

Last Stop Routemasters

by Ralf Oberfell

London 2008

I was twelve or thirteen years old when I first spotted the Routemaster. On TV at my parents house in Staufen, a small town on the edge of the Black Forest, where I grew up.

I got hit by the striking bright red, the powerful design with its friendly looking round curves, the open platform with the chrome pole located in its centre, and the fact that the bus was still conductor operated. To me, the Routemaster conveyed a sense of original London street furniture, a classic piece of art and technology that was loved and valued by Londoners and visitors alike. After all the Routemaster presented a sense of communal spirit that just made it fun to ride on.

To a few of us Black Forest kids, it was Britain and in particular London that made us feel in awe. From an early teenage age I became attracted to the punk and synth sound of early 80's English bands like The Cure, Depeche Mode, Eurythmics and Duran Duran. The Punk and New Romantic fashion sense that went with seemed hilarious and fun. That together with the three iconic Red symbols of London (Routemaster, Phone Box, Letter Box) epitomised 80's British Cool to me. Age fifteen I decided to move to London to experience and explore my attraction. I had just turned twenty when I arrived in the Big Smoke. The moment I got here I became hooked on its creative crazy buzz, one I can still feel ticking day by day.

My interest in photography was driven by London and the environment I grew up in. Our father was shooting a lot when we were kids, so photography was always around me and my younger brother Marco. Dad would teach us some tips and basic elements with regards to exposure and light. We would then just watch and learn and eventually started to shoot ourselves when he inherited us his analogue Pentax and Minolta respectively. Marco got the Pentax, I got the Minolta x700. I felt a moment of joy, and from then on I started taking my first photographs of the kids at school and family surroundings. I was fascinated by capturing beauty in its various forms, in particular people and landscapes.

My early London years I spent working in Bars and Hotels. London was hit by a big recession in the early 90. It was hard to find work, even harder so if you weren't in good command of the English language. Although I managed to make myself understood, there was still a big chunk of vocabulary missing. This wasn't really German primary

school English they spoke here, this was proper London Street English I thought, so you learn new from scratch and start all over again.

After three years I had enough of bar and hotel work. I felt my English was good enough to move on to new adventures so I decided to explore my interest in art and business on an academic level. I enrolled at the London College of Communication where I studied Advertising and Creative Marketing. Upon graduation I decided to re-visit my passion and to seriously start working on and with photography.

In 2001 a friend of mine by the name of Cecil Beacon introduced me to Jan von Holleben who at the time was founding Photodebut, a London based Art collective that promotes, supports and connects emerging photographers. I felt a sense of mutual bond when I learned that Jan grew up in Breisach, a small town not far from Staufen. I submitted some work and eventually became a founding member of Photodebut in 2002.

It was at one of our early regular Photodebut meetings that were held at the Agency on Charlotte Road in East London. The twenty founding members would get together for regular meet ups to critically analyse our work, share ideas, inspire and plan projects, exhibitions and educational talks.

At those early day meeting in Charlotte Road I became friends with Maxine Beuret and Jet. Maxine expressed an interest in working collectively on a collaboration project with some photographers in the group. She mentioned that the Routemasters were to be withdrawn from commercial operation. This sent shock waves through my veins. We soon realised that the three of us shared a common interest, a deep rooted passion for the Routemaster. We decided to collaborate to create a visual record of the the last eighteen months of the Routemaster. I approached the idea with a book in the back of my mind

We started shooting both together and individually and over time accumulated a substantial body of work that captured the interior and exterior design elements of the bus and the interactions between passengers and conductors in their work-commuting spaces.

Unfortunately Maxine couldn't continue with us because of the Slam door train she was shooting at the time. The project was in its final stages and soon to be launched at the National Railway Museum in

Jet and I decided to continue and by the time we had a produced a comprehensive body of work, Jet came up with the idea of creating a website. Jet's friend Steven Haycock came on board to design a website for the project which we named Last Stop. Routemasters.co.uk was launched in May 2005 and a year later the site became

permanently archived by the British Library in the name of national heritage.

I shot Last Stop shot between May 2004 and 9 December 2005 (the last day of the Routemaster). The shooting predominantly took place on the Arriva operated 19 and 38 'brother and sister' routes. I loved going on tour, even more so when I became friends with Kathy Muhamad and Phil Geraghty. Kathy worked as conductor on the 19 route, Phil on the 38. I'd go with them En Route, often forward and backward to its final destinations Hackney, Victoria and Battersea. On other days I'd go jumping on and off, getting onto any Routemaster that was coming from either direction. It felt like being on a Routemaster rally, something which made Last Stop even more fun. The desire to go out there and hunt for those shots felt great.

I was a bit disappointed when I learned from Jet that she didn't want to pursue the idea of a book, though I respected her wish. She was happy with what we had achieved with the website and wanted to leave it there. I decided to go the final bit alone and fulfil my original dream of creating a photography book of Last Stop. This dream was even more intensified by the many enquiries routemasters.co.uk received from world-wide. People enquired whether Last Stop was available as photography book.

Last Stop provided me with great new insights of London. I learned a lot of new about London and the importance the Routemaster played in the daily lives of the people working and communiting on them. I have great respect for the people that worked on the buses as I witnessed both joy and abuse. I obtained the impression that many of the drivers and conductors loved the Routemasters as much as they were loved by many Londoners and visitors alike. A love I hoped to re-create with my photogaphs.

I hope you enjoy Last Stop.