



[The Birth of British Rock](#) @ [The Lowry](#) Photographs by Harry Hammond

Reviewed by [Sara Porter](#) February 2011

This exhibit of over eighty photographs from Hammond's career as a music photographer is on loan from the V & A collection of over 9000 photographs, and their source perhaps demonstrates the importance that accompanies this record of the development of British music. It is considered to be the definitive photographic collection of the leading British artists and American visiting artists of the fifties and early sixties.

Hammond originally started his career serving an apprenticeship in Fleet Street followed by a period as a high society photographer. During the war years he volunteered to work as a photographer for the RAF and on his return to the UK he returned to Fleet Street but this time as a freelancer. His freelance work often required him to cover events such as race meetings, garden parties and nightclubs and with this work he was increasingly exposed to the musicians who performed at them. This work came at a time when there was a shift in demands for images of performers as opposed to those of high society and presented Hammond with the ideal opportunity to establish himself as a music photographer.

In 1952 Maurice Kinn took over the Musical Express and relaunched it as the New Musical Express, pitching for a readership that was made up of consumers as opposed to musicians. Hammond was in the perfect position to provide the images for this paper and it was at this point that his career as a music photographer really took off. He was respected by the artists of the time who appreciated not only his previous work with high society but the fact that he worked to take images of the stars looking their best whether they were performing, rehearsing

or relaxing.

The exhibit at the Lowry covers approximately a two decade era which shows the change in British musical tastes from jazz and big band to American rock and roll stars such as Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent, through to the development of British rock acts such as the Animals and The Beatles. Hammond managed to capture not just the change of tastes with regards to the emerging and established stars but also the development of music television in the 1950's in particular with his coverage Sunday Night at the Palladium.



Personally, with any photography exhibit, there are two possible reasons to view it, one is from the point of view of viewing a photograph as a piece of art and the second is viewing it as a record of its subject matter. Hammond's images fall into the latter category, they are beautifully lit and shot for the time and provide a superb record of artists of that era. With the developments in digital photography and editing, some may feel that they may lack the punch that comes with modern staged, photography, they may feel a little too safe to be called art.

It needs to be remembered though, that these were photographs taken on location, not in studios with artistic directors. There is a simplicity in their style that is to be appreciated. This was also a time when photographers were working with plates, unlike the photographers of today that have the opportunity to reel off hundreds of images in a matter of minutes, Hammond would have space for about 6 plates in his pocket and he managed to capture some of the most striking performance images of these stars. Having photographed a number of bands during my very early years as a photographer, the idea of having only 6 frames to capture 'the' image to

me is testament to his skill as a photographer.

The black and white photographs in this exhibit capture an important shift in the music industry and demonstrate how British artists came out from under a fascination with American rock and roll. It illustrates how image was so important in establishing stars although the change from leather rocker gear worn by the Beatles to the suits they wore as pop stars will appear tame in comparison to the image changes we see from today's celebrities.

For those with a taste in nostalgia and music of that time, the exhibit is definitely worth a visit.

Admission is free but there is a request for donations.