

1967 was the year of flower power, acid rock and free love - and **Baron Wolman** photographed it all. He tells **Keith Wilson** how he managed to land the best gig in the world

When Baron Wolman met young music journalist Jann Wenner, he couldn't have known that it would prove to be the most important meeting of his photographic career. Wenner had an idea for a new magazine devoted to rock music. Naturally, he needed a photographer, and before the day was out Baron was appointed the first chief photographer of the now legendary *Rolling Stone*...

When you met Jann Wenner, was it a happy accident?

It was. I met him because I had a client called Mills College in Oakland, California. They had an advanced music department, and they decided to have a conference on rock and roll in early '67. They saw what was going on in musical culture, and they wanted to have a serious conversation about it. I called the editor of a magazine I usually worked with, and he said, "That's a great idea. I'll give you the name of somebody who loves music who will probably cover it with you. He's 21 years old, he writes for *The Daily Californian*, which is the paper for the University of California, Berkeley. Call him - he'll probably do it with you."

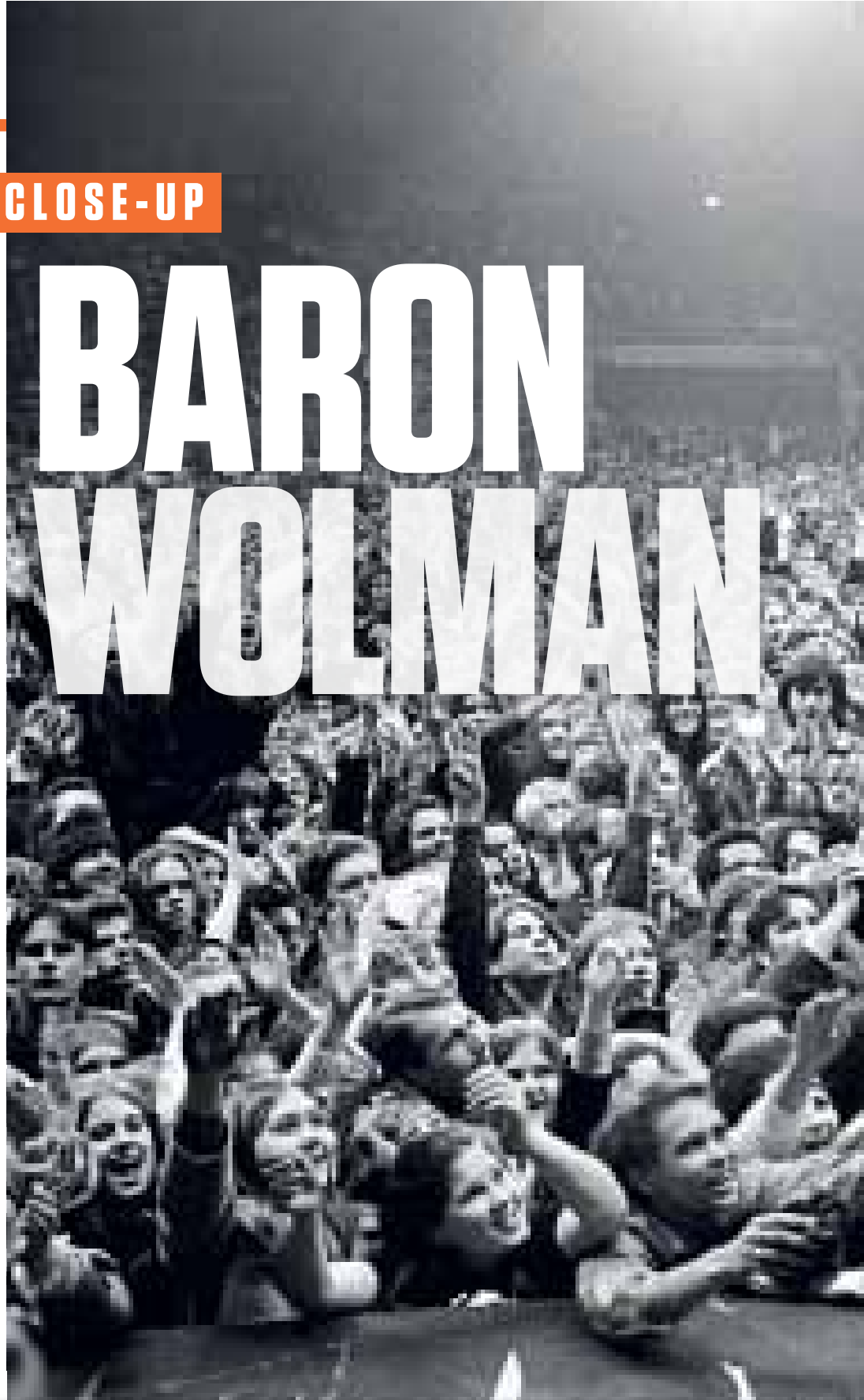
And that writer was Jann Wenner?

