



EMMA-LILY PENDLETON speaks to the man behind Pimlico's Grays of Westminster about his rock history, famous patrons and photography heroes

From humble beginnings, selling cameras from a room in his sister's home, Gray Levett has grown Grays of Westminster in to the award-winning, exclusively Nikon dealership it is today. An impressive 28 years later and with countless celebrities among its patrons, Grays of Westminster is still going strong.

Shooting Fleetwood Mac, Black Sabbath and The Who as a photographer, Gray – also the co-founder and editor of *Nikon Owner* magazine – has seen his work on album covers, book dust jackets and in magazines all over the world. As we found out, he's a man with a story to tell.

ELP: When did you develop an interest in photography?

GL: I think I was around 11 or 12 years old when I was given a Kodak Brownie 127 by my parents. That's how it began, really. It developed from there and when I was in my teens, particularly after I'd left school and started to earn a little bit of money, I could afford much better cameras. Albeit, they were fairly modest. I always wanted to own a Nikon F 35mm SLR and a Hasselblad 500CM, neither of which I could remotely consider as an impoverished student.

ELP: You started out as a photographer, is that right?

GL: That's right – I loved rock music and still do. So I started photographing bands in clubs and worked as a roadie. As I felt I needed to use better equipment, I thought the best solution was to work in a camera shop. That way I'd be able to borrow cameras or at least get them cheaper... that's how I ended up in the retail world. I kind of balanced the two, really.

I went to see bands I liked and in those days it was far easier to get access to acts just starting out: some of these would go on to become huge bands such as Fleetwood Mac, Black Sabbath, Genesis, The Who or The Incredible String Band... all the music that John Peel was playing in the late 60s and 70s.

ELP: You obviously enjoyed great success – what made you turn back to retail?

GL: I did it primarily because I wanted to increase my knowledge of all types of camera equipment. I also knew that one of the most important skills a photographer should have, apart from being a first-class professional, was how to deal with people and how to communicate. I found the retail environment a very useful training ground for life; communication being the universal solvent. You can resolve most things by communication; if people talked to each other a bit more, we might have a better world. After this initial period of working in retail in the 70s, I left London and moved to Hollywood for a number of years following the death of my first wife. My work over there straddled music, film and writing. I toured with different music acts, enjoying it very much. I also wrote for various magazines, such as *Ad Astra*, a science fiction/science fact publication reviewing films and books.

ELP: Who's the most interesting person you've ever sold a camera to?

GL: Well, to pick one specific person isn't easy. Perhaps it was Stanley Kubrick, the legendary film director – he was a very early customer of ours. We were dealing with him right up to his death and during his final



Above: Gray Levett names the "brilliant vintage aviation photographer" Philip Makanna among his photography heroes. Right: Gray Levett says Tony Hurst "set the standard" for photographing vintage equipment.

film *Eyes Wide Shut* with Tom Cruise. I have a lovely letter from Mr. Kubrick's long-term personal assistant, who had worked with him from the time of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which says: 'I only ever knew him to defer to two people on matters photographic: Geoffrey Crawley, the one-time editor of the *BJP*, and Gray Levett and the Grays of Westminster gang down in Pimlico who continue to give us an unrivalled service.' It doesn't get much better than that. He was an interesting man and very kind to me, actually.

ELP: Who are your photography heroes?

GL: There are so many. Jim Brandenburg, to me, is a poet with a camera. Somebody once told me that nature seems to bend itself to his will. They said: 'If he left your shop at midnight in the middle of London, he would walk out of your door and a deer would walk up to him' [laughs]. Then, the late Simon Marsden – an internationally acclaimed photographer who was unequalled in capturing the mysterious spirit of ancient landscapes and romantic ruins. His photographic work was magical, haunting and eloquent – it spoke of other, stranger worlds. He was the finest exponent of infrared photography in the world. Next would be master photographer, Tony Hurst. I think he has set the standard for photographing vintage equipment; it takes your breath away. Terence Donovan once told me that he thought Tony Hurst was a genius and I completely agree with him. Finally, the brilliant vintage aviation photographer, Philip Makanna.

ELP: If you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?

GL: There are so many but it would have to be dinner with The Master, P.G. Wodehouse. I consider him to be one of the funniest and best-loved writers of the 20th century. The jewel is in his writing and his style; the clarity, the minimalism, the even pace all emphasise his singular sense of humour. Creative photographers, writers, musicians, painters are all artists. They all help to elevate civilisation – it would be a poor world, grey and depressing, without them.

ELP: What celebrities – who aren't professional photographers – have you seen through your doors?

GL: There have been many over the years but we prefer to preserve their privacy. However, it is fairly well-known that David Suchet has been our customer since 1989, when he started working on Poirot. David's grandfather was the renowned Fleet Street photographer, James Jarcho. He was notable for the very first pictures of Edward VIII and the then unknown Wallace Simpson. He was an extraordinary man and taught David Suchet photography.



JIM BRANDENBURG

Born 1945 in Minnesota, USA,

Jim Brandenburg is an environmentalist and one of the world's most celebrated nature photographers. He started his career working as a photojournalist for the *Worthington Daily Globe* and went on to submit his work to *National Geographic* as a freelance photographer. In 1978 he became a contract photographer for *National Geographic* magazine, where he stayed for an impressive 30 years.

ELP: What's your favourite camera, old and new?

GL: For the old, the Nikon F – it's in my office now, looking well-used, but I'd never sell it. For the new, the Nikon D800 as I think it's an extraordinary camera. 📷

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