



# George DuBose, decades of iconic music photography.

Interview by Patrick Vogt

Disco Patrick and myself had published our second book, so we arranged a booth at the Utrecht Mega Record fair to promote and sell our book. After a couple of hours it was time to take a break and get some food. Scrolling around the fair I suddenly spotted a large sized photo with a familiar face. It was Rammellzee. And there was more eye-candy photography from artists like the Juice Crew, Marley Marl, Run DMC, Bambaataa and many, many more. I started talking to the seller which was a very friendly English speaking guy with an American accent. Little did I know I was speaking to the legendary and award winning photographer George DuBose, responsible for creating over 300 record covers, including 18 gold and platinum albums, with pieces in The Smithsonian, Museum of Modern Art and Brooklyn Museum. I spend all the money I earned that day on his photography. We had a great chat, while George cross-examined my Hip-Hop knowledge. I failed miserably... Over the next decade we kept in contact.

Recently I asked George if he would be willing to do an interview with me for Hot Stuff magazine. His responds was, "I'm up for anything you would like me to do". With great honour I present you, George DuBose.

**When someone fascinated me, I'm automatically intrigued by his or her roots. You were born in Morocco and grew up pretty much all over the U.S. as you followed your father, who was a U.S. Marine. Most people never leave the area they were born. Did travelling and not having the chance to root at a certain place have any impact on you as a person?**

My birth father was a US Marine Corps officer and combat veteran from the fight against the Japanese in WW2. His name was Walz and I suppose they sent him to the Pacific so he wouldn't have to fight his German cousins... George Walz died from polio he contracted while hunting mountain goats and wild boars in the Atlas mountains of Morocco.

My 19 year old mother moved back to the US and remarried when I was three and my stepfather would get a transfer to another city everytime he got a job promotion. I never went to one school for more than two years. I was constantly being uprooted, moving to another city or another state and then having to make new friends all over again. This moving did give me an exposure to the various cultural differences in different

parts of the US. I lived in the South, the Midwest and the East Coast. The longest I lived anywhere was NYC for 25 years before moving to Cologne. I continue to enjoy travelling around Europe and experiencing the different cultures. I am always curious about new things.

**You studied photography in the 1970s. Were you self-taught or did you attend any Art school?**

I went to a photo school in New York City to study commercial photography. I had tried to get photography training when I was in the US Navy, but they didn't like my weed-smoking and I kept getting in trouble with them for that.

Eventually, when I got out of the Navy, I moved back to Washington, DC where my parents were living and landed a job in a passport photo studio directly across the street from the main US passport office. I worked with a 4x5 inch (9x12cm) camera to make portraits, but my boss there wouldn't tell me anything technical. He told me to read a book. I made hundreds of portraits and learned how to get people to relax in front of a camera.

Antonio Hardy aka Big Daddy Kane  
© Courtesy George DuBose

I moved to New York City and went to a photo school to learn commercial photography. I realized that I had already taught myself how to develop B&W and color films and wanted to learn studio lighting, but that wasn't going to happen until the second year. So I tried to get a job in a photo studio as an assistant.

I had to take a job and my first job was washing dishes in a New Jersey Italian restaurant. Then I found a job in a printing company working a huge offset camera. I spent my free time there hanging out in the graphics department and learned the art of paste up...old school...

**Where did your fascination for photography come from and were there any artists who inspired you?**

I loved music, studied guitar after I first saw the Beatles on American TV, but realized that I had no talent for playing. What I discovered was that I did have talent for capturing special moments of musicians playing. I shoot on the beat.

I was inspired to be a portrait photographer by the famous Yousef Karsch of Ottawa, who would come to New York City, book a suite in the Plaza Hotel and advertise in the New Yorker magazine that he was available for portraits. Karsch's photo of Winston Churchill during WW2 is a very powerful image. Also, Philippe Halsman's portrait of Salvador Dali with naked women forming a human skull is a very inspiring image.

