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Chris Cuffaro's Greatest Hits

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You may not know Chris Cuffaro's name, but you definitely know his pictures. For the past 35 years, he's taken iconic pictures of some of the best-known musicians in the world. From George Michael to George Harrison, Cuffaro has shot it all – including an amazing streak in the early 1990s when a bunch of his rocker friends from Seattle became famous virtually overnight.

Cuffaro is now working on an exhibition and accompanying documentary film, both titled *Greatest Hits* – you can find more information on his [accompanying website](#). It finds him dipping into crowdfunding for the first time, with a [campaign on SeedAndSpark.com](#) to raise money for the projects. We called him at his home in Los Angeles to discuss *Greatest Hits*, crowdfunding, and, of course, the stories behind some of his famous photos. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



Fiona Apple, 1996. Photographed by Chris Cuffaro.

Forbes: For people who might recognize your work but maybe not know your name, can you give us a bio of who you are and a little bit of what you've done?

Chris Cuffaro: Sure. I'm really working hard right now letting everybody know who I am, because I've been shooting in L.A. for 35 years, and I'm starting my 45th year overall as a photographer. I started taking pictures at the age of 10, and had business cards by the time I was 12. I fell in love with photography from day one.

I was never good at self-promotion. I didn't care about being famous or rich. I just wanted my pictures to be great, and I wanted to create images that would last the test of time. So for 35 years, my agents and friends always jokingly said, "Chris is L.A.'s best-kept secret. Nobody knows who he is, but they know his pictures." I was always okay with that. But in this world today,

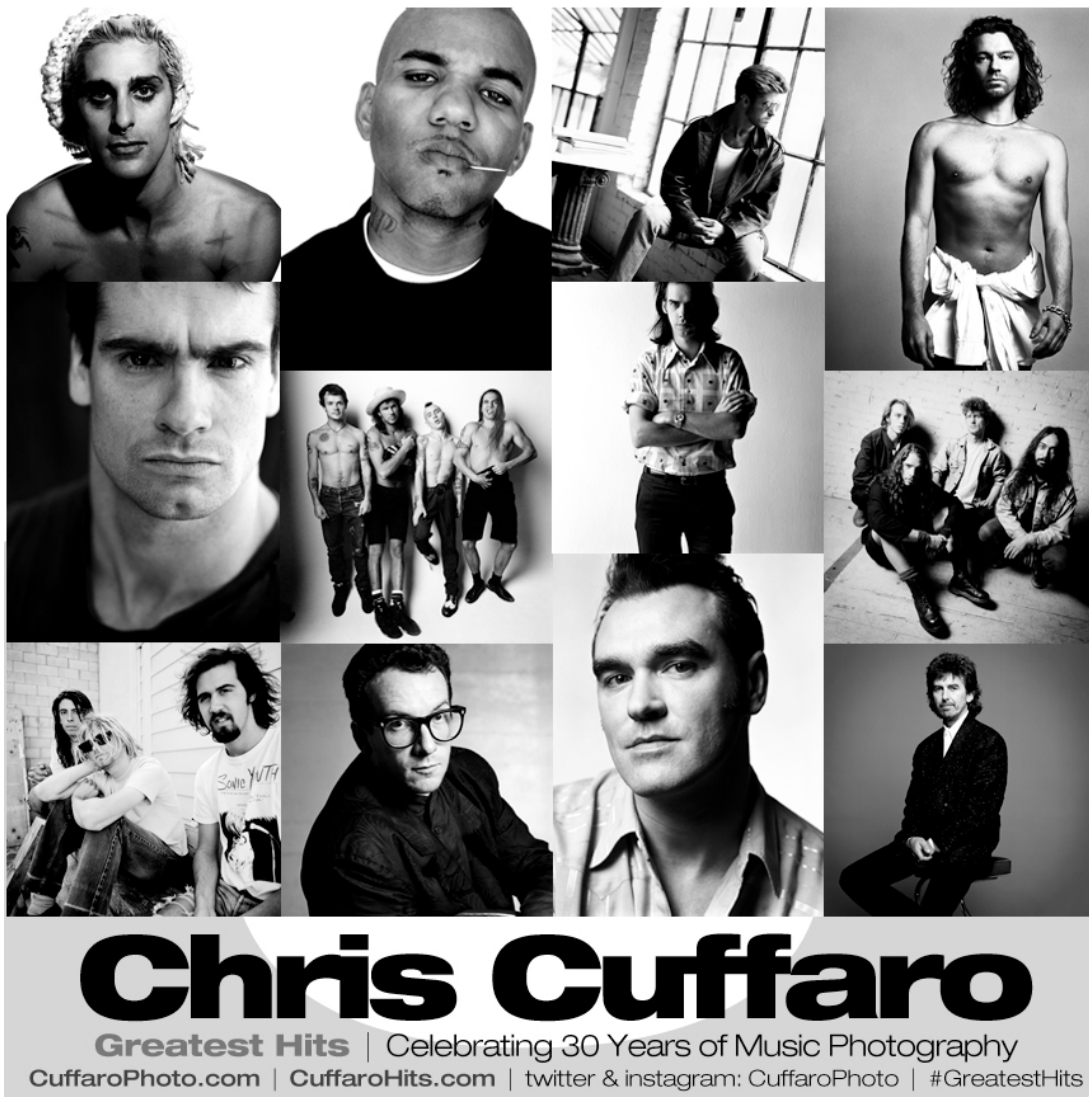
it's all about marketing and branding. So two years ago, I said, I've got to do something about this fact that nobody knows who I am, but they know my pictures. That's where the whole *Greatest Hits* idea was born from.

