

Peter Dench

(no relation to Dame Judi, that I know of) follow me on twitter @peterdench

Friday, 14 September 2012

In Conversation With Homer Sykes

I'm sat in the local Camden pub of international thriller writer [Tom Knox](#) (Sean Thomas). We are drinking a second bottle of rosé discussing success; his father is the critically acclaimed English poet, translator and novelist [D M Thomas](#); he lives in a decent house in Cornwall with his current wife who is younger than us both; we think that is success. Knox has defeated heroin addiction, is a best selling author of archaeological and religious thrillers published in over 25 countries; he owns a flat, drives a mini cooper and has lent me £1000; we agree that is success. Success for me at the moment would be finding a way to say "Hello" to the fancy flock of young women that have settled around the adjacent table. I'm about to turn 40 years old and Knox is strutting towards 50; we take a rosé-tinted moment to suck back the idea of success.

The following day I'm on a 25-stop Northern Line underground train odyssey to meet a man; a successful man? I arrive early at the lines southern tip to take the edge off the previous nights imbibing and search for a bar. I can't find one so I opt for a can of Carlsberg Export and a 'grab bag' of Quavers and sit on the wall of the Saint Martin's Way Methodist Church; the 'Brewers' decorating materials shop mocks me with it's title. As I watch the children's club depart from the church, I think of what questions I should ask [Homer Sykes](#); an independent documentary and portrait photographer of over 40 years. He has also produced one of the most extensive and comprehensive visual archives on the British. I'm visiting for two main reasons; there is something I want to ask and something I want to buy. The anticipation of achieving both in one day is making the can shake. Probably.

The semi-detached home of Homer is situated on a quiet quintessentially British suburban street. The trees are starting to bud and purple recycle bins present their neatly flattened offerings on the edge of clipped lawns. There are no clues that a photographer lives behind door number 51. Four chewed tennis balls are scattered around the pampas grass plants gesticulating at the entrance. Pampas grass!!! Isn't that the plant used by swingers to advertise their presence to other swingers? I dismiss it as a widespread urban myth and rattle the knocker that hangs next to the bamboo wind chime perched over an old Collins road map of Britain.



©Homer Sykes

Homer Sykes looks like one of those people you expect him to look like. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he arrived in the world with his shock of white hair. His demeanor is warm but firm and his manner comparable with a Victorian explorer. I follow him past some of his most iconic prints from the 2007 Tate Britain show ['How We Are : Photographing Britain'](#) the first major exhibition of photography at the premier gallery for British art. Arriving in the kitchen I present a bottle of Italian red wine and suggest a tipple; "Serious photographers don't drink alcohol during the day or on a job." Ah.

We take a coffee to the south facing garden and a seat at the table amongst the spiky plants and thorny roses; singing from his Greek neighbour plucks at the crisp spring air. Homer can track his first 'proper' photograph back to a camping holiday in 1966. While his friends watched England beat Germany in the football world cup final, Homer, who has never really been interested in watching sport, walked the backstreets of Nice. A shot that

[Share](#)

[View stats](#)

Unable to retrieve spec for <http://fcgadgets.appspot.com/spec/upt>

About Me



[Peter Dench](#)

[View my complete profile](#)

Blog Archive

- ▶ [2014](#) (9)
- ▶ [2013](#) (8)
- ▼ [2012](#) (10)
 - ▶ [November](#) (1)
 - ▼ [September](#) (2)
 - [Dench Diary : April - May 2012](#)
 - In Conversation With Homer Sykes
 - ▶ [July](#) (1)
 - ▶ [May](#) (2)
 - ▶ [March](#) (1)
 - ▶ [February](#) (1)
 - ▶ [January](#) (2)
- ▶ [2011](#) (26)
- ▶ [2010](#) (16)
- ▶ [2009](#) (1)

Followers

captured a woman washing clothes in an enormous stone tub that squatted among the tenements, won him a *Birmingham Post* photo competition.

Arguably best known for documenting British pursuits and customs, Homer never shied from gritty assignments. I ask about his time as a conflict photographer which saw him dispatched by hard news magazines to Israel, Lebanon, West Africa and Belfast where he found himself jumping in a car with Black Star photographer, [James Nachtwey](#), before racing towards The Troubles. Homer balks at the modern term 'conflict photographer' and explains with a shrug that he was simply fulfilling a magazine commission that was paying him to take pictures. Toby, the chihuahua he is looking after for his daughter Tallulah vigorously humps my foot.



