

Physiognomy

The Mark Seliger photographs

\fi-ze-ä(g)-ne-me\ *n*, *pl* -mies [fr. *physiognomon* judging character by the features, fr. *physis* nature, physique, appearance + *gnomon* interpreter] **1**: the art of discovering temperament and character from outward appearance **2**: the facial features held to show qualities of mind or character by their configuration or expression **3**: external aspect; *also*: inner character or quality revealed outwardly.

It came to me as an epiphany of sorts, spurred by an Arnold Newman portrait of Igor Stravinsky: the composer's elbow on a grand piano, his hand on his face, this arrangement echoing the architecture of the piano, which resembles a large musical note. My college professor James Newberry had been passionately elaborating on this photo in my Environmental Portraiture class, Just weeks before he had singled me out during one of his first tough critiques of the class's work, driving home the point that not all of us had the talent to become photographers. Humbled and discomfited, I'd bowed my head and left class early. But now, during this history of photography lecture, fireworks went off inside me as I realized I wanted to photograph artists – writers, musicians, painters, dancers, sculptors. I wanted to figure out a way to capture human emotion. I needed to connect.

My best friend at East Texas State (now Texas A&M at Commerce), Tom Conners, and I would lie out on top of his LeSabre under the big night sky drinking beer and fantasizing about one day publishing our own books of photographs. I told him what Rob Lawton, my graphic-arts professor, had explained in class: "Ideas are the foundation of the art, and technique is the process used to illustrate the idea."

After graduating from college and then working a brief stint in Houston as an assistant to corporate photographers, I was persuaded to move to New York by my sister Lori, who had visited once and felt the city had an energy I would love. I moved into my brother Yoel's apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in a Lubavitcher community, a neighborhood that was home to Hasidic Jews, Haitians, Jamaicans and Puerto Ricans. I'd never experienced such diversity – it set me free.

Each morning I ventured into Manhattan with my fresh roll of dimes and cold-called every photographer I could, occasionally interrupted by others waiting to use the phone at the Twenty-third Street Woolworth. It became my Manhattan

office for the first three months I was in New York. Eventually I found work assisting a plethora of talented photographers who worked for *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *Musician* and *Esquire*, before deciding that if I was going to work that hard for other people, I might as well do it for myself. I stopped assisting and jumped into the fire. I moved to upper Manhattan, and for six months my days were spent dropping off my portfolio to various magazines, going to the local bodega on 104th Street for *café con leche* and obsessively checking my answering machine or just staring it down when I got home. Then I started to get work.

Ellen Madere of *Esquire* generously gave me my first assignment – taking a photo of Bryant Gumble wearing a Cubs cap, shot against a gray seamless backdrop I had set up in his office. I'd assisted Ellen's husband, John Madere, for a year and had become close friends with him, so she threw this dog a bone. Most of my portraits for the next year were for *Business* magazine, and then I got a break. Jane Clark, the picture editor for a photo-driven business magazine called *Manhattan Inc.*, gave me a series of assignments shooting businessmen. A popular trend in the 1980s was for businessmen to look like rock stars. So, somehow, in some perverse way, shooting them for *Manhattan Inc.* became my training ground. I had the opportunity to carve my own portrait style while testing on some pretty willing subjects. If I could make these guys look cool, I thought, then the music and art world would be a breeze.

For me, the editorial pinnacle was *Rolling Stone*, which had a well-known history of providing an especially creative environment for photographers. Laurie Kratochvil, my first photo editor there, soon became my mentor. She started me off with what seemed to be a simple assignment: photographing a group of New York University film students for the 1987 Hot issue. Procrastinating, I couldn't seem to commit to a due date. I realized that the professor in Texas who used to contemptuously jab me with, "Seliger only works under pressure" must have been right.

I finally scheduled the shoot, and on January 10, 1987, three NYU students posed outdoors for me in minus-ten-degree weather for eight hours. Just moments before we all froze to death, I decided I had gotten my picture and released the weary subjects. In an attempt to save money on the project, I had borrowed a friend's Toyota and now loaded my gear into it. Seconds before I closed the door, having finished adjusting my bags, a bus slammed into the driver's side door, spinning me

and the door onto the icy street. In retrospect, I think I may have been in hypothermic shock, because I jumped up and chased the bus for what seemed like a mile, getting just close enough to read the license plates, but arriving there too exhausted to focus on the numbers. I gave up and headed back to the car, taped the door on and drove uptown, dreading the inevitable explanation to my friend. The Toyota's repair bill came to twelve hundred dollars, so my first *Rolling Stone* shoot cost me around fifteen hundred bucks. It all became worth it, though, when Laurie left a message on my machine saying how happy she was with the pictures I'd turned in and informing me that there would be plenty more assignments to come. The eagle had landed.

