

# PDN

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## FOCUS ON PORTRAITURE

Brian Smith's  
Hollywood  
Portraits



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If there's one thing portrait shooter Brian Smith has learned in his relatively short career as a freelancer, it's that honesty, while an admirable policy, may not always land the big fish. Take, for example, the time he was assigned by *New York* magazine to photograph famed contemporary painter Julian Schnabel at his Palm Beach winter retreat. Five minutes after he was given the assignment his client called back sheepishly explaining that "Schnabel wanted somebody famous—namely Bruce Weber—to do the shoot." Smith ended up getting the assignment after all—though he didn't discover why until later. "I was kind of nervous. Here's this guy that wants Bruce Weber—but then I showed up and he could not have been nicer," says Smith. "He told me, 'I really want to do this shoot with you—we can do anything you want. I've heard so much about you.'" About half way through the shoot Smith found out why: "He turned to me and said, 'Well, I just can't wait any longer—they told me you photographed Arnold Schwarzenegger for the cover and I have to know what he was really like!'"

The truth was that the Schwarzenegger story was a total fabrication invented by the client to win the artist's confidence. The only Arnold that Smith had ever photographed was a prop dummy of the Terminator—and it wasn't even for a cover. "But I realized very quickly that this was the lie they had told him and fortunately I thought quickly enough on my feet and said, 'Oh, Arnold was great!'" From that moment on, the artist nearly wore Smith out with energy. "He made it his duty to prove to me that he was a better subject than Arnold," says Smith.

"I realized right then that having photo editors tell prolific lies about you can be the best thing that can ever happen to a photographer," he says.

Fortunately for Smith, his own reputation has blossomed to the point that the truth will do well enough to impress just about anyone. Since the 37-year-old former newspaper shooter turned

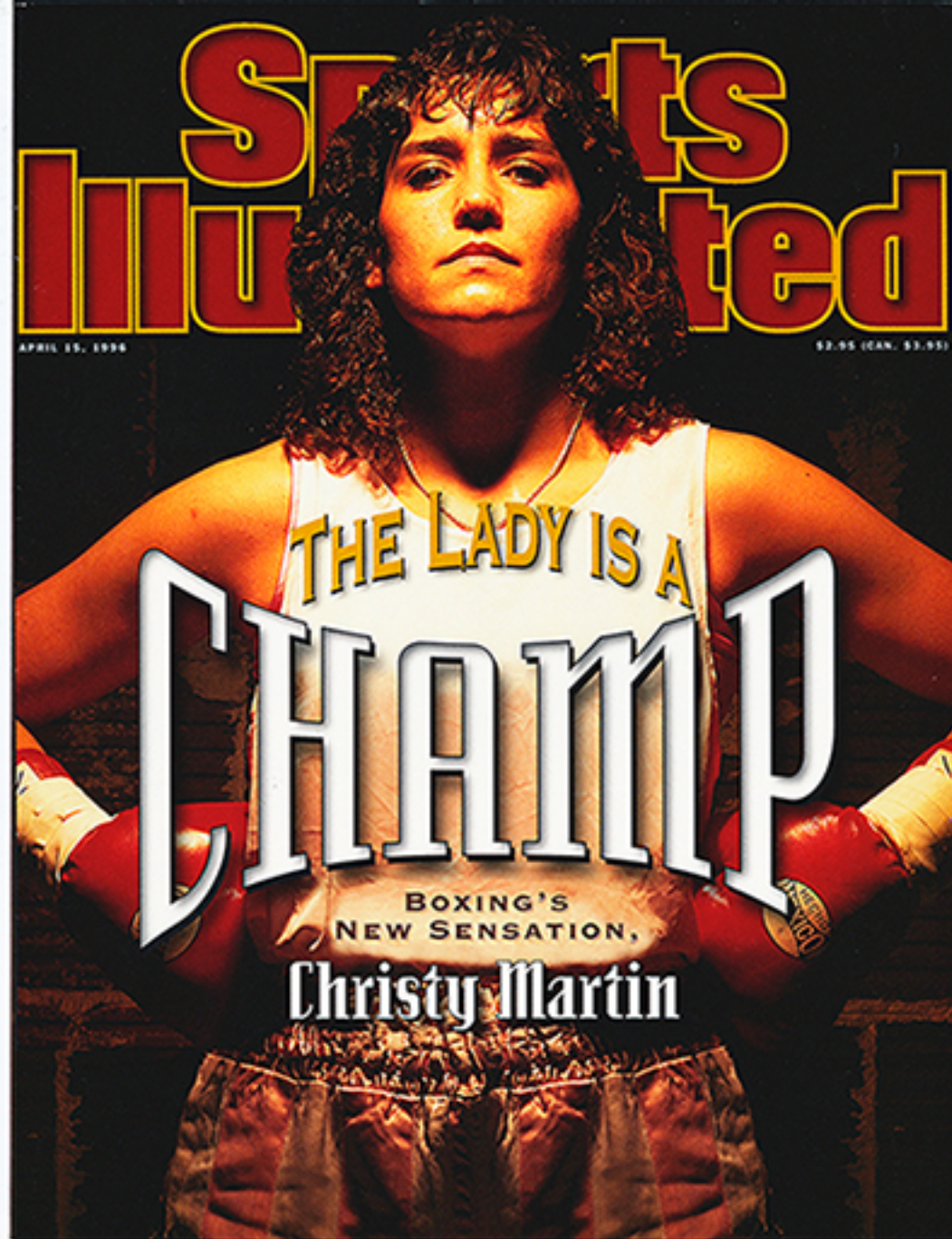
*Miami-based Brian Smith has photographed most of Hollywood.*

