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Photographer touches the soul of rock 'n' roll with Grateful Dead, Phish, Neil Young and many more

Jay Blakesberg captured iconic images of Grateful Dead, Neil Young, Phish and many more

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Looking back at local history: Nov. 6

SARATOGA SPRINGS — For more than three decades, Jay Blakesberg has been capturing the music of icons like the Grateful Dead and Neil Young in photographic images that breathe in and freeze the moment of the click.

Sometimes his photos are so free and organic, it's like the swirling batik fabrics of a hippie girl's skirt are still swirling. Sometimes so electric, it's like the wailing guitars are still wailing. Sometimes so raw and intimate, it's like stealing a peek into a moment never to be stolen again.

And for this iconic image maker, it's about capturing the unexpected and offbeat bits, shadows and textures of life. It's about telling a story — the kind of story that when you recall it even years later, you still get goosebumps.

"I certainly feel somewhat of a responsibility," Blakesberg said Tuesday in an interview just hours before a presentation at Skidmore College. "I want my photos to mean something to the viewer. And I hope when someone sees one of my photos, it might trigger a memory and they will be transported back to that moment. Maybe they will remember a time they saw Jerry Garcia and who they were with and what they were doing."

He talks about listening to the AM radio with Cousin Brucie while growing up. "Now when a song like 'Hey Jude' comes on the radio it transports me back to the 1960s and driving in my mother's Chevy Impala," he said. "It is very cool almost a Deja-vu like moment, a familiar feeling that is enjoyable and feels good."

That's what he hopes his photographs do.

This week Blakesberg, who is 54 and lives in San

PHOTOS: Jay Blakesberg photography

Photographer and documentarian Jay Blakesberg of San Francisco, Calif., has toured with The Grateful Dead and has worked with musicians such as blues legend B.B. King, Phish, moe. and rappers Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. His career spans across more than 35 years.

1 of 13



Bruce Hornsby, Jeff Chimenti, Mickey Hart, Bob Weir, Phil Lesh, Bi and Trey Anastasio - Fare Thee Well, 50th Anniversary Celebratio
Dead - photographed at Soldier Field in Chicago, IL July 5, 2015 ©
courtesy Jay Blakesberg

Francisco, traveled across the country to speak at Skidmore College about his body of work, which spans more almost 40 years and includes more than two million rock 'n' roll images.

Jordana Dym, director of the John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative at Skidmore, talked about him at Tuesday night's event, saying Blakesberg's work is evidence-based storytelling.

"He is a photographer, a traveling ..." Dym said, pausing.

Blakesberg filled in the pause: "hippie." And the 130 or so people in the audience laughed.

Dym introduced Blakesberg's daughter, Ricki Blakesberg, a Skidmore student studying studio arts and street photography at the Saratoga Springs private college. "She is following in her family footsteps," Dym said.

In a brief introduction of her father, Ricki said, “He will take you on his journey through music, allowing us to enter the soul of music.”

But like most children, Ricki was not that interested in her father’s work, although she did say she has fond memories of a Flaming Lips concert when she was about eight, and she was dressed up and danced on stage with the bands. It wasn’t until recently that she began to appreciate her father’s work, she said in an interview earlier in the day.

“This summer, my perspective of what my dad does changed; his work is so beautiful and there is so much love behind it. He really describes the atmosphere of the place,” Ricki said. “My father’s images go to the soul and heart.”

And to a standing room only audience in Davis Auditorium, Blakesberg opened his presentation, “Chasing the Light: The Rock & Roll Photography of Jay Blakesberg,” by saying his journey began when he was a young hippie doing typical teenage stuff like drinking, doing bong hits and following the Grateful Dead.

“In the mid-1970s I was a teen in suburban New Jersey. I drank beer, smoked marijuana and my house was a party vortex,” he said. “In 1977, I went to my first Grateful Dead concert. It was the summer’s end concert. There were 100,000 people, it was over 100 degrees outside and I was 15. Life was never the same.”

