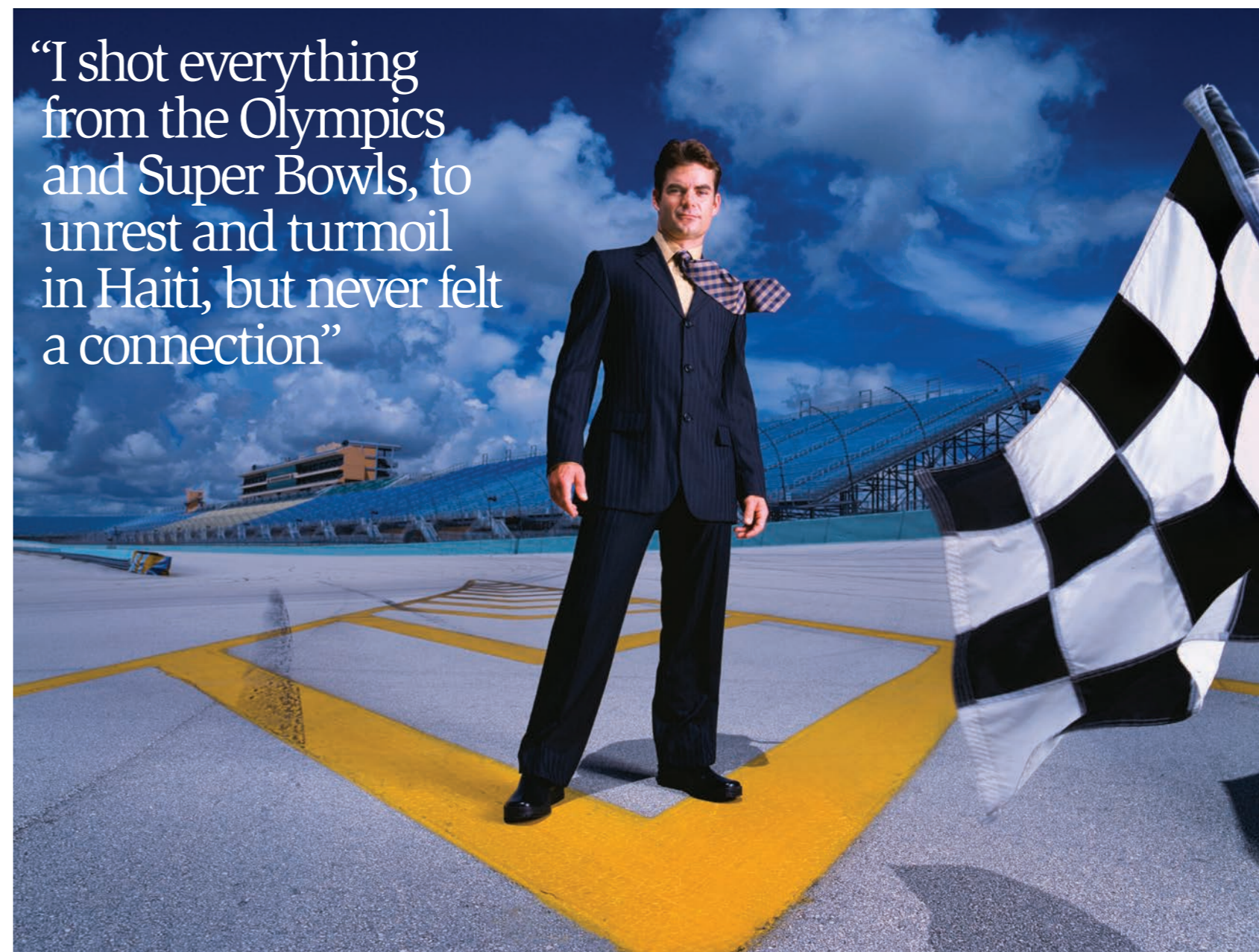




“I shot everything from the Olympics and Super Bowls, to unrest and turmoil in Haiti, but never felt a connection”



# Shooting stars

**C**elebrity portrait photographer Brian Smith is living the photographer's American dream. He's told Bill Gates exactly what to do for an entire hour, had cupcakes with Anne Hathaway and gotten drunk with George Clooney, all in the name of portraiture. We grabbed him on the phone from his office in Miami, Florida and discovered that he's never short of a good story to tell.

