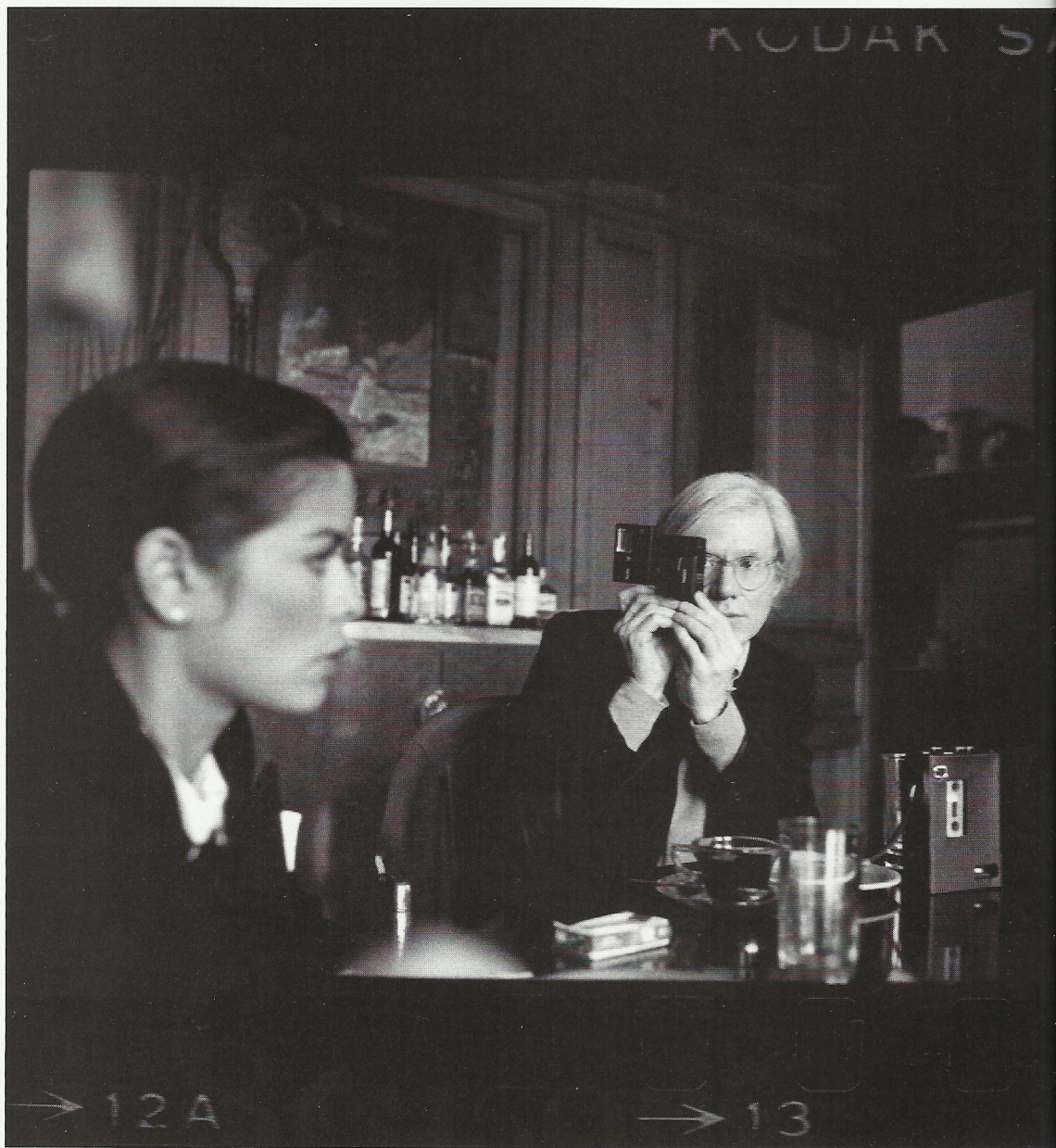


ANDY WARHOL, THE ARTIST, NEVER
WITHOUT HIS TAPE RECORDER
AND POLAROID CAMERA,
PHOTOGRAPHING BIANCA JAGGER,
HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATE, DURING
LUNCH AT WARHOL'S FAMOUS STUDIO,
THE FACTORY. NEW YORK CITY, 1977



