

# In Conversation with John Bulmer

by Philip Gray

A renowned documentary photographer and film maker, John Bulmer first came to prominence as one of a groundbreaking group during the 1960s; along with Don McCullin, David Bailey, Terence Donovan, Philip Jones Griffiths and others, they are remembered as the 'Young Meteors' of photography.

● **You were an experienced photographer by the time you went to university. Did your fascination with photography date back to school days?**

Yes. I had a darkroom at home and even built my first enlarger using Meccano and old tin cans: perhaps I was really destined to be an engineer.

When I went up to Cambridge to study engineering almost the first thing I did was go to the offices of the student newspaper Varsity to sign up with them as a photographer. They took me on and I did a variety of assignments for them right from the start of my university days.

● **I believe you also had other outlets for your photography while you were still at Cambridge.**

I started to take photographs for the Daily Express, working as a 'stringer' and sending them pictures of events within the university. I also had work published in Queen Magazine and Life Magazine.

● **You left the world of engineering after university when the Daily Express became your first employer.**

That's right. I joined the paper as a photographer in 1960 and went on to work on a wide variety of assignments for them over the next two years. Those were the days when all newspaper photography was in black and white of course.

At that time I was also producing some work for the monthly fashion magazine Town before I went on to join the The Sunday Times Magazine when it started in 1962. There was no photojournalism in colour at this time, even Life Magazine did all their news stories in black and white; colour photographs were mainly limited to subjects such as fashion. The Sunday Times was casting around for photographers with experience of working in colour: they may not have realised at the time but they became pioneers of the concept of photojournalism in colour.

● **You must have been a pioneer in another sense because you chose to work with 35mm rangefinders rather than larger rollfilm cameras.**

I worked with a Canon rangefinder when I was still at Cambridge but had switched to Leicas by the time I arrived at The Express. I used an M2 and an M3 for all my wide-angle work, but I found it harder to focus

with longer lenses on the Leicas, so I worked with an SLR when it came to the longer lens shots.

● **Your early Sunday Times work, particularly work in the north of England, is remembered for the way in which you chose poorer lighting conditions to produce such effective colour images - at a time when so many early colour photographers were searching for rich sunshine.**

I always felt that black and white photography is a kind of abstraction process where you are simplifying a complex world into something that is strong enough to give impact or a gut message. If you simply add colour to that equation then you make things too fussy and over complex. I think the photographers who worked for Picture Post weren't used to that simplification and their pictures often had too much 'stuff' in them.

● **What films did you use for your early colour work?**

I started with High Speed Ektachrome but I found it had relatively poor resolution and was very grainy. My staple film soon became 64 ASA Ektachrome X, particularly for working in bad light. Kodachrome may have been very sharp but at 25 ASA it was just too slow for the light I was working in. The Sunday Times had a darkroom for black and white work of course but I don't think they did any colour work in those days, so I used an independent laboratory for all processing.

● **Did you work with a particular editor on the Sunday Times?**

I mostly worked with the Features Editor or with the Art Director Michael Rand after he arrived in 1963. I remember too many colour montages in the early days, whereas Michael had the courage to select a few good pictures and run them large. Things really started to change because he had a wonderful eye.

● **Were you also providing editorial content to accompany your pictures?**

Very often I worked with a writer, certainly on most of the early stories. I did a great deal of work with the journalist Richard West. We went all over Africa and South America working on stories.

In the old days on the Daily Express, journalists would talk about 'my photographer'. Things became quite different on the Sunday Times with photographers and journalists working in genuine partnership.

● **Then in the mid-1970s you moved from still photography into documentary film making. What prompted that move?**

The first reason was that this was a time when advertisers were beginning to have an increased influence on editorial content: companies paying for lifestyle advertisements were not exactly happy to see pictures of famine. I remember the new editor asking for more stories on middle-class living and fashion: I had no doubt that was the result of commercial pressures.

The second reason was that I was beginning to work more and more on my own for American magazines: travelling the world like a gipsy can be quite a lonely business. I liked the idea of film making because projects had a definite beginning, middle and end. It also means working more as part of a team.

● **Your extensive list of film credits went on to include the BBC, Discovery Channel and National Geographic, but how did you start in the industry?**

Breaking into film making wasn't easy in those days. I had to do some still photography as well during the 1970s because I needed to make a living. I had drifted away from the Sunday Times by then and was photographing for various magazines, including Geo. By the 1980s I was working full time in film making and by the 1990s I was making my own films working entirely as director cameraman.

I had full responsibility for each project, shooting out on location then coming back to the cutting room for several weeks to edit the final film. I still had to travel widely during the filming but the months spent editing the projects meant I could also have home life again and be less of a gipsy.

● **Did you work exclusively on 16mm film?**

Everything was shot on 16mm film and I used Eastmancolor right from the start. This was a colour negative film and it wasn't particularly fast, particularly using filters.

I was seriously ill after a trip to New Guinea and took a long time to recover fully. I have always been a firm believer in moving on when it feels right and It was time to think about giving up lugging camera equipment through the jungle. But I never really forgot still photography during my film making career, I just put it on one side.

● **Now you are busy cataloguing your extensive still photography archive.**

Films cost a great deal of money to make so they are owned by the people who funded each one: all I have is a large collection of them on DVD. Still photographs are different. I have a large archive of my still photographs and there must be many that have never been seen.

The one problem I have is that nobody seems to be collecting digital images centrally. There are national print and negative collections, and the V&A now has the Royal Photographic Society archive: what I found extraordinary is that they said they do not collect digital images.

The early Sunday Times Magazine pictures may well be historically significant now but they were all taken on transparency film and are now beginning to fade: we did not make prints from them in those days. This is why I am scanning and working on most of the important shots, trying to sort them into an organised archive. If any members of the Society have suggestions about ways of making that archive more widely available perhaps they could share them by contacting the Editor.



**MORE INFORMATION**

John Bulmer's website at [www.johnbulmer.co.uk](http://www.johnbulmer.co.uk) includes a number of his still images from various projects as well as film clips.

Books by John Bulmer

- The North, published Bluecoat, 2013
- The Wind of Change, published Bluecoat, 2014

**A selection of photographs by John Bulmer - all originally shot in black and white, many in the early 1960s**



Continued overleaf ►



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*Guyana*



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