

Documentary

Sheila Rock: Holidays in Gray

Jim Schmaltz

“The British were fatalistic; it was the origin of their cynicism, but it also made them good sharers of misfortune. ‘Oh, well, mustn’t grumble!’”
— Paul Theroux, *The Kingdom by the Sea: A Journey Around the Coast of Great Britain*

At Paul Theroux points out in his characteristically blunt and acerbic fashion, England is a land of contrasts. This is the nation that nurtured poets that stir the heart, producing elegiac verses about the rolling hills, sumptuous countryside and weathered shores of the homeland. It’s the country of Shakespeare, Trollope, Tennyson; of Thomas Hardy’s pastoral tributes to the English landscape; of stiff-

upper-lip defiance in the face of the Blitz; the home of many of the founding principles of modern governance. It’s also the country of Johnny Rotten, Thatcherism, piratical imperialism and a suffocating class system.

It’s within this profound variance of English national character that you’ll find American-born photographer Sheila Rock. Raised in Chicago, Rock relocated to the UK in 1970 to attend the London Film School (she left after a year), and has spent nearly her entire adult life in England. Since the 1970s, the versatile artist has amassed a thick portfolio in commercial photography, heavy with celebrity portraits and high-end advertising work, along with a stint doing publicity stills for the Royal Opera and Royal Ballet. Most famously, Rock chronicled the British rock musicians of the late 1970s and 1980s, when punk and its multiple derivatives transformed the entire global music and fashion scenes.

While her work with the legendary music magazine *The Face* launched her career, thrusting her into the promethean slipstream of King’s Road and counterculture London, Rock never sought out the raucous world of British rock.

“I was married and quite young, and I was introduced to all these very well-known musicians like David Bowie and Queen. It opened up a whole world to me,” she recalls. “Then I met Nick [Logan], who started *The Face* magazine, and he began giving me commission work. I was just a young girl with a camera



Sheila Rock



Sheppey Angel



Causeway

What began as a casual jaunt along the shores of England lasted five years and resulted in an immersive and heartfelt study of her adoptive country.

who was just clicking away, but I was at the right place at the right time.”

Like many of the musicians she photographed, Rock was self-taught, mastering her craft on the fly. “I was learning photography on my feet,” she says of her days working for *The Face*. “You have to be hugely patient dealing with groups of boys in bands. But the music industry encourages you to be creative. And it was during the time where people were doing cross-processing, using funky lenses, being imaginative, and that was certainly a great learning experience.”

Rock captured just about every notable personality of that era’s music scene, including the aforementioned Mr. Rotten, the Clash, Billy Idol and Rock’s fellow American Midwest transplant, Chrissie Hynde. Rock’s work from that era was collected in her second book, *Punk +*, published in 2013, that was accompanied by exhibitions around the world. (The book has since been rechristened *Young Punks* and reissued by Omnibus Press.)

While Rock earned prestigious assignments from *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Rolling Stone*, *Architectural Digest* and other major titles, her true interests were far away from rock icons and architectural wonders. “I realized that there’s a huge world out there of other experiences and people,” says Rock. “I completely stopped working in rock and roll and began working for the Barbican Centre and the Royal

Opera House.”

But even those environments hid her endless curiosity of the world outside of glossy pages and cultural landmarks. In the late ‘90s, she became weary of the commercial life and began doing a number of her own projects. A visit to Rock’s website will yield riches in a range of human endeavor. She penetrated the insular world of Tibetan monastic life, emerging with a collection published in her first book, *Sera, the Way of the Tibetan Monk*, in 2003.

Then she read *The Kingdom by the Sea*, Theroux’s travel guide about his journeys along the English coast. Rock thought it sounded like a wonderful idea. What began as a casual jaunt along the shores of England lasted five years and resulted in an immersive and heartfelt study of her adoptive country.

Rainy Summers Meet British Resolve

At first, Rock focused on the buildings and other constructions along the coast in resort areas such as Blackpool, Brighton, Weston-super-Mare, Isle of Sheppey and Weymouth. These are places that haven’t exactly earned rave reviews from travel writers. In Bill Bryson’s bestseller, *Notes from a Small Island*, the writer finds Blackpool less than ideal. He marveled that the beach there remains popular with visitors despite the fact that, in Bryson’s words, “Blackpool is ugly, dirty and a long way from anywhere, that its sea is an open toilet, and its attractions nearly all cheap, provincial and dire.”