Harry Benson

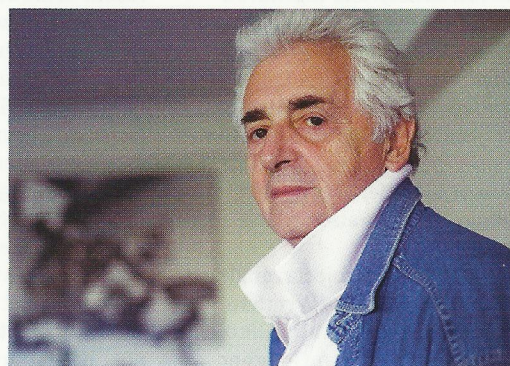
takes MANHATTAN

BY LEIGH CRANDALL



PORTRAIT (BELOW): PHOTOGRAPHS @HARRY BENSON; ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY HARRY BENSON FROM NEW YORK, NEW YORK (POWERHOUSE BOOKS); PHOTO TEXT BY HILARY GEARY ROSS.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S
 LATEST BOOK
 TURNS THE LENS ON
 LEGENDARY NEW YORKERS,
past and present.





JULIAN SCHNABEL, ACCLAIMED ARTIST AND AWARD-WINNING FILMMAKER, IN HIS STUDIO AT PALAZZO CHUPI IN THE WEST VILLAGE, NEW YORK CITY, 2011.

It's 10 a.m. on a crisp fall day when I arrive at photographer Harry Benson and his wife Gigi's Upper East Side apartment. The soft light of morning illuminates the sophisticated living room as a dachshund and a pug (Tillie and Daisy, respectively) bark in unison and the famous lensman strolls inside from the balcony, clad in khakis. Mr. Benson and Gigi have a practiced rapport—she the welcoming hostess to his refreshingly frank curmudgeon. As we talk he delivers one-liners about the dogs (“You’re an embarrassment! I’ve never seen such badness!”) and the refreshments (“Gigi, Leigh’s very upset there’s no tea!”). But clearly Mr. Benson adores his wife, who, he says, “does everything,” and who also collaborates on all of his projects.

Mr. Benson's pictures of subjects ranging from Ronald Reagan to Andrew Wyeth to Truman Capote adorn most of the walls of their home, a small glimpse into a long and highly successful photography career during which Mr. Benson has documented some of the biggest moments in U.S. history. He was on the James Meredith march with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1966, feet away from Bobby

Kennedy when he was assassinated in 1968, and in the room with Richard Nixon when he resigned in 1974. He has also photographed every U.S. president from Eisenhower to Obama, as well as countless celebrities. He was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in January 2009, and has released 15 books of his photos, the most recent being a collection entitled *New York, New York* (powerHouse Books, \$85), which I've come to discuss today.

But first there's the matter of the particularly famous picture hanging on the wall in front of us, an oversize black and white print of four young men (namely John, Paul, George, and Ringo) engaged in a no-holds-barred pillow fight at the George V Hotel in Paris.

“I was in their room,” Mr. Benson recalls, in his wry Scottish lilt. “And one of the Beatles had said, ‘That was some pillow fight we had the other night.’ And I thought, well, that’s not a bad picture. But there was another photographer from the *Daily Mail* there [at that moment], and I wasn’t about to make it a team picture. Two nights later we’re back in the room, late at night after the show and it was just the Beatles and myself. And then

Brian Epstein comes in to say, “‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ is number one in America.’ Great! Everyone’s happy. Then he comes in about 10 minutes later, and says, ‘We’re on *The Ed Sullivan Show!*’ Epstein left the room and I said, ‘How about a pillow fight?’ And they all said yes, and then John Lennon said, ‘No, we don’t want to do it. It would make us look childish. And it’s time to look more mature.’ And the rest go, ‘Yeah, that’s right.’ Then John slips away and Paul is drinking a brandy. Then John comes up and hits him in the back of the head [with a pillow]. And that started the whole thing.”

Being on tour with music’s most famous foursome and eventually becoming an internationally renowned artist himself wasn’t always what Mr. Benson imagined life would hold. Born and raised in Scotland, he left school at the age of 13 and worked odd jobs for several years, eventually enrolling in the Glasgow School of Art. “I wasn’t that good,” he says matter-of-factly. “You can’t be good at art. You’ve to be great at it. It’s not a thing that one can be mediocre at. That’s the way I’ve always thought about it. I was more interested in playing soccer. So I never went to any classes.”



HALSTON, THE LEGENDARY DESIGNER, AND ENTERTAINER LIZA MINNELLI AT HALSTON'S OLYMPIC TOWER OFFICE. NEW YORK CITY, 1978.



