



California Dreamin' with Henry Diltz

words by Susan Michals, portrait by Robert Todd Williamson, photos by Henry Diltz

We live in an era of indifference. It's not that we completely don't care, but we become apathetic when we hear about a fallen celebrity's sixth trip to rehab or the latest salacious rumors questioning a Scientology-sanctioned marriage. Instances like these are interchangeable; we move on from one sensationalist story to the next. Sadly, we seem to have lost sight of the simpler, sweeter things in life.

Photographer Henry Diltz made me realize this notion of detachment. I was moping about in a moment of classic L.A. existentialism and questioning what I was doing and why I was here. Then I sat down with the man who describes his life as a series of 'happy accidents' – a 40-year run of carefree happenstance that he's made into a magical career, and, like his photography, it had an immediate impact on my life as well as my outlook.

Since the 60's, Henry has spent time photographing many of his friends – musicians like Neil Young, Mama Cass, David Crosby, and Joni Mitchell – taking intimate, candid photos, many of which have become iconic images of the early days of rock and folk. He was the official photographer of Woodstock, and has created over 80 album covers, including the immortal *Morrison Hotel* cover for The Doors (1970) album. All this with no formal training; it was just something he loved to do. Maybe it's time to hearken back to those simpler days, when it was more about hanging out and enjoying the *Age of Aquarius*. It was a time that people like Henry Diltz reveled in, and still do. These moments are showcased in his indelible photos. So for once, just try it: Turn off the computer...tune out the cell phone, and let the sun shine in.

h: How did you get started as a photographer?

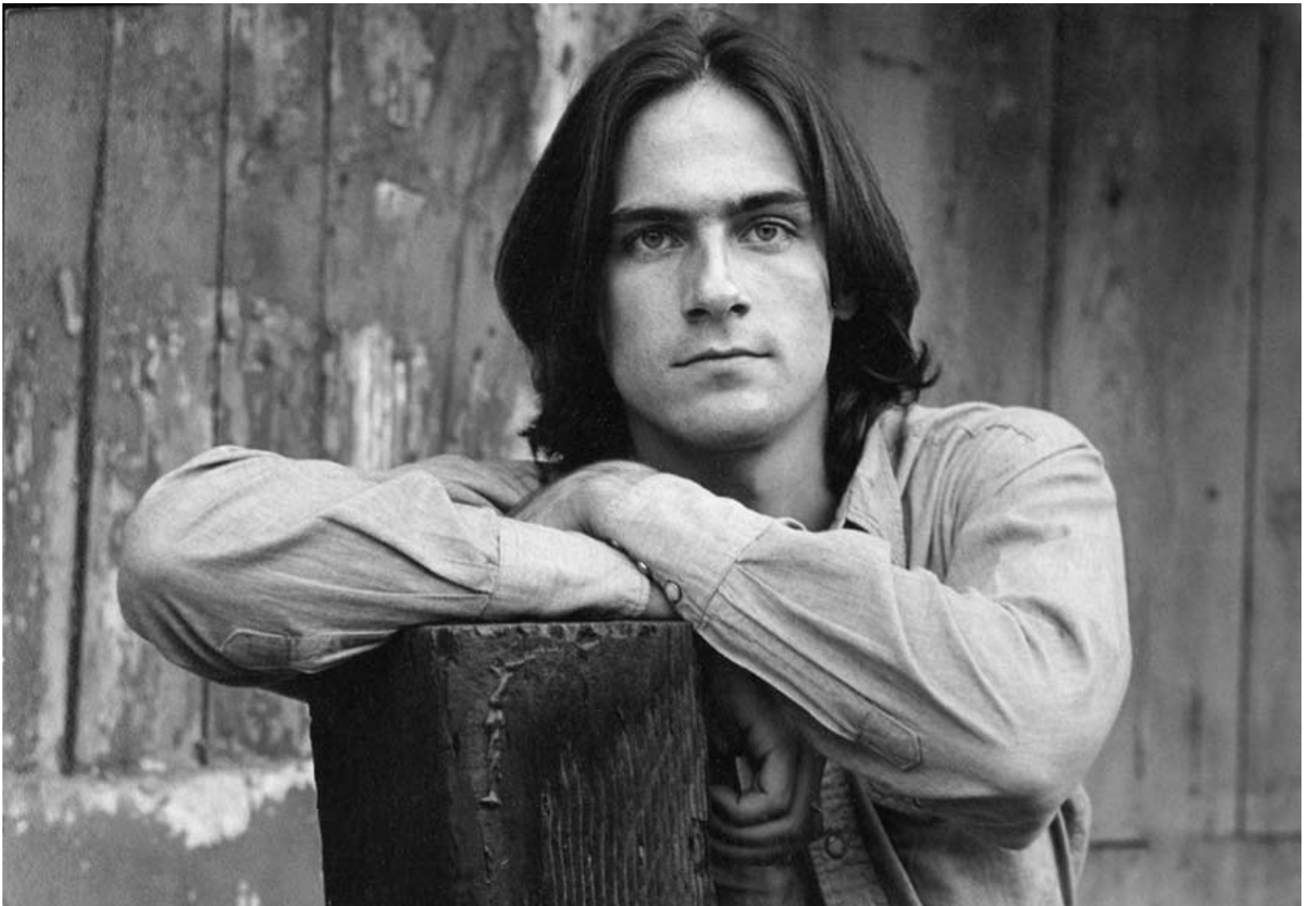
Henry Diltz: I actually started out as a musician in the folk days. On the last tour we did (Modern Folk Quartet), we bought all these funky cameras and took pictures of each other. When we got back home we had a slide show with all of our friends, and I guess I had taken more time and care with my slides. It was so amazing to see the slides on the wall with the light and shimmering. Of course these were the hippie days when everyone was smoking a little grass and it was so magical to me; I thought, 'I have to take more photos.' Whatever you're interested in, I think you gotta immerse yourself in it, and then let the universe decide.