*Left: Carol Channing, shot for Entertainment Weekly. Top right: Antonio Banderas, shot for Premiere on the set of Desperado in Acuna, Mexico. Right: Burlesque dancer Dixie Evans, from a personal project on the Queens of Burlesque.*



# Mr. Smith Goes to Hollywood

by Jeff Wignall



to full-time portraiture in 1992, he's amassed a stellar collection of covers and spreads in a magazine rack full of impressive journals. In the past year alone, he's photographed covers for *Live*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Musician*, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, *Worth*, *Money* and *Fortune*. In addition, he's shot for a host of hot titles including *New York*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Premiere*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Spin*, *Men's Journal*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *People* and *Glamour*.

Hardly the kind of reputation one has to embellish. And though only about half of his work is of celebs (the rest are mainly business and non-show biz portraits), in looking at the list of subjects he's worked with, it's obvious that Smith—who splits his time between his Miami Beach home and newly acquired Manhattan loft—has lost his heart to Hollywood. In fact, in flipping through his portfolio, it's easy to get the feeling you're peeking into the brag book of a big-bucks Tinseltown talent agent: Antonio Banderas, Sylvester Stallone, Ben Kingsley, Christopher Walken and Charlton Heston are just some of the familiar faces.

Part of what makes Smith so successful, says Charlie Holland, director of photography at *Live* magazine, who first met Smith while she was photo editor at *Premiere*, is his natural rapport with his famous subjects. "When you're assigning celebrity shoots you absolutely have to anticipate the human interaction between the photographer and the person who is being photographed, because you only get one go," she explains. "You must choose people that you know will interest each other in some way—possibly share a sense of humor." Smith, she says, is not someone who would ever appear to be star-struck or shaken in the presence of the famous. "He's a quiet, but very substantial person—someone who deals with people in a very straightforward, polite and manly way."

Smith agrees that getting the most from his subjects relies on treating them like individuals, not stars. "I think that a lot of these folks have an awful lot of nervous people walking around them on eggshells," he says. "The last thing that they need is one more person doing that—a little bit of irreverence goes a long way."

Smith seems to have a particular rapport with actors and musicians. He photographed screen hunk Antonio Banderas for the first time just minutes before the actor was to begin shooting on the film *Miami Rhapsody*. "For most actors that's kind of a time when they're trying to get the concentration right. But we got to the point where there were only 15 minutes before he was going to do a scene and the film people were telling him it was almost time and he would say, 'Well, okay, then we'll just do 15 more minutes of still pictures.'" The photographer, who was supposed to be allowed only 15 minutes to shoot, ended improvising for close to 40 minutes. "We shot right up to the point where he walked away from us and stepped right onto the set for a scene."

Another time, while on a *Rolling Stone* assignment shooting legendary folk singer/songwriter John Prine at his Nashville home, the session ran well past schedule. "After we finished the shoot—it had run until fairly late in the evening and he had a turkey roasting in the oven the whole time—he said, 'You're not going to find much to eat this time of night in Nashville, why don't you stick around.'" Smith and Prine ended up watching Monday Night Football and sharing a turkey dinner.