F: So what exactly is *Greatest Hits*?

CC: The idea for *Greatest Hits* came about a little less than two years ago. I've been asked to do exhibitions a lot in the last few years. The last official one I did was in 1992. I always said, if I'm going to do one, it's going to be on my terms.

So I was sitting around the house one day, and I was like, I've got to do something about marketing and branding. I've got to do an exhibition. The term "Greatest Hits," of course, comes from music. Everything we've tied into this is music-related. "Greatest Hits" was the name I came up with because I wanted to show the best of the best of my pictures.

At first, I narrowed it down to black and white. I narrowed it down to the top hundred, which took a while. These are my greatest hits. The reason they're greatest hits is a combination of, a. a great artist – a great musician or a great band or something like that; b. a great photo that is memorable, whether it's a picture of Nirvana or George Michael, something that people know; and c. a picture that really means a lot to me, and a moment in my life that really stood out.



It started two years ago, and it's slowly been building. I want to do this big exhibition. I want people to show up and be blown away with gigantic prints. Nothing's going to be smaller than three feet.

F: Do you have a timeline for when and where that exhibition might be?

CC: When's the last time you went to a gallery opening of a photographer or an artist? You went into that show and you walked around, and the pictures were up on the wall, and you got a cheap glass of red wine, maybe some crappy music's in the background, you walk around, you say hello to the artist, you have some giggles, you walk outside, and you're done, and you don't remember a fucking thing. That's why I haven't done one, because I would never do that in a million years.

I wanted to do something special, something unique. In 1980, Richard Avedon did [an exhibition at UC-Berkeley](#). I went to that exhibition before I moved to L.A. It made me cry, and it was this ultimate motivation of, that's what I want to be. The prints were big, the event was big. It was so powerful. That's what I want to do.

I want to do this exhibition here in L.A. It's started building, and now I'm at the point where I want to throw a big party. And this event called "Greatest Hits" is going to have the top 40 photos printed. I want live bands playing. I want it to be my Academy Award afterparty – an event you walk away from going, "I love music, and I'm glad Chris loves music, and I want to see that again. When's he going to do number two?"

That was the first goal. And that's when a friend of mine said, you should do a documentary on this.

F: So the documentary is about the process of putting the exhibit together?

CC: Exactly. It's about documenting the creation of this exhibit. It's also about the stories behind the photos, and it's about peoples' stories about music. So it's a celebration of music.

Every musician I ever shot, I always asked them the question, what was your first concert? It's my icebreaker. Everybody hates getting their picture taken, so how do I get them to relax? "Hey, so what was your first concert?"

