



## NORMAN SEEFF

Our exclusive chat with the photographer behind some of rock 'n' roll's most iconic images.

Text by STACY LEE KONG

**BACKGROUND:** Norman Seeff grew up in South Africa and embarked on two very different careers before he even considered photography. First, at 17, he was drafted to play for the country's national soccer team. Despite thinking he'd move to the U.K. and play for Arsenal, he quickly realized he didn't want to be a pro athlete. Cue a second career as an emergency room doctor in Apartheid-era Soweto, where he specialized in developing new protocols for the treatment of traumatic shock. It was both fulfilling and very sad, he says. After three years, political circumstances were such that he felt he needed to leave South Africa, so, in 1968, he bought a one-way ticket to New York, where his third career, as an artist, took off.

**HIS WORK:** Best known for his iconic photos of superstars like Ray Charles, Cher, The Rolling Stones, the Jacksons and Joni Mitchell, Seeff almost always shoots in black and white, which gives his photos a deeply personal feel — even the most polished images foster a strong sense of connection between audience and subject.

**WHY WE LOVE IT:** Edgy, raw and intimate, Seeff's photos shine in minimal spaces and add grit to trad ones. A black and white palette gives them a graphic, eye-catching quality — and of course the subject matter adds a frisson of cool, too. *Through Elle.*



In this contemporary space, Seeff's edgy rock photography is a graphic counterpoint to relaxed furniture, like a tuxedo sofa with loose cushions and a cosy slipcovered chair. Layered lighting supports the collected feel of the space, while a leather and wood bench is a sleek, modern addition. *Bel Air Sequence print by Norman Seeff, Edison lounge chair, Gregoire sofa, Ely bench, Duke slipcovered chair, Calvin Klein end table (left), Ralph Lauren end table, Dover table lamp (left), Makis floor lamp, Elle.*

Photography by Ryan Emberley (portrait)/courtesy of Elle (room)



Joni Mitchell, shot in 1975 for the cover of her album *Hejira*.



Mick Jagger, during a 1972 shoot in L.A.

**"I WAS VERY SURPRISED AT HOW ORGANIZED, DISCIPLINED AND DARING THE REAL ARTISTS ARE"**



Perhaps Seeff's most iconic photo, this shot of Ray Charles was taken in 1985 at one of the photographer's famous open studio sessions in L.A.

## Q+A

**H&H:** How did you get your start as a photographer?

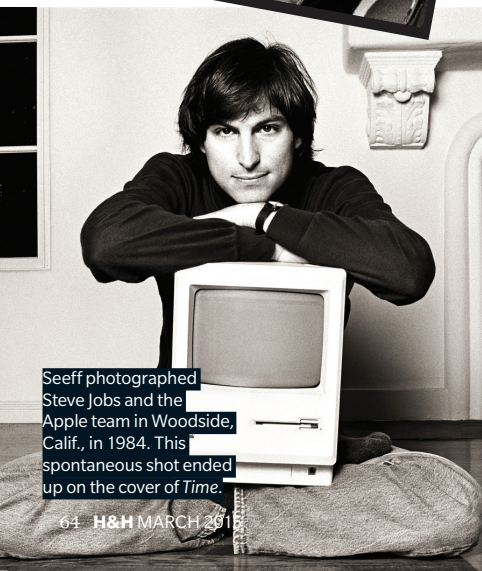
**NORMAN SEEFF:** When I arrived in New York, I couldn't practise medicine — I didn't have my American certification. But I had a little camera with me and I started walking the streets and finding interesting people. I was also hanging out at this bar downtown called Max's Kansas City that was a hub for counterculture. I started meeting people like Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, Johnny Winter and Andy Warhol. I was introduced to Bob Cato, who was a renowned graphic designer in the world of album covers, and former vice president of creative services at Columbia Records. I didn't even know there was a "music business." He was impressed with my shots of Smith, Mapplethorpe and the others, so he hired me to shoot the liner-note photos for The Band's *Stage Fright* album — one of which became a poster that quickly became a collector's item. And so, within 1½ years, I became a rock photographer.

**H&H:** Have you had any hard-to-work-with subjects?

**NS:** The truth is when you work with great artists what you find is the exact opposite of frivolity. They work incredibly hard, they explore uncertainty and doubt and a lot of scary places with a lot of courage. I'm talking about the ones that are real. Mick Jagger is incredibly organized and incredibly responsible ... although the session started at midnight. He arrived responsibly at midnight.

**H&H:** Do you have a favourite photo shoot?

**NS:** Ultimately, every session was a learning process. But working with Tina Turner was like working with a nuclear reactor. Ray Charles was another great one. He was so delighted and enchanted by the wonder of music and the wonder of what he did, he just wanted to share it. We were having this amazing conversation during our 1985 session, and he said, "My little thing is that I just share my music with the people." And I'm going, "Your *little* thing?" CONTINUED ON PAGE 146



Seeff photographed Steve Jobs and the Apple team in Woodside, Calif., in 1984. This spontaneous shot ended up on the cover of *Time*.

# APRIL

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Photography by Matthew Williams

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## ARTIST FILE

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John Belushi, 1981.

**H&H:** *What's the key to a great portrait?*

**NS:** What I've learned is if I want to create a very powerful image of a person I have to have an authentic connection with that person. That was hard at first, because I was embarrassed about how I was feeling, coming out of the macho world of Apartheid-era South Africa, where it was humiliating to admit fear. So for me, the process is not so much about taking photographs; what I'm doing is being emotionally real. Then documenting the experience.

**H&H:** *What was it like to go from Apartheid-era South Africa to New York's rock scene?*

**NS:** I was going through a hard time, because I was walking the streets of New York doing all this frivolous snapping when I might otherwise have been in Africa with my life on the line. But when I was there, I felt powerless to bring about change. I'd see people come into the hospital in a terrible state and I would fix them up, and then two weeks later the same person would be back. Photography made me realize change happens through creative thinking.

**H&H:** *What's the most important thing you've learned about creativity?*

**NS:** That there's a process to it, and fear is a part of that. At first, I thought being scared meant I wasn't a good artist. But I've worked with artists and innovators from all sorts of disciplines who all overcame fear. I realized that if you're not scared, you're probably not being innovative or going into the unknown. Being scared is, in fact, an essential state. **H&H**

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