

In a new light

Robert Carroll

Last Updated: September 08, 2008 8:01PM UAE / September 8, 2008 4:01PM GMT

London in the late 1960s had it all. From the independent fashion boutiques of Carnaby Street to the studios of Abbey Road, the world looked to the city for the best in music, fashion, photography and film. It was a musical mecca, with The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and the Small Faces all putting in appearances at clubs such as the Marquee, which would quickly become legendary.

Daybreak Reveals Its Hidden Treasure was taken in south Yemen at Wadi Hadramawt al Hajarayn. Sanders trekked through the mountains beginning at 2.30am in order to capture the dawn light. **Courtesy Peter Sanders Photography**

One of the people who was an important part of this swinging scene was Peter Sanders, an English photographer born in London in 1946. From capturing Bob Dylan at the Isle of Wight music festival in 1969 to Jimi Hendrix's last performance at the same event in 1970, his pictures, printed in British national newspapers like the Observer, documented rock music at its creative zenith. Yet for Sanders, who remains modest about his role during the era, it was a case of being in the right place at the right time.

"People must remember that the music scene wasn't as big as it's become," says Sanders. "It really was just what was happening at the time. I was fortunate enough to have access to everything that was going on."

As the 1960s came to an end, Sanders wandered abroad, first to India and then briefly to North Africa. If not an autoroute to enlightenment, going to India at the end of the 1960s was a trail well trampled by famous musicians and artists seeking spiritual fulfilment. Most famously, in 1968, The Beatles travelled to India to meet with the Indian guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. It was a "fashionable place to go", as Sanders puts it, to "begin his search".

Seven months later he returned to England. He had studied Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. He had met gurus and asked them questions. He had not found what he was looking for.

Back in London, a group of relatively unknown musicians called Mighty Baby had formed the kernel of a community of artists, academics, musicians and intellectuals who had converted to Islam. It was low-key, apolitical and "governed by the heart", as Sanders puts it.

Instead of setting off on another journey, he realised what he was looking for lay at home. "Friends had become Muslim," says Sanders. "I'd just been to India and then there was this other thing that I hadn't been exposed to in my back garden." His shahada was in London in 1971. He was given the name Abd al Adheem. He was 24 years old. "It was kind of a leap of faith," says Sanders. "I just felt it was right. I didn't know much about it, but I felt at this point, this is what I am looking for." Within three months, he decided to go on Haj. His photographs of this trip, rare at the time, were published in the Sunday Times Magazine, the Observer and Paris Match.

To many, the contrast between these photographs and his work in the 1960s seems stark. "People always assume that it was a drastic change," says Sanders. "Musicians at that time, they were people that inspired me. When I started looking at more spiritual things, I began to be inspired by people who could spend their life praying and studying. I started to admire people with a certain strength of character. Photography was a way to have one to ones with those people, the same as it was with the musicians."

He began a journey that would last nearly 40 years. Islam and its teachings were his guide. He travelled to diverse countries – China, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Malaysia, Iran, to name a few – and met and photographed many people and places. This became a major theme of his work: people living out their lives in myriad ways guided by a -single faith.

Thirty years later, a friend encouraged Sanders to arrange this mass of material into a book. *In the Shade of the Tree* began to take shape. It was his first book.

"One of the ideas behind the book was starting to think about life when I was -older," says Sanders. "I would be sitting somewhere warm preferably, maybe shading under a tree, and I would be thinking about my life. The way that I would -remember my life was by the pictures I had taken, because they are triggers to memories and things that happened to me. And then I found the passage in the Hadith where the Prophet describes himself like a traveller who takes shade under a tree. So the two things came together. Me thinking about my life and taking wisdom from all the things that had happened, and then him saying that life really is like that. That's how the idea for the book came about."

The result is an autobiographical record of people and places, a deeply personal selection from the 250,000 pictures in his archive, given narrative coherence by faith. "I wanted to present my experience of Islam," says Sanders "which was a very spiritual journey."

The result is also a very beautiful book. The images range from aerial shots of the Eid festival in Mecca, composed, almost pixel-like, of the mass of worshippers, to intimate portraits of people young and old from around the world.

Dawn and dusk are key times in the book and the sun is an important character. It may be centre stage as in *Sunset Over an Ancient Land*, where the silhouettes of minarets against the backdrop of still-lit mountains on the Turkish-Iranian border melodramatically evoke the divine. Or it may be offstage as in *Daybreak Reveals its Hidden Treasure*, where the sun's rays slowly permeate a mountain village in Yemen with warmth and light and infuse the photograph with ethereal tones.