Through the last 35 years, I've heard incredible stories. I always felt like that's what this is all about, these stories. So part of the documentary is not just my stories behind the pictures, but I wanted to intertwine with everybody else's story.

I like to share. I give prints away more than I sell them, because I like spreading joy and I like how people react to them. They always want to know the stories behind the pictures. That's how this whole documentary evolved, was people going, you should document what you're doing all the time.

F: What made you decide to [take the crowdfunding route](#) for this?

CC: I've got to be honest with you. I didn't want to. Sean [*Greatest Hits* Executive Producer [Sean Mannion](#)] told me about six months ago that I might want to look into it. I said, no, I'm going to go to friends.

We recorded videos of the stories behind each of these top forty photos, and I'm developing an iPad app that will come out in September that will coincide with the show. It's going to be free, and you can download it whether you're at the show or not. You can click on buttons and you'll see the proof sheets from that photo shoot. Then you can click on the video, and you'll hear me telling the story behind the photo.

When we were raising money, I needed money to get those things done first. My best friend gave me \$50K. Well, that didn't last very long, of course.

That's when Sean said, you really gotta do this. I said, you're right, but I don't know how. And Sean said, let me do it for ya [*laughs*]. I can't say no to that!

F: Can you tell me about the details of the campaign?

CC: We're going to try and raise \$150,000. I think we can do it. All the meetings I've had for the last two months about this, everybody says the same thing. They love the photography, they love the music, they love the stories. It's such a positive thing for everybody.

The plan is to raise \$150,000 so that we can shoot not only all these interviews that I've got to do – I've got a list of like twenty people I've got to interview – but it's also to get the footage of ordinary people talking about music. My goal is to interview people from all walks of life. I want to get peoples' stories.

F: While preparing the campaign, what have you discovered about the crowdfunding world that's different than what you expected?

CC: What I've learned is, I've got to be honest. I'm not a bullshitter, even though I work in a bullshit business. I've got to show people that I'm really passionate about the exhibition, the iPad app, this documentary, everything that's going to build from this. Because my ultimate goal is to take this exhibition around the world – *Greatest Hits* in London, *Greatest Hits* in Sydney, *Greatest Hits* in Tokyo. And I want to document the whole thing as it goes along, and interview people around the world about their experiences with music.

If we can raise this money, it's going to pay for us to make this film, get this on Netflix, and get it at a theater. My goal is to really make this big. I didn't talk to music industry people for almost ten years, and everybody I've re-connected with have all just said, thumbs up, Chris, it's about fucking time.

F: Some of your most iconic images are of early to mid 90s grunge and rock bands – Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Jane's Addiction, the Red Hot Chili Peppers. If you could think back on that time when you were meeting and photographing all these bands, did it feel like there was a distinct scene happening or something new happening?

CC: Up until 1988, I was *Musician* magazine's photographer on the West Coast. The man who gave me my start in the music world was Gary Koepke, a brilliant designer.

In 1988 I shot George Michael, and even *Billboard* magazine wrote about me. I was the pop guy all of a sudden. So then I was shooting New Kids On The Block and Debbie Gibson and all this other pop stuff, but it wasn't my

kind of music. But I was still shooting all the real musicians for *Musician* magazine.

Then it was in March of 1991. I was going up to Seattle to shoot Queensrÿche. Nirvana's manager, John Silva, was a good friend. I said to him, hey, is Nirvana around, can I take their picture? And he said, yeah, they just got a new drummer.



Nirvana, 1991 , during the making of 'Nevermind.' Photograph by Chris Cuffaro.

So that opened the doors to that world for me and next thing I know, I was trying to go to Seattle like every other month – going to shows, meeting people, hanging out, having fun, shooting everybody I could shoot, and just having a good time.

At the same time, I was a huge Jane's Addiction fan, and I got to know their manager really well. I just, on my own dime, would [shoot them wherever I could](#). They would never pay me, but they gave me free access. I could shoot the whole show, where everyone else was shooting three songs. I could go anywhere and do anything. And I got pictures that still people aren't going to see, because I can't let people see them [*laughs*].



Jane's Addiction live in Atlanta, November 1990. Photo by Chris Cuffaro.