**Your career started in 1975 as an Assistant Production Manager at Westshore Publishing Co in New York where you rapidly climbed the career-ladder. You also learned the trade by taking apprenticeships with several fashion photographers. To me it seems you were fearless, streetwise, focussed and determined to reach your goals from a very young age. Did your upbringing had anything to do with this mindset, or was it just you being you?**

It was very difficult to get a job as a photographer's assistant. I would call a studio and ask if they needed an assistant. Usually the assistant answering the phone would just hang up. I started going into the City after working all night at the printing company and just

knocking on doors. Eventually, I landed a job working for two fashion photographers as a second assistant. I was only allowed to move the equipment boxes and merchandise we were shooting.

The studio laid off all the assistants at Christmas, but in January, the photographers called me and offered me a full-time job and \$125 a week, free lunches and I could use their cameras and all the film I wanted to work on my portfolio. They hired me full-time over the other assistants with photography school diplomas, because I was always looking for something to do around the studio. I would even wash the garbage cans unasked...

After work, I began shooting young models to get photos for their portfolios and mine. This led to me shooting Andy Warhol's t-shirts on these models and eventually, I started shooting musicians for Andy Warhol's magazine "Interview". My first publication was a studio portrait of the B52s I had taken on my own. Subsequent sessions with the B52s led to my first album cover for them. I was very focussed. I spent two years working twelve hours a day, seven days a week honing my craft. All the talent in the world is useless if one doesn't practice.

**To me New York in the 70s and early 80s was the most fascinating time. Art, music, Uptown and Downtown all blended together into a potpourri of creativity. There was the Mudd Club, CBGB, Studio 54 and many other music temples. You were at the epicenter. How do you explain this explosion of creativity?**

During my early days in New York, the East Village and other parts of Manhattan were full of young out-of-towners. Artists, gays and other "misfits" would leave their confining small towns in America and relocate to Manhattan. Clubs like the Mudd Club would attract these young artists and expose us to New Wave, early Hip-Hop and other new music styles.

When visiting Berlin in the late 90s, I was reminded that when a city has a wealth of young and underemployed, these people make parties, events and other happenings on low or no budgets. This lack of funds is certainly a stimulus for creativity.



Claus Nomi at Max's Kansas City in NYC  
© Courtesy George DuBose



**Your breakthrough came after you photographed the B-52's for Warhol's "Interview" magazine in 1977 as Tony Wright, the creative director of Island Records contacted you to work with him on the cover artwork for the B-52's first album. You eventually joined him as a creative at Island Records. I read working with Tony made you a better photographer/graphic designer. In which way or form?**

I photographed the B52s at their first show at Max's Kansas because my pals at "Interview" had invited me to see a band from Georgia. I had lived in Georgia in my youth and was curious. I fell in love with the B52s when they started their set with the music from "The Peter Gunn Theme", a TV show that my parents had watched in the 50s as I was falling asleep. The Peter Gunn Theme was the first tune I taught myself on the guitar and the B's used that music for their song "Planet Claire".

I invited the band to visit my bosses' studio and made my first photo of them, but as Cindy Wilson had already returned to Athens, Georgia, I had to ask the manager, Maureen McGlauglin to stand in for her. As no one knew what the band really looked like, nothing was amiss.

**The B-52's**  
© Courtesy George DuBose

Later, Tony Wright bought another photo I had taken during my second session with the B's, when I wanted to make a street poster for the band advertising their upcoming gigs. This photo became their first cover. Tony began to give me other photo jobs, shooting Kid Creole and the Coco-nuts' first cover, a cover for Lydia Lunch's "Queen of Siam". Eventually, Tony asked me if I would start an art department for Island Records in Manhattan. My previous experience working at the printing company was most helpful. There wasn't that much work at the Island art department and when I got a call from Glenn O'Brien who was working with the start-up magazine "SPIN" I left Island to be the first art director of SPIN. This was before computers and after the first issue, I decided that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life counting words for magazine articles, I volunteered to be the photo editor and photo finder.

**In the mid 80s you started working for music magazine Spin. Funny detail, the owner Bob Guccione Jr., was the son of Penthouse founder Bob Guccione Sr. I reckon you were never asked to do some photoshoots for him?**

As the first photo editor of SPIN, I set aside every Wednesday to look at other photographers' portfolios. I met some influential photographers that way, Anton Corbijn, Mick Rock and others. My favorite thing was to look at a photographer's portfolio and then think up an assignment for them that would force them to move outside their box.

