

“I married George in a Mary Quant red fox-fur coat. Paul McCartney was the best man”

Pattie Boyd

Photographer, model and muse of George Harrison and Eric Clapton

THE
MAGAZINE
INTERVIEW
SARFRAZ
MANZOOR



In 1967, a coffee-table book was published called *Birds of Britain*. It contained a collection of photographs of women who the photographer John D Green considered epitomised the Swinging Sixties. “Resplendent!” is how Anthony Haden-Guest described them in his introduction. “Sauntering, strolling, sitting, driving around the chosen streets and squares of central London... warm vortices of flesh, supercool in sunglasses and flaming in a rag-bag kaleidoscope of stuffs and styles.” Among the women were Marianne Faithfull, Charlotte Rampling, Dusty Springfield and Julie Christie, but featured on the book’s cover was Pattie Boyd, the original It Girl and model, who was married to George Harrison at the time.

Boyd was the subject of *Something*, a Harrison song that became one of the most covered Beatles tracks, and which Frank Sinatra considered the greatest love song ever written. She was also the inspiration for *Layla* and *Wonderful Tonight*, two songs by Eric Clapton, whom Boyd married after her divorce from Harrison. Three of the greatest love songs ever recorded, all written about the woman sitting opposite me.

We are in Boyd’s flat, a short walk from Kensington High Street, in west London. She is now 72, still naturally glamorous and, unlike so many others, shows no sign of having had any cosmetic surgery. There is a copy of *Birds of Britain*, which has not aged as well as Boyd, on her bookshelf. The cover photograph of the book is a close-up of Boyd’s face with a Union Jack-shelled beetle on her nose, a sly reference to her relationship to Harrison. “I remember seeing it in a bookshop on the King’s Road and I was horrified,” she says. “All those books with me on the cover. I thought it was really embarrassing.”

Now it is Boyd behind the lens. An exhibition of her photographs, entitled *George, Eric and Me: A Personal Collection*, is at *The Beatles Story*, in Liverpool. She has been taking photographs since the 1960s, using her privileged access to the rich, famous and talented to

reveal them in their most intimate and unguarded moments. The exhibition includes her images of a topless George Harrison looking soulfully at the camera as he lies on a bed in southern India after two weeks of meditation; Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton slumped on a hotel sofa the night before Live Aid; and John, Paul and Ringo hanging out with the Maharishi.

Boyd met Harrison in 1964 when she was a 19-year-old model who had already appeared in *Vogue*. “In those days, we would turn up at a studio, do our own hair and make-up and bring our own shoes and stockings and accessories,” she says. “Models now are more pampered than we were. I would rather be a model when I was. It was a hobby and it was fun; today it is an industry.”

Through her modelling contacts, she had been invited to a casting call for the Beatles’ film *A Hard Day’s Night*. She played a schoolgirl on the train — and was dressed in school uniform. Her one line was: “Are they looking for prisoners?” Harrison made sure he sat next to her at lunch and his first words to her were: “Will you marry me?” For their first date they had dinner at the Garrick Club, the Beatles’ manager, Brian Epstein, joining them. On her 20th birthday, she introduced him to her family, Harrison arriving in a silver Jaguar E-type.

Being the girlfriend of a Beatle gave Boyd a view of Beatlemania from the inside. They travelled to Tahiti and Barbados, and Boyd was with Harrison when he visited the heart of the hippie counterculture in San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury.

“I don’t remember ever seeing a plane ticket or showing my passport,” she says. “There must have been passports and tickets involved somewhere along the line, I suppose.” The couple were married in January 1966. “We went to Epsom register office and Paul McCartney was the best man,” she recalls. “I wore a red fox-fur coat that Mary Quant made for me, and she made a black Mongolian lamb coat for George. I thought, ‘This is it, we are sealing a declaration of’



GETTY

LIFE AFTER ROCK
Right: Boyd with the property developer Rod Weston, whom she married last year

love together for ever and we are going to live happily ever after.”

She was sent hate mail by jealous fans. “It could be quite frightening at times,” she says. “I saw them play at the Hammersmith Odeon and I thought I was rather well disguised, with different hair and make-up. I got up to leave and suddenly these girls came after me, kicking me from behind, pulling my hair. It was kind of scary.”

