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Behind the Lens: Ian Witlen of The Camera Clicks

By Christine Borges

Ian Witlen knows the ins and outs of South Florida's music scene, and covers it extensively for the Miami and Broward-Palm Beach *New Times*. He's come up with visual accounts that many people that attend said concerts just couldn't see. Witlen tells a story with his in-the-trenches style of music photo journalism, often catching jaw dropping stills with just a simple click. He's shot everything from close-ups of mobs crowd surfing that look like they were taken from the ground up and photos of musicians that appear one step shy of ethereal to performances that literally seem hair raising, thanks to his split-second high-speed photography.

It wasn't until he discovered music at the age of eight, poking around his parents' classic rock and jazz tapes, that it really hit him — and music became what drove him. "I think I really started focusing when I discovered music in general," he says. "When I was in sixth grade I was very much into punk and ska. And that's when I started going to local shows and Warped Tour — the gateway drug for my music photography. It was at that time that I discovered what a festival was, and fell in love with it."

He started his career officially as a photographer's assistant on shoots for well-known fashion magazines and advertising campaigns for publications like *New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *TIME*, *Ocean Drive*, *Us Weekly* and *ESPN Magazine*, and has gone on to shoot for publications such as *SPIN*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Village Voice*. We caught up with the full-time freelance photographer to discuss some of his favorite musician memories.



How did you get into it? How long have you been doing it?
Ian Witlen: When I was in college I did take photography on a tour with Butch Walker, American Hi-fi, and Val Emmich. It was then that I learned how competitive the music photography industry can be.

After college, I worked for a commercial photo studio in Fort Lauderdale, where we shot catalogs and ads for Target, Office Depot, Motorola, fashion spreads for *Seventeen* magazine, *Ocean Drive* and the like. When I left the studio, I went completely freelance, shooting for a Tribune newspaper and a couple *Village Voice* publications. At this time, I was also doing photo assisting on shoots for *New York Times, Newsweek, TIME, US Weekly*, and many others.

In 2008, I received a call from SPIN Magazine's photo editor, to see if I would be interested in shooting a three-day festival for them. A photo from my first assignment with the magazine ended up running as a two-page spread in the Soundcheck section. From that point on, I have been traveling on assignment to shoot festivals and concerts for SPIN. Each year I shoot Bonnaroo, Lollapalooza, SXSW, and other assignments for the magazine. My clientele quickly expanded to include SPIN, AOL, Rolling Stone, Flip Video, Telegraph UK, Universals Music Group, Kanine Records, Rhapsody, Ultra Music Festival, *Interview* magazine, MTV, and many others.

Any types of subjects/photography that you haven't photographed before but are curious to try?
I would love to do travel photography. I do it already for my personal collection when I travel on assignment, so it wouldn't be much different.

What's next for you/TheCameraClicks?
In January, I'll be starting on a few personal portrait projects in addition to doing my freelance assignments. Holy Ship! will be making its second voyage, and I'll be onboard to shoot all of that insanity, as well.

What are some of your favorite subjects that you've shot?
One of my favorite shows that I shot was of JEFF the Brotherhood at Bonnaroo 2011. I had been granted side stage access to shoot Arcade Fire on the main stage, but when I found out that JEFF the Brotherhood would be playing at the same time I knew I couldn't miss their set. The stage they played was a tiny tent with a metal barricade in front of the stage. The stage was about eight inches off the ground with three and a half feet between the stage and barricade. As if it wasn't already tight enough, the barricade kept getting pushed forward until it was leaning over the stage. I kept getting pushed closer and closer to the stage. I was dodging a constant barrage of crowd surfers while shooting. It was definitely the best set during Bonnaroo. (Image below.)



Back in June, I was sent to Nassau, Bahamas to shoot portraits of prog-rock legend Mike Oldfield for his record label Universal Music Group UK and to shoot the cover for *The Telegraph* UK's Sunday magazine *SEVEN*. I spent three and a half days there. I flew in with my assistant to meet with Oldfield's publicist and we spent our first day doing location scouting; ultimately we decided on using some of the island's historic landmarks and beaches as the backdrop. He even gave us a special preview of a track he was working on with Phil Collins. Mike Oldfield was a surprise performer at the London 2012 Olympics and at the time I couldn't discuss the shoot with anyone. The photos I shot were included in the liner of his latest album *Two Sides*, and were also widely circulated around the UK to magazines and newspapers.

Images by Ian Witlen

- Surfer Blood -first promos for Kanine
- Ultra Music Festival - Miami
- SWANS -Respectables
- Ian Witlen 5
- JEFF the Brotherhood - Bonnaroo
- Gallows - Warped Tour
- Surfer Blood -first promos for Kanine
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