

Guy Webster, Master of the Album Cover Photograph, Dies at 79

Over a frenetic period between the mid-1960s and the early '70s, Guy Webster photographed many leading artists for some of rock's best-known albums.

By [Richard Sandomir](#)

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Guy Webster was smoking pot with the Mamas & the Papas in the group's rented house in Los Angeles in 1966 when he had an idea about how to photograph them for the cover of their debut album.

He told them to head into a bathroom, where all four squeezed, fully clothed, into the tub: John Phillips sat in the foreground, and behind him were Cass Elliot, Denny Doherty and Michelle Phillips, her legs stretched across the others' laps. (Mr. Doherty told a slightly different story: that they had been hiding from Mr. Webster in the tub.)

"You can see how stoned they were," Mr. Webster said when he showed the picture to an audience attending [an exhibition](#) about his career at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles in 2012. But the picture had a flaw: It included the toilet — an image, he said, that would have limited sales of the album, "[If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears](#)," in family-oriented chain stores.

"So Lou Adler," he continued, referring to the producer of the album and the president of Dunhill Records, "came up with the idea that when we put shrink wrap over the album, and put a sticker on it that says, 'Including "California Dreamin'," we can sell it at Sears. And when the kids take it off, there's the toilet."

"If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears" rose to No. 1 on the Billboard album chart and enhanced Mr. Webster's growing reputation as one of the top rock 'n' roll photographers of his time.

Over a frenetic period between the mid-1960s and the early '70s, Mr. Webster shot album covers for the Rolling Stones, the Doors, Simon & Garfunkel, Captain Beefheart, the Byrds, the Beach Boys, Tim Buckley and Nico, as well as continuing to work with the Mamas & the Papas.

"He knew about the power and longevity of music," [Harvey Kubernik](#), who, with his brother, Kenneth, wrote "Big Shots: Rock Legends and Hollywood Icons: The Photography of Guy Webster" (2014), said by telephone. "He treated music as an art form that would be around for the next century."

Mr. Webster died on Feb. 5 in Ojai, Calif. He was 79. His wife, Leone (James) Webster, said the cause was liver cancer.

Several months after that bathtub session, Mr. Webster invited the Doors to his small studio behind his parents' house in Beverly Hills to photograph them for their first album, which would be released in early 1967.

"In walked Jim Morrison, and he said, 'Guy!' " Mr. Webster recalled in an interview in "Big Shots." He did not recognize this longhaired lead singer, but Mr. Morrison reminded him that they had been in the same philosophy class at U.C.L.A.

After removing his cheap beribboned shirt at Mr. Webster's request, Mr. Morrison became the focus of the cover photo, his face much larger than those of Ray Manzarek, Robby Krieger and John Densmore, who looked more like satellites than bandmates.

"I'm sure they hated me for this cover because they weren't equal in size," Mr. Webster said at the Annenberg lecture. "The songwriter is the guy on the far right — Krieger wrote 'Light My Fire,' Morrison didn't." But, he added, "I'm happy I went with it, because it was so popular."

Mr. Webster at his Venice, Calif., studio in 2014. Lisa Gizara

Guy Michael Webster was born on Sept. 14, 1939, in Los Angeles. His father, [Paul Francis Webster](#), was a lyricist who shared Academy Awards for best original song for "The Shadow of Your Smile," "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing" and "Secret Love." His mother, Gloria (Benguiat) Webster, was a homemaker.

After graduating from Beverly Hills High School, Guy attended Whittier College and then entered the Army, stationed at Ford Ord in California. When asked whether he knew anything about photography, he pretended that he did and quickly began studying photograph books in the base's library. He eventually became the head of its photo department.

After his discharge, he disappointed his parents by telling them he would study photography at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena rather than attend Yale. They refused to pay for his education, fearing he would become no more than a paparazzo.

While he was at Art Center, his ambition to be a fine-art photographer was derailed by his friend [Terry Melcher](#), Doris Day's son, who was a producer for Columbia Records. Mr. Melcher introduced him to Mr. Adler, who was intrigued by Mr. Webster's portfolio and hired him at Dunhill.

One early project was Barry McGuire's third album, named for his apocalyptic hit single, "Eve of Destruction" (1965). For the cover, in black and white, he photographed Mr. McGuire in a manhole.

Columbia asked Mr. Webster to work with Simon & Garfunkel on their album "Sounds of Silence" (1966). He brought the duo to the shady grasslands of Franklin Canyon in Los Angeles, where he posed them on a dirt road looking as if they were walking into an unknown future. He also brought them to meet his father, who had collaborated with Johnny Mercer, Hoagy Carmichael and

others.

“Paul Simon said, ‘Hey, you want to hear our new song?’ ” Mr. Webster recalled in “Big Shots.” “And he pulled out his guitar in the living room in Beverly Hills, and my dad was sitting there, who is not a rock and roller, and he listened to ‘Sounds of Silence’ for the first time. ‘Oh, my God, you guys, what a brilliant song.’ ”

By the early 1970s, Mr. Webster, burned out by the pace of his rock work, moved to Europe for several years. In Italy, he studied art history at the University of Florence and started building a large collection of vintage Italian motorcycles.

Returning to the United States, he began photographing Hollywood stars like Jack Nicholson, Dennis Hopper, Candice Bergen and Jane Fonda. He also photographed actors for publicity shots and movie productions on location.

“He had an ability to make celebrities feel very safe,” Leone Webster said in a telephone interview. “He also had these adorable pictures of the Kardashian girls growing up — he was like their family photographer.”

In addition to his wife, Mr. Webster is survived by his daughters, Sarah, Merry, Jessie and Erin Webster; a son, Michael; two grandchildren; and a brother, Roger, who is also known as Mona. His marriage to Bettie Beal ended in divorce.

Mr. Webster’s work with the Rolling Stones — including the photo for the bucolic cover of the United States release of the anthology “[Big Hits \(High Tide and Green Grass\)](#)” (1966) — began with an unusual offer in 1965 from [Andrew Loog Oldham](#), their producer and manager: Take photographs, but don’t expect to be paid because it’s an honor simply to work with the band.

“And I said, ‘Well, it’s an honor for you that I take these pictures,’ ” Mr. Webster said at the Annenberg event. “He paid me for one album cover. Three of them came out during the years using my photographs.”

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