

# Joe Sia

## Rock 'n' Roll Photographer

1945-2003

By Ken Best

Joe Sia, the Fairfield photographer known for his photographs of rock stars, never had much time for conversation. He always had to get to a show. Typical of the messages he would leave: “Ken, Joe. Call me tomorrow afternoon. I’m on the way out.”

Sia, who died of a heart attack on April 21, 2003 at the age of 57, took more than 250,000 pictures of virtually every major rock star over the course of a career that began when he submitted a photo of Joe Cocker performing at the Atlantic City Pop Festival on Aug. 3, 1969 to *Rolling Stone* magazine. The photo was published on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Two weeks later, Sia was on stage at the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival with his first assignment for rock’s first publication of record.

Along with his photos from the previous month’s Newport Jazz Festival -- which included among its performers James Brown, Blind Faith, Led Zeppelin and Johnny Winter – the photos he took that summer resulted in *Woodstock 69: Summer Pop Festivals*, a 1971 Scholastic Books publication that only hinted at Joe Sia’s eye for capturing intimate moments in rock music.

Over the years, Joe’s photos appeared in more than 120 magazines throughout the world including LIFE, Newsweek, Billboard, Downbeat, Guitar Player, Der Stern in Germany, and Guitar in Japan. His photos have been exhibited in Hard Rock Cafes, the world-wide restaurant with a rock music theme, and at The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland.

Fifty-three of his photos also were a central part of the 1992 book that we collaborated on, *Eight Days a Week: An Illustrated Record of Rock 'n' Roll*, a daily chronicle of rock history. The striking photograph on the cover of the book is known as “The Shadow,” and it is considered by many photo and music experts to be among the best rock music photos ever taken.

“The Shadow” was taken on November 17, 1968 when Jimi Hendrix turned away from the audience at Woolsey Hall at Yale University in New Haven and a spotlight cast his shadow on a stack of four guitar amplifiers. Guitarists worldwide can instantly recognize the fringed coat sleeves, bushy Afro and signature headpiece of a Fender guitar outlined in the shadow against the amplifiers.

“I thought it was beautiful and snapped it. When I saw my proof sheets I knew I had something special, but it was passed over by many Art Directors and it took twenty years before it was finally published, in a 1989 Guitar World Magazine special

dedicated to Jimi,” he wrote in the artist’s statement that accompanies the image that is one of six of Joe’s photos included in The Kodak Rock Photography Collection, an exhibition of 500 photos that opened in January in Las Vegas.

Another famous image he captured on film was cause for a bit of lip-biting on Joe’s part. A 1979 photo he took of a bearded, shaggy-haired Eric Clapton performing at the New Haven Coliseum was used by Ron Wood of The Rolling Stones, as the source for the illustration that is the cover of Clapton’s Grammy Award-winning CROSSROADS anthology.

What separates Joe’s images from the thousands of other photographers who snapped pictures at concerts is the intimacy he captured both onstage and backstage. Whether it is Paul Butterfield making eye contact with his bass player as he prepares to end a harmonica lick or Grace Slick looking off pensively resting at Woodstock, his images have a depth not often seen in rock photography.

When I wrote a story about him for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Woodstock, Joe was finding it harder to do his job. “When I started you could shoot as long as you wanted,” he told me about the restrictions he faced. “There was nobody else around. Now it’s a war.”

Still, he persisted. Whether his subject was No Doubt, Destiny’s Child or Marilyn Manson, Joe figured out a way to do his job.

If there is a Rock ‘n’ Roll Heaven, Linda McCartney, one of the first great rock photographers, will have company at the foot of the stage where the photographers camp out. Joe Sia will be the guy focusing the lens, wearing the Yankees cap backwards.

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