



Young guns

The Lex van Rossen Award celebrates the best in young music photography, discovers [Diane Smyth](#), who caught up with some of the finalists

Above: Image ©
Vrederick.

Right: Image ©
Janos Helderman.



Shooting for a rock magazine sounds like any young music fan's ideal job, but Graham Smith, winner of this year's prestigious Lex van Rossen Award, has found success by avoiding commissions altogether.

'After shooting for the music press and individual bands for several years I began to get uncomfortable and bored with it all,' he says. 'I hated the promo shoot style and the standard live gig jobs, and I found it increasingly soulless. It lacked a real, natural, genuine connection with the musicians. Eventually it all

came to a head and I stopped wasting my time doing things I really hated. I got out of the music photography business and got into the business of taking music photographs.'

Instead Smith, who manages bands on tour, started documenting musicians and their lives both on and off stage, creating an intimate body of fly-on-the-wall shots. Ironically, this work is now regularly published by music magazines, and recently won Smith the 2500 Lex van Rossen prize. '[Shooting in this way] had an enormous positive effect on



my photography, both with the bands I tour-manage and with relations with other musicians,' he says.

'It has helped to make me less like another member of the media and more as "one of them". I have found I am trusted more than I was, and the doors I found locked for years are now opening.'

'Three no flash'

Smith says that the 'first three, no flash' rule in force at many music venues – in which photographers are herded into a photo-pit and allowed access

for just the first three songs of a concert – has made live music photographers' work particularly hard, and although she is happily working for Dutch music magazine *Oor*, Lex van Rossen finalist Titia Hahne echoes his words. 'You can only take pictures at the start of the show, without using a flash,' she says. 'But at the end of the show the artists are usually tired, in a sort of trance or all sweaty. Those pictures do tell a lot more about the way the artist and crowd enjoy music but they are a lot more difficult to take nowadays.'

Hahne prefers to take portraits, working on pre-arranged shoots but aiming for a nonchalant, relaxed style. 'I've been focusing more on the singers, taking really close-up portraits,' she says. 'The most important aspect in those close-ups is the look of the eyes – by getting so close to the artist, I'm trying to avoid their standard poses and have them discard their stage persona. I love working with black-and-white film, but I've been using more and more colour film, minimising the palette by using neutral-coloured film and a black or white background.'

Joachim Zimmerman, another Lex van Rossen finalist this year, also avoids live shoots, arguing that the strict control exerted by music venues leaves photographers with very little control over their images. 'Because the positions are set [at the venues] you can only passively shoot, with basically no influence on the setting,' he says. 'I'm much more interested in staging a shoot after I've had time to think about the picture and the band or artist.'

He avoids creating glossy, super-perfect images, though, describing his aesthetic as 'between natural

Above: Image
© Joachim
Zimmerman.





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composed-trash and classical technical'. 'There's been a move away from perfect lighting and perfect arrangements,' says Zimmerman, who shoots for German titles *Intro*, *Visions Musikmagazin* and *Opak*. 'Instead photographers try to capture the moment and pay less attention to putting the band in a line and always having the singer in the forefront. Nowadays there is a shorter distance to the band and you can try out more.'

Antigloss

Smith agrees with him, adding that he's actively trying to avoid bland, posed work. 'Photography

appears to have gone from being quite a specialised and geeky thing to the new cool, and I sometimes worry that young photographers are doing it for the wrong reasons,' he says. 'There is too much emphasis on gloss and everything being razor sharp and, in my opinion, blandly lit. I would much rather see a grainy out-of-focus photo if it actually has some soul and passion rather than another standard stock library-style image.'

For Ami Barwell, whose work is shown on this week's cover, the problem is the music magazines which, she says, pressed by difficult economic decisions,

are going for the cheapest photographic option. 'Only a handful of music magazines pay nowadays because there's always an amateur photographer willing to shoot for free,' she says. 'It seems that picture editors don't care about the quality anymore – if they can get someone to shoot for free, they generally will do, especially since the recession.'

Dutch photographer Jens van der Velde is more hopeful, arguing that the recession has actually made the public more open to documentary style. 'I believe people are interested in documentary, real photography because of the economic recession,' he says.



'But as photographer you have to find and to promote your way of thinking and visualising. It's all about being seen, being remembered or being so hot that people want to see your work. It's not important if they know you by magazines, websites or other media as long as they know you in the way you want.'

Documentary style

Van der Velde likes to shoot 'non-posed personalities', and has stuck to his guns despite facing some rejection from music magazines early on. Now he's happily working for *Oor* – the same magazine Hahne works

Above: Image © Kim Badawi.

Top right: Image © Jens van der Velde.

Right: Image © Titia Hahne.



Above: Image © Graham Smith.

Right: Image © Laurence Tarquin von Thomas.

Below: Image © Nick Heldermeren.



for, and the title that published Anton Corbijn's groundbreaking black-and-white music photography in the 1990s. 'I do live photography but my focus is on the best portrait picture,' he says. 'Sometimes posed, but mostly not – my photographs are always a surprise for the subject since the non-posed personality is given unconsciously. Just before the gig, or just after, those moments are real gifts for me.'

For Kim Badawi, though, like Smith, the key to success has been avoiding the music photography business altogether. A documentary photographer who has worked with *Newsweek*, *New York Magazine* and *Conde Nast's Gourmet*, he made the Lex van Rossen final with a series of images on Islamic punk rock, more properly known as Taqwacore, soon to be published as a book. 'I'm sure there are trends to be

monitored out there in young music photographers' work but I, surely like others, see each subject matter with slightly a different eye,' he says.

Nick Heldermeren agrees. 'Although there are a lot of photographers who can't seem to go without the 'rock angles' and overdose of contrast and saturation, there are also people who are starting to approach music more autonomously,' he says. 'I'm inspired by photographers such as Glen E Friedman, who documented early hardcore punk bands. It was a scene that existed entirely outside of the music industry, and that wasn't influenced by the primary goal of making as much money as possible. That's the approach I want to document and feel inspired by, not by music as an entertainment form represented through visual rock and roll clichés.' **BJP**

On view

The Lex van Rossen Award, which is part of the PopView festival for young music photographers, selects 10 nominees every year. This year's winner was Graham Smith and the nine other finalists were Kim Badawi, Ami Barwell, Titia Hahne, Nick Heldermeren, Janos Kummer, Jens van der Velde, Vrederick, Laurence Tarquin Von Thomas and Joachim Zimmermann. The finalists' images are on show at the Photogallery Nooderlicht, Groningen, Netherlands until 28 February. It will move to London later this year. www.popview.eu.