Jeremy Miles meets photographer Ron Howard who captured some of the greatest stars of the Sixties and Seventies music scene on the BBC’s iconic music show.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON HOWARD

Never judge a book by its cover. At a glance Ron Howard looks for all the world like just another senior citizen: a dapper 87-year-old quietly enjoying a leisurely retirement in Dorset. But wind the clock back 45 or so years and Ron was at the centre of what was ‘hot and happening’. The Beatles, The Stones, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Cream...he met them all. The stars of Swinging London literally came to his door.

Should Ron invite you into his home you will find an extraordinary archive that
reveals his life as a key photographer on BBC television’s iconic music show *Top of the Pops*. From 1964 to 1972 Ron photographed hundreds of acts, taking pictures not only on set but also in the dressing rooms. Often these would end up as pin-up shots in the classic teen-girls magazine Jackie. "Gordon Small, the editor of Jackie, would come down to the BBC once a fortnight to see who we had coming up that he could use in the magazine. I must have shot dozens of those," says Ron.

Leafing through his extraordinary collection of photographs Ron stopped at a print of The Beatles. Shot in colour - a rare occurrence in the *Top of the Pops* studios in 1966 - it captures the band mid-performance. Originally there were dressing room pictures too. ‘I shot three rolls of The Beatles in their dressing room and sent the films straight to Jackie. They paid me £12-a-roll which seemed OK at the time but I can’t imagine how much they would be worth now. I did try getting the negatives back but no one knew where they were. They said they’d been swapped with other magazines. It was just one of those things,” he says with a shrug.

Ron remembers the huge excitement "The Beatles, The Stones, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Cream...he met them all" which rippled through the studio when The Beatles, who only made one live appearance on the show, arrived at the studio to perform *Paperback Writer*. “They came in with a whole security team - they even had food-tasters.” Ron says people ask him what the Fab Four were really like. His reply, he says, often disappoints. “They were very nice, very pleasant and very professional but I never got a chance to really know them. They were just The Beatles. In all I probably spent about an hour with them.”

Ron has many happy memories of his time working on the BBC’s legendary pop
programme - The Stones he says were “real gentlemen,” The Who came with their manager Kit Lambert and were “lovely to work with.” The Kinks were “great,” The Beach Boys were “smashing” and Stevie Wonder was “a real laugh”. Ron remembers the blind Motown star breaking the ice by asking if he could borrow Ron’s camera to take some pictures of his own.

Most of the groups, he insists, behaved impeccably. “Being on Top of the Pops was important to them. They wanted to make a good impression.”

Though Ron may not be prepared to dish the dirt on difficult or demanding stars he does have some amusing recollections. He recalls being taken aside before photographing obscure R&B band Jimmy Powell’s Five Dimensions and being discreetly told “Don’t concentrate too much on the singer. He’s got a very rough voice. He’s not going to be with us for long.”

It was a story he retold with some glee half-a-dozen years later when that same singer, Rod Stewart, arrived at Top of the Pops to perform his hit Maggie May. “Rod really laughed about that when I told him.”

When asked who Ron’s personal favourite was he picks out a photo of Karen Carpenter. “I really liked her. She gave off a sort of aura of sincerity and thanked you every time the flash went off. She’d say “Thank you for keeping me where I am.”

Ron landed the Top of the Pops job after the programme’s Senior Photographer Harry Goodwin offered him £7-a-week to hire his darkroom, conveniently located just down the road from the TV studios, to process the after-show stills. Although entirely self-taught, Ron, who had started out as a schoolboy with a one-and-sixpenny camera from Woolworths, had established a thriving career as a photographer and a reputation for taking show business publicity pictures. His clients were often young up-and-coming actors and musicians including Phil Collins, Jack Wild and Nicholas Lyndhurst.

The deal worked well and it wasn’t long before he was invited to make the famous Top of the Pops end-credit captions. Within weeks he was an integral part of the team working alongside Harry and using his trademark custom-built Albancflex camera. Ron still has this massive Heath Robinson-style twin-lens, medium-format monster – though this prototype looks like it might have been knocked up in Steptoe’s yard it has brilliant optics and a near silent shutter-action. Proudly showing it to me, Ron says: “I had a Hasselblad but the chunk it made when you took a picture was horrendous. I always preferred this.”

Already in his 40s when he started working on Top of the Pops, Ron admits that many of the young musicians regarded him as something of an authority figure. “They were usually very respectful but occasionally you’d get a group who would be reluctant to respond.”

After leaving Top of the Pops, Ron went on to regularly photograph guests on the Parkinson show including huge international names like Orson Welles and Mohammad Ali. He also worked for 17 years on the Robert Robinson hosted quiz show Ask The Family.

The only time he recalls being overawed by a subject was when he found himself face to face with one of his all time heroes, Bing Crosby. “I couldn’t believe I was in the same room and talking to him. I was
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The Jimi Hendrix Experience

Rod Stewart in prime
Top of the Pops mode
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literally shaking.” The photo-session, he recalls, was far from successful. “I tapped on his door and the moment he saw the camera round my neck he said ‘Well you can put that away’. His head was like an egg. He’d got no hair at all. The hat Bing wore on stage had a kind of wig attached to it and he just wouldn’t be photographed without it.”

When Ron finally retired, he and his wife Joyce - who celebrated their Diamond Wedding this summer - set their sights on a house in Dorset. The couple had long enjoyed caravan holidays in Merley near Wimborne and loved the area. He says he originally chose Dorset as a holiday destination because photographers in London had told him that it had the best coastline in the country. He wasn’t disappointed. “Joyce and I love it for both the coast and countryside, it really is unbeatable.” Their house in Ferndown proved the perfect choice. But retirement certainly hasn’t meant giving up photography. Ron still has a home studio and darkroom and is a keen member of Ferndown Camera Club. He’s even been asked to take regular pictures at Mayoral functions, though he tends to use a digital SLR these days rather than his old Albanflex.