

Whole Lotta Love



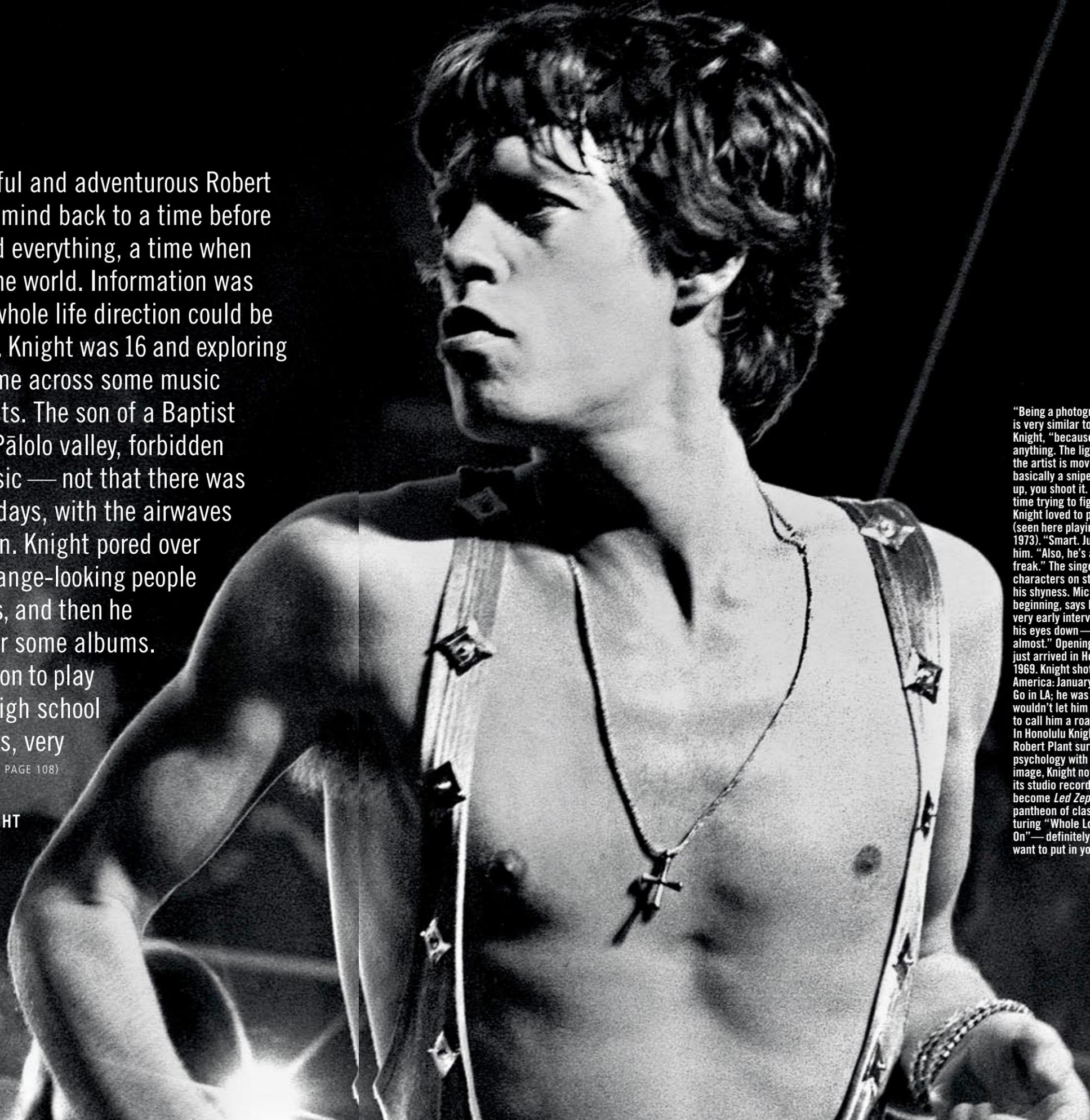
Robert Knight was a kid from Pālolo when he fell for British rock — and his passion led to some of the best photography in rock 'n' roll