The way the images are presented on the page, accompanied by Sanders' comments and recollections as well as quotations from poems and the Quran, highlights the simplicity, serenity and faultless composition of the photographs and reinforces their spiritual message.

In the context of works of faith, the idea is very old fashioned. In both structure and intention, the pages of the book hearken back to the pages of illuminated manuscripts. Between the sixth and 12th centuries, these books used rich decorations and small, intricate illustrations to clarify or explain the religious subjects in the text. In Sanders' book, the traffic between the images and words flows the other way, with -religious texts used sparingly to illuminate the photographs. "I wanted to add things that I felt might add another dimension," says Sanders. "Things that the viewer might not have thought about."

Yet Sanders had a very topical aim: to debunk the images of Islam in the media. The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11 brought Islamic fanaticism to the world's attention in a shocking and horrific way. The attacks yoked the Islamic faith to a minority group of violent extremists, who were particularly adept at using the world's media for their own propaganda. As a result, many images of Islam have been resoundingly negative. Even when the images were not of violence or destruction, they tended to characterise the rich variations within the faith into a monolithic and stereotypical whole.

"Pakistani mosques, plastic green dome buildings, people smoking shisha, and then all the politics." Sanders was keen to challenge images which reinforce stereotypes and appeal to the lowest common denominator. "I went on these journeys and I met all these really amazing people," says Sanders. "I didn't get the experience that the media was pushing forward."

Sanders' book shows the Islamic world in all its beguiling diversity. A simple portrait of girls singing at school in China; an old man from Tarim in South Yemen glinting with exotic wisdom; the diaphanous shimmer of a piazza in Saudi Arabia; or the resplendent interior of the Blue Mosque in Turkey – if any single thing emerges from the -images in the book, it is that there is a danger in grasping after general theories about the "Islamic world". The book rejects arbitrary distinctions and broad conclusions, opting instead for close encounters beautifully captured.

Of course, Sanders is a convert, which he acknowledges gives him a "slightly different viewpoint". Like the exile who chooses to call a distant land home, his experience of Islam is neither as an insider nor an outsider, but somewhere in between. Asked if he had any problems reconciling photography and Islam, he recalls the response of the many Muslim scholars he has met: "None of them ever refused to be photographed."

Meanwhile, having travelled to some of the remotest regions where Islam is practised, from the deserts of Sudan and Mauritania to the mountains of Morocco and China, Sanders turned his camera on his homeland.

In 2005, he started work on *The Art of Integration*, an exploration of what it means to be British and to be a Muslim. He began by photographing people he knew. The project expanded quickly, following leads, tracing threads. Tube drivers, teachers, doctors, architects, -graffiti artists, academics, -supermarket workers, police officers, musicians, Sanders photographed over 100 people from disparate backgrounds. What began as a 40-day project went on to take over three years.

"England is quite unique. It was quite an eye opener for me," says Sanders. "We went to all the major institutions: the House of Lords, Eton, Sandhurst. In every B-ritish -institution you can imagine, there are -Muslims."

The terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 which killed 52 commuters added -urgency to the project, amplifying the need for positive images of Muslims in British society to "counteract all the negativity", as Sanders puts it.

Exhibited in 35 countries, including Egypt, Israel, Iraq and the United States, *The Art of Integration* is about to be published as a book and a film is also underway. There are plans to bring the exhibition to Abu Dhabi, after a successful exhibition of photographs from *In the Shade of the Tree* at the Artspace Gallery in Dubai in 2006.

Sanders sees the two photographic projects as distinct but complimentary. "In the *Shade of the Tree* is a celebration of the end of what I consider to be traditional Islam. We are now in this very different landscape. *The Art of Integration* is really the positive way I see it evolving in the West." Taken together, the two works are alert to changing times, the former documenting a decline, the latter offering points of contact for growth in the future. "They say Islam is like a green plant," Sanders says. "When it dies somewhere it appears somewhere else."

Perhaps Sanders' achievement can only be really appreciated if the full range of his work is considered. In both his photographs of musicians in the 1960s and his subsequent documenting of the Islamic world, he is striving to capture an aura on film, to give form to something that does not always have form, to pick up on how the physical bears the imprint of the spiritual, and be -attuned to these occurrences, wherever they may be.

For more information visit www.inspiralbooks.com and www.petersanders.co.uk