Portrait photography is a big field. No one photographer can hope to be an expert in all of the different areas of specialization, but the more important issue might be that each area of specialization rewards a different kind of personality. Skill sets are also very different according to specialization. Wedding photography requires a different kind of diplomacy than editorial photography, if only because the client is also the subject. Celebrity and corporate photography require careful lighting and pre-production planning, while photojournalists have to be able to drop into any situation and be prepared to improvise.

The following interviews present a broad overview of the careers of six photographers in very different areas of specialization.

STANDING OUT
This off-beat wedding photograph by Karen Cunningham demonstrates her unique philosophy and approach—characteristics that all top photographers—in their separate ways—exhibit.
Before there was Annie Leibovitz, Mark Seliger, or Chris Black, there was Art Kane. While Arnold Newman might rightly be considered the originator of this conceptual portrait, Art Kane was the brash innovator who brought it into the modern era.

One of photography’s greatest roles is as a mirror that both reflects, and creates, the society of its time. Art Kane didn’t simply document the popular culture that surrounded him, he was one of its primary inventors. From 1960 to the mid-1980s, it was virtually impossible to pick up a magazine without seeing Art Kane’s photo credit. His contribution to editorial photography is inestimable. Jonathan Kane is Art Kane’s son and a magazine photo editor, musician, and photographer in his own right.

MJ: I was in junior high when I first became aware of your father’s work. I knew that much about him, aside from seeing his work all over the place when I was growing up. He might have been the first photographer I became aware of from just seeing his photo credit everywhere. I do know that he was an art director before he became a photographer.

JK: That’s right; in fact he was quite a celebrated art director at the time. He was the youngest art director of a major American magazine at the time (Seventeen), he’s in the hall of fame at the Art Directors Club, his signature is still on their wall, and he had a wall full of awards for art direction before he became a photographer.

Art Kane would win 38 awards from the New York Art Directors Club over the course of his career.

While he was working as an art director he went back to his alma mater, Cooper Union, to study photography with Alexey Brodovitch. Many of his most famous photographs were shot for that class.

MJ: It is interesting to consider his photographic career in light of his background as an art director. It was probably a very natural transition for him to work conceptually, because that’s what art directors do. They come up with visual concepts to illustrate ideas. Working as an art director probably trained him to become the photographer he was.

On a completely different topic... In my research I came across a cryptic reference to the fact that your father served in the U.S. Army during WWII as part of a top-secret “Ghost Army.” What was that about?

JK: (Laughing) That was Art Kane’s first big adventure and a funny story. During his basic training the Army put out a call for “creative types” to take part in a top-secret project. My Dad volunteered for the assignment and it turned out that they wanted artists to come up with concepts to deceive the Germans on the landing site for the invasion of France. Two of the other people that they recruited happened to be the fashion designer Bill Blass and the painter Ellsworth Kelly. The team experimented with different ways to create a fake army in northern England in order to confuse the German reconnaissance planes. They tried making tanks and trucks out of plywood, but it was too expensive and heavy. Then, being New York kids who had all grown up watching the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, they hit upon the idea of inflatables. So they created inflatable tanks and artillery pieces that could be easily transported and assembled anywhere. That was Art Kane’s first photo shoot.

MJ: I know that story! That was one of the primary reasons the Germans moved most of their tanks to the Pas de Calais and left Normandy under-defended. Amazing. One of my favorite photographs of your father’s is his portrait of Sonny and Cher. They seem to be both swimming and flying. They are happy and in love. For me it completely encompasses who they were in American culture at that time.

JK: Absolutely, and you know Art Kane was a serious editor of his own work. All of his shoots were done on transparency film and he threw away anything that wasn’t up to standard. On most of his shoots, there are only ten or fifteen select frames that are still around.

The Sonny and Cher session is one of the few Art Kane photos where all the elements came together, fashion, celebrity, lifestyle, rock stars, the conceptual thing, it’s all there in that picture.

MJ: One thing that is interesting to me is that your dad was a rock star photographer when that meant being a rock star yourself. He and David Bailey probably personify what we think of photographers of that era, but as I did my research I realized that he was older than the people he was shooting.

JK: That’s true, he was in his forties when he was shooting rock stars, but he was also an example of the modern era.

MJ: Art Kane was an older man when he was shooting rock stars, but he was also an example of the modern era that was as valid and vital. He really helped shape it into what we know today.

MJ: So tell me a story: Probably the most famous Art Kane photograph is his portrait of the rock band, The Who. How did you respond when you first heard this story?

JK: Most people think The Who commissioned that photograph, because it was used for the album cover and at the time of their concert, The Kids Are Alright. It was actually shot ten years earlier. It was originally commissioned by LIFE magazine and licensed later for the album and movie poster. LIFE asked my father to shoot a cover story on “The New Rock,” and the story included a bunch of musicians: The Cars, The Jam, Cream, Jefferson Airplane, and a few others.

My dad researched extensively for every shoot. When he knew he was going to photograph The Who, he listened to every album, looked at TimRather than consider myself a conceptual photographer, I consider myself a conceptual photographer. I really just communicate the unseen elements in a personality.

Art Kane

SONNY AND CHER, MCCALLS MAGAZINE, 1966
This shot required many telecasts in the original dressing rooms Sonny and Cher’s features.
Art Kane

Discipline creates freedom.

"I need an assignment. I love an assignment. I love discipline. Discipline creates freedom."

So he took that a step further and had a huge flag made from several smaller Union Jacks. They all jumped in a cab, he wrapped them up in the flag and told them to pretend to be asleep. Most people think it was shot in London, but it was right here in New York.

MJ: You mentioned The Jefferson Airplane shot; as well and that was an unusual photograph for the time. There’s a lot of production value there, a set was built, and I guess he flew out west to shoot them; it’s in the desert…

JK: Actually, no, I went on that shoot when I was a kid. That was shot in Long Island City in Queens, NY. Those white cliffs you see in the background are piles of gypsum. It was shot next to a factory that made她在lock.