Yes. I called him and he said, "Yeah, that's a great idea. We'll go over." Now, on the panel of discussion were Phil Spector, Bill Graham, the great producer Tom Donahue, who started the first FM underground rock and roll music station, and Ralph Gleason. Ralph Gleason was a very well-known music columnist and critic for a paper in San Francisco. Jann comes up to me and we start talking. He was explaining his and Ralph Gleason's idea for a publication. Up to that time there had only been trade publications ▶

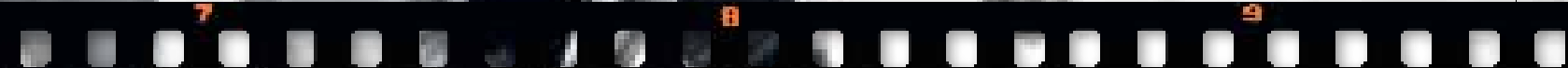
FILMSTRIP (LEFT TO RIGHT)
George Harrison at Apple Corps offices, London, 1968;
Frank Zappa at home in Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles, 1968;
The Grateful Dead at a press conference at 710 Ashbury, San Francisco, 1967; Miles Davis at Gleason's Gym, New York, 1969;
Pamela Des Barres at A&M Studio, Los Angeles, 1968

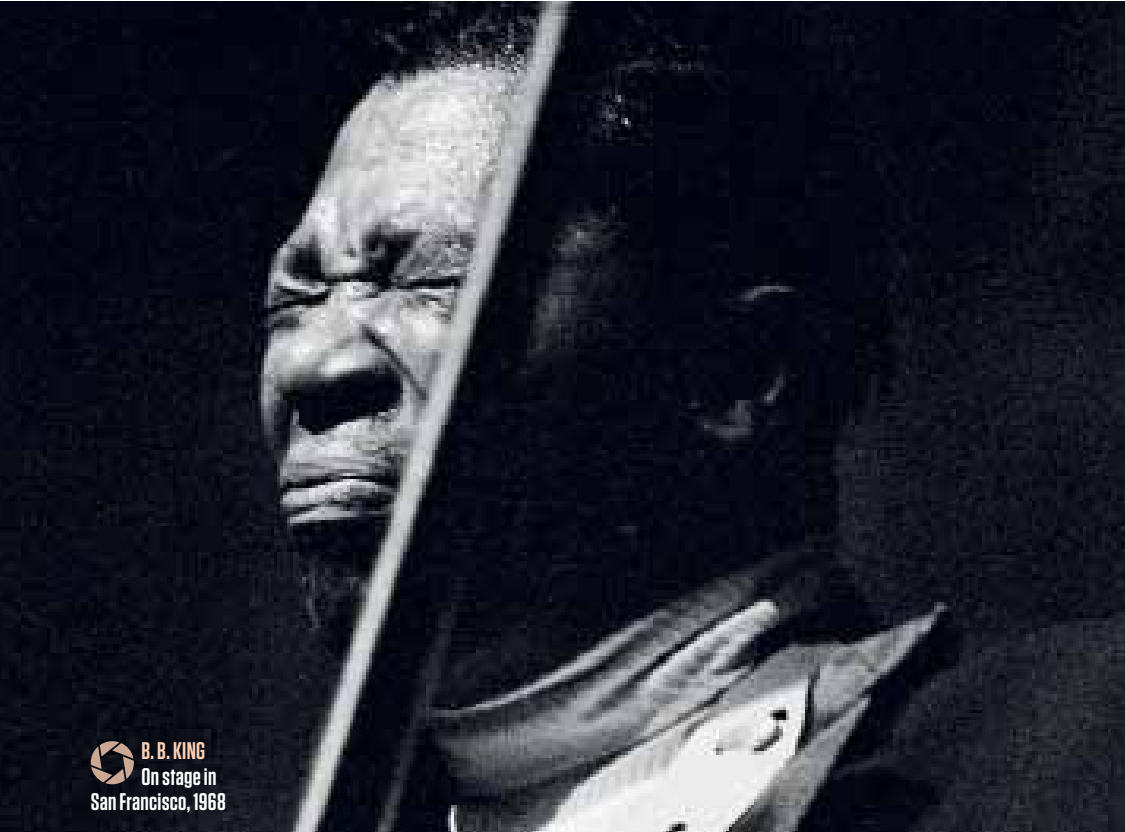
CLOSE-UP

BARON WOLMAN



**CREEDENCE
CLEARWATER REVIVAL**
On stage behind John Fogerty
at Oakland Coliseum, 1970





B. B. KING
On stage in
San Francisco, 1968



JANIS JOPLIN
At her home in
San Francisco, 1967

for the music industry, but nothing about the soul, the music, the people. So he says, "What do you think?" And I said, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea." "Well, we're going to need a photographer. Do you want to be the photographer?" And I said, "Sure, why not?"

“I realised music was big business and in the end it didn't matter that I wasn't getting paid because I would eventually license these photos”

Baron Wolman *Reportage photographer*

Is it true that you worked for *Rolling Stone* for free?

Jann then said, "Do you have \$10,000 to invest in the publication?" I said to him, "I can't do that, but I'll work for free and you can give me shares in the company." Of course, there was no company!

But you retained ownership of the photos?

That's right. I said, "You can have unlimited use, but I own them."

Do you think you were ahead of your time, coming up with a deal like that?

Here's the thing: I had realised from some of my prior work that it might be a good idea to control everything that I shot at that point in my career, so I just said it.

I didn't think forward about it because who knew what it would mean? I just didn't want to argue with him each time about whether he could use them.

Did you still have enough time to earn money from your other photography?

