

PROFESSIONAL photographer

JUNE 2013

FABULOUS
FASHION
DIXIE DIXON &
LAURA TILLINGHAST



Sir Richard Branson,
Founder of
Virgin Group

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Light FANTASTIC

ARTISTRY BEGINS WITH MASTERY

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One-light wow: Multiply
a single strobe's impact

Brian Smith photographs superstars for
magazines and ad agencies.
In a new book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer
shares his secrets for taking successful portraits.

BY LORNA GENTRY

Soulful PORTRAITS

here's a smile in his voice when Miami Beach portrait photographer Brian Smith recalls a day he spent in New York City a couple of years ago. "It was a magical day. We photographed Anne Hathaway in the morning then headed over to Tony Bennett's apartment in the afternoon to photograph him in his art studio."

Hathaway and Bennett were among the 123 celebrities Smith photographed for "Art & Soul" (Filipacchi Publishing, 2011), his first book and the brainchild of The Creative Coalition, a nonprofit social and political

advocacy organization backed by prominent entertainers, including Alec Baldwin, Tim Daly and Robin Williams. With support from Sony, *Art & Soul* project leaders asked celebrities to be photographed and



Jack & Elaine LaLanne





Don King

share their thoughts on art. In the coffee table book, the celebrities' handwritten notes are paired with Smith's portraits. A portion of the proceeds from book sales—and the sales have been brisk, according to Smith—

go to The Creative Coalition to help support advocacy for arts funding and education.

"Originally the shoot was scheduled for three days only in Los Angeles during Oscars week in 2009," says Smith. "But we were

only a few portraits into it when we realized we had to keep it going because we got such a great response" from the artists, he says. Soon afterward, Smith and project leaders flew to New York to photograph entertainers who didn't attend the Oscars. Two years and 25,000 photographs later, the project was complete.

For consistency, Smith used a classic black background and a key light. "It was elegant lighting but simple. If I had five minutes with a celebrity, I didn't want to spend four minutes on the lights. I wanted to concentrate on interacting with them." Smith typically keeps lighting simple and strongly advises others to do the same.

"Sometimes emerging photographers get bogged down with lighting diagrams and set up a lot of lights all over the place. Not to say that I don't sometimes have complicated lighting, but I always start with a key light and get everything I can out of that before adding more light. You make a mistake if you have too many variables; you miss what you need to do. For a lot of environmental portraits I start with daylight and blend in one artificial light, whether it's a big bank or something smaller. If at that point I see I need to add I will, but there's an awful lot you can do with a single light.

"One of the good things about having one main source of light on the subject is that it enables you to move very quickly," Smith continues. "Sometimes I'm photographing someone who is uncomfortable in front of the camera so I need to reposition them. But a lot of the time I'm photographing someone who moves very well and the last thing I want to do is interrupt the flow because I have to move six lights. That's one of the lessons I learned early on, knowing when to give myself enough room to move."

This strategy worked beautifully with Tony Bennett, who isn't very comfortable in

front of a camera, he says. Yet in Smith's portrait Bennett looks calm and happy. "The key was to find a way to get him to relax. We talked about a lot of things to take his mind off photo directions, and I tried to give him minimal direction. I wanted to capture the warmth I felt from him. We took a break and I asked if we could take a picture of him standing next to one his paintings. It was a painting he had done of his daughter. His eyes lit up. I asked if we could do one more for the book and he said, 'Absolutely.' Finding the spot that makes your subject glow is the key."

Smith is a natural teacher. A Sony Artisan of Imagery, he is often asked to



Jeff Gordon

Dwayne Wade



speaking at seminars and shows. He decided to use his lectures as a launching point for a new book, "Secrets of Great Portrait Photography: Photographs of the Famous and Infamous," which will be published in the fall by New Riders, an imprint of Peachpit. "I talk about all the things that go into a successful portrait," Smith says.

"There are so many decisions you make that set you up for success or failure even before you get out a single light. This book is about all the shoots we've done and the process behind them all."

Smith's body of work spans three decades. He has photographed executives, athletes and artists for magazines and advertising

agencies. He sold his first magazine photo to *Life* when he was a 20-year-old journalism student at the University of Missouri. Five years later he won the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography with his photographs of the Los Angeles Olympic Games. Although he continued to win awards, Smith changed his mind about the course of his career. He wanted to photograph celebrities, and he found a clever way to break into the market.

A TV interview with Dixie Evans, a burlesque performer of a certain age, inspired him to photograph her. He contacted her, she agreed and Smith and his wife drove to Evans' home in Helendale, Calif. After spending an afternoon taking pictures, Evans mentioned a reunion of burlesque friends she was hosting. Smith returned to photograph them and continued to return until he had amassed an impressive portfolio of portraits that opened doors with magazine photo editors.

"It started as a way to showcase how I could work with celebrities, but it made me realize that for some, fame is tossed around freely and for others, the spotlight fades prematurely. It seemed to me that burlesque was a part of Americana that was dying out. This was a chance for me to document it. The goal has always been to have a book. I have a few more things to shoot yet, but we'll get there." ■

To see more of Brian Smith's work visit briansmith.com.

BRIAN SMITH'S CAMERA BAG

Camera: Sony a900 DSLR

Lenses: Sony 24-70mm f/2.8 Zeiss

zoom; Sony Zeiss 85mm f/1.4; and the Sony 135mm f/1.8 telephoto

Dixie Evans

