

Hollywood Ace

NORMAN SEEFF



Snaps Jazzman

AL JARREAU

BY BYRON LAURSEN

"He has a type of personality endowed with such a charm as he could turn a work into a merry party before men get aware of."

Takenobu Igarashi, journalist, on Norman Seeff

"Thousands of other photographers have technical ability greater than mine," asserts Norman Seeff, the blond South African ex-doctor who has compiled one of the most fame-laden client lists in existence. "Ninety percent of the students who come here have more technical expertise than I do."

To Seeff, it's the photo session — the human interaction — that qual-

ifies as art. The rest is mere picture-taking. Typically, a session with Seeff involves hours of behavior that could pass for partying. Subjects sing, dance, drink, laugh at themselves. Seeff watches, encourages what he likes, photographs what he likes best, all the while aiming for a core of spontaneity that emerges when personality defenses are put aside. Assistants hand him loaded cameras on demand and then develop and print the expended 35 mm film to Seeff's specifications. One writer, to Seeff's displeasure, called his images of stars in moments of candor, "... the naked self under bulletproof glass."

Shooting for the cover of pop-jazz vocalist Al Jarreau's newest LP (at press time, final image choices were not yet made), Seeff assem-

bled himself, his subject, his four-year-old daughter and a small army of assistants. The studio, a vaguely derelict building on Sunset Strip, has a beautifully functional north end. A skylight opens to north light and a loft opposite it permits partial overhead angles. Jarreau began singing almost as soon as he arrived. "This man is so magical and self-confident," Seeff said afterward. "I'd say this was among the top ten percent of all the sessions I've ever done. You know, the notion that creative people are all neurotic isn't true. The greater the artist, the more open and inspired the person is about everything. But everyone has an inner creative quality. Stars are just people who have learned to project it publicly."

Midway through the session, Seeff's daughter fills a lull by rush-

ing up to the singer and nuzzling him as if they were both puppies. Jarreau lifts her up, entranced, while a pleased father keeps snapping images.

Norman Seeff grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa. His father, a doctor and a fine artist, assumed the son would ultimately hew to the medical profession as well. Norman did indeed study and practice medicine, but his happiest moments came in off-duty hours. He would plunge directly from doctoring into the life of a bohemian painter in the Johannesburg equivalent of Greenwich Village. Came the dawn and he was a doctor again.

In 1968 he ran afoul of the South African government's racial segregation policies and left the country in vital haste. Eventually he landed in New York, unable to practice medicine because of licensing requirements. He had a 35 mm single-lens-reflex camera, an old Nikon. Persistent work won him magazine assignments. He shot James Taylor for *Harper's Bazaar*, and a photo from that session was chosen for the cover of a James Taylor Song Book. Increasing specialization in musical subjects took him to Los Angeles, first to be an art director for a record company, then to freelance.

A 1974 book, *Hot Shots*, collected many of Seeff's best images to date. Without doubt the most commented-on example among them is the shot of Carly Simon on the cover of her *Playing Possum* LP, probably the best sales booster of her career.

The diversity of disciplines and fads he sampled, searching for ways to better open up creative communication, spanned yoga and Hindu Scripture. *Life* chose Seeff for a portfolio of emergent musical stars of 1979. Blondie, the Police, Joe Jackson, Brian Eno, and the Talking Heads were among them. More recently he has photographed the Pointer Sisters and President Ronald Reagan.

"I had a lovely session with him," Seeff says. "Of course, I'm totally at odds with his policies. If we had talked about politics, there wouldn't have been any communication at all."

Nevertheless, it isn't easy to imagine the president going through what Seeff calls "... stages of getting more and more inspired (continued on page 14)