That's what I had to do because I got no money from these guys. They paid for the film and processing and whatever travel. That was it, because they did not have a lot of money. In 1967, in one of the early issues, we did a story about Steve Miller signing a \$50,000 contract with Capitol Records. In 1967 this was a big deal, so Jann sent me out to photograph him. I got some great photos. One of the better ones ran in the magazine, and a couple of weeks



later Capitol Records called and said, “We want to put that picture on the record cover, and we’ll give you \$500.” At that moment I realised music was big business, and in the end it didn’t matter that I wasn’t getting paid because I would eventually license these photos to people who did have the money. So it paid off immediately.

Was the magazine deliberately named after the Rolling Stones?

I hear many stories, but it was not named after The Rolling Stones themselves, but the song, ‘Like A Rolling Stone’.

The Bob Dylan song?

Exactly. I think, however, at the back of Jann Wenner’s mind, it didn’t hurt that

PROFILE

Your at-a-glance guide to Baron’s photographic career, from rock and fashion photographer to photobook publisher

- Baron Wolman was born in 1937, and became a professional photographer after selling a photo story when the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961.
- When he moved to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, Baron’s neighbours included Janis Joplin and The Grateful Dead, whom he would later photograph for the first issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

■ Baron shot 22 covers during his three years as *Rolling Stone*’s first chief photographer.

■ He was one of the official photographers at the famous Woodstock music festival in 1969.

■ He left *Rolling Stone* in 1970 to set up his own fashion magazine called *Rags*.

■ In 1974 Baron Wolman launched Squarebooks Publishing. He now lives in New Mexico and still takes pictures and publishes books.



Image: Mario Andres Mejia



TAJ MAHAL
Playing the blues on the streets of Berkeley, California



JANIS JOPLIN (MONTAGE)
The singer performing on stage in San Francisco, 1968

there was a band of the same name and people thought it meant the same thing.

Did that happen?

Well, at the time I would go somewhere and say, I'm here to take pictures for

Rolling Stone, and people would say, "Man! The Rolling Stones!" So it was kind of a fortunate mistaken identity, and it worked to our advantage, but then it came into its own identity after a while.

