

# The Sharpest Lives Interview with Music Photographer Laura McCullagh

May 2015



Protest the Hero – Klein Libertas

**Warren Talmarkes: (If I recall correctly) The first time I shot besides Laura was at the ‘new’ Zula Bar in Long Street. The only lens I had was a Nifty Fifty, which worked perfectly for me at the time. Laura had an array of lenses including a Lensbaby and a... Actually, all I could remember was this Lensbaby. Which made no sense to me at the time.**

**When you first started photographing shows, what channels were available to show your work?**

Laura McC: To be honest I wasn't really aware at the time – I'd been taking photos (for fun) since my early teens and though I've always loved music I was pretty dismissive and ignorant of anything local for an embarrassingly long time...so after I matriculated I decided to investigate the local scene, but it was only when I started my blog in 2010/11 that I properly began to shoot gigs.

I wanted to shoot more but wasn't doing anything with my images, so I set up the blog to motivate me and to provide a platform to 'publish' my work. I wasn't thinking any broader than that at the time, I didn't even have a Facebook page till like a year later.

The self-motivation worked well though - I shot a lot (at one stage practically every weekend) and once I started getting confident with the technicalities of shooting gigs things slowly started to pick up. My first printed live shot was actually in *HEAT* magazine, of all things, it was a shot of Jax Panik I took at the end of 2010. I think I'd shared it on the band's Facebook page and a media editor contacted me about printing it early in 2011.

A few months later the same thing happened with a pic of Jeremy Loops in *Your LMG* magazine. By then I'd heard of *Your LMG* (took me long enough...) and I became a regular contributor pretty soon after that. *Rolling Stone SA* came along a little later (2012 I think?) but I didn't work much with them...I also shot for *Mahala* once or twice around that time, but mainly my work was getting out through *LMG* (print only initially) and/or my blog and Facebook page.



The Bloody Beetroots – Sonar SA, Good Hope Centre

### **What ever happened to that Lensbaby?**

Hahaha! I'd totally forgotten about that time at Zula till you mentioned it. I still have it and actually use it occasionally, hardly ever for gigs though...it's an old one (the new ones let you lock focus) so it's super fiddly because of the difficulty in two-hand focusing. It gives a very specific soft effect that's really nice for certain situations (anything gentle, outdoors, light) but it's the opposite of what I usually try to go for at gigs – crisp, contrasty, up close and wide...



**Paolo Nutini - Kirstenbosch**

**Many printed magazines aren't around any more and it's become rare to see images printed. What are your thoughts on not being able to pick up a magazine and read reviews alongside images from the show?**

It's heartbreaking...but I have a sagging shelf full of old X-Ray, Q, Clash, NME and Dazed mags from years ago (and a modest stack of LMGs too) that I'll probably never open again yet can't bear to throw away, so maybe I'm biased...it's unfortunate but it's the way of the times, magazines globally are dying. Even magazine shops (I used to looove Paperweight) don't exist anymore and a Q mag at CNA costs pretty much the same as a CD, it's nuts.

**You've been the photographer for Tuesdays on Fire at &Union and now you're covering Full House at Aces 'N Spades Bar. Is it exciting to see a different band take up the same venue weekly and give a completely different performance?**

Yeah I love it. What I like best about doing weekly gigs at the same venue is that it's familiar enough to be comfortable but always different enough to be exciting. Plus Aces is a really nice venue to shoot at.



**Jack Parow – Aces n Spades**

### How important is self-branding as a photographer?

I think with any artistic trade it's important to try to be distinctive, the most successful branding to me is being recognisable - if people can look at a shot and recognise it as your kind of style then you're on the right track. I think the more of your own personality you express through your work the more unique and engaging it'll be.

### Are there any bands that you love photographing live?

There are loads haha, probably too many to mention so I'll just generalise and say energetic rock artists (long hair is always a bonus), especially those who jump, kick, interact with the crowd or just generally go nuts on stage are at the top of the list. High energy is always great to shoot.



Zombies ate my girlfriend – Klein Libertas

### On a rating of 1 to 5, how would you say making a living in the music photography industry fairs?

Nooo don't ask me that, that's an awful question...I dunno, in South Africa, for most of us right now, I don't think it's a viable career to be a full-time music photographer, I mean it's not viable to be a full-time musician either for the majority of those who try. It's frustrating because it's super competitive but more than that it's unbalanced because you're competing with people who're happy to shoot for free or their portfolio, or everyone's favourite currency, 'exposure'. For a lot of bands it's a no-brainer going with someone who'll shoot for free over hiring someone who charges, and you can't begrudge people starting off for wanting to build a portfolio (they have to start somewhere) or the bands wanting to save money but it does make things tough...but there is work and there are artists who'll pay and who understand that photographers are an important and often overlooked part of the music scene.

At the end of the day though we're all in the same boat, and anyone who uses the 'starving artist' line on you to score a freebie needs it said right back to them: value your work enough to charge appropriately, for your sake as well as the sake of the whole industry.

### What gear do you currently have in your bag?

My typical kit is my Canon 7D, Canon 8-15 f4L fisheye, Canon 17-40 f4L, Canon 70-200 f4L, 580EX II Speedlite, spare batteries and earplugs.

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