The Beatles had become so famous so young that they had “no time to look after themselves, so they got used to being looked after”, she says. Boyd was happy to give Harrison some domestic stability, cooking and taking care of him.

The wives and partners were not allowed into the recording studio, but Boyd saw Harrison’s frustration at not having the band record more of the songs he had written. “Coming back from a recording studio, George would be annoyed and irritated,” she recalls, “because he would go there and they would all bring songs and they would go through them and decide which they would record, and it seemed as if George was never allowed, or given a chance, to record any of his. He was allowed two on an album and that used to really piss him off. Paul pissed him off more than John.”

Away from the studio, life with Harrison meant Boyd met a dizzying number of musical greats. “George and I were in Los Angeles and we heard that Frank Sinatra wanted to meet him,” she says. “We went to the studio, and into the control room, and Frank was there, and we were introduced to him. In the studio was a full orchestra. Frank said, ‘Hello.’ He went into the studio and sang My Way once, nailed it and then said, ‘Come on, let’s go get dinner.’”

She met Elvis when he invited them backstage following a concert at Madison Square Garden. “We went into his dressing room, but he wasn’t there — he was in the loo, and then he walked out of the loo looking like a god in a white suit and flared trousers. Fabulous! Just fabulous!”

Presley, Sinatra, Dylan and the rest only wanted to meet Boyd because of her husband. To the outside world, she was, in her words, “Mrs Famous George”, but she was more than just a glamorous appendage to Harrison. It was her interest in meditation and the teachings of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi that turned Harrison and the other Beatles onto him and which led



to the group visiting India in 1968. Look at the archive and there she is, dressed in flowery orange dresses, alongside Mia Farrow and her sister Prudence — the inspiration for Dear Prudence — and the Beatles. “India was amazing because it gave them two months to be alone,” she says, “and they wrote all the songs for the White Album.”

India was to mark the start of the end of her relationship with Harrison. On their return, he decided he wanted to be a Krishna figure and that monogamy no longer held the same appeal as having many concubines. He turned meditative and moody, and began to drink. “George just opened his eyes and realised he was in a pretty good position,” she says. “Not only was he famous, but he was also incredibly good-looking, and whenever he went to London there would be lots of pretty girls waiting for his arrival, and lots of great-looking girls in the office.”

He started sleeping with other women and the infidelity affected Boyd’s self-confidence. She may have appeared to have the perfect life — a Beatle husband, a 25-bedroom mansion and a successful modelling career — but the reality was rather different. She was forever hungry and took diet pills to stay slim. While it wasn’t a term used at the time, she now says she was probably anorexic. Meanwhile, her marriage to Harrison was disintegrating. In one diary entry she wrote: “silence reigns and my cheeks get wet”.

But as Harrison became increasingly distant, his great friend Eric Clapton was making his move. He wrote her lovestruck notes. At first Boyd resisted. Then, one day in 1970, Clapton invited her to his flat in South Kensington to play her a song he had written for Derek and the Dominoes. “He said, ‘I want you to hear one of the tracks we have just recorded with my band,’” she says, “and that was Layla. I thought, ‘Wow, this is fantastically powerful and desperate.’”

Layla was Clapton’s pet name for her — from the ancient Persian story of Layla and Majnun, about a poet driven mad by his love for a girl whom he could not have because she was promised to another.

Clapton would go on to write Wonderful Tonight, Bell Bottom Blues and The Shape You’re In — all

inspired by Boyd. How did she feel about being considered the ultimate muse? “In the past, muses were girls who were used and then thrown away.” She pauses, turns her head and thinks aloud: “Am I speaking about myself?” After a moment’s consideration, she decides, “No I don’t think so, I don’t think I was used.”

One frequently told story is that Clapton and Harrison fought a two-hour guitar duel in Harrison’s home for Boyd. “That story comes from John Hurt, who is a friend of ours,” she says. “The truth is that George was at home one day and Eric turned up and George gave Eric a guitar and they both played. I know what John means, though, because I did notice a slight tension between the two of them playing.”