What was your first gig for *Rolling Stone*?

It was The Grateful Dead, a San Francisco band. They lived near me in Haight-Ashbury, and had been busted for smoking pot, so I followed them down to the bail bondsman to take pictures. The next day they held a press conference. They sat in front of all the media, and they said, "Look, okay, bust us, but if you're going to bust everybody who smokes pot in this town, you're not going to have any doctors, you're not going to have any politicians, any lawyers, you're



SMOKEY ROBINSON
The Motown singer on stage
in San Francisco, 1968



ROGER DALTRY
The founder and lead singer of
The Who at IBC Studios in London, 1968

not going to have any professionals at all, because everyone's smoking." In front of them they had this huge bowl of whipped cream, and they said, "You media people, the first one of you that asks a stupid question will get a face full of cream!"

What cameras were you using at the time?

Nikon F, FM, Nikkormat – whatever was around. The F was the camera that we wanted. Funny thing was, on the box of my original Nikon F (and I still have it) it said 'fully automatic'. There was nothing automatic about it! Not in those days, right?

Was it difficult to shoot a gig manually?

You had to be very, very careful and work really hard. Light was always changing on

stage, so I had a handheld spot meter that I'd measure on the face and get the setting, but by the time I got the setting, the light would change again. So I had to shoot fast, fast, before they changed the lighting again, and try to predict it.

Was there a particular band or singer who gave you a more memorable time than the others?

Man, they all did! When I went up to Frank Zappa's house in the hills above Laurel Canyon in LA, I was very nervous. We get up there and behind his house is this collection of rusting, old road-grading

“Light was always changing on stage, so I had a spot meter that I'd measure on the face, but by the time I made the setting, the light would change again!”

Baron Wolman Reportage photographer

equipment. The first thing he does is he walks over there, climbs on one, and says, "Get a shot of me driving this!"

I gave a talk last December in Marin County, near San Francisco. This guy comes up and says, "Listen, I've got to tell you a ▶



JIMI HENDRIX
Baron Wolman's favourite subject on stage
at Fillmore West in San Francisco, 1968

story. I was with Frank for the last year of his life, living at his house, taking care of him. He had a grand piano there and a few artefacts that he liked on the grand piano. He had that picture on there and he said to

“Jimi Hendrix was my favourite performer. There was something photogenic about him. It was one photo opportunity after another”
Baron Wolman *Reportage photographer*

me, “That’s my favourite picture that was ever taken of me.” It’s nice to learn after the fact. He didn’t tell me, of course!

Who was your favourite performer?

Jimi Hendrix was my favourite performer because you couldn’t take a bad picture of this guy. Whether he was performing, or whether he was sitting with you, there was something photogenic about him. The way he moved – he played the guitar behind him, he played it with his teeth, he’d burn it. It was one photo opportunity after another. He moved around, he did things on stage that were so photogenic. Some of these guys would just stand there in front of the microphone, play the guitar, and that was it. Well, what kind of picture are you

