

My Favourite Picture

By Derek Cattani

A few years ago I was asked “what was the best photo I have ever taken?” Having been a professional photographer for the best part of 40 years and working for probably the greatest newspaper in the world, the *Sunday Times*, this was possibly an impossible question to answer. I have been fortunate to have covered the 1966 World Cup as photographer for the England Team, so my shot of England Captain Bobby Moore holding the Jules Rimet World Cup Winning Trophy aloft should count within the top 3 of my chart. Then there was the Olympic Games in Mexico, the `clenched fists` of the Black runners, the famous World record long jump leap, and the England yacht dingy boys of Patterson and Co winning the Gold medal. I was there to capture each moment for my newspaper. Back in London I had a daily run of feature and news stories to challenge me: the exclusive image of a dead Notting Hill gangster being loaded into a “make shift” police coffin at 5am which the *Daily Mail* published full spread, centre page and had the press complaints office charge them with “bad publicity” (extreme but true); “one to one” photo sessions with the likes of Nureyev and Liz Taylor at the Savoy Hotel, US president Richard Nixon, Prime Minister Edward Heath, as well as a portrait session with the then PM Margaret Thatcher at No.10. I also had a very special 3 minutes with HM The Queen at Buckingham Palace which I had to be ready for some 4 hours before the shoot!

And then my dear friend Ace asks me what my favourite photo is of Christian whom I had been taking photos of during an incredible year in 1970.

My chance meeting with John Rendall and Ace Bourke at a London Chelsea party, changed, unknown to me, my whole life, not only as photographer but as an animal lover. What unfolded in the months to come from this chance meeting was to meet with Christian the Lion. Ace had invited me to come to Sophisto-Cat a pine furniture shop in the Kings Road Chelsea where he and John worked. I followed up their invitation a few days later and arrived by chance to see this amazing cuddly lion cub being carried from the shop window by Jennifer Mary the shop manager. “I won’t be a minute Just giving him some lunch” she said, and there was me, face to face with this wide eyed bundle lapping away at a bowl of food. I was completely mesmerized and I just sat on the floor spell bound. I didn’t take a single shot at that first meeting – something told me to take in just being with an amazing animal. This was January 1970 and Christian was five months old.

The days and weeks that followed spread into a pattern of patience and understanding. I would arrive at Sophisto-Cat at different times. Christian was like any cat, either asleep or playing, or just observing and each time I quietly took my place in the shop, now with my camera, and waited. Never forcing the need to take a photo, Christian slowly accepted me into his *human* pride, all be it this odd young guy with a camera.

Never a meeting passed without a photo event, be it “play time”, chewing on a straw bin, or a walk down Kings Road or should I say carried, he was quite a lazy lad, and happy to be taken by car or being supported between John and Ace across the road. Then there were his “hide and seek” football sessions in the walled gardens of the Moravian Close where he was either jumping on me or deflating yet another ball during his pursuit of John and Ace between the trees, all of which made the most brilliant images.

My times alone with him were just as amazing. Christian had the most penetrating eyes I have ever experienced either animal or human. It was as if he was looking beyond a space in

time, an adventure yet to unfold. We would make eye contact and he would at times focus through me, as if to be watching the next episode of his life in Africa, which we were all to experience later on that year.

I would really like to instantly say my favourite shot is ... ! Then I contradict myself and recall the moment I caught him playing with a handful of day old chicks, or a playful moment with Ace and the World award winning shot of him in full flight biting the behind of John in Moravian Close. Also, the days I spent in the flat above the shop, as he padded from one room to another, playing balancing acts on the very expensive TV, or John's leather chair, and his favourite place the bathroom. Then there is the three of them on the banks of the Tana River in Africa, and Africa being a whole period I haven't even touched on with so many wonderful images to re-live.

In the past two years I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to once again exhibit many of the images of Christian, and to share with those that came to the Proud and Saatchi galleries in Chelsea, London and to stand and look again at the photos of an animal that has changed my life and quite probably the lives of millions of other people around the world.

Through the wonderful book written by John and Ace and the web and world media, Christian has become an ambassador for wildlife preservation. Together with the George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust and Tony Fitzjohn, and with the support of Ace and John we all continue the fight for wildlife preservation. And my favourite picture of Christian... they all are!

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