

# WELL CONNECTED

*For Sony Artisan of Imagery Brian Smith, people skills are the most important part of portrait photography.*  
By Aimee Baldrige

*Viewing a well-crafted portrait for the first time can feel more like being introduced to someone new by a friend than like being an art spectator. The best portraits don't just show you what people look like—they convey the experience of being in their subjects' company. That's why sitting down to look at the work of photographer Brian Smith feels a bit like flinging the doors open at the beginning of a crowded party.*

Smith got his first gig as a pro while he was still in high school, when the sports editor of the local newspaper hired him to cover swimming events. "I was a swimmer," Smith explains. "Shooting swimming really wasn't his thing, so I showed up at one of the meets with some of my photos and he hired me on the spot." Smith went on to major in photojournalism at the University of Missouri, and more than thirty years later, he's a sought-after editorial photographer with a Pulitzer prize under his belt. He has also been the president of the Editorial Photographers professional organization since 2004.

Like his photographic career, Smith's success began early, when one of his images was published by *Life* magazine while he was still a student at Missouri. "After my sophomore year in college," he explains, "I landed an internship for Unired Press Internarional in Cincinnari. When Yankees catcher Thurman Munson died in a plane crash, I called my boss to ask if I could shoot the funeral in Canton, Ohio." At the cemetery, he noticed Yankees manager Billy Marrin overcome by emotion and took a single shot before

Martin turned away and left. He sent it to the *New York Times*, which published the image on the front of the Sports section the next day. *Life* picked it up later in the month. Smith attributes this success to the initiative he took in getting the assignment and to the high standards he sets for himself: "A lot of your success comes from doing the things that no one asks of you—but what you ask of yourself."

Although Smith spent the first decade of his career after college shooting news and sports, his desire for a more personal relationship with his subjects eventually led him toward portraiture and editorial photography. "I like people," he says. "As a news photographer, you shoot a lot of news and sports with 300mm, 400mm, and 600mm lenses, and never really get a chance to connect with the people that you're photographing. To me, the beauty of photography is making that connection."

In fact, Smith considers connecting with subjects to be one of the essential skills that a photographer should develop.

Smith photographed dozens of celebrities for the Creative Coalition book *Art & Soul*. Clockwise, from upper left: Jason Ritter, Alfre Woodard, Chris Botti, Philipp Bloch, Dana Delany, Gina Gershon, Dustin Lance Black, David Hyde Pierce, Alyssa Milano (center). At right: Amy Carlson, James Denton.



© Brian Smith (11)



“When I was a senior in high school,” Smith recalls, “I applied for an internship at the *Des Moines Register*. Their chief photographer took a look at my sports photographs and told me to go up to 100 strangers and take a picture of each that showed something about who they were. That was the best advice anyone ever gave me, because making a connection with strangers and feeling comfortable talking with all kinds of people is basically what we do. Absolutely priceless advice!”

Smith obviously enjoys the time he spends with his subjects, who run the gamut from Hollywood stars to ordinary people who don’t often find themselves in front of a professional photographer’s lens. “I usually walk away from a shoot with something that I find enriching, whether the subject is famous or not.” And Smith’s engagement with his subjects in turn makes his portraits lively and engaging for the viewer. “The key to photographing people,” he observes, “is being able to slide effortlessly

“The key to photographing people is being able to slide effortlessly into everyone’s comfort zone.”

into everyone’s comfort zone and to quickly put them at ease. Over the years, I’ve grown as comfortable with billionaires as I am with the homeless.”

Another key to photographic success, says Smith, is the ability to handle difficult situations. Often the people he photographs dictate where the shots will be taken, requiring him to adapt to settings that are less than conducive to creating a beautiful image. “It boils down to Problem Solving 101: How can I pull

this off?” he says. Smith emphasizes that what sets successful photographers apart is their ability to pull off the shoot when everything goes wrong. “My job is really, really easy when everything goes right,” he concedes. To handle any eventuality, Smith comes prepared. “I always work with an assistant, a stylist, or a groomer. On bigger shoots, I might also have hair, make-up, multiple assistants, a stylist, assistants for the stylist, a producer, grips, and trucks of equipment. We had a 3-ton grip truck on my last shoot, and we literally ran out of gear.”

These days, Smith shoots with a Sony A900 camera and Profoto strobes—a point he has come to after an extensive tour through the world of image-making tools. “I shot almost every film format, from plastic cameras to 8x10, but mostly medium-format film—Mamiya RZ, Fuji 680, Hasselblad, and Mamiya 7. I was a late convert to digital, because I wasn’t about to switch until I could match the ‘look’ of medium-format film. It’s not just resolution;



Smith photographs people from all walks of life. Shown here are (left to right) art director Kevin Robie, Indy 500 champion and "Dancing with the Stars" winner Helio Castroneves, lawyer Steve Potolsky, and interior designer Luis Medina.

I want the images to be beautiful!" He finds the balance between optical sharpness and shooting speed that he gets with the A900 and the Zeiss lenses designed for it to be ideal for portrait photography. He points out that many lenses that were designed for 35mm film SLRs don't achieve the tack-sharp image quality he seeks, while medium-format digital backs can freeze up during critical moments in a shoot or become difficult to use in outdoor lighting that makes LCD viewfinders hard to see.

Smith was recently invited to be one of Sony's Artisans of Imagery, a select group of professional photographers. One of his first projects as an Artisan was to photograph a group of actors and other celebrities for a book called *Art & Soul*, which will be presented to President Obama and the U.S. Congress this spring by the Creative Coalition. In addition to Smith's photographs, the book includes handwritten messages about the importance of the arts written by each of the celebrities who participated in the project. Over the course of three days, Smith photographed 68 subjects in a small room that turned out to be the only available space at the shoot location. Employing his problem-solving skills and ability to put his subjects at ease even in a less-than-ideal setting, Smith used an A900 and a minimal lighting setup to produce an engaging series of portraits, a selection of which we've shown here. "I've been blessed with great assignments throughout my career, but this was truly a dream project," he says. ⊕

## PEOPLE SKILLS: BRIAN SMITH'S TIPS

*Insights into the personal approach that makes Brian Smith's portraits so engaging.*

**Talk to strangers.** "I'm typically an outgoing person, but initially I wasn't that comfortable approaching people," Smith says of his early days as a photographer. To learn how to put his subjects—and himself—at ease, Smith pushed himself to talk with and photograph people from all walks of life.

**Respect your subjects.** No matter who your subjects are, make sure to convey your respect for them and the time that they're giving you. "It doesn't matter if it's one of the most powerful people on the planet or someone who's never been photographed before," says Smith.

**Pay attention to backgrounds.** Smith attends to every element of a portrait, making sure that the background works well with the subject. "Find a location that brings out the personality of the person or tells me something I don't know about them, or that puts them in a context you wouldn't normally associate them with," he suggests.