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IAN WRIGHT

Catching budding stars



DAVID BECKER/VIEW

Photographer Ian Wright discusses how large some photography equipment was during the 1960s, when he began his career. Wright sits with a copy of his book "On the Brink of Fame: Pop Stars in The Swinging '60s," with Ella Fitzgerald shown in a 1962 photo.

Resident shoots trove of photos featuring performers in infancy of careers

By JAN HOGAN

VIEW STAFF WRITER

In 1962, when Ian Wright, now of Summerlin, was 15, he signed on as a junior — or unpaid — photographer for Teenage Special, a new supplement to a newspaper in England.

"They started the supplement so the teenagers would badger their parents to buy the paper," Wright said.

Too young to drive, Wright strapped a heavy camera to his bicycle and pedalled to local clubs, wherever there was live entertainment.

His assignment — photograph everyone on the bill. His directive — keep all the negatives. The thinking — you never know who's going to become famous.

As a result, the teen captured hundreds of shots from early concerts and backstage

moments of performers such as Mick Jagger, Roy Orbison, Elton John, Jimi Hendrix and The Beatles.

His first picture of a rising star was of Ella Fitzgerald. She kept him waiting for an hour, and when she allowed him into the dressing room, she told him he could only take one picture.

"I developed the film, saw the shot, and cried, 'Thank God she didn't blink,'" he

recalled.

Another singer whom he photographed was a then-unknown named Tom Jones.

"The first time I saw him, I thought he was a trucker," Wright said. "I could barely understand him, with that Welsh accent of his."

Jones asked Wright to make sure the rabbit's foot hanging off of his belt was in the shot.

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► PHOTOS: Wright recalls Beatles encounter

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It was a good luck present from his wife and his child. Jones explained that he didn't have money for postage, so displaying the charm in a picture would tell his family that he was thinking of them.

By far, the group whose potential was obvious to everyone was The Beatles, Wright said. He said George Harrison was quiet and "had three cigarettes going at once."

Wright said that Paul McCartney was interested in photography and asked a lot of questions about Wright's darkroom. He said John Lennon was shy and nervous and hid it by making funny faces.

Ringo Starr was, hands down, "the clown of the lot," Wright explained. But Starr also was the one who had the patience to sign every auto-

graph after the show, Wright said.

Wright posed the Fab Four in an old-fashioned elevator in the theater — his way of illustrating that the band was on its way up.

One singer who was friends with the young Wright was Gerry Dorsey.

The two actually lived within a couple of blocks of each other and Dorsey was at Wright's home the night Dorsey took a new stage name.

"He made such an impact on Ian," said Wright's wife, Lauren, a travel editor.

She said her husband "was always talking about him — Gerry Dorsey, Gerry Dorsey. For the longest time, I had no idea he was talking about Engelbert Humperdinck."

The name change was the brainchild of the singer's

manager Gordon Mills, who also wrote Tom Jones' smash hit "It's Not Unusual."

Jagger, of the Rolling Stones, was another talent whom Wright photographed before he became famous. No matter how late the band played, Wright recalled, the lanky lad made it home in time for school the next day for his studies in economics. That business savvy, Wright said, served Jagger well, molding the Rolling Stones into a multi-million dollar enterprise.

Wright molded himself, too. He went on to become a globe-trotting photographer for Newsweek, Time, Look and Life magazines.

His assignments had him photographing celebrities — Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole, Jayne Mansfield, Sophia Loren, Peter Usti-



PHOTOS BY DAVID BECKER/MFW

Left, Ian Wright peers through a frame while standing in front of his photos of Jimi Hendrix, left, and the Rolling Stones. Above, Wright discusses his work while holding a copy of his book.

nov, Rex Harrison, Michael Crawford and members of England's royal family.

The photographs from his bicycling days were forgotten for decades.

But they recently resurfaced, and Wright, now 63, put them into a book, along with his recollections of meeting the stars.

The book is titled "On the Brink of Fame: Pop Stars in The Swinging '60s." Wright's wife helped compile the stories

that accompany the pictures.

Some of the photos are on display at the Morrison Hotel Gallery in La Jolla, Calif., and locally at Star Studios, 5565 S. Decatur Blvd.

Wright is slated to be a speaker at the second annual Las Vegas Fest for Beatles Fans, set for June 29 through July 1 at The Mirage.

For more information on Wright's book, those who are interested can visit www.onthebrinkoffame.com.