I learned that Anton had a special technique for his early images. He wasn't trained formally, he didn't use strobe lights or flash, he would use high speed films pushed in a special Kodak developer and because he didn't use a flash, he was working with open lens apertures that gave him a shallow depth of field. Meaning...one or two people in the band would be in focus and others would be out of focus. That and his contrast coming from his pushing his grainy film, gave him his "style"... Actually, we mostly used new photos by other photographers, occasionally, I would allow access to my ar-

chives to be used. I did do a few shoots for SPIN. The first was the Talking Heads. They were working on a new album and said that they had no time, but a photographer could come shoot them in the studio. I went to the studio and set up two backgrounds one in front of the other. I told the group to come into the room where I was set up. I shot one roll of middle format, one roll of 135-36 and then another roll of 120, taking all of 5 minutes. I said "Thank you very much". They said, "That's all?"

"Well, if you come back in five minutes, I will shoot something else." I took down the first background paper and within 5 minutes had a totally different set up. The band was so impressed that when they were offered the cover of SPIN, they requested that I be the photographer.

On another occasion, ZZ Top was scheduled for the cover. Bob, Jr. asked me "Who should we send to Montreal to shoot ZZ Top for the cover". I told him since I had bought ZZ Top's first LP on the day it was released, May 12th, 1971 and was a huge fan, I should go. I made arrangements to use another photographer's studio in Montreal for the shoot. When I got to the other photographer's studio, I was surprised to see that he had had the "Afterburner" cover image painted on the wall of his studio as a backdrop. I let him shoot the band in front of the painting and I made other shots that I love...The Montreal photographer got the cover...

**I think it was about eight years ago I spotted a T-shirt which was designed to honor those who created the visual soundtrack of Hip-Hop culture. It was a list of photographers including Joe Conzo, Jamel Shabazz, Ernie Panicioli, Charlie Ahearn, Henry Chalfant and Marty Cooper. On the internet numerous websites started to write about Hip-Hop history with lists of those who captured the culture. There was always one big name missing though, George DuBose. Books were being published on Hip-Hop, but none of the publishers did a book on George DuBose. I often wondered why, as you also played such an important role in capturing Hip-Hop culture. Do you have any explanation for this?**

All of the above diligently captured the roof top parties, breakdancers in the street and the other sides of the early Hip-Hop culture as it was developing. By the time I got involved with an artist, they had a record contract and needed covers for their music packaging. My influence on the Hip-Hop culture was that I made interesting and sometimes humorous images that reflected the musician's personality or what the musician wanted to be.

My "talent" is to offer images from my mind that I feel reflect the artist's personality or the music of their recordings. Sometimes artists have their own concepts and I make their concepts "work" for the camera. I detail these creative tracks and paths in my books, "*I Speak Music - Ramones*" and "*The Big Book of Hip-Hop Photography*" that I self-publish and make available on Amazon.

One of my favorite instances of this modifying an artist's concepts was when I first met Big Daddy Kane. Kane had written some clever songs for Biz Markie, Kane was a very handsome black gentleman. He told me that his idea for his first cover was to be carried in a litter by four black men, four women in front and behind the litter throwing flowers, all dressed as Roman slaves.

I asked Kane where in the hell was I going to shoot 13 people for his cover and even on the 12" vinyl his handsome face was going to be tiny. I took his Black Caesar concept and refined it down to what you see here...He was happy, I was happy and his record went gold.

**You did a photoshoot of Rammellzee and the other Gettovetts where you first had to go through an indoctrination into his world of Gothic Futurism and his Alpha's Bet. Can you share some of your anecdotes of this photoshoot and the Gettovetts release? You also visited him at his "Battle Station" from time to time. What are your fondest memories of Ramm?**

Rammellzee was amazing artist. The first art I saw from Ramm was the "weapon" he made for the publicity shots that we did for his album "Missionaries Moving". His combination of camera and vacuum cleaner parts was my first glimpse of his sculpture work.

