



# Character building

Breaking into the music business was never going to be easy, but by creating the character Sarah Photogirl, Sarah Robinson has made herself into a brand that is proving irresistible

WORDS Terry Hope PICTURES Sarah Photogirl

**T**HERE'S PROBABLY A deliberate element of comic book here, but while the person I'm talking to might ostensibly be Sarah Robinson, once a band appears and she's behind the camera, she metamorphoses Clark Kent-like into Sarah Photogirl, would-be child of the '60s and ace music photographer. It's a character who reflects her passions in life and she slips into it effortlessly, using it as her public image.

So, where did Sarah Photogirl come from? "I'm not sure really," says Sarah Robinson. "I just started using the name a few years ago, because it just seemed to fit so well. I thought my real name was rather tedious and I wanted something that sounded a little less ordinary. Some of the bands would greet me as 'here's that Sarah Photogirl', and it kind of stuck."

More than perhaps any other industry the music business is all about image, and Sarah Photogirl has managed to break into it and to gain a considerable momentum over the past seven years, showing off the fruits of her labours on her self-designed website. Soon an Internet shop will be added, and already fine-art prints are being offered for sale as Sarah gets to grips with the serious business of trying to generate an income in one of the most competitive and cut-throat areas of the market.

#### Teenage kicks

The interest in photography started early, and Sarah suspects that it originated with her grandfather, who first taught her how to process a film and print when she was around 14. "He told my Grandmother at the time that he thought this would probably be the first and last time that I would ever go into the darkroom," she says, "because I struggled to grasp the chemical side of things."

"That didn't turn out to be the case at all, but it did take a few years for me to get more involved. When I went to university to study film, TV and literature, I was heavily into Blur, and the wall in my bedroom was covered in posters of them. I started to look more closely at the images and to pull them apart, thinking that if I had taken a particular picture I



Sarah Photogirl's shoots include the Libertines' Pete Doherty (above) and Phil Daniels of Quadrophenia (previous page).

would have done things slightly differently. I began to think that this was something I would like to do, if only to make sure that I could have some better pictures on my walls.

"That got me interested enough to want to take an evening class in photography, which didn't work out too well because the teacher never appeared the second week! It didn't put me off though. Instead I got hold of an old Pentax SLR and started to teach myself. I had to do it all through experience: if I have to learn

something by reading a textbook I just switch off. Instead I always go straight in there, make loads of mistakes and, hopefully, get things right simply by initially doing things wrong."

Sarah knew exactly what she wanted to photograph: bands in general and Blur, in particular. She wrote to the fan club on a regular basis and, on one occasion, to lead singer Damon Albarn himself. "I've never admitted that before," she says, "and no, he didn't reply. Eventually, however, the fan club cracked, and



The inspiration for Sarah Photogirl's career, Blur. Sarah pestered the band's fan club to be allowed to shoot them and her first shots "weren't all that great," she says, but that didn't stop her being invited back to take pictures backstage.

they rather wearily said that they would allow me to take some pictures front of stage at a Blur gig.

"It was quite an experience, and it was the first time I had shot in stage lighting and I found it quite challenging technically. I just took a lot of pictures and hoped that I would get at least some of them right! I was happy with my composition, however, and although I didn't think the pictures I produced that night were all that great, I was invited to come back and to take some pictures backstage next time. I found that far more intimidating, being so close to a band that I had loved for years."

#### Out of the darkness

It was a foot in the door, and Sarah followed it up by writing to other fan clubs offering her services and by photographing bands that were just starting out. She also started taking pictures for a publication called *Gig Central*, and used this as a means of getting more access to the bigger bands. "I would ring up the venue,

say that I was shooting pictures for a magazine and would very confidently ask for a pass," she says, "and quite often I would get in. It all helped me to start building my portfolio."

Determined not to take on an office job straight from university, Sarah threw herself ever more seriously into music photography, continuing to pester fan clubs, and following bands that she found interesting. She came across heavy rock revivalists The Darkness and spent a year following them around as their career took off.

Her coverage provided many of the pictures for the *Permission to Rock* book that documented their rise, but the fact that The Darkness had now become megastars didn't mean Sarah herself was about to be swept away on any world tours. "Even if you get in with someone when they are little known it doesn't necessarily help you that much later on," she says. "The music industry is a very tough one, and there isn't much loyalty around."

#### TECHNIQUE

##### GEAR GUIDE

Sarah's original elderly Pentax has long since passed on and although she has a Nikon F100, which is partnered on occasions with infrared film, Sarah now works primarily with digital cameras, investing in the Nikon D100 and, more recently, the Olympus E-1, which she uses with 14-54mm (28-108mm 35mm equivalent) and 50-200mm (100-400mm 35mm equivalent) lenses. "I do like the wide-angle and fisheye lenses a lot," she says. "Anything that's a bit weird."

The quality of digital is one of the prime reasons that she has turned her back on film. "I like using fast black & white films, such as Fujifilm's Neopan 1600," she says, "but I think grain on colour film looks really bad. It was only when I invested in a serious DSLR that I started to shoot regularly in colour, and I've been really pleased with what digital has offered me."



From her first darkroom experience aged 14 with her grandad, Sarah Photogirl has gone on to photograph some of music's most well-known names, including Radiohead's Thom Yorke.

Other mutually beneficial relationships have developed. When Sarah came across a planned mod rally she offered her services as photographer, only to find that it was cancelled. The contact did, however, lead to her being invited to photograph a Steve Marriott memorial gig planned, and both Paul Weller and Noel Gallagher were playing. Having taken some pictures of Weller backstage at that event, Sarah has gone on to photograph the self-styled 'Mod father' on a few occasions since, some of the pictures being used in publications such as *Q*.

The book on The Darkness helped to open a few more doors, and it led to shooting pictures for Internet service provider AoL. "They saw my work in the book and just asked me if I would like to be involved," says Sarah. "It normally involves me

taking on around one or two shoots a month, and it's just me and the band in a studio so it's quite intimate. I've covered bands such as The Cure, Placebo and The Zutons in the past year or so, and the great thing about the deal is that, while AoL retains the copyright on the pictures, I can still use them for my portfolio."

#### Moving on up

The considered view is that anyone wanting to seriously make it in the music business has to base themselves in London, but Sarah has moved in the opposite direction, basing herself in Scarborough. "It has been a dilemma at times," she says, "but wherever you live, it doesn't really matter if you are prepared to travel.

"What I can't do is to photograph gigs every night, or turn up at a moment's notice, but I can plan to

come to London, and I don't have the expense of London. You just have to balance things really; besides, I have other projects that I am working on at the moment, primarily a book of rather dark poems. I'm putting together a series of 'cut and paste' style photographs that are quite different to my normal style to go alongside these, and the whole project is due to be self-published in time for Christmas."

Sarah Photogirl won't be the star of this particular show, since the aim is to keep the identities separate, and to develop the poems under a different pseudonym. "I'm not sure who I will be just yet," says Sarah. "I have a list of possible names, but the parchment they are on is locked away in a top secret safe which lies at the bottom of a very murky lake."

So who exactly is Sarah Photogirl, and where does she go from here? Perhaps no one knows exactly, but her creator most definitely has a clear idea of where she's heading. ■

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#### CONTACTS

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