©Homer Sykes

Homer is a disciplined man. He rises at 7am, usually alone (the wife is ex, children Theo, Jacob and Tallulah have all grown and flown) and dresses smartly. Today his coral tank top compliments the thin lines running through his blue cuff-linked shirt that is tucked into faded jeans; a red elastic band fixes his watch in place. His constant companion, is Brendan, a Jack Russell X Smooth Haired Fox Terrier who is then taken on the first of three or four daily walks; Homer is breakfasted and at the computer screen for 9am, diligently checking Google Analytics through the screens dust; 160 non-bounced visits a day would satisfy his stat-lust.

He admits his commissioned days are behind him; the era that saw him regularly board a plane for *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *The Telegraph* and *The Observer* are gone. His last magazine commission was over three years ago; a photo illustration of a bereaved family for a German magazine. At 63 years old, Homer has taken stock of his options and his options are stock, a keyword or theme will be enough of a nudge to get him out taking pictures; laugh; laughing; laughter.

Homer is a salesman and has always had to be; marrying at 24 and raising a family made it necessary. Driven by the thrill of making a sale, his business is the business of making a living from flogging his archive. The past six years have largely comprised scanning; burgeoning his online archive to 12,000-13,000 images. He is currently shooting a digital colour project and trying to promote his rock and pop archive which includes intimate shots of the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney with his band, Wings. For Homer it's all about income streams as is it for many photographers trying to sustain a living; a fine art print sale here; a book or stock sale there - it all adds up. The solitary day suits him; despite 15 years with Network Photographers, he is no longer interested in being part of a group and generally avoids bouncing around in the photo industry bubble.



©Homer Sykes

This famous photographer of Britain arrived from Canada aged five years old in 1954 when his mother remarried (his father was killed in China before he was born). As an only child

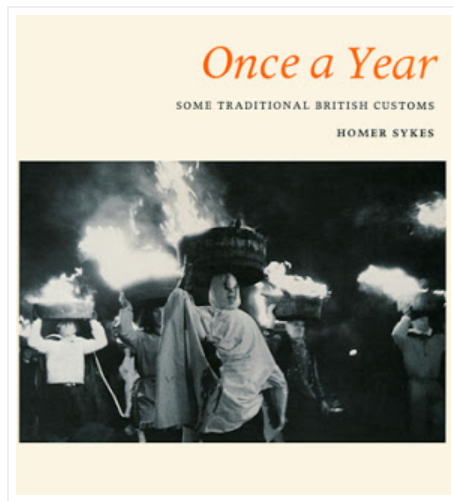
Join this site
with Google Friend Connect

Members (71) [More »](#)

Already a member? [Sign in](#)

at the co-educational Quaker boarding school in Somerset he built a darkroom, consumed copies of *Camera Owner* (later *Creative Camera*) and permanently lost hearing in one ear. In 1968, the calling of photography was unabated and he enrolled for a three-year course at the London College of Printing (now the London College of Communication). He continued to be inspired and formed a friendship with Magnum photographer [David Hurn](#) who lectured there. On his first summer vacation he visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York and witnessed the accepted 'art of photography' by modern masters; [Lee Friedlander](#), [Garry Winogrand](#), [Robert Frank](#) and [Burk Uzzle](#); Homers career was cast; four decades later he completed his own Iliad and returns occasionally to LCC to teach a new generation of potential modern masters.

Homer suggests we move up to the bedroom, I peek out at the pampas bending in the breeze. He reaches under the bed in his spare room and pulls out boxes of prints from his great British archive. There are 40 mounted prints from his book; [Shanghai Odyssey](#), (Dewi Lewis 2002); a stack of "16x20" fine prints from his self published book; [On The Road Again](#), (Mansion Editions 2002); and a box of Rollei-flex-shot square format work from his book; [Hunting With Hounds](#), (Mansion Editions 2004).



He lifts the lid on what I've waited an adult life to see, work from his book; *Once a Year - Some Traditional British Customs*, (Gordon Fraser 1977). The photographs were taken in the 1970's at more than 80 of Britain's most fabulous, dark, historic and plain bonkers traditional annual practices; a large straw effigy known as 'Bartle' is carried in procession through the streets of West Witton, North Yorkshire; Blacked up Britannia Coconut Dancers stand on a rain-soaked street, smoking in their barrel skirts, Bacup, Lancashire; manic crowds surge forward during Hare Pie Scrambling and Bottle Kicking, Hallaton, Leicestershire.