Like any teen, Brian changed his ambitions on a weekly basis, never quite convincing his parents it wasn't a passing fad until he signed up to the University of Missouri's Photo Journalism course. He clearly had a gift, though; not many students can lay claim to getting a photo published in *LIFE* magazine over the summer holidays. "I'd taken a news photograph of New York

Yankees' manager Billy Martin crying at Thurman Munson's funeral and the picture ended up in the next month's edition of *LIFE* magazine, right as I was starting journalism school," he tells us. "Getting a photograph in *LIFE* at 20 cemented the fact that maybe this was a viable way to make a living. It's hard to turn your back on that."

Before the graduation cap had been tossed, he'd joined a newspaper as a news and sports photographer, but he knew portraiture was really his genre. "I shot everything from the Olympics and Super Bowls, to unrest and turmoil in Haiti and had great opportunities, but through all of that I never really felt a connection with the people I was photographing," he explains. "When you're shooting sports with a 600mm lens, you're just sitting back and observing, you're not interacting ▶▶

## ▲ JEFF GORDON, PRO RACING DRIVER

Brian made the move from photographing news and sports to portraiture when he discovered he enjoyed the portraiture assignments for sports people more

## ◀ ANNE HATHAWAY, ACTRESS

Actress Anne Hathaway poses for Brian Smith's book *Art And Soul* that celebrates the arts

© Images by Brian Smith

▼ THE BEE GEES

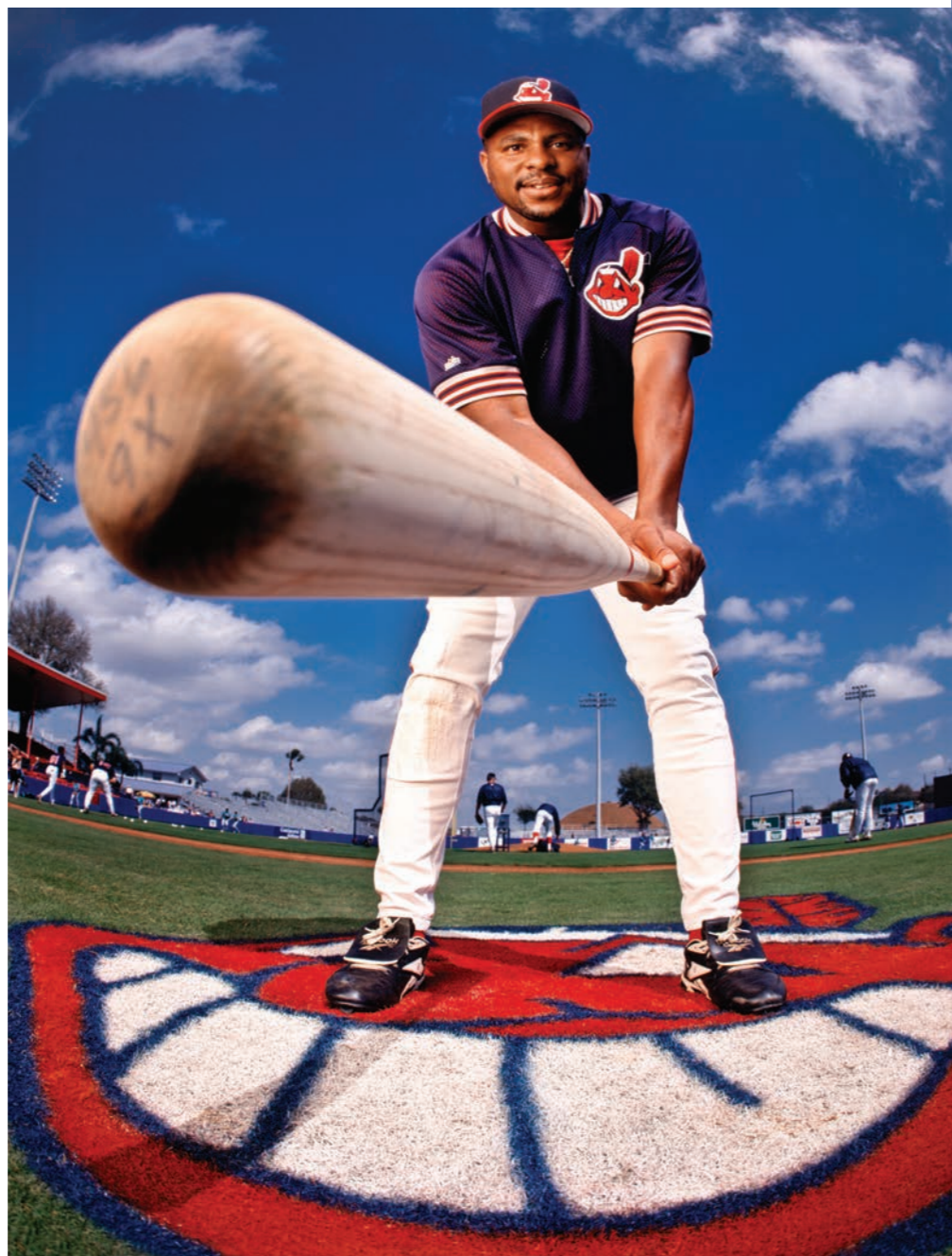
"One assignment that made a big impact was photographing my Miami beach neighbours the Bee Gees when they were on their comeback tour in the 1990s. I was fortunate enough to photograph all the guys together and sad to see Robin's passing earlier this year"