The next year, Blakesberg’s father lent him his Pentax camera and at age 16 he got his first semi-professional shot of Jorma Kaukonen, famed blues and rock guitarist known for his time with Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna.

“We saw Jorma at a concert at the Capitol Theater in New Jersey,” Blakesberg said. “At the end of the show, we all jumped into the back of a friend’s Karmann Ghia and followed him to a deli in New York City. I got out of the car and said, ‘Hey Jorma, can I take your picture?’”

Relix Magazine published the now famous image. He was 16.

It seems as if photography found Blakesberg rather than him trying to make it happen. And the early photos of the Grateful Dead were headed toward papering a young teen's bedroom wall. "I wanted the memorabilia. And I loved working in the darkroom I built in my mom's basement."

Nonetheless, while still a teen, Blakesberg followed the Dead around the country, taking Greyhounds or whatever to get to the next show. And in the process, he captured never-before-seen images of Dead Heads and the band that were getting picked up by *Relix*.

And while never setting out to make photography a career, with the exception of an eight month stint in a New Jersey state prison for possession of LSD, Blakesberg has been documenting the lives of music makers and the fans who love music ever since.

This week wasn't the first time he visited the area, and he vividly recalls the last time he was in Glens Falls.

"I saw the Grateful Dead on Aug. 31, 1979. I had just graduated from high school. I was wearing cut-off jeans and there was a tree swing into a body of water," he said, obviously enjoying his recollection. "We were just kids on an adventure."

But it's been a long road since his visit to the area, and after all these years of documenting pop culture, he said what he has created is visual anthropology.

"I got my start with the Grateful Dead. But it is much bigger than the Grateful Dead," he said. "We were all a bunch of misfits that fitted together with the music. It's the hippie ethos, the hippie mentality to become a kinder, gentler people."

His archive is interesting and vast with decades of rich work chronicling the careers of the Grateful Dead and Santana to name a few. At the

same time, Blakesberg documented the culture of the time.

“It’s a study of the hippie movement,” he said. “It is a visual anthropology of the tribe.”

Blakesberg continued.

“The hippies were right,” he said. “They were right about the food and the environment.”

In addition to such legends as the Grateful Dead, Neil Young, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Keith Richards, Johnny Cash, Tom Waits and Bob Dylan, to name a few, Blakesberg captured images of more alternative music makers like the Flaming Lips, Soundgarden and Jane’s Addiction and many of the jam bands that have sprouted from the seeds of the Grateful Dead including moe. and Phish.

And this week, Blakesberg stayed with friend and moe. drummer Vinnie Amico, who lives in Ballston Spa. Amico said they both have roots in the Grateful Dead and it gives them a common core, adding that many musicians he knows have ties to the Grateful Dead.

“I don’t think it was his (Blakesberg’s) intent to do it as a profession,” Amico said Tuesday. “But look at some of his photos; he knows how to capture the energy of what’s going on in a room. His Tom Waits stuff is phenomenal.”

Blakesberg started working with moe. when he was brought in to direct filming at Summer Camp Music Festival in Chillicothe, Illinois and “moe. down” in Turin, New York. And a couple days before the Skidmore presentation, Blakesberg made sure to leave time in his trip’s itinerary for moe.’s Halloween show at The Fillmore in Philadelphia.

Last year it had a Star Wars theme, Amico said. This year it was a tribute honoring the films of director Quentin Tarantino. “We picked songs from his films and re-wrote a bunch of songs for it,” Amico added.

As far as Blakesberg’s presence on stage?

“He’s invisible on stage and he can capture what most everybody does not experience,” Amico said. “The closer to the band, the more energy you can feel, and you can see that energy in his pictures. He’s capturing what he’s seeing.”

Some might think that such an intense scene might lose its luster for a man who has been examining it through his unique lens for all these years. But that could not be further from the truth. And he’s still hoping to get a chance to do a portrait of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards together.

Does he still get the same rush as when he was 17?

“Absolutely!” Blakesberg said. “If not, I would stop doing what I do.”

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