You’re right, though; it was done at enormous expense. They had to have those Plexiglas cubes made, and that was not cheap. But Art Kane was a very persuasive guy and was probably considered the king of editorial photography at the time. The Airplane was also at the height of their popularity. I think everyone involved was pretty sure that the photograph would end up as the cover, so he got his way and the magazine paid for the set built.

Part of what my dad knew about Jefferson Airplane was that they were considered an “Acid Rock” band. The cubes were meant to reference the sugar cubes that people used as a way to take LSD and as a reference to the “Windowpane” acid that was around at the time.

MJ: I would never have guessed that was shot in Queens, and the white ponderosa hills beyond do look like mountains of drugs. All available light?

JK: Yes, most of my dad’s work was shot with available light. The photo of Jim Morrison in the closet of Morrison’s hotel room at the Chateau Marmont, there’s a little lighting in that one.

MJ: That was the same assignment?

JK: Yes.

MJ: That’s remarkable—of the photographs we’ve talked about, three of them are from that assignment. That’s an amazing batting average.

JK: Yes, there were two big shoots on musicians and youth culture, one for McCall’s in 1966 and the other for LIFE magazine in 1968. Most of the iconic music photographs—Dylan, Cream, Janis, Joplin, The Rolling Stones, Frank Zappa—they all came from those two assignments.

MJ: You have a unique perspective on this; you’re not only your father’s son, but you are also a photographer and photo editor. If it’s possible, can you take a step back and assess your father’s career objectively?

JK: His contribution to the way we think of editorial photography today was profound. We’ve talked exclusively about his portraits because that’s the focus of your book, but of course he was also doing a ton of fashion work and other assignments.

I think that Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdain, Avedon, Hiris, and Art Kane personify what we think of when we think of fashion photography from the 1960s through the 80s. He was also an innovator in the area of photo-illustration, combining images through layering that predates Photoshop by decades. I sometimes think he doesn’t get enough recognition for that work, which was incredibly forward. No one else was doing anything like it.

The amazing thing is that his work hasn’t lost an iota of its power—it’s still as fresh as the day he created it.

Jim Morrison at the Chateau Marmont, LIFE Magazine, 1968

Given our modern perspective on technology, it might be natural to assume that hearing the image of a woman who appears to be Marilyn Monroe on the TV screen was pre-planned and set up, however this photo was shot before VCRs and DVD players were commonplace. Kane’s work is a great example of a photographer who made luck part of his plan.

"Part of being a photographer involves being a detective, images come out of investigation."

Art Kane

"Performance shots are a waste of time. They look like everyone else’s."

Art Kane

THE WHO, LIFE MAGAZINE, 1968

In the history of rock photography there are few images more iconic and influential than Kane’s portrait of The Who.
Richard Renaldi

Many photographers take photographs in order to engage with the world. There is nothing passive about being a photographer; they stroll the sidewalks, observing and looking, but for what? They often don’t know, until their eyes fall upon something they don’t understand or someone they want to know. But why is it necessary to make a photograph? This is like asking why it is necessary for a composer to hear work performed. The photographic act sharpens their observational skills and makes the exchange concrete. It changes the experience from spectator without consequence to active participation with real stakes at risk. When it all goes well, the reward is something they expect and better than they could have hoped for.

Richard Renaldi drives the rural routes of America and wanders the city streets, taking photographs of strangers with his 8 x 10 camera over his shoulder. He takes photographs of people he doesn’t know without fully understanding why but trusting in the photographic act to peel back the veneer of the stranger to reveal the person, and the people we are, underneath.

MJ: Part of the reason I wanted to talk to you is because I think what you do is one of the hardest things any photographer can do, which is to photograph an ordinary person, a stranger, and make the photograph in such a way that it engages another stranger (the viewer). What makes you want to do this?

Richard Renaldi: I’m just drawn to certain people. I use the camera as a social extension; it’s a way of engaging with people. When I studied photography and then worked in the field, I saw that a lot of attention was given to fashion and celebrity photography and I was never interested in that. I was drawn to real people and I wanted to make my art about real people.

MJ: The type of work that I do... leaves the viewer with questions about the subject’s story. There is no narrative in still photography because it’s just one still frame, but I think there is an implied narrative, or a narrative that the viewer creates.

RR: That’s true, but when I’m out there, driving around or walking the streets with my camera, I’m doing my own casting. There are people I’m drawn to that I want to photograph, people that I might ordinarily stare at, or even flirt with. That’s almost a subset of portraiture, because there’s often a level of flirtation.

I see people with character and there are certain places where you find that and others where you don’t. I’m interested in rural and urban America, but not in suburban America. But, having said that, I think that you can find interesting subject matter anywhere.

MJ: Tell me about the 8 x 10 camera.

RR: My partner Seth had an 8 x 10 camera that he never used, so I took it out to Madison Avenue just to try it out. I liked the way it slowed the photographing process down. I just fell in love with the level of detail it got out of the negative, and the enlargements just took everything to a whole other level.

MJ: You’re still printing analog?

RR: Yes, I don’t print myself anymore, but all my prints are still done with an enlarger and using chemical processes.

MJ: I think sometimes that’s one of the problems I often find with digital, especially with younger, student photographers. Every tool we use creates a distinctive tool mark on the finished product. Traditionally, photographers have chosen to use certain tools because there’s a unique character to the tool-camera that we find suits the work. Sometimes I worry that we’re losing, or are in danger of losing, the individual personalities of what a Leica or an rZ 67 is, or the particular fingerprint of a certain film or paper. When everyone is using the same tools, then everything can start to look the same.

RR: That’s true, but that means you just have to try harder to distinguish yourself within that. In terms of the specifics to the 8 x 10, I don’t think it’s the camera, but I do think that when the camera is on a tripod and all of that dynamic between the photographer and the subject. There’s a different gravity, and an implication of greater importance because it takes more time compared to a snapshot with a small camera that takes 1/60 second. There’s a different level of engagement, but you can still get it with a small camera. I also carry a digital SLR with me when I shoot and what I get from it is different, but I’m still interested in these photographs.