BROOKE ASTOR AT THE MAIN BRANCH OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, ONE OF THE MANY INSTITUTIONS SHE CHAMPIONED. NEW YORK CITY, 1988.

Mr. Benson's photography education instead came through hands-on experience, and he began with shooting weddings. "The thing about weddings is that they do discipline you," he says with a chuckle. "It's dead serious. Meaning that at a wedding, people want a nice picture of the bride, and a nice picture of the bride and groom, and the families. And they want it to look very proper." Other jobs included work at a holiday camp, where Mr. Benson "took pictures of nobbly knee contests," and a term at local weekly paper, *The Hamilton Advertiser*, before heading to London's Fleet Street in the late '50s, where he worked first at the *Daily Sketch* and then at the *Daily Express*.

"One night I'm home and the phone rings," Mr. Benson remembers. "And [my editor] says, we would like you to go to Paris in the morning with the Beatles. They're starting their first tour. At that point I'd really only done news and I was already going to Africa to do a big story on the independence [movements]—I'm a serious photojournalist!" he says, laughing. "Of course I ended up going to Paris, though I wasn't particularly happy in doing it. And the first night [the Beatles] opened in Fontainebleau—just a little gig in a kind of church-hallish place. But before they go on, I go back to my car for another piece of equipment. Walking back into the hall I hear, 'Close your eyes and I'll kiss you ...' and I thought, wow, I *am* on the right story."

And so, with the Beatles, Mr. Benson came to the U.S. for the first time in 1964, arriving on the tarmac of JFK Airport to the sound of screaming fans. He felt an instant connection to the city. "It doesn't let you down," he explains of the attraction to New York. "You go other places, and there's just something missing."

New York, New York focuses the city's boldfaced names of past and present. Hilary Geary Ross, a longtime friend of the Bensons' who wrote the book's text, explains that the idea for it was hatched over dinner in Palm Beach, where both she and her husband and the Bensons have homes.

"Harry has all of these amazing photographs from his incredible career," says Mrs. Geary Ross on the phone from London. "He had so many pictures of dynamic New Yorkers starting in the '60s when he arrived. And we thought it would be wonderful to fold in his old photographs with new photographs and get a wonderful history of New York." The result is 320 pages of striking historical images of politicians, tycoons, athletes, and artists (Barry Diller, Barbra Streisand, and Andy Warhol to name a few) combined with new images of



JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS, DOUBLEDAY EDITOR AND FORMER FIRST LADY, RIDING IN A CHECKER CAB, NEW YORK CITY, 1972.

current-day figures like Michael Bloomberg and Diana Taylor, Julian Schnabel, and Matt Lauer created specifically for the book.

Mr. Benson continues to prefer a photojournalistic approach to his work and looks for spontaneity and an “urgent” feeling to images. “Speed isn’t everything—it’s the only thing,” he explains. “You want to move fast and you don’t want a lot of people with you. All my best pictures have been taken when I’ve been alone [with the subject].”

“Harry is a true gentleman,” adds Mrs. Geary Ross. “He has talent and his manner puts people at ease very quickly. And he’s trained as a photojournalist, so he doesn’t take a long time. What more can you ask for? Someone who is charming, quick, talented. It’s remarkable.”

But Mr. Benson isn’t overly precious about his subjects or his work. As we flip through his books together, he’s open about whom he enjoyed working with (and whom he didn’t) and is quick to poke fun at himself if he feels like he’s bragging. He admits that his opinion of his work can change over the years, too. “Sometimes, years later, pictures take on a whole new interest and become historic in a way—it wasn’t quite as dopey as you thought it was.”

One thing Mr. Benson truly can’t abide, however, is the hoopla of publicists and managers and the back and forth that’s

often the norm with celebrity photography nowadays, and he’s also not a fan of digitally altering images. “They always say photographs don’t lie, but they do now because we manipulate them. They’re moving things around and that’s not photography. I don’t do it,” he explains, sounding passionate, not bitter.

He also remains unabashedly enthusiastic about the city that’s been his hometown for decades now. For the book title, he considered *We’ll Take Manhattan*, “because Manhattan is a great name,” he says, a grin coming to his face. “There’s not a better name. Where do you live? I live in Manhattan! It has a Ziegfeld Follies quality to it. And that never left me, that thing about New York. It’s an exciting place to be.”



KAREN AND RICHARD LEFRAK WITH THEIR CHAMPION STANDARD POODLES, MIKI AND GEM, IN FRONT OF THE ELLSWORTH KELLY PAINTING GREY SAILS IN THEIR TOWNHOUSE, NEW YORK CITY, 2009.