I've done in a studio; God knows I did lots of studio work, hundreds of covers for *People*

magazine. But there's no life there. It's going nowhere.

'None of the pictures I've picked was posed. I want people to be what they think they are, not what I think they are. What's happening is happening; it's not trick photography. It's a glimpse, and gone forever: that's what my photography is.'