

# A LIFE LAID BARE

A new book has just come out which documents the colourful life and tragic death of the great photographer Bob Carlos Clarke. Terry Hope adds his own personal thoughts

WORDS Terry Hope

It's one of life's tragedies really that I'm not sitting here and writing about Bob Carlos Clarke's latest set of edgy images, or chuckling at his pithy - and usually mildly libellous - stream of consciousness about the world he lived in for a column that he'd produced for me. There was just so much more to come, but instead I've just finished reading a book which chronicles the impact that his life, and very shocking death, had on those around him, and which tries to reveal, some three years after his suicide under the wheels of a train at the age of 55, what it was that really made him tick and how ultimately his life unravelled and led him to such an act of self destruction.

It's not every day that you get such devastating news about someone you that you know, worked with on many occasions and liked enormously, and it was a real bombshell. As the dust settled you wondered about just what could have made him do such a terrible thing, and perhaps a few of the answers are to be found within the pages of *Exposure: the unusual life and violent death of Bob Carlos Clarke*.

Put together by established author Simon Garfield, the book consists of a series of interviews with many of the people who knew Bob best, including his wife Lindsey, daughter Scarlett, agent Ghislain Pascal, brother Andrew and friends such as Tamara Beckwith, Geraldine Leale, Allen Jones and Philippe Garner. It's no hatchet job but nonetheless it is a brutally honest, uncompromising work and you suspect Bob himself wouldn't have had it any other way. It's all here, warts and all, and the man who held such sway in his studio, and who could mix it on a regular basis with celebrities such as Keith Richards, Jerry Hall, Marco Pierre White and Princess Diana and all the top models of the day, is stripped bare and revealed as a very vulnerable human being, full of insecurities and with a dark side that those who got too close ended up inevitably experiencing.

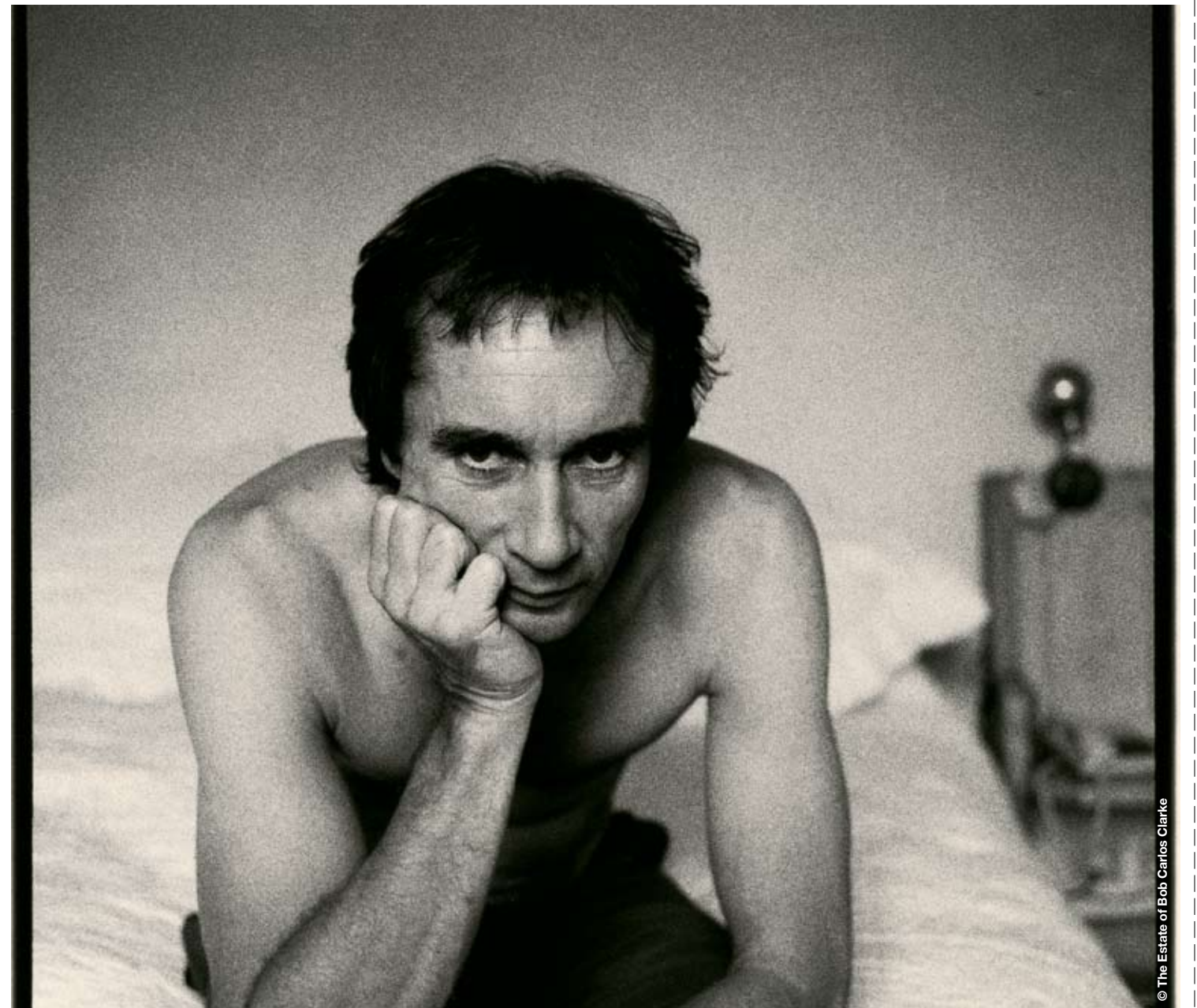
He was also unquestionably a genius, and maybe those who are a bit special tend to come with a little extra baggage: as Lindsey Carlos Clarke puts it in the book "Picasso was a complete bastard as well." But he was a lot more than just that, as Lindsey herself makes clear immediately afterwards when she says "I know we weren't blissfully happy but there was a big area of our lives where we were fantastically good together. We had the same visual thing. He could say anything to me about his work, I wasn't put out by anything, and if he'd come back with a body in the car I wouldn't have been terribly surprised."