MJ: Shooting 8 x 10 color neg is really expensive (with processing, almost $20 per exposure). How many frames do you typically shoot of a subject?

RR: One or two, that’s it. You learn to be very deliberate. But you do have that big beautiful ground glass to preview your image. Still, there are other things that are left to fate, like the gesture of the subject.

MJ: Tell me about the “Touching Strangers” project.

RR: When I was shooting some of the bus travelers that are in the Figure and Ground book, there were a couple of occasions where the portraits were of a group of subjects who didn’t know each other. Instead of asking one person if I could take their portrait, I had to ask a group. I found it challenging to have orchestration that I was interested in how the dynamics of the portrait were changed when two strangers were posed together.

My idea in “Touching Strangers” was to ask two or more people, who don’t know each other, to be in a portrait together and ask them to touch each other. They started out very tentative, but as the work progressed, I’ve become more involved, I’ve learned how far I can push people and the photographs have gotten more intimate. There are these incredible moments of bringing people together to perform this moment of contact for me and my camera.

MJ: So, it’s almost a performance piece that you are orchestrating?

RR: Yes, and the pictures reveal these levels of discomfort, or comfort, depending on who the people are. I was, to a certain extent, inspired by how we are fracturing apart in our culture because of technology and online networking. It takes a certain kip of faith on the part of my subjects to consent to do this and it also takes a level of vulnerability. “Why would my reaction be if someone asked me to do it?”

It’s also interesting because, without the background information of who we get people to pose together, the photographs create a fiction about the relationships between the people. There’s an implied relationship. I hope the work challenges a number of social taboos.

TIMELESS STRANGERS
MJ: Do you get nervous?
RR: Oh, I get very nervous, it’s like asking someone on a date. It can take a few minutes to build up my courage. When I’m out shooting the first person of the day it’s hard, but then it gets easier.

MJ: I’m always terrified approaching strangers. It’s easier for me when I’m on an assignment; then I can be pretty fearless, because I can explain who I’m shooting for and what the story is about. One of the first assignments I give my freshmen students is to go out and shoot 25 portraits of strangers and you can just watch the blood drain from their faces. They hate that assignment.

RR: That’s a great assignment, but I can see why they would hate it.

MJ: How do you approach people?
RR: I’m pretty straightforward, I just walk up and introduce myself, tell them what I’m doing. I get everyone's name and address so I can send them a print later. I’m very direct, and I think that’s a lot of why the photographs look the way they do in my photographs.

MJ: How do you approach people?
RR: I’ve always been a project-based photographer, and I always have four or five projects I’m working on at the same time. I did a project on Madison Avenue that came to the attention of Christopher Phillips (Curator at the International Center of Photography, and NYU faculty member), and some of that work was included in the ICP Triennial in 2003. From that I got a show at Debo & Company and another at Yossi Milo Gallery (both prestigious private galleries in New York City’s Chelsea art district).

MJ: Are you able to make a living as a fine artist?
RR: It has peaks and valleys, but yes, and I do get the occasional commission. I just did a pretty huge ad campaign for Microsoft that I shot in 2007 and 2008, where I traveled to 17 different countries.

MJ: Did you shoot that on 8 x 10 as well?
RR: Yeah, it was pretty amazing experience. They let me shoot exactly the way I normally shoot, but it was strange because I was shooting with a huge crew. Normally I work alone, but on the Microsoft job I’d be shooting and then turn around and suddenly be aware that there were 18 people standing behind me.

MJ: Did that affect you?
RR: Surprisingly, not really.

MJ: How did you start Charles Lane Press?
RR: I got my feet wet in publishing when I published my first book, Figure and Ground, with Aperture in 2003 and I found that I loved the process of putting together a book. I had been shooting in Fall River, Massachusetts, since 2000, and by 2008 I felt like I had enough work for another book. I approached Aperture again, but the timing wasn’t right for them. I wanted to go ahead and do it, so I just took the money from the Microsoft job and created Charles Lane Press with Seth.

RR: That’s right, I feel like the people I photograph are people whose stories aren’t told, and those stories need to be told.

MJ: Isn’t that kind of similar to why you make the portraits you make?
RR: It is, and it goes back to your first question about why I make the pictures I make. It’s because we live in a culture that celebrates youth, beauty, and surface, but that’s not the reality for most of America. Most of this country, once you get out of the cities, is pretty poor. That’s what the “Fall River Boys” project is about, it’s about coming of age in an area where there are pretty limited economic opportunities.

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MJ: Those are the guys we hire to fight our wars.
RR: That’s right, I feel like the people I photograph are people whose stories aren’t told, and those stories need to be told.
Emily Shur is living the dream of many young photographers, working for the top magazines, photographing celebrities, and doing great work. She is exactly where she wanted to be, but it wasn’t easy to get there, and it isn’t easy to stay there.

MJ: So tell me your story, you got out of school and then what?

ES: I did an internship at SPIN magazine when I was a student. When I graduated I worked in various photo departments for a few years at different magazines, mainly Rolling Stone. Then I went to Newsweek as a freelance photo-editor, which was great because I was only there a few days a week and that allowed me to start doing my own shoots.

MJ: You’re actually unusual because you never assisted for anyone. That’s great, but doesn’t it put you in the position of having to make it all up from scratch as you go along?

ES: Well, yes. I learned a lot from being a photo-editor. That job really helped me to decide what I wanted to do and what I didn’t want to do. But ... I feel like everything I know about being on set, lighting, and all the technical stuff I really just taught myself by trial and error or trying to emulate images that I admired.

MJ: Tell me about your early shoots. You worked for various magazines, mainly Rolling Stone. Then I went to Newsweek as a freelance photo-editor, which was great because I was only there a few days a week and that allowed me to start doing my own shoots.

ES: Yes, Interview was great because, even though they didn’t pay anything, they really did make every attempt to help as much as possible with production and put together a great-looking shoot. Working with great stylists, hair, and make-up people taught me a lot about how to elevate my images and it got my foot in the door. Shooting entertainers and celebrities. The celebrity world is a tough nut to crack, but once you’ve shot a few, people are less hesitant to hire you.