From 1990 to the end of '92, it was the best music time of my life. In 1991, I had more friends become millionaires than I'll ever see in my life ever again. These guys were all poor. *Nirvana* was broke. The first time I shot Nirvana, I bought Dave Grohl 100 pairs of drumsticks because he didn't have any. I would feed them all the time, I gave Eddie [Vedder] a guitar. Not that I had any money, but they were poorer than me. Next thing you know, they're all doing really, really well, and by '92 they're buying houses with cash.

F: I remember it seemed like that success was, from an audience point of view, lightning-quick – that one day, only the cool kids knew about Nirvana, and then three months later, everyone knew about Nirvana.

CC: It was funny for me to watch the changes. You know a band's doing really well when they have new clothes. Because for the first year, Eddie Vedder wore the same t-shirt, and all of a sudden he can buy new clothes.

It was just a really amazing time, but it was crazy to watch it all blow up, whether it was the first year of Lollapalooza, how that just grew and grew, and Jane's Addiction – we had seen them play every year in L.A. a bunch of times, but all of a sudden now everyone knows Jane's Addiction. And going to shows with Nirvana and watching people go crazy.

F: Harkening back to George Michael: you shot stills from [the "Faith" video](#). What do you remember about that?



George Michael on the set of the "Faith" video. Photo by Chris Cuffaro.

CC: George did a shoot with Herb Ritts, but didn't like any of the pictures, so they killed the whole shoot. At the time, my friend Kathy [Jeung], who was a genius makeup artist, was best friends with George. She's the Asian girl in the ["I Want Your Sex" video](#). Kathy was like, "You should meet my friend Chris," because Kathy and I used to do headshots at my apartment in the early 80s. So I met him, and I met the managers. They said, "Can you come and shoot at the "Faith" video? We'll pay you \$500." I got five hundred bucks. They made a million dollars off of the t-shirt alone.

So the manager, Michael Lippman, was just like, come shoot, do what you can. Afterwards, George liked a bunch of my photos, which is unheard of. He would usually pick like one photo from a shoot, and it'd drive the record label and the managers crazy. But he picked a bunch of my photos. From that point on, they're like, "Okay Chris, you're the guy. George likes you, and

Kathy likes you.” I just fit right in. And I really liked George. To this day, I still think George is one of the best singers, writers, pop performers there is on the planet, period.

F: You were around him for this groundswell, when it was [hit after hit](#).

CC: It was after Wham! *Faith* was taking off. For 1988, I got to go to Australia and Hawaii and all over America on tour with him and shot on all the videos. It was so much fun, because it was a little family. It was my first time touring, and I was flying in private jets and first class and things like that. I’d never done something like that before, so it was exciting. I was just talking to George’s manager a couple weeks ago, and I told him, get George off his ass. He needs to be making music.

F: Another George you had an encounter with was your favorite Beatle, George Harrison. Back around 1987 or so, you shot him for *Musician*. What was that like?

CC: Gary Koepke called me up and said, I’ve got a big shoot for you. I grew up on The Beatles. They were everything to us as kids, and my favorite Beatle was George Harrison. I wished I was George Harrison. So he calls me up and says, you’re shooting George Harrison. I said, you’re fucking kidding me. And he’s like, yeah, but you’re only going to get like fifteen minutes with him. I was like, I’ll take five, I don’t care. I’ll take whatever I can get.

So we go to Warner Brothers records. They said, you’re going to get fifteen minutes. But then George walks in. They were getting ready to release the album *Cloud Nine*. And he asks me and the writer, do you want to hear the new record? You guys’ll be the first. And we were like, sure.

The next thing you know, he’s playing the record for us. I’m shooting him, and we’re talking, and the shoot was like an hour long and we were together for over two hours. I got to ask him questions about *A Hard Day’s Night*, which is like my favorite movie of all time. He’s just the nicest man in the world.



George Harrison at the Musician Magazine shoot. Photo by Chris Cuffaro.

A couple days later, I get a call from the publicist going, hey, George really liked you and we're shooting a music video. Can you go down and shoot some pictures on the video? So I said hell yeah. I went down and got to talk to him some more. I've never been in awe of anybody. But it was so nice to meet your hero, and he's just beyond normal.