[England Uncensored](#) is my own book attempt at documenting Britain; I ask the question I have come here to ask; "Is there anyone currently documenting the English in a way that interests or inspires you?" "No." That's that then! Then I ask to buy what I have come here to buy; a copy of *Once a Year*. There are copies of various prices of varying quality; copies Homer has reclaimed over the years. I reject the one that has a library stamp in the front and the mint conditioned one which is out of my price range. I flourish a (post dated) cheque and choose the one inscribed; "from Rachael and Nigel Xmas 1978." The Christmas I unwrapped Star Wars toys to the sound of Bony M's *Mary's Boy Child - Oh My Lord*.

At 5pm Homer declares the afternoon is over and it's time for wine. We push my passion for his work back under the bed and I'm waved into the lounge to be presented with his; modern British painting from between the wars. When Homer wines he does so with gusto; two bottles of Stamford Brook Chardonnay are quickly sloshed back as he tours me through the art. There's an [Eric Malthouse](#) portraying a naked woman held aloft and paraded down an urban street (Malthouse can be seen in the foreground taking a photograph). Homer hooks his infected plaster-protected thumb towards an [Anna Zinkeisen](#); a blind cherub carries a bloody arrow. There's a [John Armstrong](#); a [Hans Tisdall](#); a [Sine Mackinnon](#); a painting of Christ by Tom Nash; a [John Elwyn](#) and a painting by self-taught artist [Francis Coudrill](#) bought for £200 from a shop in Marlborough. Coudrill is perhaps more fondly remembered for creating children's comic character 'Hank the Cowboy', the subject of Homer's painting is a little more adult; Coudrill's wife as a mermaid with her breasts thrust out.

As I unscrew the red wine; lamb chops, mushrooms, potatoes and carrots are cooked. Homer would usually eat a meal then head over to The Chelsea Arts Club for a pint of London Pride and chat with fellow photographers; [Roger Hutchings](#), [Neil Libbert](#) or [Leo Mason](#). The chat would not be about photography; the talk would more likely be what it is likely to be by men in bars the world over; women, clothes, beer. Weekends may often find

him selling Fosse Meadows Farm free-range chickens at a farmer's market in Kensington on behalf of his son Jacob. The perfect date with his girlfriend would be a visit to an out of the way old English church, light a candle, maybe say a prayer, walk around the grounds looking at the architecture then a pint in the pub.

I dab the lamb juice from my chewing the chops, pull on my coat and ask Homer if he is pleased with how photographic history has acknowledged him and if he considers his career a success? "I'm not finished yet!" On the the tube train home, the northern bound passengers play games Tetris and Angry Birds on their phones; I flick through *Once a Year*; there's a newly penned homage from Homer. I must be cackling like crazy and the eyes of the carriage level at my contorted face. I meet the gaze of my inquisitors, raise the book aloft, jab a finger at the cover, and much to their surprise, and mine; shriek out loud; "SUCCESS"!

More of Homer Sykes extensive archive can be found [here](#)

A version of this feature first appeared in issue 7 of *Hungry Eye* magazine available to buy [here](#)

Posted by [Peter Dench](#) at 01:15

3 comments:



[miami lakes kia](#) October 04, 2012

Different post you are shared with us!
[Kia Miami](#)

[Reply](#)



Anonymous November 03, 2012

This post gives the light in which we can observe the reality. This is very nice one and gives indepth information. Thanks for sharing this nice article. [cremation in atlanta](#)

[Reply](#)

[Replies](#)



[m rana](#) February 04, 2013

The paradiddle can be used to form a funky linear drum groove. Play your right hand on your hi hat and keep the left hand on the snare drum (maintaining the accent positions as written above). If you are accenting the notes correctly you should hear a funky groove. Take the initiative to add some bass drum patterns and experiment with this highly versatile rudiment.

[paradiddles](#)
[paradiddle book](#)
[paradiddle exercises](#)

[Reply](#)

Enter your comment...

Comment as: [Google Account](#) ▾

[Publish](#)

[Preview](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Simple template. Powered by [Blogger](#).