MJ: How does your office work now? Do you have a team of stylists and assistants that you work with regularly?

ES: Yes! I have people like me, but there is a little dance that goes on because celebrities often insist on using their own people for hair and make-up. I’m fine with that, there are other battles I’d rather win, and I want the subject to feel comfortable on set.

In terms of wardrobe, often the magazine will assign someone or I’ll suggest someone I like, then we (stylist, photo-editor, art director, and photographer) will all discuss the direction of the shoot and the stylist will pull clothes based on that. When the wardrobe arrives, the stylist and I go through the racks together and edit things before the celebrity shows up so we can suggest our favorites first. There are times when that doesn’t work and we’ll all have to compromise to find clothing that works for everyone. At that point, we have to go to the other racks.

MJ: Is there always a publicist on the set? Is it a problem working with them?

ES: Most of the time a publicist is present, but sometimes the celebrity will just show up with an iced coffee in their hand and be like, “I’m here, what do you want me to do?” I’m fine either way I get on well with the publicists and we all understand what we’re there to do: I don’t want to make a picture that pushes too far or asks someone to do something they’re not comfortable doing. I think the subjects respect that.

MJ: But not all celebrity photographers will do that. I like Martin Schoeller’s work a lot but it’s not all flattering.

Amy Poehler

For her series of portraits of Amy Poehler, Emily posed the actress as various movie icons. Emily used her research combined with her knowledge of lighting and styling cues enabled her to exploit some of the most iconic photographic images from popular culture to her advantage.

Amber Tamblyn

Now, wardrobe, and a lighting setup is a toolkit mix of available light with flash make the actress look beautiful, ethereal, and timeless.

Emily Shur is a freelance photographer whose work has appeared in Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, and other magazines. She has shot portraits of celebrities such as Tony Curtis and Amber Tamblyn. She is known for her ability to create iconic images of her subjects, often using available light and flash to create a timeless look.

Tony Curtis

This portrait of a Hollywood legend is lit simply, using just enough fill from the photographer’s lights to keep the existing sunlight from obscuring his face with the shadow from his hat brim.

Celebrity Photographer

Emily Shur

1976: Born in New York, NY


1998–2001: Freelance photo editor working at various magazines

2001–2005: Working as a photographer in New York for various photo departments for a few years at different magazines, mainly Rolling Stone. Then I went to Newsweek as a freelance photo-editor, which was great because I was only there a few days a week and that allowed me to start doing my own shoots.

2005: Relocated to Los Angeles

www.emilyshur.com

Emily Shur’s work has appeared in Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, and other magazines. She has shot portraits of celebrities such as Tony Curtis and Amber Tamblyn. She is known for her ability to create iconic images of her subjects, often using available light and flash to create a timeless look.
ES: That’s true, and you happened to pick one of the photographers I most admire. I think the fact that he gets people to pose for photos that may not be typical celebrity portraits is a sign of how much respect they have for him and the integrity of his work.

MJ: But there is an aspect of one hand washing the other right? ... Are your photographs helping to establish the celebrity’s brand and identity?

ES: For sure, but often that’s when it’s most interesting because that’s when it’s most collaborative. Those are the people who understand photography, they want to do something interesting. They have an affinity for photography and respect it for the art form that it is. They’re not just trying to get it over with. And even if it’s just a woman who’s really beautiful, who knows how to pose and knows her best angles, well, that’s helpful too. I try to appreciate the whole spectrum of how the collaboration can go. It doesn’t help them, or me, to have bad pictures out in the world.

MJ: Amy Poehler seems like she went completely over and above the call of duty for what she was willing to do for the photos.

ES: She was amazing, and that is one of my all-time favorite shoots as well as one of the lowest budget shoots I’ve ever done. It was so minimal. We did that totally bare bones, everyone was working for free ... she was the opposite of high-maintenance and a joy to work with. She made the shoot that much easier.

MJ: So there is a give and take between what they want, and what you want, because as photographers we want to make great pictures—I’m sure there are a lot of start-ups out there who just want to look hot.

ES: Absolutely, and you know, sometimes that’s just what the shoot is. As I’m sure you know, the actual photography is often the smallest part of the whole process. Most of the time, it’s me and a few of my closest friends who are readings people, and really listening to them. I’ll meet someone and know immediately, “Wow, this is going to be a fun day,” or I’ll know, “This is what they’re willing to give me. They just want to look hot, so I am going to make the best picture I can of them looking hot.”

MI: Tell me about working with Michael Cera.

ES: Your photographs seem to reinforce his on-screen persona—how deliberate is that?

MJ: Absolutely, I do a lot of internet searches and use other portraits of them. I’ll watch interviews they’ve done, but the most useful thing is to look at other portraits of them. It gives me a sense of what they’re up for and what they want. Not everyone can do this kind of photography. There are definitely compromises that you have to make, but I love to photograph people who love to be photographed. I’ve always wanted to take pictures of people who were performers. I’m such a huge fan of television and movies. I love entertainers and I really do respect what they do.

MJ: Yeah, there is a part of the process that is about being a fan and being interested in the subject ... if you build your career around what you love, it’s always enjoyable and an adventure.

ES: Exactly. I was an only child and both of my parents worked, so I watched a lot of TV as a kid, and I still go to the movies all the time ... It’s easy to write off celebrity photography as superficial but it’s not when it’s done well, by people who do it well. It’s really creative, and you get to work with some of the best people in their field. It’s a real privilege.

MI: Let’s talk a bit about the technical stuff. You were shooting 4 x 5 for a long time. How are you doing your shots now? How did the digital switch change things?

ES: I kept shooting film until recently, and I still shoot film for all my personal work. For my celebrity and music work I had to give in and start photographing digitally. When the budget allows I work with a digital tech and a medium-format Hasselblad camera with a Phase One back.

MJ: You rent the digital camera?

ES: Yes, it all comes as a package with the digital technician, the camera, the on-site computer. They do everything, the color calibration, the file processing; I took a while to make the switch, and at this point in the industry having a great digital technician has really become as integral to the whole shoot process as having a great first assistant.