At one moment on the video set, I laughed. It was him, the director, the producer, and myself. The four of us are just sitting there talking. And the director and producer have to go do something. They get up and they walk away, and I find myself there just with George Harrison, sitting on apple boxes, and I'm going, okay, this is *really* weird.

F: I was surprised to see that you are a big fan of digital photography. Unlike a lot of veteran photographers, you actually prefer it to film.

CC: I'm not afraid of technology, unlike a lot of older photographers. I'm 55, but in my head I'm still 12 years old. I don't want to be that photographer who lives off that one fucking picture he did twenty years ago or thirty years ago. I don't want to stick to same style. I don't want to be stuck in a box.

That's why I get mad when people say through the years, "Chris, you're the pop-rock photographer," or "You're the grunge photographer," or "You're the alternative photographer," "You're the crazy-guy-who-does-TV

photographer.” Can’t I just be the photographer? And I don’t even want to be *that* at this point. I want to be the starving artist. I think that’s much cooler.

I only shoot digital now, and it’s the best. I don’t care what anybody says – if done right. Too many photographers these days are relying on Photoshop, or they’re relying heavily on tricks. And I’ve always said tricks are for kids, and keep it simple. The best portraits, just like the best music, are the simplest ones of all.

F: Speaking of portraits, you’ve done them, but you’ve also done at this point hundreds of album covers. Is it a different type of session for an album cover, as opposed to a magazine shot or a portrait?

CC: Here’s how it went. Back in the day, you would get hired to shoot an album cover, or you’d get hired to shoot a publicity, or an international publicity. For the record label, there was three to four shoots per album. Sometimes if the record was a success well after it’s released, like No Doubt, a year later they’d do some more photos because they wanted fresh art to sell.

Nowadays, everything’s done all in one. Everybody wants twenty different setups for nothing. But back then, what I loved was when you got to spend time with an artist. Like Iggy Pop – we hung out, we talked. Then when it was time to do the photo shoot, you did the photo shoot, and then it was used for publicity or whatever. If the album cover wasn’t done yet, they’d use it for the back or packaging of some kind.



A 1993 shot of Iggy Pop by Chris Cuffaro.

So it varied, but the best ones were always the ones where you got to know or spend time with the artist.

F: Finally, you mentioned No Doubt a second ago. You worked with them on their first album, back in 1992. They wouldn't break until two or three years later. Did you have any idea working with them that their then-new singer would become a pop icon?

CC: When I met the band, the record company asked me to come and meet the band before the shoot. It was for their album cover. I went down to the recording studio and I met the guys. Adrian [Young, drums] and Tony [Kanal, bass] were there, and they're the nicest guys in the world. But Gwen wasn't there. Tony was telling me, Gwen's amazing, you're going to love her, she's going to be a star. He just went on and on.

So she comes walking in, and she's wearing overalls and a baseball cap. In my head I'm like, not gonna happen [*laughs*]. Then we do the shoot, and I can see that she has that special "it factor." A handful of artists I've shot, they have it.



No Doubt's first photo shoot with Cuffaro.

Fiona Apple, Eddie Vedder, Kurt Cobain. These people have the it factor. And Gwen had the it factor right off the bat. We had a good time shooting. And I didn't see them for a couple years, until the next album came out, because that first album didn't do so well. And then the next album came out and it blew up. And I saw them again, and it was like family reunion, and I shot them like three times after that.

F: Any last things you want to tell people about *Greatest Hits*?

CC: I hope people who love music will get behind this. I hope at some point to be in a room with my prints on the wall, telling everybody, "Thank you." Let's get past the whole bullshit of how music is money and business and just product these days. Let's get back to how it changed our lives. Get back to how amazing it was. I don't know if you ever went to Lollapalooza, but how amazing that was.

I saw some of the best shows ever, whether it was Journey and Blondie on New Year's Eve in '77 to Earth, Wind & Fire...it's crazy, the stuff I've seen. I want to get that passion back. Not just for me, but for everybody. We're so wrapped up in living our lives that we've forgotten about those really amazing times. So my goal is to really get people fired up about music again, if that's even possible. But I hope so.

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