



Denis O'Regan Profile

- Born in London in 1953 to Irish parents who eloped from County Cork, Denis O'Regan began his working life as a trainee broker in the City of London.
- By the mid-1970s, he was a major contributor to the music weekly *NME*, focusing on punk bands such as The Damned, Sex Pistols and The Clash, among others.
- Denis was the official photographer on world and European tours by Queen, David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, Kiss, Duran Duran, Thin Lizzy and Pink Floyd.
- Denis was the official photographer for Live Aid at Wembley Stadium in 1985. In 1999, he was the only photographer allowed to cover Paul McCartney's concert return to the Cavern Club in Liverpool.
- In 2021, he was appointed Artist-in-Residence at the Royal Albert Hall, London, the first such appointment in the revered venue's 150-year history.

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Denis O'Regan



Denis O'Regan has photographed every rock star from AC/DC to ZZ Top, toured with the Rolling Stones and shot more than 200 David Bowie concerts. Now, as he contemplates a significant birthday, Denis tells Keith Wilson his guest list – and who he'd like to capture for one final tour... →

All images: Denis O'Regan

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he first time I tried to interview Denis O'Regan was back in 1987 when he was the official photographer for David Bowie's Glass Spider world tour.

Of course, such a meeting wouldn't have been of any use for this magazine (even if it had existed all those years ago), because back then Denis was shooting with a Minolta! Although the interview failed to materialize, I still went to the sold-out concert at Wembley Stadium. For the opening half of the show, Bowie was dressed head-to-toe in red, but my distant view from the opposite end of the stadium meant the Starman mostly resembled a tumbling red streak as he was thrown or pushed from one end of the stage to the other by mime artists and dancers.

So, where was Denis in all this? My guess was that he was on stage trying to get the Minolta's autofocus to lock onto the great man's kinetic figure for just long enough to get a blur-free frame. Now, 36 years later, he is talking down the line to me from his West London gallery,

where Bowie's presence is preserved for all time among hundreds of images of other legendary artists that Denis has photographed: Queen, the Rolling Stones, Duran Duran, Thin Lizzy, Blondie, The Who, Kiss – the list, like the beat, goes on. But it is the incredible Bowie who remains the most influential on his own life's performance...

It was a Bowie gig as Ziggy Stardust that inspired you to become a photographer. What did you feel at the time? An epiphany?

It was an epiphany, that's exactly what it was. It needs some context. I'd seen the Beatles when I was young, got my mother to take me to the Christmas show at the Hammersmith Odeon in 1964 – the same venue where I saw David. But before I saw David in 1973, I had seen Paul McCartney and Wings, Led Zeppelin a few days



An epiphany, that's exactly what it was. I was absolutely stunned because he fused mime, theatre, rock music

Previous page: Paul Stanley of Kiss on stage at the Stockholm Stadium during the band's Alive 35 World Tour.

Below: Paul McCartney at the Silver Clef Award Winners Concert, Knebworth in 1990.



before, the Stones, Alice Cooper. I had seen a lot of mainly rock bands and then a friend suggested we go and see David Bowie, and I said 'Um, okay' as I wasn't fussed.

I imagine your opinion changed...

I went along and I was absolutely stunned because he fused mime, theatre, rock music; his lyrics of course, were just so... as I said, I had seen Led Zeppelin, a straightforward rock band, and now suddenly I had this performer with all these theatrical elements, some of them Japanese, where they pull the clothes apart: a girl came to each side and pulled the outfit off and then there was another one, all this. It really affected me. Apparently, Kate



Bush was there that night as well; she was obviously affected because she became a bit of a female Bowie.

And you caught the travel bug too?

That's right. In 1974, I went on an Interrail trip around Europe. I was working in the City at the Lloyds underwriting room and a guy next to me said: "I've seen this at the station, shall we go?" I thought, okay, it's only a month, and then I'll change jobs, get another job when I come back. That had a gigantic effect as well. So, it was the combination within that one year of Bowie and Interrail. I headed off around Europe, became utterly hooked on travel, and I took my camera, my Zenith, which had no meter, in fact, no nothing. →

Above: Andy Taylor and Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran taking it easy in New York before their concert at Madison Square Garden.



A DIGITAL CAVERN

ON A DECEMBER NIGHT IN 1999, DENIS WAS THE SOLE PHOTOGRAPHER TO SHOOT PAUL MCCARTNEY'S RETURN TO LIVERPOOL'S LEGENDARY CAVERN CLUB...

You decided to shoot digitally for the press. How brave was that?!

This was very early on in digital imaging, and it was on Nikon, a D1. I got permission to shoot Paul McCartney at The Cavern and I was the only one allowed to photograph him. I took a real risk of shooting digitally. I shot film as well but it was as a backup. I had a website built, password-protected, so you needed a code. I gave each newspaper and Reuters a different code and uploaded all the pictures to the website. They all downloaded them and every single national paper had my pictures of Paul McCartney on the cover just a few hours after he'd been on stage. And the other thing – it was on a dial-up modem that I was uploading the pictures from my laptop under the stairs of the Cavern Club. It was as bare bones as you could possibly get!

