

AMERICAN FACES

*Michael O'Brien's Downhome Look
at Celebs & Everyday People*



TEXT BY BRIAN BERK • IMAGES BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN

Don't expect to see Michael O'Brien shooting portraits in his studio anytime soon. That just isn't his style. Whether he's creating portraiture in the mid-

dle of a farm, in an historic mansion, or on Main Street, U.S.A., O'Brien captures people being themselves in their natural environments.

With a prestigious clientele topped by *ESPN The Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*,

Texas Monthly, Nike, Apple, Visa, Wrangler Jeans, and the Bank of America, you'd think Austin, Texas-based O'Brien might have a photo formula up his sleeve. Not the case. Rather, he says, the key is "getting his subjects comfortable with the camera and

helping them block out anything extraneous, so they can be in the moment with the photograph. I try to let my pictures speak for themselves. I love photographing people in a way that is real and believable without any artifice."

FINDING THE PERFECT CORNFIELD

His flair for capturing his subjects in their environs is evident in the images appearing in this story. Take our spread of the Quad City River Bandits minor league baseball team (*left*). He photographed the team in a cornfield just outside of Davenport, Iowa. The photo ran on *ESPN The Magazine's* cover for a story titled "Farm Life: From Cornfields to Concrete Jungles, the Minor Leagues Cover America."

"I scouted and found the perfect cornfield," recalls O'Brien. "We had an overcast sky the first day, but the players were willing to come out on a second day. The sky and clouds cooperated and I made the shot. I love the surreal quality—the dreamlike feel that comes across."

O'Brien's image of George W. Bush (*top, right*), then governor of Texas, presented challenges of another sort. Taken at the Texas governor's mansion, the image appeared on the cover of *Fortune*.

"The one day that Gov. Bush was available to do the picture, I wasn't," he recalls. "However, *Fortune* was able to convince the governor's staff to reschedule by telling them a 'famous photographer' was going to do the picture. When I met Bush, he looked me up and down and said: 'You don't look like a famous photographer!' He liked the shot so much he chose it for the cover of his autobiography, *A Charge to Keep*."

The photograph of Cleveland Cavalier forward LeBron James (*above, right*) was a cover image of *ESPN The Magazine* in 2002. "We had LeBron for about an hour before an early-morning basketball practice at his high school in Cleveland," O'Brien says. "LeBron was in the 12th grade and about to go pro. He came into the shoot wearing a white T-shirt wrapped around his head. I shot him with my Hasselblad 553 ELX and Elinchrom Octalight against a 20x30 brown muslin backdrop. I was impressed by how calm, collected, and centered he was with all the attention focused on him."

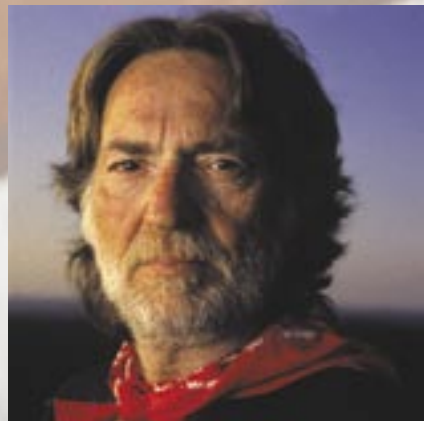
"Calm and collected" also describes the timeless Willie Nelson, whose portrait (*right*) appeared in *National Geographic* in June 1990.

"Willie is one of the kindest and gentlest people I've ever photographed," says O'Brien. "The picture ended up running as a postage-stamp size in the magazine, and became the cover of my book, *The Face of Texas*."

Published by Bright Sky Press in 2003, his book features 80 color and B&W portraits, and are accompanied by the writing of O'Brien's wife, Elizabeth, a former newspaper and *Life* magazine reporter.

"Even before I moved to Texas in '93, I was in love with the state and working on stories for *Texas Monthly* and *National Geographic* in Texas. To me, it didn't look or feel like the rest of the country. There was a distinctive presence in the people and the land, and I enjoyed celebrating it with my camera."

In addition to images of everyday people like Ran Horn, the "Van Gogh" of Van Horn, Texas; and Shannon Perry, the "Gatorfest Queen" of Anahuac; the book features celebrities such





as country singer Kelly Willis (p. 35, right, middle) and Destiny's Child (above).

Regarding the Destiny's Child shoot, O'Brien recalls, "The girls were wonderfully cooperative, standing perfectly still, while I framed and focused."

PASSION FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

O'Brien, whose "photographic life is film," uses his Hasselblad 553 ELX and 500 CM cameras with Kodak E-100GX for most of his portraits, including those showcased in this article. Depending on the project, he shoots in Kodak B&W and color, with his Hasselblad, Canon EOS-1, EOS-3, or 4x5 Toyo-Field view camera with Polaroid Type 55. When necessary, he'll shoot with his Canon EOS 20D.

O'Brien's gift for capturing his subjects looking right at home in their natural environs extends to his advertising assignments, as well. Whether he's working on the CLIO award-winning, five-year Apple PowerBook campaign; the "Banking on America"

campaign for Bank of America; or his work for GTE, Saturn, and Iomega—O'Brien wraps his cozy, down-home look and feel around the project at hand.

He recently completed a project that's closer to home than most: capturing his children as they grow.

"I put together a photo book of my son Jesse's first 18 years in the world, using one picture from each of his 18 years. I've photographed all three of my children growing up. If the collection becomes a book, I'll probably call it *Shadow of a Dad*."

His friend, photographer Bill Wittliff, once told O'Brien, "Take good pictures and they will take care of you."

"I try to live by that. I love editorial work and make the most of every assignment. I keep my website current with my strongest editorial and commercial work and enter annual competitions, such as *Graphis Photo* and *Communication Arts*."

O'Brien is currently working

on a "ZipUSA" story on the River Oaks, 77019 area of Houston, scheduled to run in *National Geographic* in 2006.

Wherever he focuses his lens next, O'Brien will create another uniquely American portrait, naturally. ❖

For more Michael O'Brien images, visit www.obrienphotography.com

MICHAEL O'BRIEN'S GEAR BOX

Medium-Format Cameras

Hasselblad 553 ELX and 500 CM
with Zeiss Planar lenses:
50mm f/4.0, 80mm f/2.8, 100mm f/2.8,
120mm f/4.0

35MM CAMERAS

Canon EOS-1 and EOS-3
Canon lenses: EF 28-70mm f/2.8,
EF 70-200mm f/2.8

DIGITAL CAMERA

Canon EOS 20D

FILM

Kodak E-100GX and Tri-X
Polaroid Type 55

LIGHTING

Dyna-Lite 2000W Strobe Packs
Elinchrom Octalight
Chimera Light Banks

COMPUTER/DIGITAL

Apple G4 and Apple G3 PowerBook
Nikon 8000 Coolscan
Linocolor Saphir Ultra 2
InView and StockView

LABS

API, Austin, TX
Gil Acevado, The Fine Print, Teaneck, NJ

ACCESSORIES

Lightware and Domke bags
Palm Treo