

# For the record

In the first of a new series documenting his year-long charitable “For The Record” project to capture musicians with their favourite album, music photographer Carsten Windhorst gives us the story behind the very first shoot

**WORDS & IMAGES:** Carsten Windhorst

I always try to challenge myself as a photographer and decided towards the end of last year that I’d focus on portrait photography for my next project. I wanted to create a beautiful collection of portraits of popular and influential musicians and then auction these images off on eBay for Charity. The rough idea behind the project was to photograph each musician with their own favourite album - and I’m planning to come up with specific ideas for each shoot as I go along.

With the concept and theme in place, the next thing I had to do was decide on the charity I want to support with the project. Amnesty International was the perfect fit for me - I support their mission and work, plus they already have relationships with musicians so the connection was obvious. At the end of January I met with Amnesty International at their London headquarters to present my idea to them and the feedback I got was extremely positive, then about a week later I got the green light to move ahead with the project.

I’ve got a lot of images to get done, as the collection is to be launched in December 2010 to coincide with Human Rights Day and the auctions will take place shortly after that so I only have approximately ten months to get as many artists as possible involved. This is an extremely ambitious project with an artist wish list as long as my left arm, covering everyone from Lady GaGa to U2 - you name them, they’re probably on that list!

Having said that, there are two more logistical factors I have to bear in mind in terms of selecting artists. Firstly, since there isn’t really a budget I need the shoots to take place in or around London so I’ll probably have to limit myself to musicians who will be on tour and passing through the capital this year. Secondly, since I want to raise as much money for Amnesty International as possible I need to involve artists who have a loyal and dedicated fan base - as it’s the fans who will ultimately make this project a success by bidding in the auctions.

## The set up

The first band that I thought of was Duran Duran, since I’ve known the guys in the band for a few years. John Taylor (the founding member and bass player of the band) was the first person I contacted. His love of music and, in particular, his vast collection of vinyl

records is well known amongst the band’s fan base and I was certain that this project was right up his street. I sent him an email and got a reply straight away: “Sounds like a fun project. How mobile are you? Would you be able to come to my house to take the photograph?”...

John had bought his beautiful country manor in 2004 and American Vogue did a shoot there last year so I really couldn’t have wished for a better location. I needed to raise the bar really high with this first shoot to ensure other artists would be willing to help me find and use equally impressive locations, as I felt that doing the shoots in a recording studio just wouldn’t be particularly interesting, especially in terms of creating photographs that people want to buy.

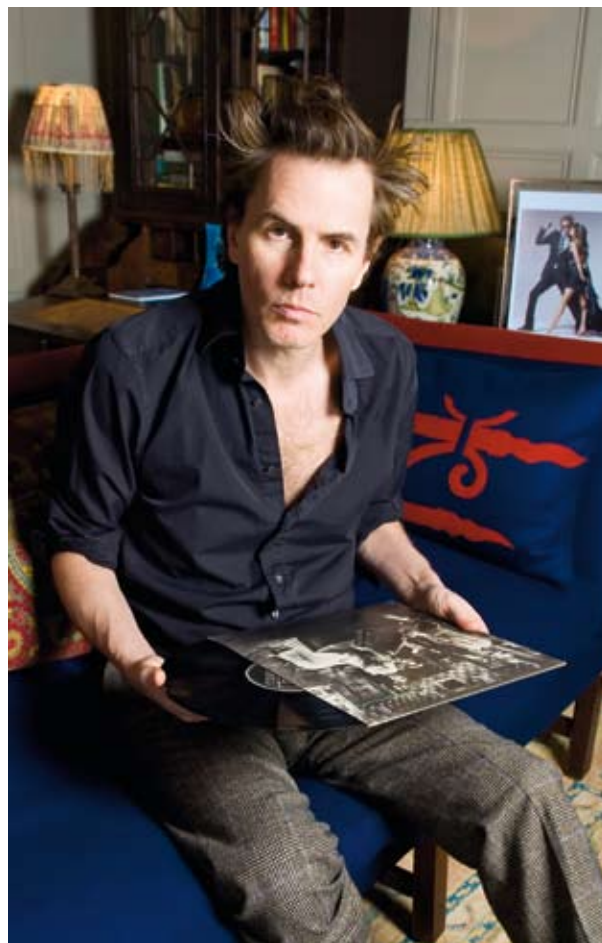
A tentative date was set and John asked me to contact him the following week to confirm everything. This is when I encountered the first set back. John got in touch to say he’d be working in London towards the end of the week and asked if - due to his busy schedule - we could just do the shoot there. Within five minutes I had gone from doing a shoot at a 14th century country manor to photographing John at a recording studio in London...