Many people started off with those cheap Russian cameras. It must have been a great learning experience for you?

Exactly, because I had to learn everything, I had to estimate everything, I had no light meter, nothing. I bought it for £5 from a friend, so I took that around Europe and I didn't take that many pictures because it was an expensive process. But I did some black and white in Hungary, and it looked like the war years. While in Yugoslavia, we went to Belgrade, and everyone was dressed in black. I went to the Arctic Circle, so I got absolutely hooked. I came back and, within the year, the punk scene happened.

How significant was that for you?

The thing about punk was it gave you access, easy access. Until then, you needed a portfolio and to get a portfolio, you needed access to take the pictures, so it was a bit of a vicious circle. When punk came along, it was very easy to get into. I photographed The Damned at Hertfordshire School of Art and Design, and it was only their second-ever performance.

What was that experience like?

Up to then, the only shows I had seen had a lot of lighting: I go into the school hall in Hertfordshire and there are virtually no lights. I thought, 'Oh my God!' I didn't own a flash, so I ask a photographer there called Chalkie Davies if I could borrow his flashgun. I told him I'd left mine at home, and he lent it to me. He had shot David and Ziggy Stardust professionally, and he said: "I really don't like all this, send your pictures in to NME." So, that's what I did and I ended up getting the bylines for all of these photographs.

So, at that time you were still doing your day job in the City?

I was working during the day in the City, coming home to develop my films. I taught myself photography, processing and developing and printing, so everything.

Were there any other budding photographers, contemporaries, who benefited from the easier access in the same way?

Well, one contemporary who suggested we work together was



Richard Young. We went down completely different roads. At that point, everyone socialized together as well and I knew a lot of the punk bands because we were all going to the same things. So, I would take off-stage pictures, which was where Richard was going, and then he said we should work together. But he started doing the parties and I knew that was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to enjoy the parties rather than photograph them, so I did not want to go down Richard's route.

You wanted to tour instead?

What I really wanted to do was to go on tour, combining the travel, the photography and the music. I already loved the music before everything. That's how it all began. I knew what I wanted to do, I wanted to go on tour with David. And I wanted to go on tour with the world's biggest bands, so that will be the Stones. Then Queen came along and Freddie was amazingly photogenic, so I wanted to tour with them as well, and I ended up touring with all three.

Above: Denis has photographed David Bowie more than any other photographer, including more than 200 concerts.

Right: Freddie Mercury raises his fist in front of 80,000 fans during Queen's concert at Slane Castle, Ireland.

Was Bowie an artist who really understood photography better than most?

You see, there was no brief, but there was a brief. I never got briefed on tours about what to do. I was told: "You know what you're doing, you come along and you just do it." But with the first Bowie tour (*Serious Moonlight*, 1983), the way I got the tour was to suggest a book. This was the *Serious Moonlight* book, so the book was the plan. I thought, if I'm doing a book I get to stay longer on the tour, otherwise it would have been about three weeks just to capture the essence of it and then disappear. But if you're doing a book, the more the better. So, David always had one eye on the book and that variety of pictures like him pushing his own trolley, things like that, sitting on the baggage carousel and waiting. Those things were mundane but it's David Bowie doing it so it becomes more interesting, and he knew that.

What was your first Nikon?

Oh my God! First Nikon? I was Olympus originally, which I loved, and then very briefly, in 1987, I switched to Minolta because they brought out a self-focus camera, the Minolta 7000. Everyone laughed at me: "That will never catch on!" Nothing is ever going to catch on if you've never seen it before. Then I switched to... what were the last few film cameras? →



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Above: Rolling Stones lead singer Mick Jagger is dwarfed by the 120,000 crowd packed into Roundhay Park, Leeds in 1982.

There was F4, F5, there was even an F6. By then Nikon were fully committed to digital SLRs.

Yeah, and I went right through that switchover, so I used the last two film cameras and then used the first digital one, which was quite low-resolution, the D1. Everybody was saying this is never going to be as good as film, but I was really sold on the digital side of things. I had Photoshop in 1989, very first version because I had a Mac. It was written for the Mac, which was years before Windows came out, so it was the only way you could use Photoshop. It got me started on the digital trail. I had my hard drives so I was ready when cameras went digital.

So you went digital early on?

I did the European MTV Awards and I set up a little studio and I had everyone in there and shot it all on the D1. I then went onto the D2 but, for live performances, there was too much of a lag, and then the D2X

came along and that was it. That was the gigantic game-changer, you could shoot at normal speeds and not have to wait for it to chug through the memory. From then on, there was no looking back, I had the D3, D4, D5, I had them all. I absolutely loved them, I still do.

You have been an early adopter of new photo technologies, is that the nerdy part of Denis O'Regan coming out?