Like all great photographers of women he had an instant rapport with the girls in front of his camera and a natural talent for making them feel special and at ease: because he flirted with the fetish scene and never shied away from being open about the sexuality of his subjects, some people mistakenly thought that there was a pornographic edge to his work. It was risqué for sure, and Bob was never afraid to cause a little offence amongst those who were quick to rail against a perceived exploitation of women - in fact he loved it - but you didn't hear Bob's models complaining, and he was no tacky photographer producing cheap images for the titillation of his audience.

It's a mystery in many ways why Bob never quite broke through to become the internationally respected photographer that he probably deserved to be. Had he been based in the US, where the photographer celebrity is far more common, perhaps he would have done, but he was in the UK where people are ritually put up on a pedestal only to be pulled down again just as quickly. Where *The Dark Summer* looked to have set Bob up to become one of the most influential photographers of his generation, by the time he came around to producing *Shooting Sex* he was so frustrated by some of the negative feedback that he was receiving from publishers that



© The Estate of Bob Carlos Clarke



© The Estate of Bob Carlos Clarke



© The Estate of Bob Carlos Clarke

he ultimately went ahead and put it out himself, and incidentally made a better job of it than they would ever have done.

Bob may never have really felt that he was truly appreciated by the art world in general, but one suspects that his time may yet come and that over the years his work might finally achieve the iconic status that he thought it deserved. That's what can happen when the person it would have meant the most to is no longer around, and the cruel fact of life is that artistic work tends to have more value when there is no more left to come.

This is not particularly a book about photography, rather it's a biography of a fascinating character and you read it knowing that the ending is a foregone conclusion and that it's not a happy one. As Simon Garfield puts it, this is not like "It's a Wonderful Life where James Stewart gets down off the bridge." This instead is real life where the central character is heading

**ABOVE:** Bob photographed by daughter Scarlett

**ABOVE LEFT:** Masked Blonde

**LEFT:** The Agony & The Ecstasy

inexorably towards destruction and even those who love him the most can't pull him back.

For those who knew Bob it's a difficult book to read but it does paint a portrait of the man and reveals him as he truly was. Which was a mixture of things, and certainly not all bad. I feel I probably got the best of him, flitting in and out and seeing him when he was truly on form, working on a shoot for a client such as the Powergen Calendar and doing something outrageous like having a temperamental tiger in his Battersea studio (which ripped his shirt to shreds at one point I seem to recall). He was slightly mad, deliberately provocative and would say the most dreadful things but was still able to totally get away with it. I've got great memories of him and thank god that there is still room in this life for characters and people to add a touch of colour to what can be a very drab world.

Writing on the website that was set up

after Bob's death his brother Andrew Carlos Clarke said: "Truly great man - he just didn't know it." There's a touch of truth in that and somehow you get the feeling that this was one character who was always set to go out with a headline rather than just simply fade away.

**EXPOSURE:** *The Unusual Life and Violent Death of Bob Carlos Clarke* by Simon Garfield (Ebury Press, £18.99)

• The Bob Carlos Clarke exhibition 'Wall to Wall' is showing at the Little Black Gallery until July 3. The exhibition features images from Bob's 30 year career, and includes pictures which have never been seen or made available for sale before. Contact:

[www.thelittleblackgallery.com](http://www.thelittleblackgallery.com)