



YOU BOY! WEAK THE LOOK

JAY BRANNAN
WILD IN OUR WARDROBE

STYLE ISSUE

IDEAS FOR AUTUMN

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THIS IS ME PHOTOGRAPHED A LONDON ICON



Words MATT MILES Images RALF OBERGFELL

RALF OBERGFELL, 36

As a kid all I wanted to do was come to London.

I grew up in Freiburg, Germany. I left the Black Forest for London in 1991 age 20. I was always fascinated by the city, and England, and a burning desire to explore kicked inside me throughout my teenage years. Those fascinations and inspirations included schoolboys in their uniforms - in Germany it was just boring jeans and T-shirts - bands like Duran Duran and Depeche Mode, fashion from the likes of Vivienne Westwood and the iconic classic design of the Routemaster buses. And, of course, London also offered the perfect anonymous place to come out as a gay man.

Sometimes we don't take enough care of our icons.

The Routemaster bus is one of the ultimate symbols of London. Nearly all public transport users in the city liked using them. I felt saddened when I learned that the Routemaster was to be phased out, so I decided to take action and produce a tribute. I created the photo book *Last Stop!* to commemorate the Routemaster's passing into obsolescence and preserve a piece of London heritage. *Last Stop!* is a unique photographic and historic record of the RM's final months, which I shot over one and a half years until the final day of its commercial operation. *Last Stop!* taught me a lot about Londoners, their affection for the bus and what it meant to them and their daily lives. The project also provided me with a great insight into the workers, and what they sometimes had to put up with, and how important the conductors were - particularly to London's elderly populations and the tourists. The Routemaster was like 'old faithful' to many.

But you also have to let go.

Life, and a major capital city like London in particular, is in perpetual motion. You need to let go of the past, and continue to work on the realisation of your future vision and dreams. The Routemaster had gone, so I moved on to new adventures and projects like *Sea Gypsies* - a social and cultural documentary on the Urak Lawoi Sea Gypsy tribe in Borneo, Thailand and Malaysia, *Man at Work* (a series on London's construction workers), and *Beautiful Freaks/Creatures of the Night* (a club portraiture series shot in London, Stockholm and Rome). Whilst creating these new bodies of work, *Last Stop!* was signed up by Black Dog Publishing for a photography book publication to be released in spring 2008. All elements for publication are in place, including most of the funding and the corporate sponsorship for a big media launch. I just want to get the book launched so I can truly move on, but frustratingly I'm just £5,000 short of the £30,000 target so I'm

still spending a lot of time looking for a final corporate or private sponsor.

If you believe, you can make it happen.

You only live once, so you 'd better get on and do something with your life. Keep an open mind, listen to critical feedback and take it on board but stick to your own guns. Have a vision, never give up, work hard and just go for it. That's always been my life philosophy.

I was a late starter.

Although I have been snapping away since I was a kid, my photography started to become more serious five years ago when I joined the international photographer's collective Photodebut. The collective acted like a springboard for my career, helping me make my work available to a wider audience and to develop my skills and knowledge which has recently helped me to receive nominations for the Paris Photography Award.

I didn't intend to live for so long in London but...

The city has become a bit of an addiction. You just can't let go of this place. There always seems to be new stuff around the corner that needs exploring - I'm not talking about the rent boys on Marylebone Road! And although London is an exciting place to work and live in, it's not always an easy place to be. In comparison to any other big European cities I think we are paying too much money and getting too much shit in return. But overall this place is cool. To still be here after 15 years must be down to the excitement and creative buzz of London's multicultural, tolerant heart. And of course to the man of my life (the DJ/producer Per QX) and my friends who all keep me ticking.

Travel rocks my world... especially when you get hit by a tsunami.

To get away for a while, experience a complete change of scenery and to be inspired by its change is what keeps the creative process going. I spent time in South East Asia where I was creating the *Sea Gypsies* project. I was shooting on a long-tail fishing boat when the Boxing Day tsunami of 2002 struck. At that moment I thought we were over and done with. Only the knowledge and skills of the Sea Gypsies on board, who manoeuvred the boat to ride the wave, helped us all to save our lives. When I returned to shore I was still shaken and disorientated. The experience was frightening but also exciting, as it was the biggest adrenalin rush I have ever experienced. The tsunami experience reminded me that life really can be short, and because of this I realised once more how important it is to follow your dreams.

Find out more about *Last Stop!* at routemasters.co.uk and ralfobergfell.com



'THE ROUTEMASTER BUS IS ONE OF LONDON'S ULTIMATE ICONS. WHEN I LEARNED IT WAS TO BE PHASED OUT, I DECIDED TO TAKE ACTION AND PRODUCE A TRIBUTE'