Yeah, there's a huge nerdy part in there. I think because the technology



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enabled me to be more creative, that's what it was. You could only do so much when it was film. You couldn't tweak colour anyway because everything the press wanted was on transparency, so you had to send in the transparencies and that was the end of the story. When I was able to tweak things digitally and have a little play with them I began to have a lot more fun. I could create the images that I wanted to create as opposed to the one that just come out of the can. For me, that was amazing.

When you're shooting concerts, do you have a go-to lens?

Usually when I work I have good access. By having good access, I can get close and that means I can use my go-to lens, which is the 14-24mm. I love it. If I was on stage, I could stand on the corner at the very front and they would come as close as they wanted to come, and I would get them and the stage all in one picture.



That lens makes for more dramatic photography. I remember all those years stuck in the pit and you had no option but to use the telephoto. To me, there's zero creativity in a telephoto, but with wide-angle you can create so many different things.

How did you become the Rolling Stones' official photographer on their 1982 European tour?

I got that tour the night of the show when I went over to Rotterdam and the band opened at Feyenoord Stadium. They were doing two nights there and I turned up to shoot the first three songs like everyone else. On their American tour the previous year, I had gone to a show and I was with some friends, and a woman wearing a headset took the photographers into the pit and my friend said: "Why don't you duck in?" So, I ducked into the pit with the many other photographers and she said: "Out!" That was it, I got slung out of the pit.



WHAT I MISS ABOUT SHOOTING WITH FILM

WHILE DIGITAL MADE SHOOTING GIGS A LOT EASIER, DENIS SAYS THERE IS ONE THING THAT HE MISSES ABOUT FILM, WHICH HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH TECHNOLOGY...

How much easier did you find shooting in variable lighting thanks to digital photography?

It's 100 times easier, 500 times easier! Before, I had to uprate my films to ISO400, to 800, possibly 1600 sometimes. It used to cost me a fortune to shoot a show. I'd have £150 worth of film in my bag just to cover all eventualities because I'd have colour, black and white, then I'd have tungsten film just in case, and pay for the processing. Now, you can machine gun and it doesn't cost anything once you've bought the card. But the advantage of film on tour was I couldn't develop them, so I could go out every night for a week! Then send the films in and wait another few days to get them back. But as soon as digital came along, everyone wanted to see the pictures the very same day!

That doesn't sound good...

Well, the next year, when they were about to do the European tour, we were both in the same airport lounge and she said: "I remember you!" And I said, "How?" She replied: "Well, you were so polite when I threw you out in Detroit, that you stuck in my mind." So, when I got to Rotterdam for the Stones show, I had to phone up to get my pass, and it was her! I tried to do a deal to get more than the three songs and she said: "You know there are 75 photographers here tonight?" I asked, "Who's the official photographer?" She said: "We don't have one", and I told her: "I'll do it!"

Is that really how you got the gig?

Yeah, that's how it came about. So, she said: "Well, I couldn't have asked you, but since you've asked me I'll take it to the band." In the meantime, I'd been upgraded in my room to a suite, so it was all looking good, and then she called back and said: "I'll take you down to meet them. And you can shoot the show for us." And then it moved on and on.

You've got a significant birthday coming up this year, Denis...

Yeah, don't tell anyone.

Do you have any special plans?

I want to get Duran Duran to play

because, apart from David Bowie, they are the ones I've worked with the most, I know them really well. We're still friends, so them and maybe Europe, I did a lot of work with them as well, so I might want to get them to play The Final Countdown, which hopefully it won't be! These are the birthday things in my mind that I'm planning.

Is there an artist you would love to have photographed on tour but, for some reason, you haven't?

Yeah. Paul McCartney is one. U2 is another. I was auditioned for Paul McCartney in 1987, when I got invited down to his mill in Sussex where he had a recording studio. I was such a Beatles fan. I'd been on tour with the Stones and Bowie by this time, but when it came to going down to the studio and he was auditioning me, I just became 'Mr Boring' and failed the audition. That was a disappointment because I really wanted to work with him because he was my hero.

And what was the story with U2?

No, that wasn't an audition. I fancied touring with U2, it was the early '90s and they supported Thin Lizzy when I shot Thin Lizzy at Slane Castle. But with Bono, I was in a BA lounge and the TV was next to me on the wall and I was sitting next to it. They bring in Bono and he was sitting at the other end of the TV, and the two of us were leaning in watching it and I didn't say one single word because I was really just too shy! He would not have known my name but I think, had we had the chat, that might have led somewhere.


Perhaps there's still time, and maybe you'll get the call yet?

Lady Gaga should have taken me on tour. Bowie and Queen are her two biggest influences and I've toured with both of them but no phone call!

Happy birthday, when it comes...

Thank you. It's 11/11. Plenty of time to prepare. It depends what day of the week it is. If it's a Friday, I'll probably start on the Tuesday, and it will all come together.

Unless Bono calls and asks: "Hey, fancy coming on tour tomorrow?"

I'm there! 

Next Month
Shetland-based
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