



BEHIND THE LENS

VOTED ONE OF FORBES MAGAZINE'S 30 UNDER 30 LIST AND AN AMBASSADOR FOR WWF UK, CONOR MCDONNELL WAS THE OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER AT KIM KARDASHIAN'S WEDDING TO KANYE WEST. HAVING ACTED AS PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHER TO THE PLANET'S BIGGEST POP STARS, THE 27-YEAR-OLD LIVERPUDLIAN MEETS LUXURY LONDON AS HE TURNS HIS LENS TOWARDS THE MOST PRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES OF OUR AGE

Words: Hugh Francis Anderson

I first came to hear about Conor McDonnell while sailing across the North Atlantic. Earlier this year, I joined adventurer, sailor and marine biologist Andreas B. Heide to sail from the Faroe Islands to Iceland as part of the Arctic Whale project, an initiative intended to raise awareness of the impact of plastic pollution on the sub-Arctic.

As we crossed the ocean, Heide told me about this young photographer who was flying out to join the project. “He shot Kim and Kanye’s wedding,” he said. “He’s also worked with David Attenborough.” Rather a varied portfolio, I thought. The day before McDonnell joined us on-board Heide’s expedition yacht Barba – anchored at Akureyri, a small city on the southern shore of Eyjafjörður, northern Iceland – he’d been shooting with Calvin Harris at Wembley in front of a crowd of 80,000 people. I was determined to find out more.

Born and raised in Liverpool, McDonnell had an unlikely migration into photography. “I used to go to loads of music concerts when I was younger,” he says. “There was this one Subways concert that I really wanted to go to, but it was sold out. I tried every angle to get a ticket, and then remembered I had just got a camera for Christmas to help with my GCSE art at school, and thought, ‘I wonder if I could try to get a photo pass?’” McDonnell contacted the band members directly through their MySpace profiles and managed to get a photographic press pass to shoot the concert. He was just 16.

“I thought it was wicked; I had free tickets to the show and wasn’t even bothered about the photography side of things. I had a very basic knowledge of photography and assumed automatic mode would do,” he laughs. “Halfway through the first song I had a quick flick through the pictures and was like, ‘Oh, this isn’t good.’ So, I popped the camera into manual mode, and that began my obsession with photography.”

At 27, that obsession has already turned into quite the career. Following The Subways’ gig, McDonnell reached out to more and more artists, sending up to 100 emails a day to PR teams, record labels and management companies for photo passes. Most failed to reply but McDonnell made an immediate impression on those that did. “They’d say, ‘Oh, we really liked you, do you want to shoot the whole show for us? We can chuck in a bit of cash.’”

McDonnell started touring with artists across Europe – “it spiralled quite quickly” – and today counts Calvin Harris, Ellie Goulding, Rita Ora and One Direction’s Niall Horan among his “regular” clients. (His first tattoo was scrawled by a drunken Dave Grohl while backstage at a concert.)

McDonnell’s big break came in 2014, when Annie Leibovitz pulled out as Kim Kardashian and Kanye West’s official wedding photographer, and the then 22-year-old received a rather unexpected call. “It was pretty crazy,” he laughs. “I’m not a wedding photographer at all, and I was asked the day before the wedding. I didn’t even know what ▶



THIS PAGE CONOR MCDONNELL;
OPPOSITE FROM, FROM TOP
DAVID ATTENBOROUGH;
ELLIE GOULDING PERFORMING
AT WEMBLEY STADIUM





► I was doing until I arrived and found out it was the wedding itself.” One of his photos ended up becoming the most liked photo on Instagram at the time, with 2.4m likes, a title it held for more than a year. “I mean, that was pretty cool,” says McDonnell. “That definitely helped boost my career quite a lot.”

In 2016, McDonnell was named in *Forbes* magazine’s 30 Under 30 list of artists. “When I got the email, I thought it was spam,” he laughs. “And then I looked into it, and it was the same day the list came out. It was crazy. It’s definitely impacted me because I think it’s quite a big accolade; a boy from Liverpool associated with the *Forbes* list is something I never expected.”

McDonnell’s career then took an unexpected sidestep into a different type of photography. “I’ve always been obsessed with adventure,” he says. “As a kid, my mum and dad would read me stories about explorers like Shackleton, and then when touring I’d end up in places I’d never expected to be in – I’d explore them on my off days.”

His first big expedition was in 2017 as part of the Arctic Mission led by British explorer Pen Hadow. The purpose of the expedition was to try to be the first team to sail by yacht to the North Pole to conduct scientific research. The team was looking for a young photographer with an interest in adventure and a dedicated following, so McDonnell was put forward. “It was on two sailboats and we basically tried to go as far north as possible and see if we could reach the North Pole. We didn’t get there, but we were at sea for more than a month, and it was the first time I’d ever stepped foot on a yacht. It was a very quick crash course.”

Conditions must have been tough? “I didn’t mind it. Because of my years of touring and being on buses with 15 other smelly artists, I thought it was really comfortable, like a tour bus but at sea.” McDonnell has continued to explore the environmental side of photography, becoming an ambassador for WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) – for whom he’s photographed the Maasai Mara in Kenya – and worked closely with Sir David Attenborough on the documentary series *Our Planet*.

“He’s my absolute hero and idol,” says McDonnell of the naturalist and broadcaster. “It was cool enough being in the same room as him, let alone getting to travel around the world with him.” They have since travelled extensively together. “Probably the coolest experience I’ve had so far is walking around the Smithsonian Museum with him. He’s an absolute legend, and the fact that he steps in front of my camera every once in a while is an honour.”

McDonnell’s other heroes are *National Geographic* photographers Paul Nicklen and Jimmy Chin. “I’ve ►



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP CALVIN HARRIS AND SAM SMITH; MAREN MORRIS AND NIALL HORAN; DAVID BECKHAM; KIM KARDASHIAN AND KANYE WEST OPPOSITE PAGE CALVIN HARRIS AND SAM SMITH



► read *Nat Geo* for as long as I can remember. It's always the best photography in the world, so it's definitely a dream [to work with them]."

Over the next 10 days of our expedition, McDonnell will dive with humpback whales, photograph puffins and blue whales, and live the rudimentary existence that is life at sea. And then? Las Vegas to photograph Calvin Harris. And then? LA, London, Ibiza... It's a bit of a counterintuitive career, no? "Yes, so I've been offsetting my carbon emissions for the past few years now," McDonnell explains. "I basically got to a point where I just started feeling really guilty about flying and travelling so much. Of course, with my job, there is an awful lot of travel, so I decided to do something about it." For McDonnell, that means pledging £5,000 to carbon offsetting schemes each year. "It's just got to be done. It gives me peace of mind." ■

ARCTIC WHALE

Conceived by Norwegian marine biologist, adventurer and sailor Andreas B. Heide, and impact manager Sandra C. Ness, the Arctic Whale project sets out to investigate the impact that plastic is having on our whale population and wider marine life.

Some eight million metric tons of plastic waste are poured into our oceans each year, of which almost 240,000 tons are microplastics. According to a report published by GESAMP, a group of independent scientific experts that advises the UN, microplastics have been found in more than 100 species of marine life. Such plastics can lead to changes in gene expression and promote tumours. Larger plastics result in the death of an estimated 100,000 marine mammals and turtles each year, alongside more than one million seabirds.

arcticwhale.no

