Renowned Photographer
Peter Simon Dies

COM alum’s subjects ranged from musicians like Bob Marley to his beloved Martha’s Vineyard

“Make sure you put in that he always picked up the check,” writer Stephen Davis (CAS’70) says of photographer Peter Simon (COM’70), who died of cardiac arrest in November. “He was just a great spirit.”

They were friends and frequent collaborators beginning in September 1966, when they met as sophomores living in Myles Standish Hall and worked as student journalists on the weekly BU News. Simon was the son of Richard L. Simon, cofounder of the Simon & Schuster publishing house, and he had a car, rare among undergrads then. “You’d want to do a story with Pete because you didn’t have to take the T,” Davis says, chuckling. “And then he’d take you out to lunch and pick up the check.”

Simon was already a talented photographer when he arrived on Comm Ave for the first time. “He went to Riverdale, a private school in the Bronx, and he wanted to come to BU, but he had terrible grades,” Davis says. “But he came up to Boston and showed someone his portfolio, which was brilliant, and he got in. He very much appreciated Boston University taking him in.”

The convulsive social change of the late 1960s offered fertile ground for the young journalists on and off campus and shaped their worldview for life. Simon photographed 1960s antiwar demonstrations—and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street encampments. Last year in the Boston Globe, he published a funny and moving remembrance (with photos, of course) of his postcollege involvement in two Vermont communes, Total Loss Farm and Tree Frog Farm. It wasn’t long before the “hard realities” of rural living and group politics pushed him out of the north woods and back toward photojournalism.

He and Davis worked together for the fledgling Cambridge Phoenix, and soon they were on assignment for Rolling Stone and other magazines. They counted among the country’s premier music journalists, and each

One of Peter Simon’s iconic images: Led Zeppelin lead singer Robert Plant savoring the view from a hotel balcony above Sunset Boulevard.
Peter Simon (COM’70) gave a talk on campus in 2010. The University had invited members of the Class of 1970 to join the Class of 2010 on Nickerson Field for Commencement because theirs had been canceled amid campus antiwar protests across the country. He probably wouldn’t have attended—“I was such a hippie,” he said at the time. “Forty years later how do I feel? Well, time has mellowed me, I have to admit. I still feel the same way about the issues we fought so strongly for: equal rights, female equality, a green Earth, prochoice, opposition to Vietnam, breaking down the walls of oppression. I feel that our generation really got the ball rolling, and I’m proud of it.”

 contributed to the other’s books. Simon’s best-known photos from the period include one of Led Zeppelin lead singer Robert Plant savoring the view from a hotel balcony above Sunset Boulevard and shots of the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir harmonizing backstage.

“And we hung out with Bob Marley for three months,” notes Davis, who wrote a biography of the singer. Simon quickly grew to love reggae music and photographed all of its top stars, often at home in Jamaica.

But Simon’s spiritual home and increasingly his main subject was Martha’s Vineyard, which he first visited as a child and where he moved in the 1980s. One of Simon’s three sisters is the singer-songwriter Carly Simon, who also made the Vineyard her home, and he often photographed her there. For the last decade or so, he and his wife, Ronni, ran a gallery in Vineyard Haven for his photos and her handcrafted jewelry. (The gallery closed on New Year’s Eve.)

Simon produced a calendar of Vineyard scenes annually for more than 30 years. His 2016 book, Martha’s Vineyard: To Everything There Is a Season (Simon Press), collected more than 700 of his photos, with words by Davis and Geraldine Brooks. Davis says that recently he’d been after his old friend to do a book of his portraits.

“He was incredible with them because he was so good with people,” Davis says. “He’d be sitting there with his camera, and he’d make eye contact and chat you up a little bit and find out about you, and the next time there was eye contact, this big old Nikon would come up and—click!” JOEL BROWN

ON THE JOB

The Voice of BU for Almost Half a Century

Telephone operator Marie Gannon is “the human directory”

It’s the first week of school and BU’s switchboard number, 617-353-2000, is lighting up in the basement of 111 Cummington Mall. An exasperated parent is unable to reach anyone in Financial Aid. A student’s flight to BU has been delayed and he needs to know if he can move into his dorm after the 5 pm cutoff. A parent has promised to stock her son’s fridge, but doesn’t know where to buy groceries.

Through it all, BU Call Center senior telephone operator Marie Gannon remains unfazed. She calmly assures the first caller that Financial Aid is deluged with calls this time of the year, and she stays on the line until he’s reached the office. Gannon puts the harried student through to the South Campus Residence Life office. She suggests Shaw’s supermarket to the last parent. Over the next eight hours, she’ll field approximately 100 such calls.

Gannon has so many department and office phone numbers memorized that she rarely needs to consult her computer. And she instinctively knows who best to reach out to and where to send a caller.

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No wonder. She’s been working BU’s switchboard since 1973.

“I call Marie the human directory,” says Call Center manager Roberta Contant, Gannon’s boss.

When Gannon joined BU, the switchboard operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. There were four full-time operators, aided by a team of work-study students, handling as many as 80,000 calls a month. The arrival of cell phones dramatically reduced the number of incoming calls. Today, she’s one of only two full-time operators (the other is Sonya Richburg). An automated system directs callers after 5 pm and on weekends.

What does it take to be a good telephone operator? You have to be able to remember phone numbers, Gannon says, and you have to be a good listener. “Every call is different,” she says. “I can almost always tell what’s going on with the person as soon as I answer the phone. I can just tell by the person’s voice what kind of call they are.” JOHN O’ROURKE