▶▶ with the subjects and that's what I discovered I really liked to do. It was the times when I was sent to do a profile on one of the athletes, where I got to understand something about that person that I may not have realised before, that I started looking towards the next thing I wanted to do: magazine portraiture."

His career sounds like it was in cruise control up until now but this genre swerve meant years of hard grafting under the hood. He devised an exit strategy of building up contacts and experience outside of working 40-50 hour weeks at the newspaper. "I'd shoot freelance assignments on my days off, vacation time, nights, whatever I needed to do so I could carry out shoots for everybody from *Sports Illustrated* to *Rolling Stone*," he continues. "It was a big transition where you're capturing news to creating images and I enjoyed both, but you have to recognise the difference. Finally after about six years of doing that I got to the point where I was making more outside of the newspapers and at the point where I wasn't having any vacations so I left to freelance full-time. Since then I've been shooting portraiture for magazines and advertising agencies."

Now that he's hit over 30 years in the business, Brian has celebrated by trawling through his entire backlog and uploading one shot for every year onto a section on his website ([www.briansmith.com](http://www.briansmith.com)). Flicking through, it's obvious that Brian has one of the brightest portfolios in the business. We put this observation to him and are met with a knowing chuckle down the line, "I think it's got something to do with living in Miami where everything is big, bright, bold and colourful," he explains. "It's funny, most of the portfolios of photographers I see out of New York are cold and grey and desaturated colour. That's just not the way Miami looks so I guess it's an example



▲ ALBERT BELLE, FORMER MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL PLAYER

When paparazzi photographers tried to steal shots of this set-up, the baseball player waved his bat and watched them scurry off. "He didn't know what they were shooting, there wasn't the collaboration or trust so he was my hero for the day"

that saturation sliders actually go to positive values, not strictly negative ones."

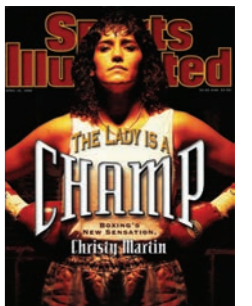
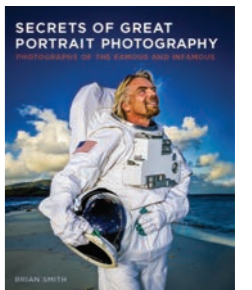
It's a portfolio that most would envy him for, but luckily for Brian he's extremely affable, making it easy to see how he draws the most out of his portrait subjects. "If you're photographing people in high demand, the demands on their time are much greater. Sometimes I'll get an hour but it's just as likely to get five, or 15 minutes," he says. "It boils down to being ready for them and having all the technique and all the variables under control so that it's all about the interaction with

"Most of the portfolios of photographers I see out of New York are cold and grey and desaturated colour. That's not the way Miami looks"



◀ CINDY MARGOLIS, MODEL AND ACTRESS

"Even during a night shoot Brian's style is bold and bright, reflecting the beautiful setting of Miami beach"



▲ BRIAN'S PUBLICATIONS

Brian Smith has had his work printed in countless publications. He has also authored two books: *Art & Soul: Stars Unite To Celebrate And Support The Arts* and *Secrets of Great Portrait Photography*

them. Sometimes if everything goes really smoothly, then those five minutes can become 15 minutes. It's a challenge with an opportunity at the end. If people are enjoying themselves you sometimes get more time out of it."

