

Left: The Beatles,  
Hotel George V,  
Paris, 1964.  
Right: Benson in  
1963 with his Fleet  
Street mentor,  
British journalist  
Lord Beaverbrook,  
owner of London's  
*Daily Express*.

# BENSON'S BEAT

Harry Benson has frolicked with the Beatles, faced presidents, and witnessed assassinations. After 50 years, he's still out for just one thing: a good photograph. By Russell Hart



LADY BEAVERBROOK

**H**arry Benson has a reputation, and he knows it. "I've been a big-mouth all my life, and kind of arrogant in the way I worked," says the 71-year-old photographer, who has photographed celebrities for *Vanity Fair* and hard-hitting news stories for *Life* in his uniquely varied career. "But I've always basically just tried to get the best picture. I've never thought photography was a team sport."

In fact, the ever-candid Benson is surprisingly hard on himself. He wonders aloud, in his lilting Scottish accent, if his work is any good at all. He says that his iconic 1964 photograph of the Beatles having a pillow fight, which hangs on the wall of his Manhattan apartment, is "the only picture I can live with." And he freely admits to the killer instincts that have served him so well since his formative years as a photographer for London's Fleet Street tabloids. "When I'm photographing people, the nicer they are to me, the more predatory I become," he says. Yet Benson is never cruel. "I don't take mean pictures," he quickly adds.

What Benson does take are deeply revealing pictures, or, at the very least, pictures that catch his subjects off guard. How does he accomplish this with such consistency? Movement is key. "I'm always on the lookout for rigor mortis," says Benson. "You've got to keep the subject moving." That philosophy colors Benson's attitude about the state of the art. "The problem with photography now is that it's absolutely static," he complains. "It's all about lighting and composition and technique."

A selection of Benson's work has been gathered in a new retrospective book, *Harry Benson: Fifty Years in Pictures* (Abrams, \$50), and in an accompanying show at New York City's Staley-Wise Gallery that runs from November 2 through December 1. On the following pages, the photographer tells the stories behind some of his best work—from his coverage of the assassination of Robert Kennedy to his paparazzi shot of the notoriously camera-shy movie legend Greta Garbo, which is published here for the first time.



**Beatles Pillow Fight, Hotel George V, Paris, 1964** (previous spread) "I was on tour with the Beatles when they got a cable saying "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was number one on the U.S. charts. They were elated with the news, because it meant they'd be going to America to perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I'd seen them have pillow fights before and when I suggested it, they all said it was a silly idea. Then John sneaked up and hit Paul in the head and the fun began. I was using a Rolleiflex with a little bounce flash. This is my favorite picture. It meant I'd be coming to the U.S. with the Beatles. "The reason the Beatles became so famous, apart from their music being so great, was that anybody could get to them. If there were 50 journalists waiting to see them, everyone would get five minutes. That doesn't happen anymore."

**IRA Soldiers, Northern Ireland, 1985** (below) "We'd arranged with Sinn Fein to do some photographs of the Irish Republican Army for *Life* magazine. When I met them in Belfast, they blindfolded me and took me to a safehouse. Then I went with them on maneuvers. A couple of times they stopped people on the street, waving their guns around. I was there because the IRA wanted me there, of course, but the situation could have turned nasty very quickly. My first instinct was to get the hell out: I wanted to photograph for *Life*; I didn't want to die for it. One soldier put on a mask of Prince Charles. I asked what they would have done had the real prince been there, and they all drew their guns and pointed them at the head of the man in the mask. When I was back in New York, I got a phone call from the British embassy. They'd seen the pictures

in the magazine, and one of their security people wanted to come up and talk to me about what I remembered, especially what guns they had. I said, 'You must be out of your head. They'll kill me.' "I've yet to be in a difficult story where at some moment it doesn't break in your favor. Opportunity comes along like an express train in photography, bang, and you've got to catch it. You've got to be paying attention. But to make those opportunities happen, you have to work hard. If you work hard, you're more inclined to get lucky. "I think photographers who go straight to the studio and do commercial work regret it in the end. Because when they had all the energy and all the love of the game, they should have been out and about, photographing uncomfortable things. But they were chasing money instead of pictures.



© HARRY BENSON (3)



**Robert F. Kennedy Assassination, Ambassador Hotel, Los Angeles, 1968**

"I hadn't planned to cover Bobby's victory speech in the California primary, but something told me not to miss it. After he'd finished talking, Bobby started to work his way toward the kitchen exit. I followed, and as I neared the kitchen door I heard a horrifying scream.