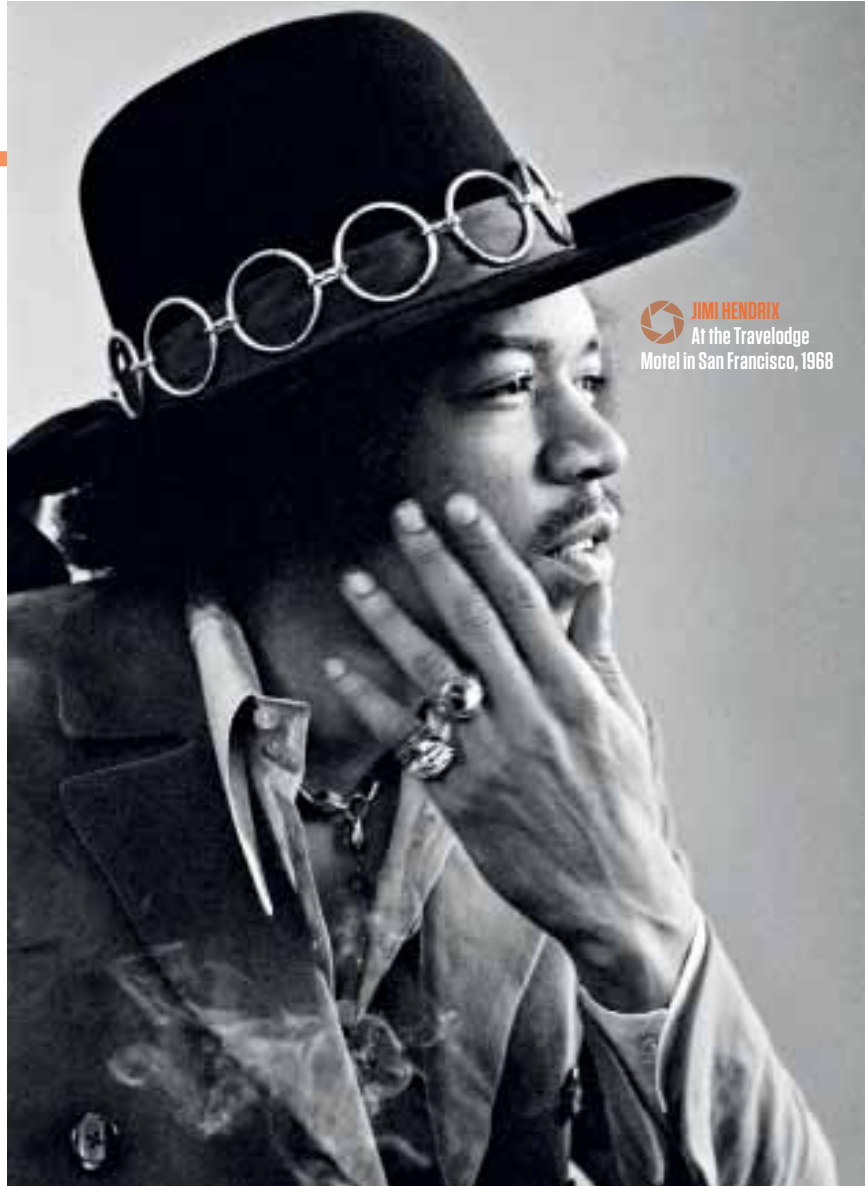
going to get? But Hendrix was all over the place, and his face, his expressions, they were changing all the time.

How did photography become your profession initially?

Photography was a hobby of mine for many, many years, and when I got to Berlin I was working for the military. Then the Berlin Wall went up.

When you say you were working for the military, were you actually in the forces or on a contract?

No, no – it was shady! When the Wall went up, I went up and took a bunch of pictures over the Wall. We all thought it was the beginning of World War III really, and I



JIMI HENDRIX
At the Travelodge
Motel in San Francisco, 1968



SHOOTING HENDRIX

By the time of his death in 1970, aged just 27, Jimi Hendrix was already renowned as one of the world's greatest rock guitarists

Baron's years at *Rolling Stone* coincided with Hendrix's rise to fame. He developed a close working relationship with the guitarist, even photographing him on stage during some of his greatest live performances...

Jimi Hendrix is a clear favourite. Was it like that from the beginning?

■ Let me tell you, when I went on stage the first time with Jimi Hendrix, something magical happened. I got home and I developed those films and printed those contact sheets. There were 20 or 25 fabulous shots on every roll, not just the usual three or four. So something was going on! I felt so connected to the band, I'd tell people I was playing my Nikon and they were playing their Fender and their Gibson and their drums. I really felt like part of the band because I could almost anticipate what they were going to do and that's why I got some phenomenal action shots with Jimi Hendrix at that time. I never got much better after that.

Where was that?

■ Fillmore West in '68, in San Francisco. Bill Graham had given me the best gift that anybody could ask for: complete access to all of his shows, any of the venues, any time I wanted to go. That gave me the opportunity to do the best job I possibly could. Nowadays, no photographer gets that kind of accessibility.

No, they're told to clear off after the first two or three songs

■ Right. The sad thing is, I think the musicians are the losers for that because if a good photographer is not allowed to practise his skill with the musician, the musician will not get the best part of his work, or her work. So they hurt themselves with all these stupid rules they have now on restricting photographers.



