

## Interview: Terry O'Neill

A 'zonked out' David Bowie, a cranky Frank Sinatra, a tired Faye Dunaway...Terry O'Neill has charmed and photographed them all. What's his secret?



Jean Shrimpton, 1964. 'People used to say she looked like a doll, so I took her to a doll's hospital I used to pass on my way to the office. She was the best model I ever photographed, without a living doubt.' Photo: TERRY O'NEILL

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The Lost Child



By Lucy Davies

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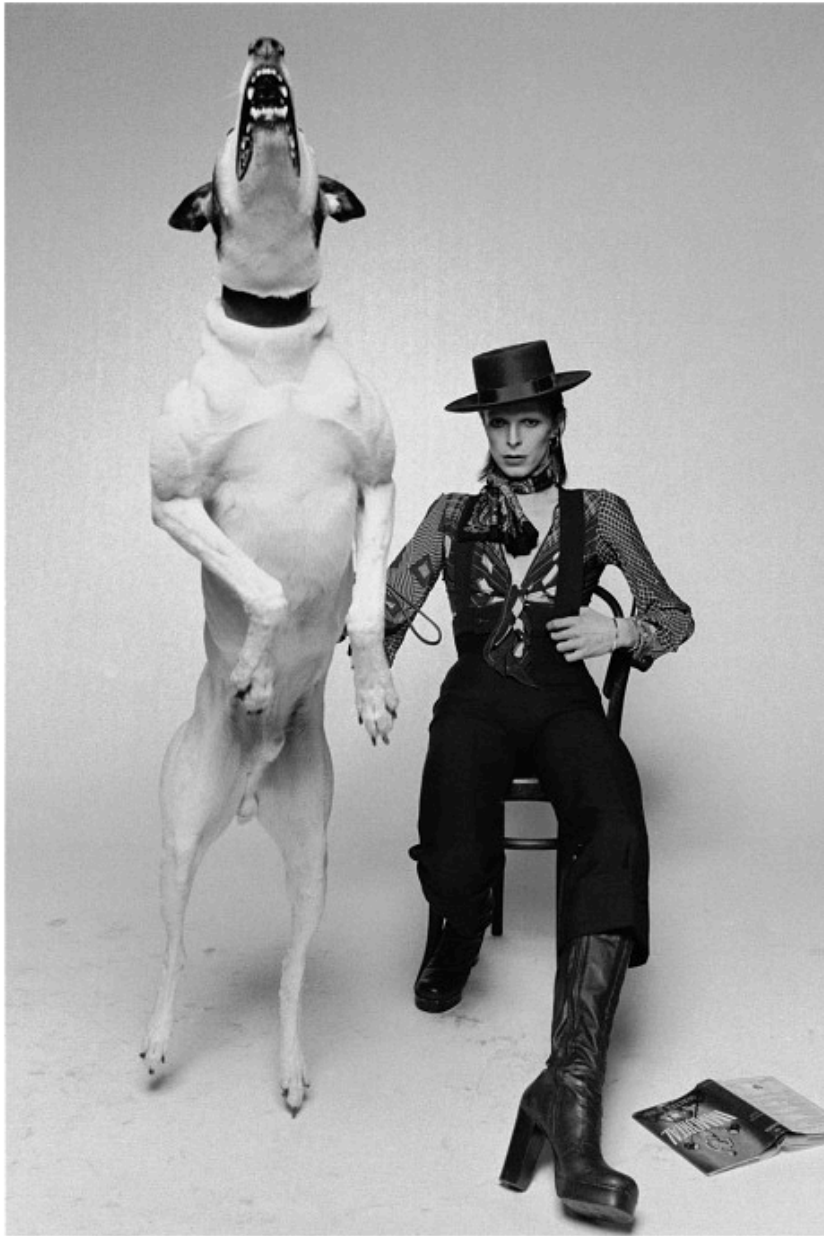
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Terry O'Neill has been up since 4.30am when we meet at Chelsea's **Little Black Gallery** one fine, sun-streaked December morning. Second only to his jazz habit, of which more later, the 75-year-old photographer is a cricket devotee, the Ashes in this case, heading to bed early the last several nights to rise with the larks and catch the dulcet thwack of leather on willow over Australian soil.

He doesn't look in the least bit tired; bouncing in on the plump soles of a black pair of Nike's finest. He's all open arms and those famously piercing, pale blue eyes; eyes that have seen, sized up and made bloody beautiful, as he would say, a choice portion of the great and good.

Over a 50 year career – he was recently awarded a **Royal Photographic Society medal** for a "sustained, significant contribution to the art of photography" - he has photographed film stars and rock stars, royalty and rogues. He is famous for his charm, which coaxed an easy, intimate sparkle from those who had it and knew it, those who had it but hid it, and those who never had it at all.

Many have remarked on his diplomacy - he hasn't a harsh word to say about anyone, even the famously cantankerous Sinatra - and yet his talent for dry asides of the sort your favourite uncle might make, is resolutely mischievous. On photographing David Bowie with a ferocious hound for the Diamond Dogs album: "He [Bowie] didn't turn a bloody hair. Mind you he was zonked out at the time, all the time." Of never having photographed Marilyn Monroe: "I fell in love with her PR, and she said 'I'm not going to let you shoot Marilyn because she always takes the photographers to bed.' 'Of course', I said, 'I don't want to do that'...What a mug!" Leafing through a giant edition of his work on the table between us to show me a particular shot, "Christ," he says, "this bloody book goes on and on."



