

Ten Burning Questions: ROCK PROPHECIES

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[**Ed. Note:** 2009 Audience Award Winner for Best Documentary Feature, **ROCK PROPHECIES** received the highest combined vote total collected of any film playing at the 2009 AFI DALLAS Film Festival.]



When you are delivered the life story of a man who has spent 40-some years photographing everyone from Jimi Hendrix to Led Zeppelin to Elton John and Santana to Slash and Panic At the Disco and pretty much everyone in between... Well, you've been delivered gold. Now, let's say this rock n' roll photographer also captured the last images of guitar legend Stevie Ray Vaughn before his untimely death—yet, refused to sell them to the highest bidder out of respect for the artist and the man? Still not sold? Seriously?! Okay, here's your third act—the guy finds and champions a little band called Sick Puppies. Maybe you've heard of them. Or maybe you “need a hug”. Wait—he's not done, because he might just have found a kid that could be the next legit guitar hero. This guy's name: Robert Knight. The title of the movie: [ROCK PROPHECIES](#). And the director who spun a great film out of all of this: John Chester. Movie gold.

1. How did you learn about Robert Knight and his story?

As a documentary filmmaker, it's a rare thing to capture even more than you had hoped when you first set out to follow a story. I don't know if it was luck or tenacity, but somehow incredible things happened in front of the lens. Now to your question...

ROCK PROPHECIES

7:30 pm Friday, March 27 @ Landmark's Magnolia

4 pm Saturday, March 28 @ Landmark's Magnolia

John Chester will attend both screenings and participate in Q&As afterward.

Check out the events surrounding ROCK PROPHECIES: Concerts, the Robert Knight photo exhibition and more! In the [Daily News](#).

I met Robert through my producer, Tim Kaiser. Three years ago, Tim calls me and says he's met this amazing guy who has spent 40 years as a rock photographer and claimed he was friends with some of the worlds greatest guitar legends. He dropped names like Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Stevie Ray Vaughan. The thing that captured my attention was this story where Robert in 1990 was actually the last person to photograph Stevie Ray Vaughan at Alpine Valley in Wisconsin. These were big claims, did he really have friendships with these guys? I was skeptical so I set up a meeting with Robert in LA at the Sunset Marquis. I showed up early and Robert was sitting at a table with another guy who was wearing a backwards hat, mirrored glasses, a cigarette hanging from his lips and a black T-shirt that said "I support strippers". Robert said John, meet Slash. And all I could see was the dumb look on my face reflected in his glasses.

OK, so he knows these guys. An hour later Slash left the building and Robert and I had our first real face to face. Just for notes, I grabbed my camera and shot our conversation in Robert's hotel room. The audio from that interview actually became 75% of the VO for the film. As most filmmakers know, a second interview is never as good as the first. I can't explain it fully but the main reason I decided to do the documentary had to do with how Robert handled the big money offers from Rolling Stone and everybody else the day after Stevie Ray died. Plain and simple, Robert's decision to not sell those photos is why I wanted to tell his story.

2. How did you weigh the decisions regarding the balance of telling Robert Knight's story versus the artists he actually influenced?

At first I thought we were making a film about Robert Knight re-telling amazing stories from the road with Led Zeppelin, Elton John, Alice Cooper, Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix. But within two weeks, I realized Robert Knight is what Malcolm Gladwell would call a connector. I watched him spend more time connecting young bands to people who could help their careers than he did photographing concerts. I thought, "Wow, here is a guy who gets more joy out of being the connector than he does out of making money shooting them". So the balance came from that: Robert knew what he was looking for because of 40 years studying the common threads that link all of the legends together. When we visit with Jeff Beck, Slash, Santana, Steve Vai and others, we begin to see the common characteristics. Robert uses these as clues when looking at young acts. I'd say it's about 50-percent gut and 50-percent recognizing the traits of his legendary guitar friends.

3. On the surface, making a documentary about the guy taking the pictures as opposed to what he's taking pictures of wouldn't seem the way to go. What was your way "into the film"?