He created the artwork for this album by pouring epoxy over elements that he had arranged in a large tray. This gave us the background for the album cover. Yes, Ramm spent quite some time educating me about Gothic Panzerism and the lettering he created. Ramm created a piece for the name of the band, "Gettovetts", in his unique lettering and when I presented the design for this package to the production department at the record company, the head of production said we couldn't use Ramm's lettering as it was unreadable. Unreadable to the uneducated...

I forced production into a compromise. We placed a "readable" sticker over the artist's name on the cover and everybody was happy.

**"My "talent" is to offer images from my mind that I feel reflect the artist's personality or the music of their recordings."**



**Rammellzee (Gettovetts)**  
© Courtesy George DuBose

From 1983 till 1996 you worked together with the Ramones. This journey ended at a concert in 1996 when the Ramones decided to stop. At that particular moment you even smashed your camera on stage. A dramatic but beautiful way to express, this is the end. How would you describe your relationship with them? I recon they weren't the easiest people to work with.

Actually, the Ramones were really easy to work with. No clothing or makeup to worry about. Line 'em up, nobody in front, no smiles. No shooting endless rolls of film. I had learned to be quick with them and any time spent arranging lights or elements of the set had to be while they were snacking on pizza.

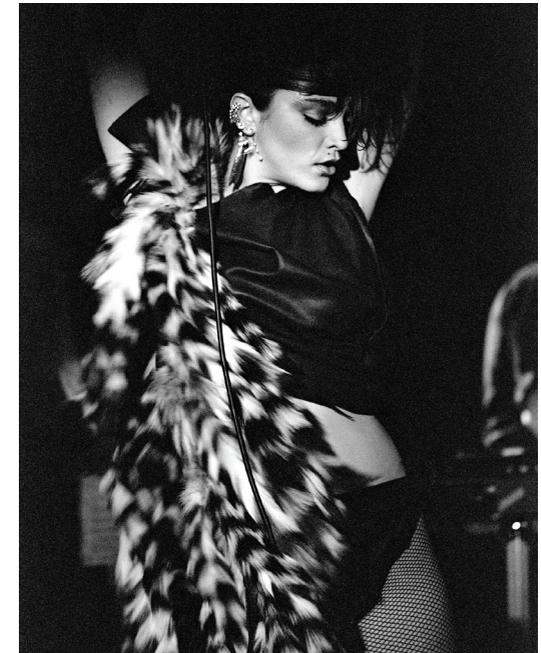
One of my favorite experiences with them was the shooting for "Halfway to Sanity". I had scouted several locations in Chinatown, NYC. That was the only "clue" I got from Johnny about the "concept" for this album. When the band got to the first location, I was all ready with the lighting. I lined 'em up in the doorway to a Chinese restaurant, took a Polaroid to show them the setup. Johnny liked the Polaroid, Joey said "OK", Richie said "Cool" and Dee Dee said "Great, can we go home now?"

I told Dee Dee that I had to shoot some real film. After three rolls of middle format film, 36 photos in all, Johnny said, "That's enough". "Great", I replied, "Let's go to the next location". Johnny said, "No, that's enough". The most money I ever earned in 15 minutes...

You captured numerous anecdotes in your book "The Big Book of Hip-Hop Photography". Many made me laugh. The book gives a great insight into the world of Hip-Hop, the artists and the creative process. Your work is an important document and should be kept for future generations to come. I know many artists have sold their work to the Cornell University Hip-Hop archive in New York. What will eventually happen to your archive?

I have single or several pieces in The Smithsonian, Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum, so far none of these entities are expressing any interest in acquiring my archive. I am still actively licensing my photos to books, magazines and films. I recently licensed quite a few photos from the first photo shooting that Christopher Wallace ever had to Netflix. These very early shots of a weed-dealin' gun totin' gangsta from Bed-Stuy. The Netflix documentary is scheduled for a March 2021 release.

[www.george-dubose.com](http://www.george-dubose.com)



**Madonna at Uncle Sam's Blues, Long Island, NYC**  
© Courtesy George DuBose



**Afrikaa Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force**  
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