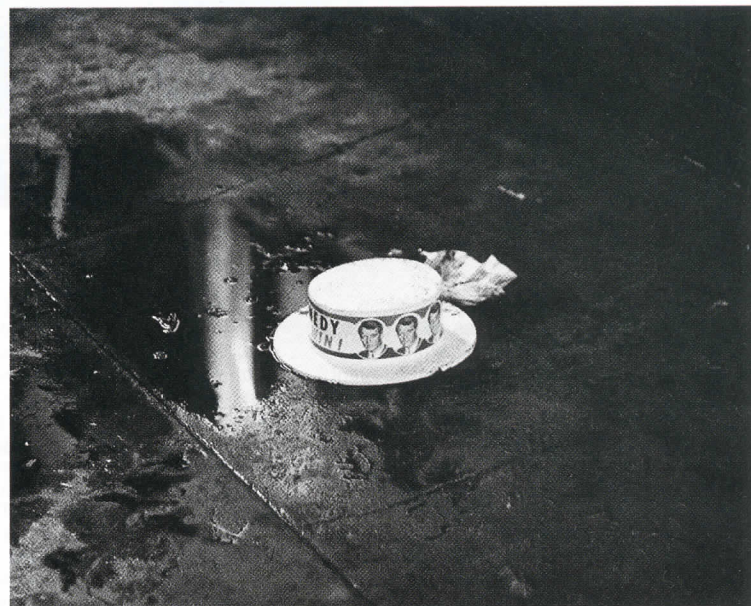
"There's something about violence—you can feel it—and Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated just three months before. So I knew Bobby had been shot. I kept taking pictures, telling myself, 'This is for history; mess up tomorrow, don't mess up today.'

"People were screaming and crying, beating their heads against the wall, yelling 'f--- this country—not again, not again.' I was moving in and out like a rat, stuffing the exposed rolls of film into my socks so the police wouldn't find them and take them away. The Kennedy people were punching and hitting me. I saw

a commotion going on to my left, and it was Sirhan Sirhan being grabbed by Rosey Grier and George Plimpton, but I stayed with Bobby, who was lying on the floor with blood coming out of the back of his head. Bobby was the center. When it was all over and he'd been taken away, a young woman placed her straw campaign hat beside the pool of blood.

"When you're in a situation like that, it's never three cheers for the photographer. After I had transmitted my pictures to the *Daily Express*, and I knew that Bobby was dead or close to it, I wandered around for a while feeling sort of numb. I was shaken but not shattered.

"People have asked me, 'How could you keep taking pictures?' But I kept telling myself that Bobby would understand my doing this, doing my job. And the strange thing is, when I'm in dangerous or life-threatening situations, I find I come out feeling that I'm a stronger character, morally and emotionally."





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**Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Washington, D.C., 1991** "I drove straight to Thomas's house after an all-night flight from L.A. to photograph him for *People*. Thomas had just been confirmed to the Supreme Court after grueling confirmation hearings, and when I arrived he was about 20 yards away, speaking to neighbors. That was a stroke of luck, because it let me get chummy with his wife, who answered the door. When Thomas came back in, she introduced me to him, and it changed the whole feeling of the encounter.

I quickly put them in different situations, one after another, making small talk about how they should go off on holiday to Scotland now that the hearings were all over. It's harmless but disarming. I got pictures of them kissing and hugging while Thomas complained about all the stuff he'd had to read in preparation for the hearings. Then, when we were sitting there having coffee, I tightened up, closed in. I was like a horse with blinders on, looking straight ahead. This was one of the last pictures I took that day, and it's never been published."

**Former President Richard M. Nixon and Diane Sawyer, Washington, D.C., 1978** "Nixon's old White House staff was giving a reception in his honor, and he invited me to it. Broadcast journalist Diane Sawyer, who'd worked in Nixon's press office, was there, and the former president asked her if she still had that long blonde hair. She answered by doing a kind of pirouette. I liked Nixon. It's hard to dislike someone who gives you an entree—someone who lets you do your job. As he said to me, 'You must let professional people do their job.' "





© HARRY BENSON (2)

**Jack Nicholson, Aspen, Colorado, 1990** "I never assume what people are like before I meet them. Never. When someone tells me that so-and-so is a wonderful human being, I go for my revolver. But this picture definitely tells you something about Jack Nicholson. He's a good man to photograph because he knows exactly what you want. He has manners, and he's independent. He got on his motorbike and I followed him up into the mountains. It was just me and him, no publicists. "The problem with journalism is that editors and photographers are all star-struck, and will do anything the publicists say. It's really shock-

ing. If a photographer doesn't take a nice picture of their client, not only will he not photograph that client again, he won't photograph any of their clients again. About 98 percent of photographers show the publicist the pictures before they go to the magazine, and the magazines know this. Do I want to be a part of that? No. I refuse to sign anything, and I own all my own pictures. I don't have to phone up Elizabeth Taylor and cross my fingers that she'll let me run a picture of her. Thank God I didn't go with an agent, because he'd have all my pictures by now. I've been a loner, and there's no reason I shouldn't carry on like that."

**Greta Garbo, Antigua, 1976** "I was doing a story for *Town & Country* about an enclave for the very rich on the Caribbean island of Antigua. I paid my hotel bill and was waiting to go to the airport when there came a tap on my shoulder. It was a woman who wanted me to photograph her hotel for the story. She said, 'Mr. Benson, if you come photograph my hotel, I'll drive you to the airport.' There was no way out. "So she's walking along showing me a very nice place, with chalets along the water, and she says, 'See the one at the very end? Greta Garbo will be staying there in a day or two.' Naturally, my ears

cocked. So after the lady dropped me off back at the airport, it was like a crime movie: I cancelled my plane reservation, got a taxi back to the hotel, and called up a friend who had a boat. "When Greta Garbo arrived, we were already anchored right off her chalet, so she wasn't suspicious. We even had the boat owner's baby on board, which was the perfect cover. Garbo was a legendary recluse, and this was definitely a paparazzi picture. But at least I didn't chase her up the beach and spoil her holiday. I spoiled her holiday when she came back and saw herself in *People*."