MJ: When the budget is tight I shoot with a Canon DS Mark II and use Capture One software for color correction and process the files myself.

ES: Tell me about shooting musicians and bands.

MI: Music photography is probably the hardest thing I do. They’re not actors so they sometimes aren’t interested in performing for the camera, and their image is usually something they’ve cultivated pretty carefully. Once in a while, I get to do something conceptual, but most of the time it’s about helping a band achieve the image they’ve set for themselves.

MJ: Ah-ha! Yes, of course, actors make a living by pretending to be someone they’re not, while musicians are all about the authenticity of their persona ... I always think it must be like shooting the board of a Fortune 500 company. You might want to put the short guy in the front because he’s short, but suddenly you realize that he’s just an accountant and you’ve offended the CEO because you stuck him in the back. It seems like you have to be really sensitive to the internal politics of the band. I notice that in all of your band photographs they’re democratic, you’ve found a way to give everyone equal stature.

ES: With band shoots I just try to keep it loose while structuring the composition of the photo, so the people are just visual elements in the frame. Sometimes, someone will step in and let me know how they like to be positioned, either

MI: Michael Cera

Emily has done several photo sessions with Michael Cera and many other stars, who demand Emily’s Cera is easy to work with. This photo was shot on a street near Emily’s home as they walked through the neighborhood looking for locations.

MI: The Airborne Toxic Event

Emily’s portraits of musicians always seem to respect the drummer as much as the lead singer. The palette of this photograph is all warm tones, which makes the white objects pop in contrast.

MI: The Airborne Toxic Event

Emily’s portraits of musicians always seem to respect the drummer as much as the lead singer. The palette of this photograph is all warm tones, which makes the white objects pop in contrast.

ES: People think that because you’re photographing glamorous people you must be living a glamorous life. They don’t think about the red-eye flights, waking up at 4 in the morning, getting to the set hours before talent to set up, etc. It’s really hard work. You sweat and get dirty.

MJ: You can’t do it for the glamour or the money. There isn’t much glamour and there are other areas of photography where you can make a lot more money. You have to do it because you love it.
Kristen Ashburn

PHOTOJOURNALIST

Photography may be the most difficult career in photography, both financially and psychologically. Even in the heyday of the great picture magazines, the path of the photojournalist was never easy. But at least David Douglas Duncan and his contemporaries could be assured that their photographs, etched on Tri-X by light filtering through the haze of battle, would be seen by the public. The photojournalists of today are no less brave, the stories no less important, but it is increasingly difficult for stories to get the exposure they deserve. Kristen Ashburn is a true believer in photography’s ability to move the viewer and inspire social change. In a person with less passion, energy, and drive it would be easy to dismiss this as nave idealism, but Kristen has built a reputation as one of the world’s foremost photojournalists by skilfully balancing her lofty ideals with pragmatic activism and dogged hard work. It is the privilege of the photojournalist to witness the beautiful, tragic, and moving moments that shape our time. With the privilege of witness comes the responsibility to tell the story: to document what they were seeing. Over the years I kept going back during my summer and winter breaks to Romania, and it is these in-between moments that I love. Kristen’s work—proof that one determined person can make a difference.

KA: You worked for the fashion photographer Steven Klein after school.

KA: I was a young photographer trying to figure out what I wanted to do and I had always admired the work of photojournalists. The act of documenting our collective history felt important to me, and that feeling led me to want to be a photojournalist. It seemed like a noble path. While in college I saw the pictures and footage, like everyone else, of what was happening in Romanian orphanages after the ’89 revolution. A family friend, Monica McDaid, who was a schoolteacher in England, had also seen the news about the orphan crisis. She organized a bunch of truck drivers who volunteered to drive supplies to Romania. Once they got there they found horrific conditions. Children kept four to a cot, open sewages, rat infestation, no electricity, it was beyond imagination, really. The news stories didn’t prepare her for what they would see. That was the start of her relief effort and her organization called The Romanian Challenge Appeal. I signed on as an aid worker for her the summer after my freshman year. It was my first real international travel. My role was to work with the children first, photographer second. I had to shoot/deliver the same locally. That time, Romania was aware of the negative press and didn’t want anyone, including aid organizations, to document what they were seeing. Over the years I kept going back during my summer and winter breaks to volunteer and I kept shooting. I was acutely aware of my role and how involved I was as a volunteer, but I kept my distance as a photographer. I would only photograph once the job was done, during the in-between moments. Toward the end of my work with the organization, during my senior year at NYU, I organized an art and photography auction to raise money for the Romanian Challenge Appeal. It was then that I used my photography not only to raise awareness but also to raise funds. After working so closely with the children, it was impossible to sit back and not try to do more to help. In a way, this set a pattern for how I approached other projects I’ve worked on. I’ve crossed the line into activism on a few occasions.

KA: You worked for the fashion photographer Steven Klein after school.

KA: Actually, I first worked as a printer at a great lab, Mv Labs, in New York City. It was later that I met Steven through the lab. When Steven was doing his first work on the topic, The Voice had just won a Pulitzer for their work on the topic. The story was so large and so reaching that I couldn’t understand why more wasn’t being done to cover it. I decided that I would be my next story. I wasn’t sure where it would lead me, but I was willing to take the leap. If I was going to spend my time and money to work independently, I wanted to make sure the story was something I could completely commit myself to. And that trip launched the “Bloodline: AIDS and Family” multimedia project.

KA: You worked for the fashion photographer Steven Klein after school.

KA: I began to follow articles dealing with the AIDS pandemic in the Times and the Village Voice. The Voice had just won a Pulitzer for their work on the topic. The story was so large and so reaching that I couldn’t understand why more wasn’t being done to cover it. I decided that I would be my next story. I wasn’t sure where it would lead me, but I was willing to take the leap. If I was going to spend my time and money to work independently, I wanted to make sure the story was something I could completely commit myself to.

KA: And that trip launched the “Bloodline: AIDS and Family” multimedia project. You funded it all yourself?