Rock sees the coast in more generous terms, her gaze attuned to the richness of the area’s history, the British resolve in the face of deterioration.

“It has a number of seaside communities, which were built with rather grand piers and fabulous architecture, but over the years, it just fell apart and became rather squalid,” observes Rock. “You’d have these beautiful little seaside towns, but they were falling to bits. But it’s quite romantic in a sort of disheveled Victorian way. I saw it as rather beautiful.”

After capturing images of retro structural teardowns, Rock met with an editor who suggested she focus on the people who swarmed to the shore—those who brave the typical inhospitable British summer because it’s their vacation and they’re going to bloody well go to the beach, dammit.

Rock, whose father is from Hawaii, has



'50s Couple



Canvey Boy



"I was drawn to the working class from the impoverished coastal towns. The people had more character, more grit. It was as though I was photographing a time in the 1960s."

spent plenty of time on tropical beaches, and the sight of shivering beachgoers braving terrible weather on rocky shores was something she found peculiarly—and endearingly—English.

"The British have a resilience about them. It could be really cold. It could be raining. And yet the British being the British will go because it's their holiday."

She left the buildings in the background and began to seek out the vacationers swarming the shoreline in hand-me-down beachwear and ducktail haircuts. It made her feel as if she had traveled back to an earlier era.

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When you look in these faces, you see what Rock sees: the glare of defiance; the pensive, wounded expressions of those living hard lives. The wary embrace of young lovers seeking a pocket of warmth under cold, gray skies. Even the children carry the burdens of their class as they seek joyful play in the crashing waves.

Whether in Liverpool or farther up toward Blackpool and Morecambe, Rock found each coastal visitor more compelling than the last.

"I said to my assistant, 'There is so much etched in their faces. There is so much character.' And he looked at me in a strange way and

said, 'Sheila, you're looking at the faces of poverty. You're not looking at middle-class and affluent London. This is an area of England that you've never really seen.' I found it very uplifting in a weird sort of way because they had great character."

Against this backdrop of rundown arcades, Punch and Judy theaters and seedy tattoo parlors are cultural traditions that are as unchanging as Stonehenge.

"They have things like the Blackpool light, where in the summer you have all the lights go on and lots of people in the North go to see the fairy lights. It's a bit like fireworks. And then they have all kinds of different festivals from rock and roll shows to ballroom dance. It's very archaic. It's not of our time. And yet it seems to draw people from Europe and even Japan."

Rock's coastal photographs are collected in a 2015 book called *Tough & Tender*, a title that she feels hits the mark.

"I thought *Tough and Tender* was the ideal title. These pictures have a bittersweet quality about them. They're tough, working class people, and their hardships are carved in their faces. And yet there was this kind of innocence about them, an open-heartedness that I experienced when I met them."

What comes through in Rock's comments, but especially in the photographs themselves, is her affection for those who stand patiently in front of her camera.

