

NEWS

ON SHOW

© Brian Griffin,  
Courtesy of Brian  
Griffin & IMMX Gallery

Whether photographing a businessman or a celebrity, **Brian Griffin** knew exactly how to make the most of the relationship between himself and the sitter, says Tracy Calder as a new exhibition in London celebrates his work.

When Brian Griffin collected a Design and Art Direction award for his work on the Depeche Mode album cover *A Broken Frame*, he did so dressed as the Royal Albert Hall. 'Everyone was going on the stage in dinner suits, so why not?' he declared in an interview at the Olympus Gallery in 1983. Griffin was 35 at the time and had long had an interest in the arts, particularly performance art.

His act of rebellion was nothing new. Born in Birmingham in 1948 he was raised in the Black Country, an area of the West Midlands synonymous with industry. Having left school at the age of 16 he took a job in engineering, where he worked for five years. His father worked on a machine-shop

floor and would often come home with his hands covered in oil. 'My father was proud that I came back from work as clean as I had gone to work,' he recalls in a film made in his studio in 1980. Griffin had been advised that you were not supposed to enjoy your work, but as a spirited young man he refused to accept this, and in 1969 he left his office job and enrolled on a three-year photography course at Manchester Polytechnic School of Photography.

As soon as he finished college Griffin set about establishing himself as a freelance photographer. He promptly moved to London, with the intention of becoming a fashion photographer, but received his first commission from Roland Schenk, art director of *Management Today* magazine. Unsurprisingly, Griffin had a rather unorthodox approach to shooting corporate

portraits: many of his pictures showed great humour and some were quite surreal. 'I found new ways of portraying what was regarded at the time as boring subject matter, in desperation to succeed,' he revealed in an interview for the *Birmingham Post* in 2013.

Having held a well-respected position as an engineer, he was able to establish a rapport with many of the managers he photographed. He learned how to read a situation and when to propose something a little out of the ordinary to the sitter. Having enjoyed chess as a child, he knew exactly when to make his move. This ability to connect with the subject is crucial to Griffin's work. Whether photographing a businessman or a celebrity he knew how to make the most of the relationship between photographer and sitter, and he treated all his subjects equally.

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Museum of Cosmonautics, Moscow, 1974.

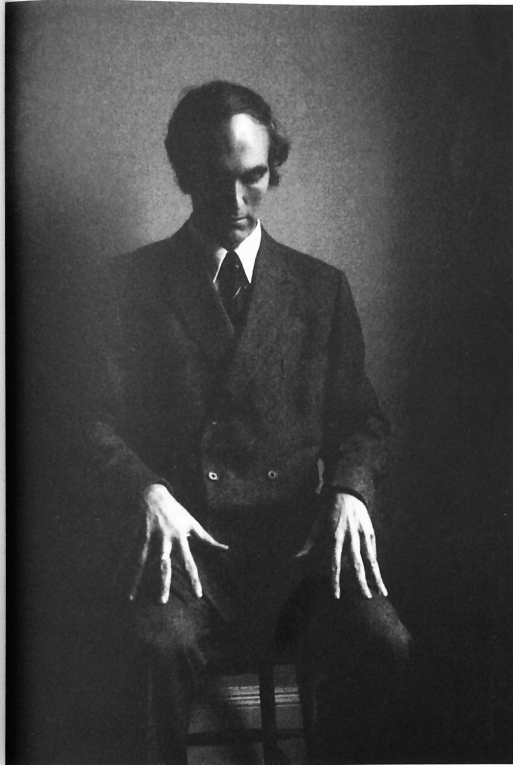


Rocket Man, Dungeness, Kent, 1979.



Above left Charley, Shepherd's

By the late 1970s Griffin's unusual and thoughtful portraits of men in suits had attracted the attention of the music industry, such as the Jam and Ultravox. He seized the opportunity to enter the field in 1980, when he set up his own studio. He had a client list that included *Sunday Times* and *Esquire* (1981). Just two years later he was standing in a cornfield close to Stansted, photographing the cover for *A Broken Frame*. Griffin's masterclass in lighting, with the subject positioned to bring out the texture of the subject's clothing, while also catching the yellow of the corn. The light is reminiscent of a pre-Raphaelite painting.



Above left Charley, Shepherd's Bush, London, 1977. | Above right Anthony Good, director of Jensen Motors, 1975. | Below right Bureaucracy, London, 1987.

By the late 1970s Griffin's ability to create unusual and thought-provoking images of men in suits had attracted the attention of the music industry. Bands such as the Jam and Ultravox often wore smart shirts, jackets and ties, and the photographer seized the opportunity to enrich his portfolio. By 1980, when he set up his first studio, Griffin had a client list that included *Rolling Stone*, the *Sunday Times* and *Esquire* (US) magazines. Just two years later he was standing in a cornfield close to Stansted airport shooting the cover for *A Broken Frame*. The image is a masterclass in lighting, with three flashes positioned to bring out the rich colours of the subject's clothing, while also boosting the yellow of the corn. The light at the front is reminiscent of a pre-Raphaelite painting.

*'This ability to connect with the subject is crucial to Griffin's work.'*

Despite the success of this distinctly colourful image, Griffin is primarily known for his black & white work. One of his first books, *Copyright* (1978) features monochrome shots of businessmen at the dawn of Thatcherism, many of the pictures clearly inspired by religious paintings. *Copyright* is one of several books that Griffin has self-published over the years, others include *Open* (1986), *Work* (1988) – which was named the Best Photography Book in the World at the Barcelona Primavera Fotografica in 1991 – and

*The Water People* (2005).

From 1991 to 2002 he worked as a film director, creating TV commercials, music videos and short films. In 2013 he received the Centenary Medal from the Royal Photographic Society in recognition of his achievements in photography. A selection of his pictures from the 1970s and 80s (many of them vintage silver gelatin or vintage silver bromide prints) is currently on show at MMX Gallery in London.

#### SEE THE IMAGES

*Brian Griffin – Work and Other Stories* runs from 6 June to 3 August at MMX Gallery, 448 New Cross Road, London SE14. [mmxgallery.com](http://mmxgallery.com).