While cancellations of shoots are nothing new to me, I was still rather disappointed. I emailed John to say that there was a lot riding on this first shoot and if we could stick to the original plan of taking the photos at his house, it’d be great. Luckily, he said it would be possible, but we’d have to do it on the following Monday - so the original plan was officially back on.

I spent the next few days planning the shoot with fellow music photographer Gerard Hynes, who was going to be my lighting assistant on the day. The shots of John’s house from the Vogue shoot were our only point of reference so we decided to come up with various lighting set-ups, since we didn’t know exactly which room we’d be photographing John in.

On Sunday night with just over twelve hours to go, it was time for another setback. John emailed me saying he wasn’t feeling too good and if we could postpone the shoot until the next time he was in the UK - i.e. May...

At that point I started to despair. The project had got off to a really bad start, despite the positive feedback I’d already had



from other musicians and publicists. I knew it was important to get the John shoot done to set a benchmark for other artists to match, so I went back to John and politely stressed how much planning had already gone into the whole project. It came as a pleasant surprise when John reconsidered, saying: “Maybe we should just go for it: it won’t take long will it?”

And with those few words, we were on for the third time. The Amnesty International project was now officially up and running...

## The day of the shoot

Monday, 22nd February. We arrived at the house just after 10am and it became apparent straight away that John really was feeling under the weather. His first words to us were: “Guys, I’m a bit low on energy” - so we had to work fast to make the shoot as easy for him as possible.



John’s assistant took us through to his private study, which hadn’t been featured in the Vogue shoot so all our careful lighting preparation went out the window. From a value-for-money point of view, however, I couldn’t have asked for a better location. The shots are for the fans, and for John to let us photograph him in his private study was pretty amazing. It turned the photo into a personal item.

Equipment-wise I had brought 4 Nikon Speedlights, a 60 x 60 cm Lastolite Hot Shoe EZYBOX Softbox (which is handheld with an extending handle), two umbrellas and a couple of reflectors. We had to quickly work out how to set up the shoot but the room was very narrow and didn’t allow for an elaborate lighting set up. Lighting the background in particular proved to be a real problem due to the lack of space. What’s more, we had barely assembled everything when John walked into the room to start the shoot, so in the end we only used the Softbox coupled with the reflectors and I opted for a slow shutter speed to let the ambient light expose the background.

I had originally envisaged spending about half-an-hour shooting John with three of his favorite albums but in the end we did the entire shoot in exactly nine minutes. When you work that quickly the pressure is really on you as a photographer and it’s extremely important to pay attention to every detail. As a result I’m the first to admit that some of the shots I took work better than others but I still came away with a great set of photographs that I’m happy with.

In an ideal world I would have waited for when John was feeling his best and spent at least thirty minutes setting up the shoot, taking plenty of test shots in the process to fine-tune every single aspect. However, that wasn’t an option - but the lessons I learnt from this are invaluable and will help me deal with similar situations in the future.

Before we left John’s house we said to him: “We hope that wasn’t too painful,” to which he replied “It wasn’t painful at all” - and at nine minutes this must have been one of the fastest photo shoots he’s ever done...

## Next up

I’ve already got great feedback on the shots of John and the other members of Duran Duran should come on board as well now - so Nick Rhodes and Simon Le Bon will probably be the next musicians I shall come face to lens with, so to speak. Tom Jones has also expressed his interest to take part and I’m in the process of setting a date for that shoot. Other artists who have been contacted and who I’m waiting to hear back from are Vampire Weekend, Corinne Bailey Rae, Goldfrapp and Tori Amos. I also desperately want to photograph Grace Jones for the collection so I have made contact with her people. Fingers crossed! 🍀

● For more information about For The Record please visit [www.for-the-record.org](http://www.for-the-record.org)