Perry Farrell was the first person I shot for *Rolling Stone* who qualified as a rock star, though he wasn't as well known in 1987 as he's since become. At the time, though, Jane's Addiction was *the* new West Coast band. I flew out to L.A., went to Perry's house, and we hung out together for two days. I shot him at a show; I shot him with his girlfriend; I shot him at his house in his backyard garden; I shot him at his rehearsal space. I did portraits of him and of the group, which made me realize how much I enjoyed shooting bands. Then, after all that, only one quarter-page picture ran in the magazine.

A few months later, my first *Rolling Stone* cover assignment came from associate photo editor Jim Franco on the spur of the moment: Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. I had only four hours to prepare to photograph this great songwriter and the ten-member South African group on a backdrop of white seamless, and then, as if I wasn't nervous enough already, Paul Simon called, saying, "We need to do this quickly, okay?" "Sure, Paul." "Good, I'll be over in fifteen minutes." By that time, Ladysmith Black Mambazo had started filtering into the studio, and I panicked. How the hell was I going to group all of them plus Paul Simon together on one page? It was like solving a jigsaw puzzle, and luckily I discovered I had a flair for it. After I'd shot a couple rolls of film, Paul and the gang started to sing, and I got my first real taste of the kind of perks that come with being a music photographer. Everyone working on the session suspended animation, transfixed by the a cappella voices.

After the shoot was finished I called my folks in Texas and shared my day with them, swearing that I could care less if I ever shot another cover for *Rolling Stone*, that just having done this one was enough. But I was a damn liar _-

shooting the covers became an addiction.

Rolling Stone kept me plenty busy, and I had a great time working on its covers, stories and photo essays. Then, in 1991, Laurie and *Rolling Stone* art director Fred Woodward asked me if I wanted to be involved in the magazine's Twenty-fifth Anniversary Portraits issue. I was flattered and honored, but I knew the other photographers on the project were hard acts to follow. It was a scary prospect: "Oh no, another test! I'll surely fail this one!" I had four or five subjects assigned to me initially; that turned into ten, and then the number just kept on growing. Among the first was a portrait of Mick Fleetwood and John McVie. The results pleased me so much, I started a series of images bent toward the surreal and unusual. Before the shoot, I talked to Mick Fleetwood's publicist, and he said, "You know, I want to warn you that, for Mick, the kinkier the better." So I called up Mick, and he spoke to me from his studio. He said, "What do you have planned for this little photo shoot?" I said, "Well, what I really want to do is this photograph of you and John McVie _ I know it's gonna sound crazy _ but as a bride and groom." He goes, "Oh good! That sounds terrific. We're celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary as a band. It'll be perfect. I want to ask just one little favor." I said, "What?" He answered, "I want to be the bride."

After the Twenty-fifth Anniversary portfolio was finished, Laurie, Fred and I met for a drink and they asked me if I'd be interested in working full-time for *Rolling Stone*. My duties would be shooting half of the magazine's covers and bringing the visual approach that I used for them to *US* magazine, *Rolling Stone*'s sister publication. After my subsequent meeting with editor and publisher Jann Wenner, I became Chief Photographer of both magazines.

All this changed my life substantially and presented a huge challenge. It was daunting to know I was now going to be shooting all types of people. For instance, I had always been interested in photographing women, but had never actually done it. At first I found it difficult, because dealing with feminine beauty requires a whole different set of technical rules, the details of which I'd been previously unaware. I now had to rethink lighting; I had to rethink how I would approach my subjects.

In that regard, photographing Drew Barrymore of an *US* magazine portfolio probed a breakthrough for me, for together we experienced an absolute, instant mutual trust. We spoke briefly on the phone before the shoot, and it was as though we'd known each other for years. A shoot usually requires me to put my subject at

ease, but in this case Drew was the one who did that for me. When I started to explain what I wanted to do for her session, she stopped me in mid sentence and said, “Whatever you feel like doing is fine – I totally trust you.” It was like when you ask a pretty girl on a date expecting her to say no, and, astoundingly, she says yes – I kept yammering on, as if she had said no. She repeated: “I totally trust you, whatever.” That kind of reaction from subjects is rare and welcome, but it also creates a lot of pressure not to let them down. During that first session, we shot Drew as a “naughty” Alice in Wonderland, and we shot her in a boxing ring in South Central L.A. wearing only boxing gloves and a fighter’s cup. After seeing the day’s results, I felt we had captured her like nobody had before. I’d revealed that little dark edge of the cute, familiar Drew Barrymore. She truly has the ability to be a chameleon – Drew is my original muse.