Basically I took photographs of anything I thought would be trippy and look good blown up on the wall, like cats and snails. Gradually I started photographing my friends that were coming to the slide shows. Among those were people who were part of my extended karmic family, like Stephen Stills, David Crosby, Mama Cass, Neil Young...we had played together as fellow musicians. Then one day Stephen (Stills) said to me, 'We're going down to Redondo later, why don't you come?' This was the first year I'm taking pictures. So while they were doing their sound check I was photographing the beach and this mural alongside the building where they were performing. They came out and I had them stand in front of the mural...then *Teen Set Magazine* called me and said, "We hear you have a picture of the Buffalo Springfield and we wanna publish it and pay you \$100 dollars." I thought, 'A hundred dollars? That was amazing!'

h: What was your first album cover?

HD: I traveled around the country with The Lovin' Spoonful one summer and took a ton of pictures...that became my first cover for their album *Hums of the Lovin' Spoonful*. After that, I got a call from *Tiger Beat Magazine* and they wanted me to go spend the day on the set with this new group called The Monkees. So I went down to the set and met some kindred spirits there. Previously they (The Monkees) had had these older conservative guys – photographers from AP – it





wasn't fun for them. My style was more documentary and candid. I could take tons of pictures and they wouldn't have to pose and I could get very intimate portraits of the guys.

h: How did *The Morrison Hotel* cover come to be?

HD: After shooting The Monkees, I met an artist named Gary Burden at a love-in, and we ended up doing many album covers together, beginning with the Mama Cass cover, then Crosby Stills Nash sitting on the couch – their first album cover. The Doors must've seen that album cover, because that's when they called me. They had a new album... and I asked them if they had a title or an idea, and they didn't. Ray Manzarek said, 'My wife and I were driving downtown and we saw this sign that said Morrison Hotel. It was a derelict hotel – the sign in the window said "Rooms from \$2.50". But the young guy behind the desk said we couldn't take any pictures because we had to ask the owner. We went back outside and I was just going to shoot them in front of the hotel on the street instead, when I saw the clerk leave the front desk and go up in the elevator. So I told the guys, 'Quick, get in there' and we shot a roll of film and we were out of there before the guy even came back to bust us.

h: You have a series of galleries across the country entitled The Morrison Hotel Gallery – how did that come to pass?

HD: In the late 80's people started talking about the fact that I must have quite an archive and I didn't know what they were talking about. But as time moved on to disco and hip hop, that wonderful period kind of became the past and I had captured all that as it had become an era. I had friends that urged me to make a gallery show. A friend of mine at Capitol Records, Peter Blachley, and this other guy Rich Horowitz – who was selling John Lennon lithographs on the road – we got together and tried it out across the country and we got a great response. Eventually we landed in NYC and found a place in Soho that was for lease and we rented it for a weekend because we couldn't afford to rent it out for a year or anything. Finally we found a little place on Prince Street. We had the Doors Morrison Hotel print in the window and we still didn't have a name for our place, so I said, 'What if we just repeated that up above the storefront and made it our name' ...and it stuck.

I don't think of myself as a rock and roll photographer – I mean was James Taylor rock-n-roll or Joni Mitchell? They're balladeers who expressed themselves through music. We didn't want the gallery to be a rock and roll gallery. It was a representation of my life and my friends.

h: I'm sure you love them all, but do you have one particular photo that stands out to you?

HD: You know, there was a "Sweet Baby James" portrait that I took – it wasn't the cover shot – that was color -- this was a black and white. It's such a peaceful picture ...and "Sweet Baby James" became one of my favorite songs which I sang to both of my children when they were little babies when they went to go to sleep, and now my daughter sings it to her little boys, so it's been part of my family for a long, long time. It makes me feel good to look at that picture.

h: What's the most fun you ever had on a shoot?

HD: It's all been fun and it's all been great. But I really enjoyed spending a week with Paul McCartney in the Virgin Islands on a boat when they recorded *London Town*. He is such a wonderful, nice guy – you forget he's a Beatle. I had made a friend of Linda before she was with Paul and so when she married Paul, and they needed photos of the two of them for the *Ram* album they asked if I would come out to their home in Malibu and photograph them. That was the first day I met Paul. We spent the afternoon around the swimming pool, while Paul sat there plunking on his ukulele and making up songs that no one but me and his family will ever hear. At the end of that day, Linda told me she wanted to see photos the very next day – and that was back when it wasn't digital and it wasn't so easy to turn stuff around overnight, but I did and the next day I got her a bunch of slides. This woman was at their house from *LIFE* Magazine and she picked one – and it ended up on the cover.

h: Did you always want to do this with your life?

HD: I think of all of this as a happy accident. Years ago I was going to be a forest ranger; then I went with my parents to Europe instead and learned about classical music. When I went to college in Hawaii I wanted to be a psychologist, because I love people and I wanted to understand them. There I started singing in a coffeehouse, and kind of spent more time in the coffeehouse as opposed to the college and I became a musician. Y'know, I sometimes have compared myself to Jane Goodall – just the fact that she would sit there with her pad and paper, and observe these primates and not want to disrupt their natural habitat. I like to just go and observe – not ask these people to pose or whatever. I like to be invisible, and just let them do their thing.

For more info on Henry, go to www.morrisonhotelgallery.com