No doubt part of what charms Smith's subjects is also what has endeared him to many of his clients: his subtle and quirky sense of humor. Holland recalls an early assignment at *Premiere* where Smith was assigned to photograph a biker-type person who had Disney characters tattooed all over his body. "Brian took an incredibly melodramatic picture of this guy flexing his arm and looking menacingly into the camera," she recalls. "Meanwhile, on closer inspection, you realize the guy's got Minnie Mouse running up his biceps—there's an element of gentle absurdity happening."

Julie Mihaly, former associate photo editor for special projects at *Entertainment Weekly* (now a freelancer there) is another fan of

Top left: Boxer Christy Martin shot for the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Bottom left: Humor writer Dave Barry. Above: Shaquille O'Neal for *Live* magazine.

Smith's silly side. "Brian has a great sense of humor and you can see that from his own personal work," she says. But there is a fine line, she adds, between bringing out the humor in a subject and inadvertently humiliating them—a line that she says Smith doesn't cross. "The things that he chooses to shoot are the sort of things that could, in the wrong hands, be sort of mawkish or condescending, but when he does it there's a playful irreverence that overtakes the pictures—that keeps them from going over the edge. There's always a healthy respect for his subjects and that's a nice thing."

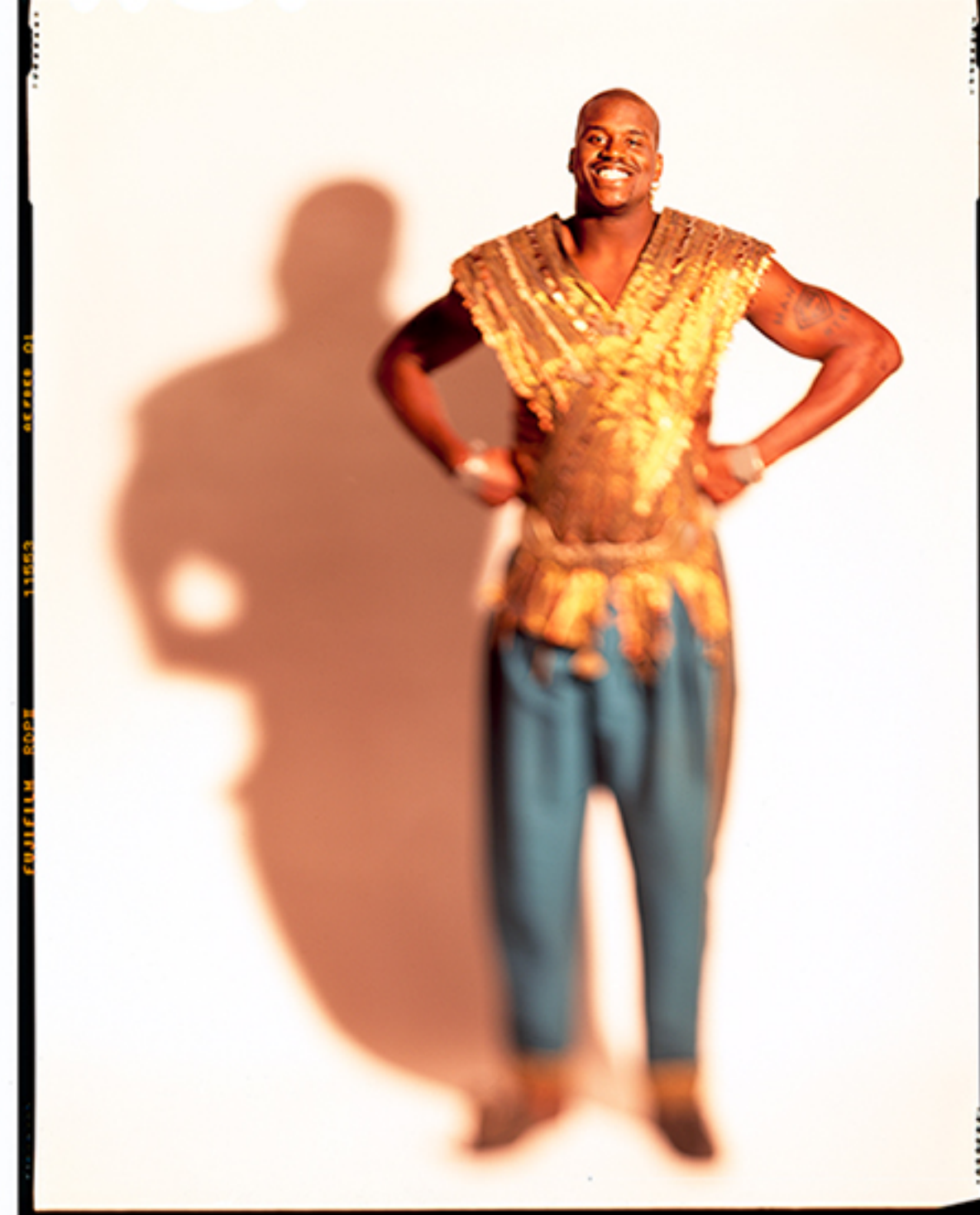
Mihaly remembers a shot of model Cindy Crawford that Smith did for a fifth-anniversary issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. "He shot her on this set where she was kind of daubed with blood and her jeans were being cut by the costume person, and it's just so wonderful because she's still so sexy and so beautiful, but it's shot at this moment of total ragged-edge life—it was beautiful and he pulled it off."