One of the challenges and benefits of working for *Rolling Stone* and *Us* is having the opportunity to capture artists just as they’re breaking through. That was the exciting aspect of photographing Brad Pitt for the first time – it gave me sort of a naive quality to the entire session. Brad is true to his art. Each of the four sessions we’ve done together has turned into a sort of adventure. Our sessions have always been uninterrupted and concentrated, truly collaborative. As a result, we’ve created a journal of time and place. Our work together perfectly embodies my philosophy of photography.

During our first conversation, in 1994, while planning a cover session for *Rolling Stone*, Brad proposed that we do his shoot in a Los Angeles barrio. I took his lead and suggested Mexicali, in Baja California, Mexico. At the time, he and I were at similar places in our careers. We both realized the artistic value of putting ourselves outside our usual element in order to push our individual envelopes and create work that was truly different for us. *Rolling Stone*’s new photo editor, Jodi Peckman, and I met Brad for our shoot in San Diego, a town where he could still feel completely anonymous. Each morning we drove for two hours to get to Mexicali. We’d cross the border and go into town and start walking along the streets, taking pictures. We were just a couple of gringos coming in, shooting photos of a buddy. We’d see a group of kids, and Brad would start playing soccer with them, or we’d be on the street and he would have a taco. We documented it all.

On the second day we happened upon a dry lake bed that was absolutely

magical. As the sun started to drop low, and while Neil Young's *Mirror Ball* cranked on my boom box, the sky became a mixture of deep blue, purple and orange. We shot picture after picture, knowing this would be our only chance to capture that idyllic tableau. Since then, whenever Brad and I work together, we try to recapture the spirit of that first shoot.

Photographing Nirvana resulted in some of my favorite pictures also. At the time of our first session, which was shot in Australia, the last thing Nirvana wanted – particularly Kurt Cobain – was to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. The day before the session I had specifically said to the band, “Tomorrow, if you don’t mind, could you wear plain shirts without any writing on them? It’ll photograph better.” The next day Kurt showed up on location wearing a T-shirt on which he’d written CORPORATE MAGAZINES STILL SUCK, and he refused to take off his sunglasses. Though I tried to negotiate with Kurt he wouldn’t budge. He wasn’t angry at me – he was just happy to be standing there making his statement. It was very important to him not to be seen as selling out.

I photographed Nirvana for the second time when *In Utero* came out. I imagined they thought I was the devil – the *Rolling Stone* photographer who had helped change their status from underground to mainstream. But instead, the opposite was true. Letting Nirvana do as they wished during the first session had worked in my favor. This time when I saw Kurt he was warm and talkative. My concept was for Nirvana to wear Brooks Brothers suits, as a play on their first cover, and Kurt was cool about the idea. He thought it would be funny, so we did that for Nirvana’s second *Rolling Stone* cover. Kurt had been open to doing an individual portrait as well, and though he had seemed quite happy during the session, in the resulting photos his face conveyed a real sense of melancholy. A few months later I was in Paris photographing Counting Crows when I got the devastating call from *Rolling Stone* that Kurt had shot himself. He had seemed to be in such a good place when we had done those last photos. One portrait we did together became the cover of a special memorial issue of *Rolling Stone*.

About six months after Kurt died, I photographed Courtney Love for the cover of *Rolling Stone*. She was still very emotionally raw at that point, but we’d developed a comfortable, close relationship while doing a photo shoot together the year before. We did this session in Chicago, from five in the evening till four in the morning. She was spirited and lucid as we photographed her in several different

setups. Then, while waiting for us to adjust some lights, she threw on a tattered, grey-plaid raincoat to keep warm in the drafty room. When we resumed the session with Courtney still in the coat, I could see her begin to withdraw, overcome by sadness. Within minutes she was lying quietly on the floor, entirely wrapped in the garment. The coat had belonged to Kurt, it turned out, and after the session, she asked me not to publish those photos in the magazine. I agreed.



I used to write compulsively in my journal after every photo session I did – either on the plane or back at the studio – dissecting what had gone right or wrong with the shoot. One day I accidentally left my journal on a plane and became obsessed with idea of a stranger finding it and learning the stories behind my work. Since then, I’ve stopped making notes afterward, but continue to write down my ideas and sketches for sessions beforehand. I’ve learned, though, that what happens during a shoot is completely unpredictable. Nine times out of ten, once I get an idea and proceed with it , the concept changes anyway – subjects want to do something different, or it’s raining, or the location’s not exactly right. As a photographer, you have to be open to adjustments. You have to be willing to put yourself into uncomfortable situations. It may mean falling on your face, but my experience has been that my work has always benefited from facing the unknown.

When I return home after being on location, I drop my bags in the hallway, beneath my framed print of Newman’s Stravinsky. It reminds me that the one constant in photography is that you should always strive to please yourself. And to this day I still marvel at how incredibly perfect that portrait is.

– Mark Seliger, 1999