KA: At first, but then grant money and resale of the work funded trips. My first trip spent almost six weeks between Botswana and Zimbabwe. When I returned to the States I contacted Robert Pledge, of Contact Press Images, who had met while working at MV Labs. I showed him the...
I think I was working on a project on Israeli suicide bombers in Palestine. How did that come about?

One of my favorite projects of yours is on Robert's encouragement. That was the year I won the grants and awards. That was the year I won the magazines and encouraged me to apply for it. He's very generous to young work and asked him to help edit it. He agreed. It was really through his guidance that I was able to get it published. He's very generous to young work.

I had a friend who I trusted with contacts there, he connected me to a reliable fixer he had used in the past. A fixer is a local contact hired by photojournalists to help translate, travel in dangerous areas, and negotiate with the local authorities and population.

I kept seeing all these posters and billboards memorializing Shalhevy ( martyrs) on almost every street corner. I wanted to understand the culture of what these Shalhevy meant to their community. I started by going to the families of the Shalhevy and interviewing them. I just did portraits and interviews to gain a broader perspective of what these peoples’ deaths and actions meant to their families and friends. From there I was able to gain access to men and women who were training for suicide missions.

It was an unnerving experience. I was taken to places—secret places—over long distances. The camera took great lengths to make sure I wouldn't know the true identity of the subject. It was disorienting, and risky. After talking to them for a while, hearing their stories, I became a little more relaxed. There was this strange mixture of fear and comfort. Fear because I could only see their eyes and I knew what they most wanted to accomplish in death, and comfort because I knew I was sitting across from another human being, even if they happened to be wearing an explosive belt.

As photojournalists go, your work is far more methodical than I think that usually it’s diabolically simple, and I mean that as a compliment. There’s very little of the traditional action and visual tension that we normally associate with photojournalism. What is it about the portrait that serves your work?

Because of the influence of the decisive moment and Cartier-Bresson, there’s a history of photojournalists capturing life in this very designed and composed way. I never put much energy into that. I was more interested in the story. Not that there’s anything wrong with that style. It can be beautiful and poetic, and it’s an important way to see. It’s just not always me. I was more interested in the composed way. I never put much energy into that. I was more interested in the composed way. I never put much energy into that.

I’m impressed with work I’ve seen from other people do it. So I’ve taken up the challenge of reimagining photography digitally. As you know, it’s more like shooting slide film so you have to be a lot more careful with the exposure. You just don’t have the same latitude you have with film. I’m happy with the results I’m getting from my digital camera and I like working with it.

My newest project is Albinism. I shot all shot digitally. I just bought an 8mm 9.1 and I’m excited by how the lens renders the subject. But ultimately I want the person, or the situation to speak for itself. The camera is just the means to the end.

I’m curious, now that you are shooting digitally with the Canon 5D Mark ii and having produced your “ Shirahat portrait,” what is it about this piece, or you interested in shooting video?

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Karen Cunningham

Family Photographer

Wedding photographers are some of the best photographers in the field and they seldom get the respect they deserve. Weddings are challenging, requiring the photographer to have skills in photojournalism, still life, architecture and interiors, as well as studio and location portraiture. A wedding is an event, a fast-moving freight train that won't stop while you load film or fumble with lights. The pressure can be intense: guests will make requests for candid photos just as you are setting up for a very important formal portrait, churches and clergymen will restrict your access during the ceremony, the wedding cake will come out just as you have sat down to take your only break in a grueling day. This is hard work: 12-hour days are common. It requires diplomacy and a genuine interest in the event; outstanding people skills are mandatory. It's not easy, but the challenges are also what make wedding photographers so special. A wedding is an event, a fast-moving freight train that won't stop while you load film or fumble with lights. The pressure can be intense: guests will make requests for candid photos just as you are setting up for a very important formal portrait, churches and clergymen will restrict your access during the ceremony, the wedding cake will come out just as you have sat down to take your only break in a grueling day. This is hard work: 12-hour days are common. It requires diplomacy and a genuine interest in the event; outstanding people skills are mandatory. It's not easy, but the challenges are also what make wedding photographers so special. A wedding is an event, a fast-moving freight train that won't stop while you load film or fumble with lights. The pressure can be intense: guests will make requests for candid photos just as you are setting up for a very important formal portrait, churches and clergymen will restrict your access during the ceremony, the wedding cake will come out just as you have sat down to take your only break in a grueling day. This is hard work: 12-hour days are common. It requires diplomacy and a genuine interest in the event; outstanding people skills are mandatory. It's not easy, but the challenges are also what make wedding photographers so special.

Weddings are a good fit for me because I was always interested in the social dynamics of the people I photographed when I was shooting news stories, and weddings are all about social dynamics. One of the big draws for me was the lifestyle of the wedding photographer. There’s a wedding season, and I worked really hard during the season, then I have big blocks of time when I’m free to work on my personal projects. Unlike a lot of photographers—I like you, for example—I’ve always considered commercial photography as my day job. My creative outlet is in my printmaking. Karen Cunningham has had a few different, and very successful, careers in photography, as both a photojournalist and as a custom printer for an amazing roster of “A”-list photographers. It all adds up to a savvy woman who brings skill and dedication to every assignment.

KC: So you’ve gone through some career moves and changes. How did you settle on shooting weddings as a career?

MJ: Because you’re primarily working on weekends when you’re shooting weddings?

KC: Well, now that I’m shooting digitally. At ISO 800, the files are still super smooth and I have all the ambient light I need. A lot of high-end weddings these days use lighting designers, so I want to make sure I’m not overpowering the existing light.

KC: What were you doing as a printer, you were able to dig through the contact sheets of some of the world’s greatest photographers. What did that teach you?

KC: It was great; I got to work with the best photographers in the world. I learned how to approach a subject and tell a story. I also learned their palettes. Antonin [Kratochvil] is very dark, big palettes. Albert Watson, the colorist of the wedding photograph. Photographers such as Patrick Demarchelier, Bruce Weber, and Annie Leibovitz.

