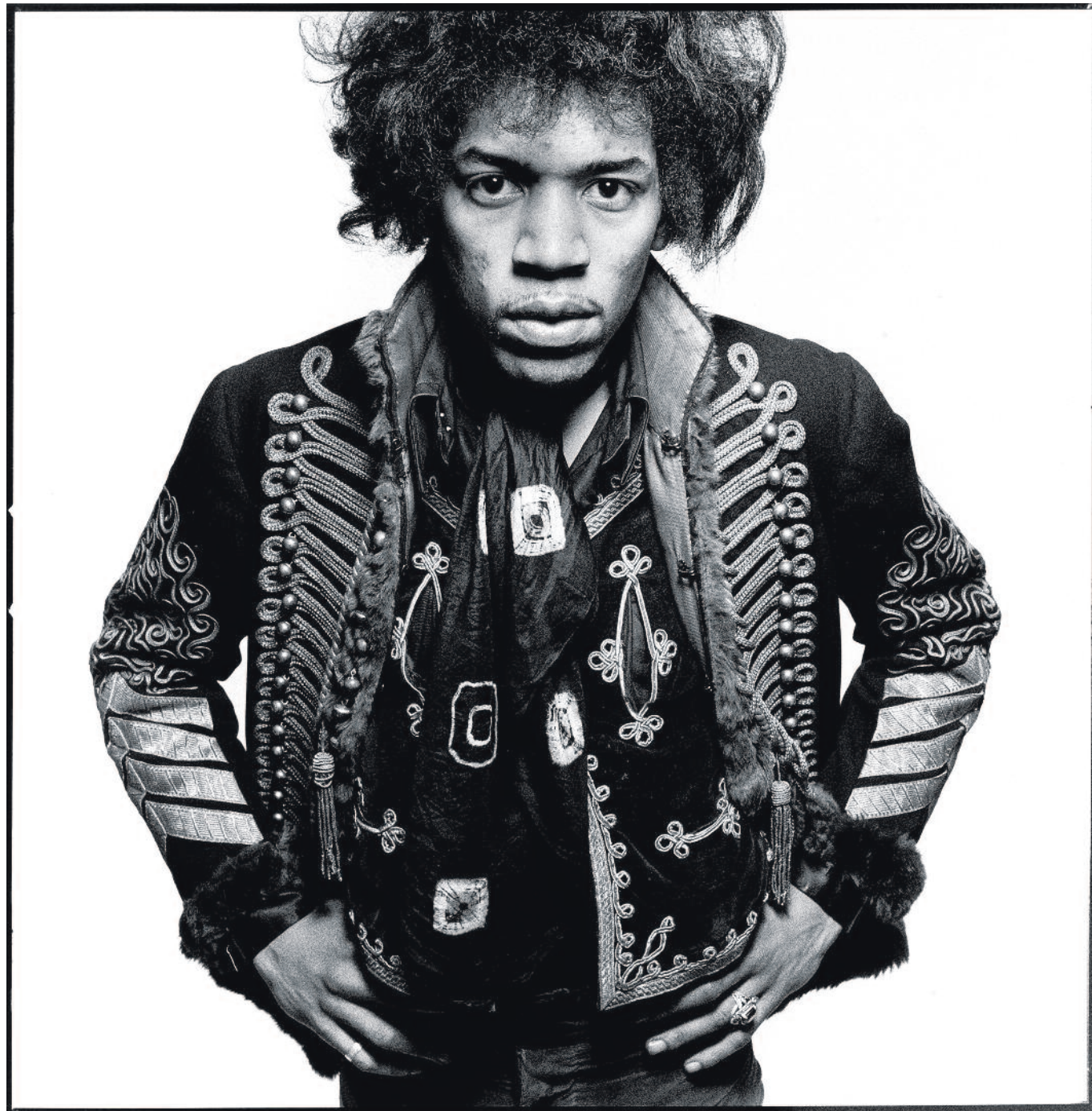


BLACK AND WHITE WORLD

Despite its rumoured demise, chemical photography is here to stay. Robin Bell, one of the country's leading printers, tells David Land why digital doesn't mean the death of the darkroom



In a garage somewhere in Fulham, master printer Robin Bell has weathered the digital storm, and is now enjoying the resurgence of his craft. "My work has been more appreciated in the past two years than ever before", he says. "The people who come to me are passionate about both photography and printing.

"I welcome hobbyists and professionals equally. I don't turn anyone away. When people see for the first time what a real print does for their work, the satisfaction in their

eyes is incredibly rewarding."