JIMI HENDRIX
In a hotel room in New York, 1970

wrote a story and I sent the pictures and the story back to my hometown newspaper, which was a fairly large newspaper in a middle-sized city. They ran the whole thing – the pictures and the text – and they sent me a cheque for \$50, which in 1961 was pretty reasonable. And I thought, 'Wait a minute, if I'm getting paid for my hobby, why shouldn't my hobby be my profession?' So, that was when I decided to become a professional photographer: Berlin in 1961.

How old were you then?

I graduated in '59, so I would have been 24.

So, you're self-taught?

That's right – no formal training. In fact, when I got out of the military, I signed up

JIMI HENDRIX (MONTAGE)
Again in San Francisco in 1968, this time performing with his band at Winterland

for a photography course at the Art Center Los Angeles. I went for two weeks and I thought, 'Why am I here? I already know this stuff! Why am I paying money to sit around with these people to photograph a white egg on a white background? I'm not going into advertising photography, I'm going out into the streets with the people.' So I quit after a couple of weeks. It was reportage for me.

You were with *Rolling Stone* for three years. Why did you leave?

Well, I found after a while I was repeating myself. I liked the music, but I was not a ▶

PINK FLOYD
At the Casa Madrona
Hotel in Sausalito, 1967



fan in the sense that I had to be close to every musician there ever was. I found I was taking similar pictures to what I had already taken, but they were just of different musicians, so I wanted to go on to other things.

These two women came up to me and said, "We love *Rolling Stone*, but there

“I see life as a big buffet, and if you stop at the salads and don't do the rest, you're going to miss the soup, the fish, the meat...”

Baron Wolman *Reportage photographer*

should be something similar in the world of fashion.” So we started *Rags*. We called it the *Rolling Stone* of fashion. Jann moved *Rolling Stone* a couple of blocks away, I took over Jann's old office and hired some of his employees, used the same printing press, and printed on newsprint. We were hugely successful editorially and artistically, but we hit a recession and advertisers stopped paying us, so after a couple of years, we said, 'Can't do that any more.'

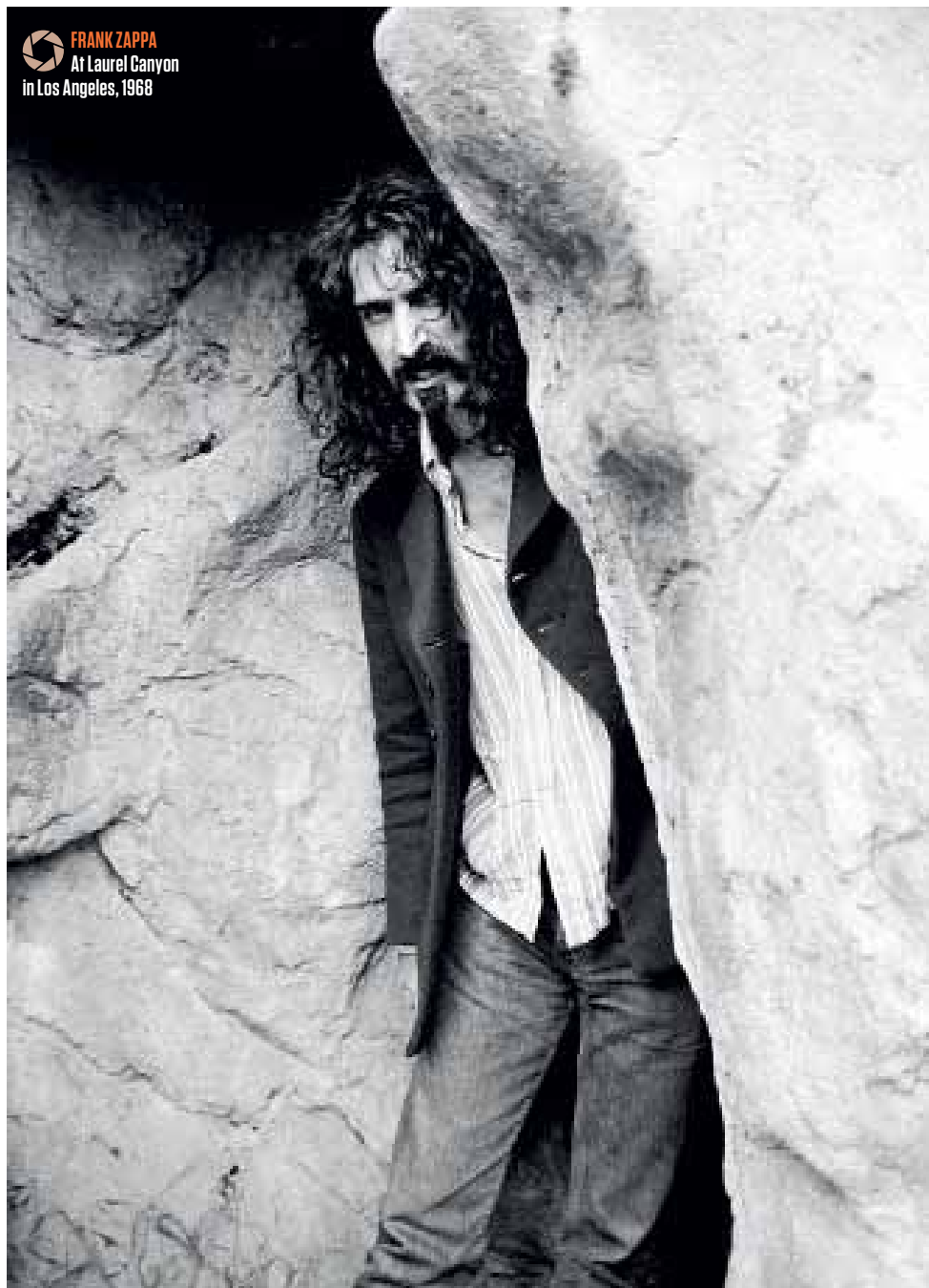
My theory always has been this: I see life as a big buffet table, and if you stop at the beginning with the salads and don't do the rest, you're going to miss the soup, the fish, the meat, the dessert. And I have always wanted to taste all the different aspects, the tastes of life. I was ready to go on.