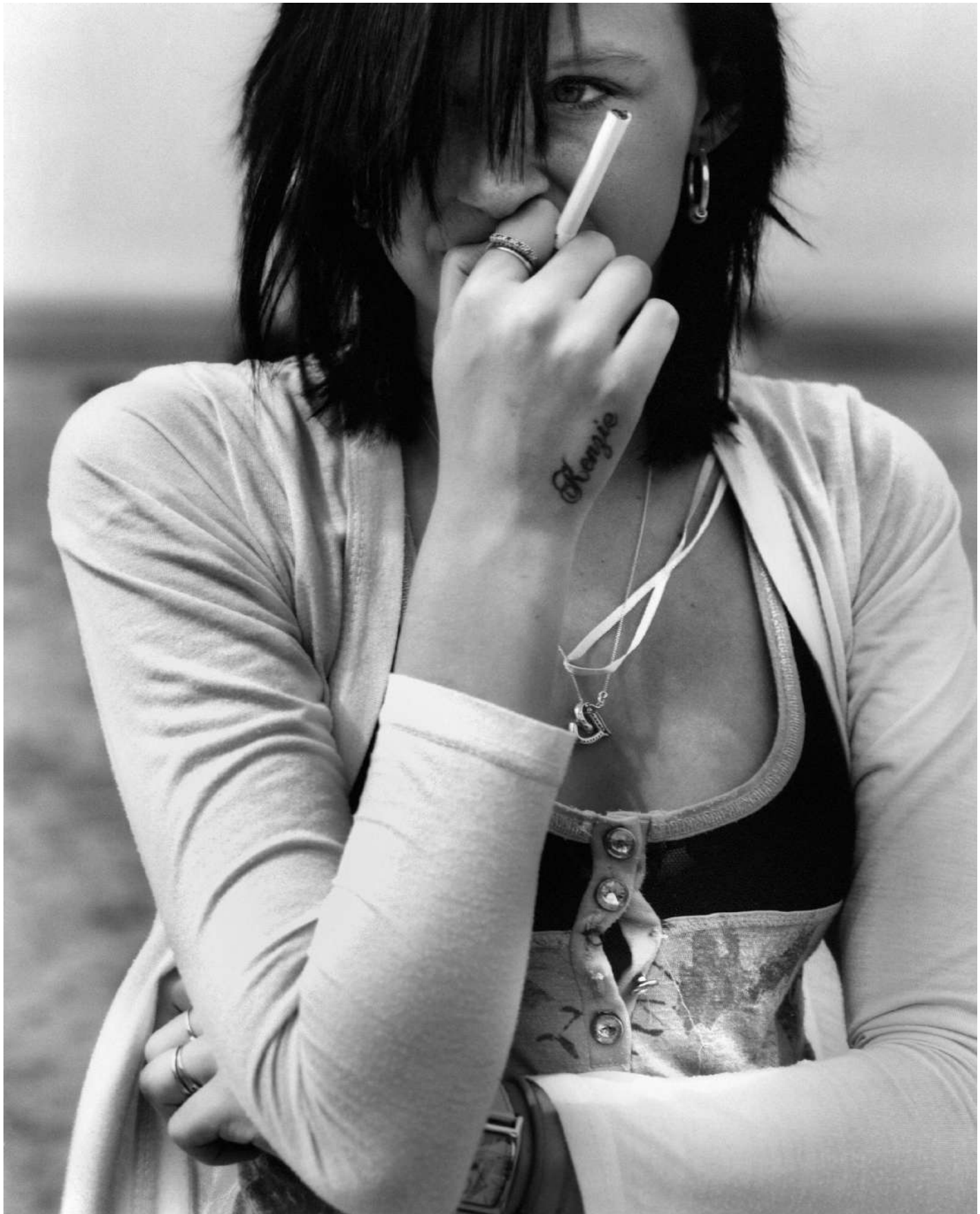
"Photographers who do satirical portraits of the British I find somewhat exploitive. Such pictures, while clever, are a bit snarky. And I don't like that. My project was more like my love letter to the British. And the more I got involved discovering whole communities of people I'd never met because I don't come from that economic background, the more I found that they were wonderful and warm. Rather than trying to bring people down, I want to elevate them, not in a snobby way, but to show their humanity in the best possible light."

One of Rock's favorite locations for *Tough and Tender* was Leysdown-on-Sea on the Isle of Sheppey. That's where she encountered a woman in a makeshift halo and angel wings who was part of an English version of a bachelorette party.

"There's a tradition in the UK called hen parties, when a woman who's going to get married goes out with her friends, dresses up and gets as completely blind drunk as the men



Weymouth Bandstand



Renzie



Beach Bums

“I would just sit and wait or walk down the piers, and it was as though the gods had given me fantastic gifts of great people.”

do on bachelor nights. In this hen party at Leysdown-on-Sea, one woman was dressed as a chicken, one was dressed as an angel, one was dressed as a clown and one was dressed as a hooker. They were all completely paralytic drunk. But the woman with the halo and wings had such an extraordinary face. It’s one of my favorite pictures from the series.”

The Advantage of Analog

When Rock worked the coast, she did it the old-fashioned way, wielding a 4x5 analog camera and working exclusively with film.

“I had some leftover Polaroid film, so when I started the project, I would do a Polaroid to get the composition. And if someone I liked walked into my frame or even in the distance, I would ask if I could photograph them in a more controlled setting. I was able to strike up a conversation, learn a little bit about them. It was personally very enriching to learn about the British in a completely different way.”