Bell first encountered photography in the early 1970s, after training to be a chef at Ealing Technical College. The college also happened to incorporate a photography school, and Bell found himself more inclined to socialise with the photography students than with his classmates.

"Chefs weren't the glamorous creatures they are these days", he says. "They all seemed rather stiff and military. After school, I'd had enough of such a disciplined

approach to everything, so I gravitated towards the more freethinking and liberal photography students. That was my first contact with this world.

"I quit chef school after a year, and went travelling. Then, in 1969, I began to assist the photographer Clay Perry, who was doing colour supplement work at the time. I assisted him for free because he couldn't afford to pay me but, being a privileged child, I was probably getting an allowance of about £5 a week from my dad."

After a year with Perry, Bell assisted a series of photographers who all had darkrooms within their studios. Part of his work was to process the films at the end of the day's shooting.

"I developed an interest in the darkroom", he says, "and withdrew from the front line, as I see it. I wasn't confident enough to be a photographer. You have to be quite self-assured to deal with teams of art directors, models and make up artists, and in those days I didn't feel I could cope with all that. The darkroom suited my temperament and personality."

Bell was soon appointed third printer at John Freeman's darkroom in Newman Street, along with Gerry Dickens and John Stone. "They were two of the day's fashionable celebrity printers", he says, "printing for famous photographers, such as Clive Arrow-smith and Justin de Villeneuve."

"They never taught me how to print, but I was expected to keenly observe what was going on around me, and that's what I did."

"Working alongside someone who's always churning out beautiful prints is the ideal way to learn, because you get to know what's possible. You can't necessarily do it yourself, but you aim toward something higher."

"If you don't have a target that you know to be a good product, it's hard to know what to work toward, which is why people who work for themselves struggle to discover the art of good printing. You don't know what your limits are until you see the ultimate product. Working at John Freeman's I got used to seeing proper, rich, silver gelatine prints."

Bell also spent some time working for Joe Andrews - 'Gypsy Joe' - of Joe's Basement fame. "I started his processing and printing from negative department", he says. "Until then, he'd just been doing commercial work."

"I also built up a client list. Simon Bottomley, Clive Arrowsmith's assistant, was my first breakthrough. He brought in his work to be printed, and showed the results to Clive, who then started using me himself, and it snowballed from there."

"I was helped by the fact that Gene Nocon, who was the main printer at the time, was slightly queering his own pitch by printing for Prince Andrew. Photographers such as Alistair Morrison, Terence Donovan and Terry O'Neill couldn't get their foot in the door, because his darkroom was surrounded by security guards from the palace."

Bell struck out on his own in September 1983, opening a darkroom on Chelsea Wharf. "In the mid 1980s and early 1990s, you couldn't help but make money from photography", he says. "It was madness. I used to employ about eight people. Now I employ a freelance processor, Kristof, while Jed looks after my many admin needs, including PR and so on."

Perhaps surprisingly for someone renowned for his monochrome prints, when Bell takes his own photographs, he prefers to shoot in colour, citing William Eggleston and Ernst Haas as his biggest influences.

"Most people are attracted to black and white because it's unusual", he says. "Everything is in colour nowadays. The only time you see black and white is in photography."

"I, on the other hand, work all day with



black and white, so I prefer shooting in colour. If I shot monochrome, I wouldn't get round to printing my own work. There's never enough time."

Although passionate about printing, Bell was never drawn by the chemistry of the process. "I'm not one of those people who really understand what developer is made of and why it works", he says. "I still can't quite grasp it. Dish processing one-off hand prints is more of an organic process. You can see it happening in front of your eyes, and you can make corrections then and there."

Understanding paper, on the other hand, is a fundamental part of Bell's work. When Multigrade papers appeared in the early 1980s, he treated them with suspicion. "I thought it was cheating", he says. "I have a rather stubborn, old fashioned mentality."

"It wasn't actually a very good product when it first came out, so I sat back and waited for it to improve. I had no need to go messing around with Multigrade because I was so happy with the products I was using. Record Rapid and Portriga were my favourites."

"I think all printers threw up their arms in despair when, due to EC toxicity regulations, cadmium was removed from Record Rapid. It was never the same again."

"Cadmium makes a paper very adaptable. You can lith print and tone it in gold and selenium, and all sorts. Fortunately, the Hungarian paper Forte Polywarmtone came to us in our hour of need. It still had cadmium, the magic ingredient, and it was variable contrast."

"The quality, though, was inconsistent, which eventually brought about Forte's demise. It was almost saved by a management buyout a few years ago, but they wanted printers to commit to buying a minimum amount of the product, so they knew they'd have enough orders to start manufacturing again."