Well, considering Robert is the common thread in all of these stories, I would say Robert was our way in. It seemed natural to make a film about him and let things branch out from there. Robert's a wonderful storyteller, so even if the whole film had been him talking into the camera,

it would have made for an entertaining time regardless, but if you look at his life, Robert has been in the right place at the right time so many times that we just knew it would happen again. And it did. Since we started filming, Sick Puppies have blown up, Panic at the Disco has blown up, and the Answer is opening for AC/DC. The film became about Robert—who at age 60 felt his relevance as a photographer hinged not on his past success but on his future ability to find the next great guitar talent. And amazingly, he found just that person and we thank god we captured the ride. But watch the film and judge for yourself.

4. Who was the most surprising interview for the film?

Honestly all of them. I think what the film reflects most is how in control these guys are of their individual creative processes. The words they use to describe this translate to any artist and for that matter anyone who has ever wanted anything out of life. They are the ultimate happiness seekers who turn obsession into art. Which is the natural process most people ignore. Steve Vai, Slash, Santana, and Jeff Beck all fight the same battle every day. The same struggle I have as a filmmaker and, sure enough, the same struggle Robert Knight has as a photographer wrestling with his own self worth, relevance and desire for his career to never end...

5. Seeing as how Robert is accustomed to being the one capturing the image, how difficult was it for him to be the one in front of the camera so frequently and insistently?

Now would be a good time to tell you what made Robert most uncomfortable. It was my clothes. Look, I'm from Maryland, and the LA rock star world is fairly new to me. He hated that I didn't wear black pants, shirts, and a leather jacket. He despised my sun scorched tee shirts and shorts. I think I embarrassed him in front of his way-cool rocker friends. On several occasions he pulled me aside and asked me to wear more black. I bought a black shirt but can't see the use of a black leather jacket in sunny CA.

Now, as for Robert—yes, he was uncomfortable with the idea of Tim and me making a film about him. He never liked that idea, he wanted it to be about the guitar players. And to a large degree this film is about them. However I think he did an amazing job of opening up and being vulnerable and honest about his shortcomings as a man, as an artist. The more he opened up about his creative desires the more we all wanted him to see them achieved. Tim Kaiser and I could not have asked for anything more.

6. If you couldn't make films, what would your second career choice be?

In the film, Jeff Beck is asked that same question, and he says he'd probably be a serial killer. I have been making films since I was 8. I don't know if I know how to do anything else. I hope one day I get better at making films... Or serial killing may be my only option.

7. What recent documentaries have made an impact on you?

Everything Erroll Morris and (Werner) Herzog. There's that wonderful Werner Herzog quote about how a filmmaker's job is to provide people with images they've never seen before, and that's my goal every time I set out to make a film. I can only speak for myself here, but the image of Steve Vai successfully playing the guitar with his tongue is one that will stay with me for the rest of my life, for better or worse. I cut it out of the film three times before finally leaving it in.

8. What is the best thing about having your film at AFI DALLAS?

Well, lots of reasons. There's a big fan base in Dallas for both the Sick Puppies and Tyler Dow Bryant, two artists whose careers Robert Knight helped get going. Plus AFI DALLAS is one of those festivals that still does it right.

9. So admit it: Which rock star stories did you geek out about the most?

Surprisingly, the craziest stories came from another rock photographer, Robert's mentor Jim Marshall, also in the film. Let's just say it started with him punching artist "Matthew Barney in the fucking mouth" and ended with a .45 caliber bullet going through a picture of Janis Joplin and Grace Slick, which was hanging in his living room. Did I mention that Jim is 72? As for guitarists, I have loads of admiration for Steve Vai's mind. He's got some sort of alien brain.

10. Popcorn or candy?

Since my wife Molly is a health supportive chef... I'd have to say sprouts. She claims I'll live longer. And given how long it takes to make a film nowadays, I should be able to make at least three more.