MJ: After the job I did for Eddie, Kathy Ryan, editor of the New York Times magazine, called me and asked me to work with the best photographers in the field and they agreed. It all added up to a savvy woman who brings skill and dedication to every assignment.

MJ: What was the day job? My creative outlet is in my printmaking. It was a good fit for me because of the skills I already had. I’m really good at fashion photography, and environmental portraiture.

KC: It’s actually a solid five-to-six-day-a-week job during the season, but yes, during the winter I have some time for myself to make art. Weddings were also a good fit for me because of the skills I already had. I’m really good at fashion photography, and environmental portraiture.

KC: I shoot with. I do have a 105mm that I’ll use occasionally, but I’m very “Cartier-Bresson” – I like the 50mm perspective. I like the equipment and technique to be simple.

MJ: And for lighting?

KC: I use a Nikon flash set to TTL on the camera and shoot in manual mode on the camera, so I’m controlling the exposure manually by using the aperture and shutter speed in combination to create different mixed light and shutter effects. My assistant has a Lumedyne on a stick mounted to a manpod that I trigger with a Pocket Wizard connected to the camera. We have a fairly elaborate sign language that we use to communicate across the room, so I can tell him how to set the power and where to point it.

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There is nothing easy about what they do. Photographers is that models really work hard! Even if the lighting isn’t quite right, I’ll start and they can’t ever feel as though you’re judging them. Even if the lighting isn’t quite right, I’ll start shooting just so the subject doesn’t think it’s something about them. Then my assistant and I will make adjustments as we’re shooting.

So take me through the day… I haven’t shot many weddings but what I remember was that there was this great long list of about 75 pictures I was expected to get: Mother with bride, Father with bride, grandparents, bouquet being thrown, etc. Do you have a script of shots?

I don’t do that. I have an itinerary of what’s going on over the course of the day. I allow one hour for all the formal portraits. I spend twenty minutes with just the couple and then twenty minutes with the family, the extra twenty minutes I’ll use to fill in anything I might have missed. I try to never do more than 10 to 15 portraits of all the family combinations, which means I have to carefully come up with a realistic list, that is just what they really want for the family portraits.

I make a list of everyone’s names and I have them all memorized before I get there. I address everyone by name, never their title like “Mom” or “Maid of Honor.” I think that’s important.

That’s an amazing skill and strikes me as very, very important.

Well, I type up the list for my assistant and once I’ve done that then it’s in my head, and that’s also part of my emphasis on being “the family’s photographer”… Little things count, like my assistants and I never shout out to each other or to the family because I want to reinforce that idea of being the family photographer.

One thing that scared me about shooting weddings is that it seems like there’s often a disconnect between what I shoot and what people remember. It’s this great day for them, but maybe they don’t notice how tacky the banquet hall is, that kind of thing.

Right, and a lot of “flaws” are actually caused by the way the camera records things, like the extremely short exposures of flash lighting.

And formal wear. Most people don’t dress formally very often and you have to carry yourself differently. Strapless dresses and tuxedos require a different posture and presence than a T-shirt and jeans. Look at pictures of the Royal family sometime. They really know how to do it!

Tell me about your workflow.

The subjects relax, relying on me to direct in real-time, and composition to carry the photograph.

My assistant downloads the cards and backs them up to an external hard drive during the wedding, but none of the cards are erased until all of the files have been loaded into the desktop computer back at the studio and backed up again. Then we load them into Lightroom and I do 90 percent of what I need in Lightroom. Occasionally I’ll go into Photoshop to use the “ liquify” tool to slim someone’s arm or something, but Lightroom does almost everything I need.

Then I upload the shoot into a web gallery for the client to look at, and have a “proof” album made. Most young couples are comfortable looking at photos online but sometimes parents and grandparents aren’t as computer savvy, so the proof album is important.

What’s the appeal of this for you? I mean I know there was an economic imperative, but why weddings?

There was an aspect of shooting weddings that I adored, the same satisfaction I had as a printer, because I was helping someone else realize their vision. I liked being in that position as a collaborator, but I also had the autonomy that I never really saw myself as a fashion photographer. There was an aspect of shooting weddings that I adored, the same satisfaction I had as a printer, because I was helping someone else realize their vision. I liked being in that position as a collaborator, but I also had the autonomy that I never really saw myself as a fashion photographer.

I love observing how people interact. But also, as a woman I’m fascinated by the fashion component of wedding and how the women present themselves to the public and to their husbands. I love imagining the bride as a fashion runway, the significance of each dress and what it means to her, her family, the photographer, the public, etc. It’s very important.

I use a famous wedding dress designer on a TV show advise brides to look at the wedding aisle as a fashion runway. That comment made me think about how we live in a society where style and beauty is actually a route to power, with celebrities for instance. These brides, especially in New York, want to present themselves as stylish. It’s exciting and fascinating to record.

And that’s interesting because the family is commissioning you, which is very different from someone like an editorial photographer. In your case, you are entrusted with carrying their projected image forward.

Um yes, it but it has more facets than that. Part of it is simply recording, telling the story of what happened that day and they also want great portraits of people who are important to them. But I think the most important aspect is about creating something concrete, a document of all the planning that they have put into the event over the course of a year. A wedding day is ephemeral. My album is one of the few concrete things that they take away from the day. There’s a certain satisfaction in that.
Sarah Wilson

1973: Born in Durham, NC (raised in Austin, TX)
1999: Born in Durham, NC (raised in Austin, TX)
2000-2001: Assistant to photographer Mark Jenkinson
2000-2003: Interim for James Evans in Marathon, Texas
2003-2001: Visited the Desert Rose Lighting Fellowship to complete project about the Cajun area of Southwest Louisiana
2004: Salto shone of Louisiana Project at NYU’s Gulf and Western Gallery
2005-2000: Assistant to photographer Mark Jenkins
2006: Photographer for Texas Monthly
2007: Volunteered as prom night photographer for the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired
2008: Awarded the PhotoNOLA Review Prize for Blind Proms, a documentary project about the town of Jasper, Texas in the aftermath of the brutal murder of James Byrd, Jr.
2009: Published: Jasper, Texas: The Road to Redemption (University of Texas Press). Exhibited in six cities in the United States, and showed in New York’s White Box Gallery.