To understand just how resourceful and adventurous Robert Knight is, you have to cast your mind back to a time before the web connected everyone and everything, a time when there was far more mystery in the world. Information was random and scarce, and one's whole life direction could be determined by a chance finding. Knight was 16 and exploring in Waikīkī one day in 1965 when he came across some music magazines left behind by British tourists. The son of a Baptist minister, he'd grown up in Honolulu's Pālolo valley, forbidden to watch movies and listen to rock music — not that there was much rock music in Honolulu in those days, with the airwaves full of the Kingston Trio and Jan & Dean. Knight pored over the magazines and their pictures of strange-looking people with long hair and musical instruments, and then he sent away to an address in the back for some albums. When the discs arrived, he got permission to play them at lunchtime over the PA at his high school in Kaimukī: bands like the Pretty Things, very

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TEXT BY JULIA STEELE | PHOTOS BY ROBERT M. KNIGHT



"Being a photographer of rock concerts is very similar to shooting a war," says Knight. "because you can't control anything. The lighting keeps changing, the artist is moving around. You're basically a sniper: A guy puts his head up, you shoot it. You can't be wasting time trying to figure out exposures." Knight loved to photograph Mick Jagger (seen here playing a show in Honolulu in 1973). "Smart. Just smart," he says of him. "Also, he's an absolute fitness freak." The singer, says Knight, played characters on stage, one way to handle his shyness. Mick shy? Definitely at the beginning, says Knight. "Watch those very early interviews of him. He puts his eyes down — like Princess Diana almost." Opening image: Led Zeppelin, just arrived in Honolulu in the spring of 1969. Knight shot the band's first gig in America: January 2, 1969 at Whisky a Go Go in LA; he was so young the doorman wouldn't let him in, and the band had to call him a roadie to get him through. In Honolulu Knight played host, shooting Robert Plant surfing and talking parapsychology with Jimmy Page. In this image, Knight notes, the band is carrying its studio recordings for what would become *Led Zeppelin II*, a star in the pantheon of classic rock albums featuring "Whole Lotta Love" and "Ramble On" — definitely not something you'd want to put in your checked luggage.



Knight first photographed Jimi Hendrix at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco in 1968. He had a roll of thirty-six exposures but was so mesmerized by Hendrix's playing that he shot only fourteen. "It was so sonic, you just said, 'Oh my God,'" he recalls. "That was the beauty of that era. All of the archetypes of rock were being created." This image shows Hendrix at the Waikiki Shell in 1969. "It was a weird show," Knight recalls. "Jimi played three or four songs, then announced to the crowd that they should go home and come back the next night. It being Hawai'i, nobody rioted. They all left and came back the next day." Hendrix often hung out with his band in the Islands, Knight says, staying in a house at the foot of Diamond Head. "I would go down and they'd all be in Speedos. I never took any pictures because Hendrix in a bathing suit, it's not how you want to see him. These artists liked that I also knew when *not* to take the picture." At right, Ray Charles at the HIC in 1973. "The fact that he'd overcome so much and become a worldwide phenomenon, I admired that," says Knight. "I loved it."





In 1971 Knight got a call to go down to JCPenney at Ala Moana Center: A young British singer was going to be there signing pictures and talking up his show that night. "He'll be a superstar one day," the promoter promised. Knight went and got his first images of Reginald Kenneth Dwight, better known as Elton John. The photograph at left shows John playing Honolulu circa 1974. "He was an extrovert onstage," says Knight, "but again, a shy guy. He was very knowledgeable about music, and he and Bernie Taupin were one of the greatest singer-songwriter teams ever. He loved comedy, too. He used to send me Monty Python albums." Bette Midler, seen here, grew up in Honolulu and was working as a secretary when she went to a local music promoter with some of her recordings. "Don't quit your day job," he told her. Incensed, she did just that, struck out for New York City and made it huge. This shot was taken at her triumphal homecoming concert. The show featured a then-unknown piano player who would himself become a star: Barry Manilow.