Boyd stuck with Harrison for the next three years, only leaving when he slept with Ringo Starr’s wife. She married Clapton in 1979. Two months into the marriage, the couple held a reception where among those in attendance were Harrison, McCartney and Starr, who took part in a jam session alongside Mick Jagger, Elton John and David Bowie.

The life of rock royalty she had enjoyed with Harrison continued with Clapton. Once, in Memphis, the couple took a phone call saying that Elvis wanted to invite them to the movies. Presley would rent local cinemas and get them to show old movies from the 1950s for him and his invited friends. “I was thinking, ‘This is the life!’ It was unbelievable, so surreal,” she says. But her bliss was to be short-lived.

Clapton, who battled heroin addiction during their marriage and drank heavily, started cheating on her within a week of their wedding. Meanwhile, Boyd wanted to have a baby. “I had taken for granted that you grow up, get married and have children, and then I realised that this was not happening,” she says, her eyes starting to redden. “I started seeing doctors to see what was wrong, and started IVF.” It was while on IVF that she discovered Clapton had got another woman pregnant. Their marriage started to wither and eventually she and Clapton divorced. “When Eric and I split up, I really lost it,” she says. “I lost my reason for living. I lost who I was. That moment of security had dropped, like silk, from my fingers, and I had nothing to hang on to.”

What made it worse was that, as the divorce was taking place, “the press would show a photograph of some girl who Eric was seeing and say that it looks as if she is pregnant, so it seemed as if everyone in London was pregnant with Eric’s baby and here I was, utterly miserable”.

Having spent her twenties and thirties in a bubble of money and fame, Boyd was suddenly forced to return to normal life. She had not been awarded much money from either of her divorces. Now she found herself living in a tiny flat and trying to work out how to get around on public transport. “I had never seen an electricity bill or anything, so I had to go through a whole learning curve,” she says. “I lost myself in drink and drugs. It worked for a while, but when you go to bed

‘It seemed as if everyone in London was pregnant with Eric’s baby. I was utterly miserable’

GETTY, CAMERA PRESS, SCOPE FEATURES



at night the demons come rushing back. I was trying to escape and I didn’t know what to do or where to go.”

She started seeing a therapist twice a week. “I couldn’t wait to get in her room and lie on the floor and cry.” Through therapy Boyd began to tackle the identity crisis that came from having spent so much of her life as a muse to others. “I had forgotten my main love,” she says. That love was, and had always been, photography. Following the end of her marriage to Clapton, Boyd enrolled on a three-month photography course and began to take her hobby seriously. Having inspired some of the greatest love songs recorded and been the muse for others’ talents, it was finally time to focus on her own talent. Since 2005, her work has been exhibited around the world.

The photographs on display in Liverpool may depict the past, but Boyd is also looking to the future. Last year, she married for the third time; her new husband, Rod Weston, is a property developer nine years her junior, whom she first met in the 1980s. They have a cottage in West Sussex and a flat in west London. Boyd feels grateful for having survived the transition from rock royalty to civilian life. “I am really lucky, because I know a lot of girls who were taken out of that glamorous situation and they couldn’t cope,” she says. “A couple of them died. Another one I know is just hanging on by a thread.”

Harrison died in 2001, but she still gets texts from Eric Clapton. It can’t be easy for Weston, following in the footsteps of two music gods, but Boyd says her current marriage is far healthier than the previous two. “I am not attached in the way I was to my first two husbands,” she explains. “I am in full control of my life and myself. I finally feel happy.”

In her younger years, Pattie Boyd was famous for the men who loved her, but the price she paid was forgetting what made her truly happy. “I used to feel useless and hopeless and it took a long time to realise that all was not lost,” she says. “Photography saved my life, because I had forgotten I had something to offer the world.” ■

George, Eric and Me: A Personal Collection is at The Beatles Story’s Hidden Gallery in Liverpool until October 1. Boyd will be attending the exhibition on July 26 and 27. For more details, visit pattieboyd.co.uk For an online gallery of Pattie Boyd’s photography, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/pattieboyd

BEATLE DAYS
Below: Boyd and George Harrison, in 1967, when they had been married for a year, arrive home after a trip to the US