Of course, the path of true humor does not always run quite so smoothly: Consider the time Smith was assigned by *Entertainment Weekly* to photograph humorist Dave Barry "at home" in a living room set painted entirely in red. "We built a set and had everything painted exactly the same color red," says Smith. Everything had dried perfectly, he recalls—except the vinyl chair that Barry was going to sit in. "When we were finished and he went to stand up, the chair was totally stuck to him and we had to peel him away from it." Fortunately, Barry was quick to see the absurdity in the situation. "He was laughing so hard it was difficult to separate him from the chair," remembers Smith.

Humor aside, Smith's work is also marked by his fine ability to use lighting to create a sense of mood and drama. "The way he uses light is really beautiful," says Mihaly, "he's got this yellow, I call it buttered-popcorn light, that sort of late-afternoon light, which is really lovely."

Indeed, much of the impact of Smith's images comes from a dramatic, yet seemingly spontaneous feeling of light that has a National Geographic journalistic-type of honesty—not surprising considering the ten years of newspaper-shooting experience that led him to freelancing. "When you shoot for newspapers you live for the times when they send you out early or late in the day, but most of the time you just have to do the pictures at high noon. I quickly learned that available light wasn't going to cut it," he says. He spent a lot of his time at papers learning to use strobe lighting to mimic the dramatic daylight qualities he admires. "One of the nice things about coming up through newspapers instead of assisting is that you're always making your own pictures from day one."

In the end though, says the photographer, how dramatically he is able to light each shot really depends on who is being photographed. With calmer, or slightly inhibited types, he says, he is able to fine-tune his lighting placement; while shooting more ani-



mated subjects requires keeping as broad a light source as possible. "If I'm shooting somebody that I know is going to be uncomfortable in front of the camera, that lets me be a little more elaborate and precise with the lighting," he explains. "I know that that type of person isn't going to move until I ask them to move." The opposite, he says, is a live wire that's totally unpredictable. "Someone like Robin Williams is the last person I'd want to handcuff to one spot."

**Mihaly: "Brian has a great sense of humor and you can see that from his own personal work."**

Because virtually all of his work is done on location, Smith leads something of a gypsy existence—spending up to 250 to 300 days a year shooting. Fortunately, he is often accompanied by his wife Fazia Ali, who works as both his stylist and all-around assistant. "Early on I had read a comment from a photographer who said that picking an assistant was a bigger decision than getting married because ultimately you were going to spend more time together!" In their case, Smith says, that combining the two has worked out quite nicely: "It has given us both somewhat of a home life even when we end up on the road for ten days—we're both working and traveling with the most important person in our lives."

His wife's background in fashion design and hair and makeup styling has also been a

blessing. "She's very versatile—I take the pictures and she does virtually everything else. We've even built sets together."

After graduating, Smith landed a staff job at the New Orleans Times-Picayune and then a year later moved on to the Orange County Register—where, in 1984 he won California Newspaper Photographer of the Year and, in 1985, he was a member of a three-person team who won a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the Los Angeles Olympics. In

1986 he moved again, this time to the Miami Herald for which he covered the overthrow of the Duvalier government in Haiti and, in 1988, got named as a runner-up for another Pulitzer Prize for that coverage. A now-famous picture of Olympic diver Greg Louganis striking his head on the diving board in the 1988 Olympics won him first place in both the Pictures of the Year competition and the World Press Photo competition.

It probably won't hurt his odds much that most of the people he works for like him as much as they like his work. Says Mihaly: "He's one of the nicest people on the face of the earth. Brian will bend over backwards to get something for you—he's a very nice, kind, straightforward guy and that means a lot to people when they're being photographed."