Throughout the 1970s Knight photographed dozens of Hawaiian musicians and entertainers, including Gabby Pahinui, Cecilio & Kapono, Olomana, Rap Reiplinger and, at right, Robert and Roland Cazimero. "I did a lot of stuff with the Cazimeros," says Knight. "Album covers, pictures of their residency at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. I used to go out to eat in Chinatown with Robert after the show. What a voice. His cover of 'You Are So Beautiful' was almost a religious experience. And Roland was such a wonderful guitar player. When they would harmonize and sing those high notes—the two brothers merging their voices together—it was unbelievable." Genoa Keawe was one of the greats of twentieth-century Hawaiian music, famed for her ability to sustain a falsetto note for well over a minute. "I remember how wonderful she was," says Knight. "I really liked these kumus [teachers]: so sweet, so loving, very giving human beings."





Denise Truscillo/WireImage

Knight in Las Vegas at an exhibit of his work. That's Slash, lead guitarist for Guns n' Roses, in the picture behind him. "We've been friends since the late '80s," says Knight. "I see him as the last iconic guitar hero. Who else has that kind of swagger? Go anywhere in the world and they know who Slash is. People recognize him from pictures of his *shadow*."

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early Who, fledgling Rolling Stones. The Stones came out and played the Honolulu International Center, and when Knight snuck out and saw them, he knew he had to get to England. But how?

Less of a problem than you might think. The enterprising teenager was already a travel agent: He'd found some airline guides in an alley behind a Kāhala travel agency one day, studied them and come up with an itinerary that would fly him all over the United States first class for the price of coach. "Impossible," said the agent when Knight went in. The teenager pulled

out the guides, explained how it was done, and the agent offered him a job on the spot. Which is how, not long after the Stones headed home, Knight flew (first class) to London after telling his parents he was going to spend the summer in Portland with his grandmother.

The city was a dream of music and adventure. The director Michelangelo Antonioni was there making *Blow-Up*, a film that featured the Yardbirds, a band Knight worshipped for its guitar players, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. Antonioni's movie told the story of a photographer; watching it back in Honolulu, Knight

thought, "I can do that." He caddied for a year until he had enough money to buy a Nikon camera and three lenses—only then, he felt, could he call himself a photographer. He began shooting, fashion mostly, but his parents urged him to get into college if for no other reason than to avoid the draft. Inspired by Bill Graham's 1968 summer concert lineup at the Fillmore West in San Francisco, Knight enrolled (alongside classmate Annie Leibovitz) at the San Francisco Art Institute. But he was rarely in school. His education came in the clubs and the halls, the ballrooms and the arenas. The first concert he shot at the Fillmore was Jeff Beck, followed by the Who, Jethro Tull, Santana. The first image for which he got paid was a shot used to advertise a Grateful Dead concert at the Avalon Ballroom; it paid \$50, a month's rent. He shot Led Zeppelin in Los Angeles and San Francisco, then met up with the band in Honolulu. Knight stayed in his home city all through the '70s, and local promoters gave him carte blanche to shoot musicians who came through town. One month it was Ike and Tina Turner; the next, Cat Stevens; the next, Alice Cooper. It was the age before 24/7 celebrity, mega-security and cell phones, and all of the work took place in a fluid, easy haze of creation. "I had no restrictions on me when I shot," Knight remembers. "I could shoot onstage, offstage, backstage."

In the '80s Knight headed out into the world to work as a travel and advertising photographer—that was where the money was, not in music, which had always been more of an avocation than a career ("a god-send in retrospect," Knight says, "because now I own all my stuff"). But rock was hardly through with Knight. In 1985 a chance conversation led to an ongoing gig shooting hundreds of portraits of guitarists for Guitar Center. Knight has toured as a photographer with Aerosmith, Def Leppard and Journey. He founded Brotherhood of the Guitar to support young guitarists. He married a distinguished rock photographer in her own right, Maryanne Bilham; Bilham's a Kiwi, and she and Knight now split their time between Auckland and Las Vegas. In Auckland the pair have just launched Anthology Lounge, a club that showcases their photography and features musicians from throughout New Zealand and beyond. Knight is delighted and excited that life has led him back to Polynesia. Says the man who has already watched so many unknowns transform into icons: "New Zealand is a hotbed for young artists." **HH**