

Rolling Stone

Images of Rock & Roll

In Sid Vicious's version of punk, anger against the world is turned against the self – and the body as the most visible and most accessible manifestation of the self. In this view, the body is a trap, just like the other traps a bankrupt society sets in your path, and the pleasures of the body are a bribe, a means society exploits to try to make you conform, to become indistinguishable from everyone else. Sex (as the portrait of Sid handcuffed to his girlfriend Nancy Spungen attests) is a form of bondage. The purpose of drug use, if drugs are used, is to numb pain, not to experience revelation. To set yourself apart, you punish your body, mutilate it; it is a prison and, ultimately, you want to set your self free of it. Art becomes, in part, a kind of vandalism of the body; a wound, a scar, a kind of savage beauty that connects you to others of your desperate tribe who are similarly marked. Your willingness to damage yourself offers proof of your commitment and even consolation: No one can ever treat you worse than you are willing to treat yourself. You conquer enemies by internalizing them and, in your willingness to destroy yourself, you release yourself from their clutches.

Photographers have access to times and places in the lives of artists that we do not, and it's a kick to sneak inside with them. Images caught at such times can document the crafting of an image, the act of refining in private the version of the self that will be presented to the public. That activity can be a process of discovery, a means of experimenting with possibilities, a justification of the conviction that identity is not fixed but endlessly malleable, subject to our desire to make who we are who we want to be.

Clothes and props and makeup and faces can tell stories – one look at Peter Gabriel transforming himself before going on stage demonstrates that. Does Gabriel view himself as a warrior preparing to enter battle as a clown whose purpose is to entertain a jaded public? Rock stars are a bit of both, and their performances both pander and assault, flatter and challenge. Makeup enhances and disguises, making a theater of the face and body, transfiguring a person into a character. Life becomes larger than life; the performer is himself and someone else, a man and a metaphor, a person and a commentary. The element of artifice is part of the performance to come, part of the medium through which the artist and the audience engage.

Videos, for better or worse, are now the primary visual medium for rock and roll, not movies, not photographs. A video can have that kind of commercial impact. A photograph cannot. So what, then, can photographs tell us that videos can't? For one thing, a photograph is about a moment. It's not a song — or selling a song. Any message

a photograph sends about an artist's work is secondary; its primary message is about who we believe that artist to be, how he or she wants to be seen, how the photographer perceives that person. For the artist, the photographer and the viewer, a photograph is a journey into the self. The moment captured in a photograph can be about the whim of an afternoon or the heart of an artist's vision.

The hip trappings of success – a fancy car, a limousine, a private jet – are all accessories of the rock and roll image. Lusting after the stuff has never been cool – rappers excepted, of course – but enjoying the stuff has always been. Rockers must never appear to be aspiring to success as artificially defined by the society at large; the symbols of their success must suit them exactly, must seem to be quintessential expressions of their personalities. They must also seem to have been gained on the artist's own term and no one else's. For one artist it could be the perfect sports car of teenage dreams. For another it could be a lucrative record contract or an elegant home, proof that rock and roll can be the means of secular salvation, can raise a person from the streets to the heavens of personal indulgence. Fans, meanwhile, regard the material success of their favorite artists as confirmations of their faith. The only unforgivable sins in their eyes are pretension and bad taste.

Buddy Holly sinks into his coat after being driven back onto a tour bus by a screaming crowd of young girls in Rochester, New York. What's happening outside the bus is nowhere reproduced in Holly's expression, which is serious and inward looking, a far cry from the optimism and delicate yearning of his songs. He is concentrating, thinking about tonight's show or the problems with last night's. Or maybe he's simply tired, and another quotidian reality of the road. When artists are seen offstage, they are often on the fly, in dressing rooms, airports, hotels, cars, buses – the condition of in between. The road has been a time-honored theme throughout the history of rock and roll, the subject of innumerable songs, the pilgrimage from town to town a combination of excitement and unbearable tedium, the road of excess and the lost highway, a quest and a tiresome ordeal. The rush of performance is pitted against the crushing boredom of life in unrelenting movement or the everyday agony of enforced stasis. The thrilling sense of imminent possibility at the heart of travel struggles against the absence of home. Adoring crowds alternate with excruciating isolation, and drugs and alcohol beckon as the road's great balms. The impulse to engage the audience – and the search for a new audience – is unending, exhilarating and bruising. So like all traveling entertainers, rock stars find the road eventually becomes ingrained within them, an internalized no-place place that haunts them, but that also offers frighteningly seductive comforts: The luxury of meaninglessness, a love affair with the surface of things, from the ecstasy of escape from all the deepest commitments, the calming decadence of just another night along the road.

Images can involve the elaborate construction of a persona, metaphor made visible, or they can simply be a minute on the street, an easy instant of posing and moving on, the photographic encounter forgotten the second it is over. The first type of image can entail costumes, historical journeys, a submergence of the self into characters, the evocation in the still photograph of an implied, ongoing drama. The other relies on the viewer's knowledge of the photographic subject; ignorance of the person being shot drains the image of all significance. But are those two approaches ultimately so different? A street is no less consciously chosen as a photographic site than a studio set – even if it is chosen exclusively by necessity. Nor is it any less theatrical. Street clothes are not arbitrary; they are no more or less revealing or concealing of meaning than costumes. Neither is more or less a clue to identity. People smile or laugh in impromptu pictures, not necessarily because they are happy but because they are being photographed. They are playing a roll – the role of someone whose picture is being taken – as surely as if they were on a stage.

Once a artist permits a trusted photographer into his personal life, the secret world becomes known, revelation yields to the ordinariness of everyday life, and the look of domesticity becomes as much a part of the artist's iconography as the most hyped publicity shot. This can be a conscious retreat, as when the artist who has boldly pressed a vision upon us steps back and appears to say, I am just a person. Or it can be a challenge, pointing out how far from reality we let these beings live in our imagination. But seeing the secret world is simultaneously reassuring – “they're real, just like us” – and suggestive of betrayal. Having sought to be larger than life – a wish we, the audience, granted – artists then seek life. But once a person has trespassed onto the symbolic order, there can be no true return to life and life only. Images, public or private, will always shadow them.

In portraits of quiet moments we can sense the explosive drive within artists. And as we stand in awe of their impressive might onstage, we remember the resonant images of their quieter selves. Often photographs are also private moments made public, with all the contradictions such a description suggests. In seeming isolation, the artist is, in fact, twice being observed, first by the photographer, then by us. To the degree that the artists conspires in the shaping of the shoot, there may even be three levels of observation, with the first taking place in the artist's imagination.

Celebrities in our culture do not believe that their souls will be trapped in the camera or in the photograph – at least not in so many words. They are afraid of losing their souls and their selves to the machine, however willingly they may have sought the warm gaze of the public eye. They understand how important images are in our culture, and, more to the point, they understand that however hard they try, they will never be able to control that power.

Anthony DeCurtis 1995