If you were starting all over again, would you make any changes?

I had it all. Spending a day with Miles Davis, working out in his gym, driving around in his Ferrari, going on tour with Jeff Beck, being on stage with The Who...

You seem to have been at the right place at the right time

Oh, I was so lucky. I was blessed, and I really want to thank whoever was responsible for making this possible, but I don't know who to thank! I would always have been a photographer, but to have had that opportunity to be the first photographer of *Rolling Stone*? Put it like this: who was the first person to fly across the Atlantic solo?



'IT'S ALL ABOUT THE NEXT MOMENT'
Margaret undressing, one of Baron's favourite pictures

FAVOURITE PICTURES

After three years shooting the biggest names in rock for Rolling Stone, choosing a favourite picture is no easy task for 75-year-old Baron Wolman

Do you have a favourite photograph?

■ One of my favourite photos is of Johnny Cash backstage prior to performing. And there's a picture of Taj Mahal I shot in Berkeley and this kid walks up behind him out of nowhere with a piece of wood and just stands there and starts playing it like a guitar. It was a moment that just happened. There are so many pictures – I photographed Townsend right before he destroyed his guitar on stage, and there's Syd Barrett with a sugar cube on his tongue. We were sitting around having coffee and Roger Waters says, "Hey Syd! Show him how you do your acid!" And he just put sugar cubes in his mouth. So many wonderful memories.

What about the pictures of the groupies?

■ I love this picture of Margaret undressing. I prefer to call her a muse. She called this picture, "It's all about the next moment". And it is. You're thinking, what's going to happen after this?

It's a stunning picture, the way her hair flows down. So what did happen next?

■ Man! You're asking all these personal questions and you've got your tape recorder on!

Charles Lindbergh

Ok, who was the second?

Ah, good point. No-one knows

Right! And who was the first photographer at *Rolling Stone*? That much I can claim, and I always will. ☑

• *Baron Wolman's latest book, Every Picture Tells a Story: The Rolling Stone Years, is published by Omnibus Press, RRP £24.95. To see more of Baron Wolman's images, visit his website at www.fotobaron.com*



JOHNNY CASH
Backstage at the Circle Star Theatre in Redwood City, 1967