Her old-school camera was a fitting match for her surroundings, where many of the promenades and attractions had been unchanged since the 1960s.

“I would just sit and wait or walk down the piers, and it was as though the gods had given me fantastic gifts of great people. They weren’t used to being photographed, but they were pretty amenable to it. Many of them had never

seen a 4x5 camera, so I suddenly became an attraction myself along the seaside.”

Today, in the age of COVID, Rock is far from the British coastline, riding out the pandemic in Connecticut. Some of her planned exhibitions have been canceled, including one that was scheduled for last April at the John Lennon Art and Design Building at Liverpool John Moores University. She’s using the time in lockdown to gather a definitive collection from her days in music.

“I’m working on a book called *The ‘80s Sound and Vision*. It’s all about style, music, clubs, trends, the visionaries of the time. I have a formidable body of work from that decade of so many incredible artists, and I had the opportunity of meeting them in their formative years. I’m talking to different writers to contribute to the book.”

It’s a far different world in 2020 than in the days when magazines had fat budgets and Rock was flown around the world. But her true satisfaction has come from projects like *Tough and Tender*.

“I feel very privileged to have been at the genesis of *The Face* and worked for a number of high-flying magazines. But I began to feel slightly disgruntled about never really expressing myself. And I’m very glad I began doing these personal projects, because I found them more enriching. It’s very good for a photographer to do a project over a period of time, because you not only learn more about your craft, you begin to see the art of photography in different ways.”

Now that she’s in Connecticut indefinitely, Rock is experimenting with photos documenting nature in the lush landscape of New England. But you get a sense that she’ll eventually return to the country that gave her such a thrilling life in the arts.

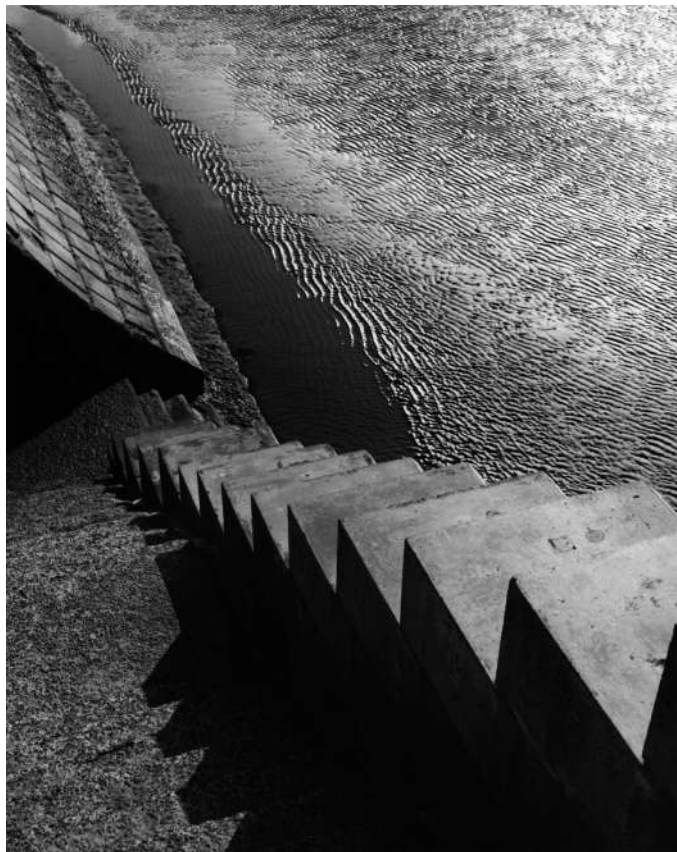
“I do love England. I was this young American girl who didn’t know anything. I would gravitate to people who were wild and imaginative. It was all very underground, but if you’re hardworking and you have an experimental spirit, the British will give you an opportunity to be creative.”

Addendum

All images copyright Sheila Rock. To see more of her work, visit sheilarock.com and [instagram.com/sheila_rock_photographer](https://www.instagram.com/sheila_rock_photographer).



Crabbing



Sea Steps



Snapshot



A Pause at Play, Canvey Island





Deckchair and Tats





Mare



Sheppey Shorts