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**Issue 35**

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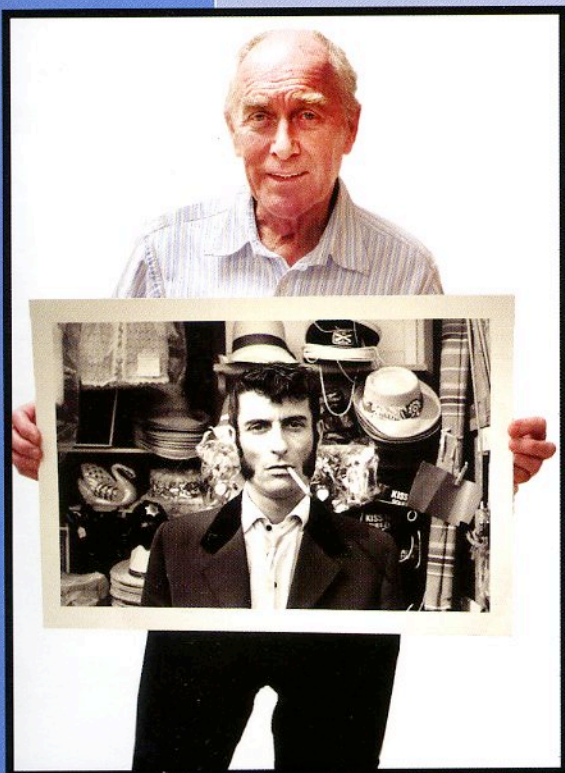
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## Blue Eyed Soul Rod Shone reflects on Kevin Lear's creative journey

**Above:**  
Kevin Lear  
with one of  
his Teddy Boy  
photographs

© Rod Shone

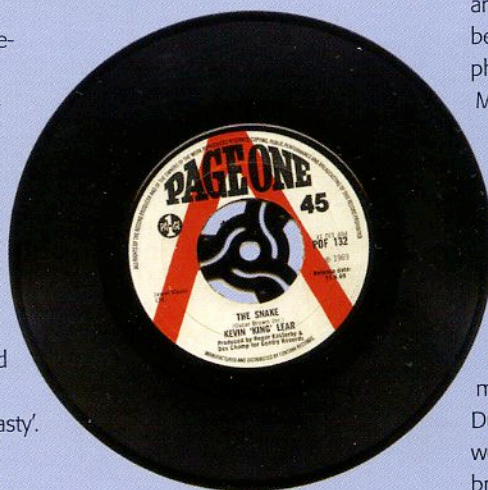
Kevin Lear's  
photographs  
© Kevin Lear

I first met Kevin Lear when I was a student at St Martin's School of Art in the 1960s. Kevin was working as technician in the photographic department, which was part of the graphics course and run by the sage-like Dermot Goulding, ex sports photographer and – it was alleged – ex jockey. Dermot was kindly, knowledgeable and encouraging, and Kevin was his trusty sidekick. Kevin was more than a technician, more like a teacher, and later became a part-time lecturer. It was he who turned me on to the photography of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, and I remember him trying to make my prints less 'contrasty'. 'Use more of the grey tones,' he counselled. And he was right. Kevin was a better photographer than any of we students, and in the early 1970s

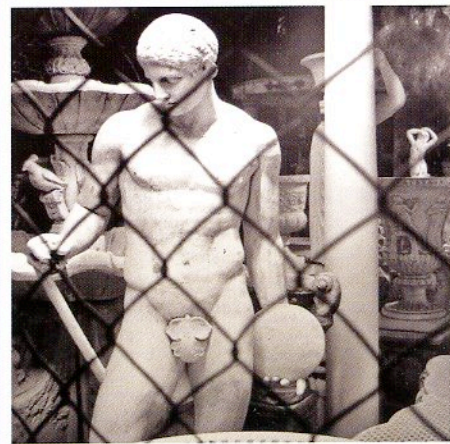
had a photo essay, *The Teds*, published in the prestigious French photo magazine, *Zoom*, as well as the UK's *Creative Camera*. Modestly, he never mentioned this.

At the time, urged on by Dermot, I had some pretension of making a career in photography and would have given my all to see just one of my pictures published pretty much anywhere. But there was even more to Kevin than this. He was a *bona fide* rock singer, with a clutch of 45s that he had recorded to prove it. He does a very fine version of the classic *Cry Me a River*. The history of British pop music was altered in the late 1950s and early 1960s by a succession of musicians who emerged from art schools up and down the land. Their names are well known – The Beatles, John Mayall's Blues Breakers and the Rolling Stones, for example – and their route to musical success stemmed from an interest in the music of Black America, specifically the blues, and an ability to project this music into mainstream British culture. Kevin was such a performer, blessed with a beautiful, soulful voice, an ability to play the Fender Rhodes electric piano and Hammond organ, and a natural presence on stage.

Kevin originally wanted to be an actor, but his careers advisor reacted nervously to this ambition and suggested he might like to work as a film cameraman. He was duly advised to study photography. He took a foundation and then photography



Kevin 'King' Lear's 45 of  
Oscar Brown's *The Snake*



An image from the book *A Glass Darkly*

course at Rochester College of Art, where he also became involved in music. Although, on leaving Rochester, he worked as an assistant to several photographers, he was also busy as a singer and keyboard player. He has a distinctive voice and was lead singer with a band called *Blues Syndicate*. They appeared in package tours alongside the likes of Manfred Mann and Van Morrison's band, Them. When the band split up, Kevin went back to St Martin's as a photographic technician but while there started to make recordings as a solo artist under the name of Kevin 'King' Lear – his recordings appeared on Page One Records, one of several important small record labels of the early 1960s. You can find these recordings today on YouTube. He also had several breaks, appearing live on the BBC Radio's *Saturday Club* and also on TV on the *David Jacobs' Show* – and all this while he was still working at St Martin's.