To hone this technique, Brian recalls the best piece of advice he was ever given. "I applied for an internship with the largest newspaper of the state and a guy took a look at my sports photographs and said, 'All this shows me you can do is focus with a telephoto lens. If you really want to be a good photographer you need to know how to deal with people.' He told me to go out and shoot 50 portraits of strangers, creating a portrait that said something about their personality. It was the greatest exercise I ever had. It teaches you to interact with people to tell their stories and get over any fear you might have of approaching people. The *Art & Soul* book was an expansion of that project really."

For this book, Brian shot over a hundred well-known faces from film, theatre, television and music. "I think that opened a lot of people up to a personal experience, you're not following an

agenda," he adds. "Anne [Hathaway] was one of the wonderful people we had time photographing. We had an hour and at the end of it she said 'Oh there's one more thing,' and she went into her bag and pulled out a big box of cupcakes for the entire crew. Those are the kind of days where it's hard to imagine there's anything more fun than what you're doing." This shot was captured at his favourite focal length - 70mm. According to Brian, it translates the view of his favourite medium format lens, the Mamiya RZ 140mm. "It flattens the perspective without being out too far so it gives you that intimate feel in a tight portrait," he says. "I love the 24-70mm at the longest length and if I want something a little tighter then I'll go up to the 85mm. I carry a ton of lenses but those two account for 95 per cent of what I shoot." Incidentally, these lenses are always attached to his workhorse of the past three years, the Sony A900.

By trying to convey the soul of each sitter, the portraits in this book are classically simple. Explore those featured in Brian's latest book *Secrets Of Great Portrait Photography*, however, and you'll find elaborately executed shoots with bold concepts. ▶▶

▶▶ One such image shows US business magnate Donald Trump perched on an eccentric white swan fountain. “I saw these giant swan fountains where I thought if he was seated on them, the wings would pop out behind him like angel wings.” Brian’s wife and fashion stylist Fazia Ali had ordered a rail of dark suits and cancelled it right away, asking for every white suit the store had instead. “Initially his people were nervous but one of the great things about photographing a personality like Donald Trump is they like the attention so he jumped at the idea.

“Those are the dream subjects where you have someone who recognises what’s going to be a great photograph, but know when to go for a bold concept and when to keep things quieter.

When we photographed Bill Gates he was very introverted. We had everything ready for him and our direction was simple, it was the right approach for him. It can set the mood.” More helpful tips such as this can be found in Brian’s book, which gives a behind-the-scenes look at setting up a shoot. “In the course of 30 years, these are all the lessons I wish someone had told me when I got started and all the stuff I wish I learned in college,” he says. “With every successful and not-so-successful photograph you walk away with a learning experience, and this book is based on those experiences.”

Brian Smith’s latest book, *Secrets Of Great Portrait Photography* is on sale 28 September 2012.

DP

▼ **DONALD TRUMP, US BUSINESS TYCOON**

“Always check out the location before the shoot. This swan fountain was found by doing just that, helping to create an image with impact”

▼ **ANTONIO BANDERAS, ACTOR**

“A quiet moment with Spanish actor Antonio Banderas where the low-angle lighting is used to direct the viewer’s focus onto his contemplative face”

“A 70mm lens flattens the perspective without being out too far so it gives you that intimate feel”

**Post-shoot analysis**



Brian Smith talks us through the click-by-click account of post-production

“Despite the word ‘post’ on production, I really view it as an important part of producing a photograph. It’s like being a cabinet maker but not applying the finish, it’s not quite done. Whenever I can I like to see things through the very end and it’s important to know where to draw the line.”

**BEGIN IN LIGHTROOM**

“I always start processing everything in Lightroom, partly because it’s a very quick way to batch apply a look across an entire project, things like colour balance, saturation, or if you’re converting to black and white.”

**FINAL TWEAKS**

“I reserve the final retouch for Photoshop and I typically use the tools that it comes with.”

**SELECTIVE EDITS**

“OnOne software has a great group of plug-ins, including some that are really good for dealing with problematic skin. One of the nice things about it is you can keep it as a layer and paint it in selectively so skin doesn’t end up looking artificial.”

**THE DESIRED LOOK**

“I prefer it if someone looks like themselves after the most incredible six-week spa vacation they could possibly take, as opposed to the point where everyone on the planet knows that’s not their skin or face. The end look should be dictated by the statement you want to make.”