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David Bowie, 1976 (Terry O'Neill). 'What the dog is doing here is trying to bite the flash - every time it went off, he jumped. [Bowie] didn't turn a bloody hair, he was zonked out at the time, all the time. But he was such a class act.'

Born to Irish immigrants in London, 1938, O'Neill grew up on the outskirts of the city near where Heathrow lies today. It's little known that as a child he spent two years training for the priesthood: "my parents were thrilled, but I could never bring myself to honestly say yes, I totally believe in a god". He stumbled into photography quite by accident: "I took a job to become an air steward so I could play drums in America, and they assigned me to the photographic unit."

In 1959, a chance photograph of Rab Butler, then home secretary, asleep at the airport caught the eye of Fleet Street editors, and furnished him with a job at the feverishly popular Daily Sketch, where youth and enthusiasm – "I'd do five or six jobs a day, while the old timers wanted to do one and go back to the darkroom and play shove ha'penny" – ensured he fast became one of the most published photographers of the Sixties. "Within two weeks I had photographed the Beatles and the Stones...nobody ever fazed me after that."

He credits his photographic fluency to chasing what's known as "the bull", as in bullseye – the centre spread of the Sketch's tabloid pages. "I thought, I've got to get that spread, and it was always in me. I'd plan one image, down to the last detail and it all worked from there." Listening to him describe the shots on these pages, it seems the words "Listen, I got this idea" seem to have prefaced most of them, whether Pete and Dud on lilos, or Raquel Welch on a crucifix.





Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, 1975. 'I rang up Dud who was by then a star - he'd just made *Arthur* - and I said "Listen, I got this idea for picture of Pete and Dud in Hollywood." They were always making jokes, like "bloody Raquel Welch was on the bus" or "I was sitting next to Greta bloody Garbo", you know. This was taken when Peter Cook was out of his head. Bloody Hollywood. I said, "If you don't go home, you're going to die, you're going to kill yourself, Pete". He was in a terrible state. He was a total wreck.' (Terry O'Neill)

He may have been mixing with the haute monde during daylight hours, but by night our skinny-tie wearing, quiff-sporting hero was bunking down on the floor of a friend's flat in Ladbroke Grove, "where nobody wanted to live". It doesn't seem to have dampened his spirits. "I was having the time of my life. Every young person had a chance, it didn't matter, you were all the same, and we all helped each other."

He makes no secret of his nostalgia for those heady days: "I wouldn't know how to succeed in today's world, if I was starting again. I don't know where I'd get the inspiration. Back then film stars were film stars, they had personalities, the secret to their success was hard work, resilience. Now it's 15 minutes of fame. I don't want to do people in X Factor and Get Me Out of Here. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. Everyone would do somebody over today sooner than help them. I don't know what's happened to the world."

He hasn't given up photographing entirely: "If Eric Clapton phones up and wants me to photograph him, I'll do it. And I did Pele at the beginning of this year, and Mandela of course – meeting someone like him, pure goodness – but there's not many."

Next on his agenda is a book of his rock and roll back catalogue. He owns albums in the thousands and listens to music at all hours. He's a jazz obsessive (hence the teen drummer dreams). Of all the photographs he's ever taken, it's only Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie that adorn the walls of his Battersea home.



Frank Sinatra, 1968. 'This was the moment I first met him. He hadn't seen me yet, and he came around the corner striding across the boardwalk with all his bodyguards and his body double. It was really intimidating.' (Terry O'Neill)

His perfect sitter? "Frank Sinatra. Because as long as you're with him, you're the best". His worst he won't divulge – "I never wanted to stay around to see the bad side...There was a time [with Sinatra] when I pulled back. He wanted to go drinking, for us to hang out, and I realised if I was sitting there drinking, somebody else would be taking the photographs, and I wanted to be taking the photographs. Drinking, that wasn't my idea of a good time".

In fact, for a Sixties photographer, he's pretty hard on partying. "When the Beatles started to become famous, they switched from living during the day to living at night. And I couldn't do that. I wanted to be in the office at 8 in the morning. Drugs, I find obnoxious, they're the worst bloody disease the world's known."

So if it wasn't the revelry, what was the best thing about being a photographer at that time? "It was like I was doing something important, I used to love that. I used to work every single day of the week, I didn't care, Saturday, Sunday."

You begin to see why O'Neill always gets the gold – his willing, ray of sunshine manner must have seemed a strange and marvellous thing compared with the David Baileys of this world. He's enthusiastic about everything, leaning forward, chopping and sweeping at the table between us with his bear-like hands. In the middle of our interview his phone rings - it's David Montgomery, fellow veteran of the Sixties. "Miss you, Dave," he says. "Lots of love."

So what's the secret to his longevity? "Make people forget they're being photographed. Make yourself invisible. I never wanted attention; I wouldn't want to be famous. I'm happy being anonymous, living where I live, with my music and my memories. I read [Scott Turow, a biography of Bill Shankly and the Obama campaign exposé Double Down are currently on his bedside table], I watch TV [Homeland - "That girl's not attractive though, is she? She drives my wife mad" - and Borgen], I take the bus to Knightsbridge if I want to go shopping, I like going out for dinner. I'm very happy. I hope I have another 20 years."

No regrets then? "Honestly, no. I mean I wish I could relive it all. And I wish I'd kept all my negs, someone somewhere is sitting on a pile of those. And the memorabilia. None of us dreamt of keeping any of that stuff. When I think of the money I could make out of all that."