Following St Martin's, in the early 1970s, I lost contact with Kevin for a while. He married and started a family and, after leaving the music business behind, began to concentrate on photography. He eventually left St Martin's and in the 1980s I found myself sharing a studio with him in Central London. He became a freelancer and put his photographic skills to good use with a range of projects, from record sleeves to working for the famously challenging but intensely creative and groundbreaking magazine, *Management Today*. During all this time Kevin had been working on his own imagery – which brought him great personal satisfaction.

Between freelance assignments and his own projects, Kevin subsidised his



## THE GREAT PRETENDERS



KEVIN LEAR

### The cover for Kevin Lear's unpublished book *The Great Pretenders*

income by working as a truck driver. In the end, he decided that he just wanted to take his own photographs and embarked upon that. He revisited the Teddy Boy pictures and started to think of publishing a book. Over the years he honed and edited the material into several book dummies, which he showed to anyone who was interested. It was a long process, involving plenty of footwork and knocking on doors, but his persistence paid off. Just before the Teddy Boys, he had started to produce photographs that are best described as urban street landscapes: poetic and dark images of corners of the ordinary world that would normally go unnoticed; objects and images that appear to be full of foreboding, with a strong abstract visual appeal. They have soul.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the word 'inscape' to describe

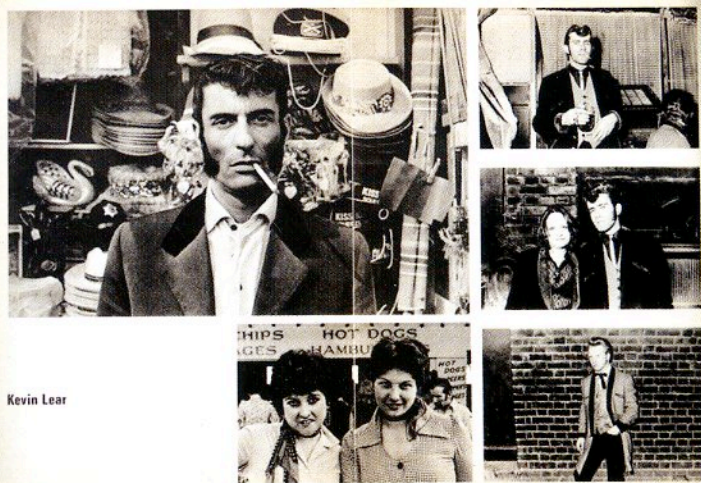
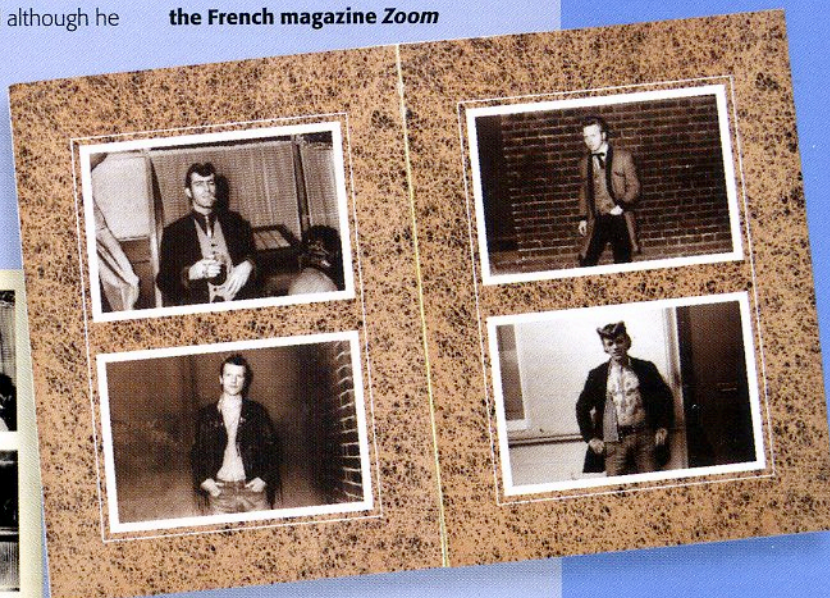
the unified and complex characteristics that give each thing its uniqueness. I believe 'inscape' is what these particular photographs of Kevin's investigate and demonstrate. In 2015 he submitted a book dummy of the photographs, entitled *A Glass Darkly*, and was nominated for the First Book Award. The First Book Award, established in 2012, is a photography publishing prize open to photographers who have not previously had a book published by a third-party publishing house (this does not include self-published print-on-demand projects). Kevin was shortlisted and although he didn't win the award, Michael Mack, the founder of the First Book Award, liked his material and wanted to publish it. Kevin's first

published book was launched at *Photo London* in May 2017. In the meantime, examples of his work are currently in the print collections of the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Media Museum in Bradford.

These photographs are remarkable and I have also been lucky enough to see a complete set of Kevin's Teddy Boy pictures, collated and made into a dummy book – *The Great Pretenders*. The photographs are very powerful and, although they were taken during a revival period in the early 1970s, they give a terrific sense of the period of the late 1950s. Inspiring work, but even more so a demonstration of commitment and talent by a young man who was still in his twenties when he commenced the project.

**Some technical detail:** Kevin shoots all his photographs on film using either a Hasselblad, Nikon or a 5x4 Wista large format camera and even, on occasion, his mobile phone. He scans the processed film himself and makes digital prints.

### Some of Kevin's photographs in the French magazine *Zoom*



Kevin Lear

### A spread of Kevin's photographs published in *Creative Camera*