"Like me, others wouldn't commit because of the paper's lack of consistency, and the buyout never happened. They should have had enough faith that printers, liking their product, would buy it if they manufactured it, but they weren't prepared to take the risk, so the company folded."

Bell has been hoarding papers as they be-

**Left: Gered Mankowitz - Jimi Hendrix.
The Ultimate Experience.**

**Above: John Swannell - Jacques-Henri Lartigue,
Photographer.**

come discontinued, and his darkroom contains such hidden gems as Record Rapid, Kodagraph Transtar and Bromofort. "People put them on eBay sometimes", he says. "I also occasionally get phone calls from people who've been saving something they think I would like, and I then buy it at an inflated price. I haven't yet reached the point of standing in the darkroom panicking that there's no paper left."

Not that Bell gets much demand for experimental papers anymore. "There isn't the market there used to be", he says. "I suppose people are getting enough variation out of digital. What they want from me is a straightforward beautiful black and white silver gelatine print. That's the granddaddy of printing. And if I do get the occasional request for a lith print, there are still the papers and chemicals to do it."

Unlike Forte, fellow paper manufacturer Ilford was successfully bought out by its management, and the brand is still going strong as part of photographic media company Harman Technology.

"Ilford fills all the gaps that appear in the market", says Bell. "It really tries to keep printers happy. I have many conversations with Steven Brierley, Director of Sales and Marketing at Harman Technology Ltd, about what we need. He tells me that digital's effect on the silver gelatine market has plateaued and is now in fact diminishing, so silver gelatine is growing again. It's very encouraging."

"Digital has changed every photographer's life. When it first emerged, there was a huge overreaction to it. Even as recently as last year, I saw an article about the death of gelatine printing, and the last working darkrooms in London. All I can say is that the rumours of our death have been exaggerated!"

"Two years ago, I was dreading the future, but now colleges are refurbishing darkrooms, and people are becoming interested in printing again. I'm seeing renewed interest from peo-



ple who have discovered the limitations of digital, or who don't feel comfortable using it in a non-commercial situation. They tend to revert to film for personal work, because they prefer the connection with it.

"The only thing that worries me is who will be brave enough to set up a darkroom when oldies like me have gone. The great Adrian Ensor and Klaus Kalde make a living from other avenues. I suppose in future, printers will have to make a living from digital, and offer silver as an extra."

Despite the proliferation of digital imagery, Bell believes that film has the greater longevity. "When we hang our images on the wall, we leave them vulnerable to light and temperature", he says. "Silver gelatine is subject to a great deal of bombardment and pollution which it didn't have to cope with 50 years ago, but I would still expect one of my prints to last longer than a digital

print in identical conditions.

"As we send our prints out to the world, we hope they're going to last, and not get abused by people who don't understand where and how they should be hung."

Although Bell doesn't offer digital printing, he is willing to print from intermediate 5x4 negatives on FP4, converted from digital files by Michael Dyer Associates. "There is a drop in quality when you print from intermediate negatives", says Bell, "but there's not as much of a difference as there used to be between an original and a copy negative. There always used to be a grey veil over everything. A negative made from a digital file is a step up from that, but it'll always be a few percentage points short of the real thing."

As digital has become the mainstay of commercial image making, chemical photography has developed its own special significance.