In the past, the concept of “the extended project” or photographic thesis was usually reserved for graduate students working towards an MFA. Now, almost every undergraduate class in photography relies on each student completing some form of extended project at least once in every class.

From a teacher’s point of view, extended projects bring real intellectual rigor to the classroom and teach students to build a consistent artistic process and a coherent identity. Most important, extended projects require a strong work ethic that helps students break free of the “lucky shot” mentality.

However, as teachers and practicing artists, many of us also realize that there is something inherently artificial about any project that starts at the beginning of a semester and is expected to be complete by the end of a semester and is expected to be complete by the end of the academic year. The pressure to perform, will often choose to work on an idea that isn’t motivated by an inner creative need, but something that is less ambitious and can be completed within the constraints of the class schedule. Real projects, by real artists, evolve much more organically.

Sarah Wilson was a student that came to my attention as a freshman at NYU. She was funny, smart, and creatively ambitious. These qualities, combined with a strong work ethic should have made her a stand out, but she just couldn’t seem to find her focus.

In the summer between her junior and senior year Sarah went to the small town of Marathon, Texas, to intern with local photographer James Evans. She came back knowing what she wanted to do with her life.

Since then she’s gone on to shoot many more projects, including stories on the racially motivated murder of James Byrd Jr. in the small town of Jasper, Texas. Most recently she has been working on a new extended project, “Blind Proms,” at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Austin, while balancing a busy career as a contributing photographer for Texas Monthly and shooting a variety of commercial assignments.

MJ: So, we know each other way too well. Sarah (was my assistant for three years), but tell me about the Marathon, Texas, pictures. What was different about working there? What did it do for you?

SW: I had the opportunity to go assist a photographer there. Marathon is a small town of about 400 people in the West Texas desert and I had just come from being in New York for three years. I grew up in Texas, but I had never stood in a town that small. Going from New York to Marathon I was suddenly in a community that I could really sink my teeth into. Within two weeks I knew everybody’s name and I could wave to everyone as I drove by.

MJ: It was a place I could really get a handle on; the story of this community just unfolded itself to me very quickly. It felt like I was in a sitcom about a small town and I was another one of the characters. There’s a real mix of people. in that sense I knew everybody as I drove by.

SW: (Laughing) I know, I know. There are great stories bring real intellectual rigor to the classroom and teach students to build a consistent artistic process and a coherent identity. Most important, extended projects require a strong work ethic that helps students break free of the “lucky shot” mentality. However, as teachers and practicing artists, many of us also realize that there is something inherently artificial about any project that starts at the beginning of a semester and is expected to be complete by the end of a semester and is expected to be complete by the end of the academic year. The pressure to perform, will often choose to work on an idea that isn’t motivated by an inner creative need, but something that is less ambitious and can be completed within the constraints of the class schedule. Real projects, by real artists, evolve much more organically.

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MJ: It was a place I could really get a handle on; the story of this community just unfolded itself to me very quickly. It felt like I was in a sitcom about a small town and I was another one of the characters in the story. It was very accessible to me. I could meet everyone and also be part of the community. Asking to photograph someone was nowhere near as scary as doing a portrait project in New York City. It was more open. It was the perfect place to do a first portrait project.

MJ: And the town seems almost like a Twin Peaks kind of town. I mean, I don’t know too many small towns that have a town drag queen. It seems very typically Texas, but also very liberal at the same time.

SW: (Laughing) I know, I know. There are great characters. There’s a real mix of people. In that...
little pocket of West Texas, there are a lot of real progressive people and some real traditional cowboys.

MJ: Tell me about shooting 4 x 5, what did that do for you? It wasn’t really your medium before this.

SW: No, not at all. I had been playing and shooting with a lot of cameras, but I didn’t have a real solid idea for what I wanted to do with photography before I did this project. I learned a lot from the photographer I was working for and he had a 4 x 5 field camera I was able to borrow. I remember we were on a road trip assignment for a magazine and we saw an awesome exhibit in El Paso by the photographer Max Aguilera-Hellweg about Texas border towns that he shot on 4 x 5 Polaroid pos/neg. They were these beautiful portraits of these really interesting characters in the Mexican and US border towns that he had shot for a story in Texas Monthly. There was one I remember of a kid with an inner tube on his head because he was fantastic low-tech presentation device that completely launched his career as a magazine photographer.

MJ: I actually called him after I saw that work, he was really nice and we talked for a long time. It was a pivotal moment for me. Suddenly what I wanted to say was all right in front of me. I went back to Marathon and made it happen.

MJ: The beauty of that Polaroid pos/neg film was that you had something you could hand to someone after you took their picture, like a thank you. It helped them understand what you were trying to do, it was great for establishing rapport with the subject.

SW: Yes, and that 4 x 5 was so much fun. I remember photographing this rancher, Ike Roberts, and I can tell he’s thinking, “what is this girl doing? And why is she putting so much effort into a picture of little ole me?” Using the 4 x 5 camera is really formal way of photographing someone; it takes time and it’s like you’re really honoring them. You’re taking a real portrait, not just a snapshot.

MJ: Part of what makes you special is your amazing ability to just charm everybody. I don’t have that ability all, it’s different for me. People really like you, and it’s so apparent in all of the pictures. How do you approach someone?

SW: I really bend over backwards to make people comfortable. I feel like a therapist; in fact, if I weren’t a photographer that’s what I’d probably do. It’s all about having empathy and the ability to really put yourself in their shoes, I could probably be happy sitting on a couch and just listening to people, but the great thing about being a photographer is that you get to go into their world. I feel like when I photograph someone I completely immerse myself in their life.

MJ: I think the pictures reflect that. It’s like the interaction between you and the person is the real reward. I think you’re genuinely interested in everybody you photograph, that’s a gift in itself.

SW: Yes, coming away from a situation, sometimes it’s not about the photography so much for me, it’s about the moment I got to share with someone I didn’t know yesterday.