"The difference between now and the 1980s



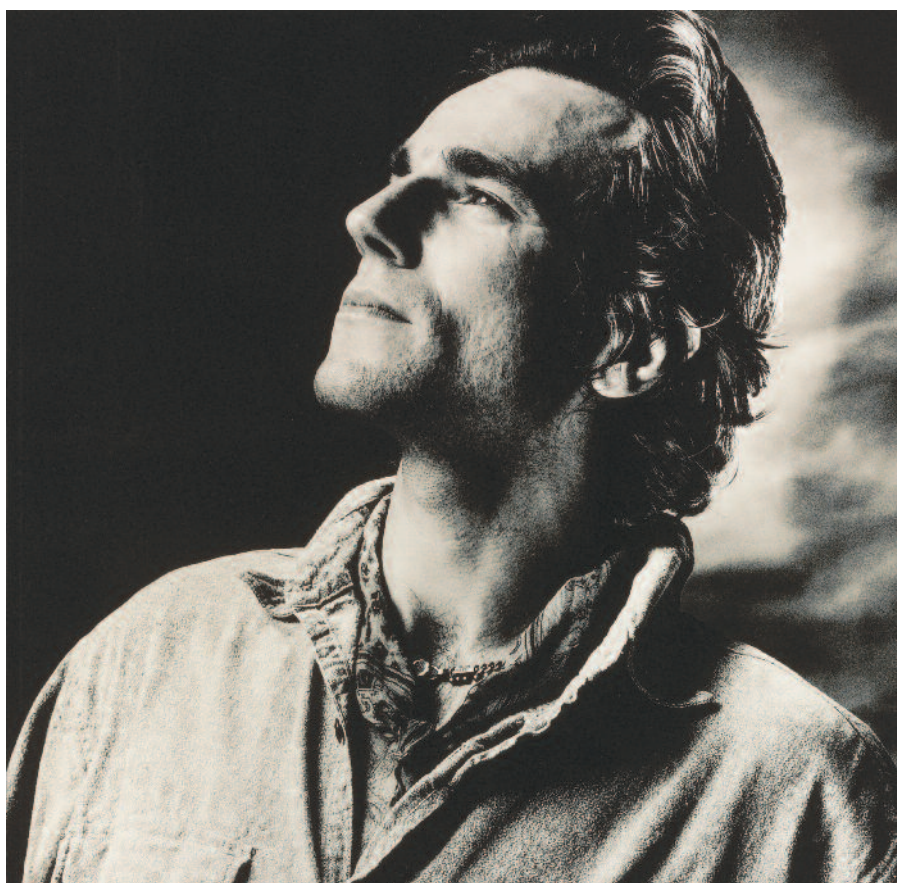
is that every single job I get these days is nice quality work", says Bell. "All the everyday commercial stuff is done through digital, so I am left with the people who are enthusiastic about photography and don't just see it as work. Every job is an absolute delight."

Bell is philosophical about his continued success. "I've always taken each day as it comes", he says. "I come in, do some printing, love it, and go home. I don't think about the effects of digital or double dip recessions. I just do what's in front of me and enjoy my day enormously, because printing is - and always has been - my passion."

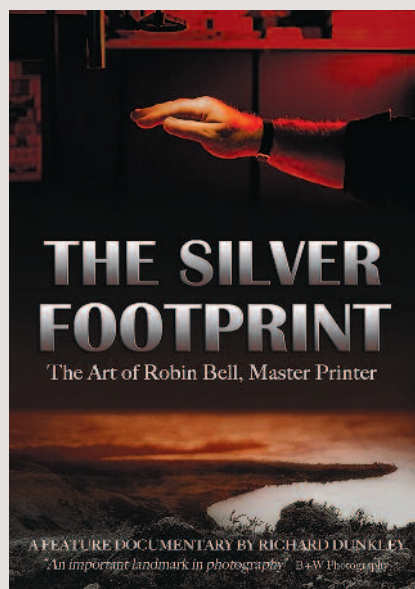
David Land

Above: Ian Berry - Fulham Jubilee Celebrations - London.

Above, right: Alistair Morrison - Daniel Day-Lewis
Left: Warwick Sloss - Urban Fox No1.



THE SILVER FOOTPRINT. THE ART OF ROBIN BELL, MASTER PRINTER



Robin Bell has been darkroom printing for more than 30 years, and is widely acknowledged as one of the world's master printers. Richard Dunkley's film documents Bell's working methods and techniques, and interviews some of the photographers, archivists and galleries who continue to use his services.

Dunkley's film is essentially one long interview with Bell, who talks to the camera about his life and his work. He is followed into the darkroom, around his studio and at his workbench. He explains what he is doing and why - everything from the 'hand ballet' of dodging

and holding back under an enlarger, to loading 10x8 cut film into carriers for processing, toning and retouching his finished prints, right through to drying and bagging them. Nothing is too mundane, but all is part of Bell's work and he more than justifies the discussion.

For the traditional darkroom worker, there is some nostalgia, but also much to be reminded of here. For students going into the darkroom for the first time, Bell has plenty to teach. This explains the demand for his work. The National Portrait Gallery used Bell to make prints from Ida Kar's original negatives, and the curator notes that he was the best of several printers the gallery tried out. Bell was able to get the most from Kar's negatives in a sympathetic way.

The photographer Amanda Searle says that Bell's prints have a life of their own. This suggests that Bell's work is more than a 'mix of chemistry, craft and art' - in Bell they are pitched perfectly. As he acknowledges, he has a passion for his work and a fantastic job.

This film is a celebration of Bell's work, and of the darkroom generally. Bell hopes that he will leave a legacy to silver photography. The fact that photographers such as Richard Young, Ken Griffiths, Mike McGoran, Amanda Searle, Martin Colbeck and college students all use his services suggests that he will.

Dunkley's film is entertaining and informative. It is well produced, and great value. Highly recommended. **Michael Pritchard FRPS**

Available through The Society's online shop: www.rps.org/store at £19.50. Total running time, including extras, 70 mins.