Featured Photographer: Bryan Mullennix

When did you decide you wanted to be a photographer and how did you go about achieving your goal?

When I was in the first grade I had the opportunity to participate in a school wide photo contest for all the kids in grades 1 through 6. The winning picture was a shot of two men raising the flag in front of the school. The prize was a sweet Kodak Instamatic.....and that's how I got my very first camera. Take that you 6th graders!

Like most kids I bounced around with different ideas about what I wanted to be when I grew up. A different week, a different idea. Photography was the only interest that I kept coming back to time and time again. Looking through a camera lens has a meditative quality and allows me to really get in the zone and focus in depth on a subject. We spend so much of our lives working. Shouldn't it be spent doing something you love?

I'm a self-taught photographer and I continued to work full-time for many years while shooting stock part-time for my first agent Tony Stone Images. During this time I learned most of what I needed to know about photography in general and the stock photo business in particular. I've now been shooting stock full-time for almost ten years.

What qualities do you look for when composing an image?

In short, I try to compose with simple, clean, graphic lines. I want an image that reads well and conveys a message, emotion or concept quickly. I learned a long time ago that pretty much any subject broken down to it's most basic form can be graphically captivating. In the end, it's more about choosing what to leave out of a composition than what to include that makes for a great image. I've been doing this long enough that it's almost automatic but sometimes it still takes a bit for the wheels to start turning :)

What goodies do you keep in your gear bag? What lens and body do you use most?

For the most part, I think I keep pretty standard gear in my bag. Camera, lenses, flash, etc. I always carry a polarizing filter. I've been using Canon equipment for years. Currently, I'm shooting with a 5DmkII. While I've got the lenses to cover any range, from wide-wide angle to extreme telephoto, I find that for 80% of my pictures I use the Canon 24-70L 2.8. Recently, however, I've been shooting more and more with the new Fuji X-Pro1. The image quality is amazing, the form factor's pretty cool and the size/weight of body and lens is nothing short of a dream come true. More on that below.

Are you a backpack or shoulder strap guy? Do you carry tripod all day or just at magic hour?

I've definitely always been a backpack kinda guy. Having said that, though, I recently purchased a messenger style bag to carry with me around town. My new man bag (does this look like a purse?) is small, lightweight and easy to grab on my way out the door.

As for a tripod, I'm a bit of a fanatic! I've always carried a tripod. To me it separates the professionals from the more casual image maker. I'm aware that may not be the case so much anymore now that higher ISO's are becoming much more useable. I once carried a twenty pound video tripod/head combination as well as a backpack loaded with another 50lbs of gear under a barbed wire fence and up a mountain to photograph and film a remote section of the Great Wall of China. So while I impress myself with my past feats of stamina, I'm not as willing to do that anymore. To that end a smaller and lighter camera system is beginning to hold some sway over me. In addition, I recently purchased one of the Traveler Series tripods from Gitzo. It's only 13 inches fully collapsed and weighs just 2.5lbs! So I think I'll continue to carry a tripod with me everywhere.

Do you always keep a camera with you or are you very specific about when you shoot?

I'm always on the hunt for a good image. Great images can be found anywhere and everywhere. So I try to be ready to shoot all the time. With mobile phone stock photography gaining acceptance I think it's safe to say that I ALWAYS carry a camera with me.

What kind of research do you do before embarking on a trip?

Because a trip generally carries a significant bit of expense, my wife/business partner and I always conduct an extensive amount of pre-trip research. Prior to departure we scour the web for information about a location and put together a detailed shoot brief in order to keep us on track. The brief is filled with info about specific locations, best times of day as well as any general ideas for shots that we come up with. Of course, before we even get that far we research a location enough to build a business case for going in the first place. What kind of demand is the location we're considering likely to have for photo buyers as well as how well is the location already covered? Do we have a unique angle to make our images stand out?

Are you a Photoshop Wiz or do you try to get it all in-camera? What are your thoughts on post production?

I think that's a loaded question :) Photoshop is such a deep application I think very few people actually master it. My Photoshop skills have continued to increase over time and are an important part of our production. This is especially the case when we are traveling. While traveling, particularly far from home, there is too much to do, see and photograph with a limited amount of time to be able to always wait for the perfect lighting or weather conditions. So while I try to do the best job in camera as possible, I often use techniques in Photoshop or Lightroom to make an otherwise good image great. Sometimes it's something simple like a slight vignette or blur to guide the viewers eye where I want it to go. Other times a great shot might have a lousy sky but I shot a great sky the day before in the same location. I can bring these two pieces together to make a captivating image. More and more I think of the images I'm capturing on location as the raw ingredients for a terrific photograph. I still have to take them home and cook them to create the visual feast.

Would you tell us one of your memorable shooting experiences?

My wife Wendy is invaluable to our business. I have a lousy sense of direction but she always gets me where I need to go. I've come to refer to her as my wheel man....er...woman. A while back we were at the intersection of Hollywood and Highland Boulevard, one of the busiest intersections in Los Angeles on a weekend night. We were in our truck camper, as we usually are when on one of our road trips, and there was absolutely no place to park. We've developed a system when we get into busy locations like this where she slows down and I jump out to start shooting. If the parking gods are with us she will eventually find a place to park or else she will just drive around till I'm done. In this particular instance, I set up at the intersection (with tripod, of course) and started to shoot. About five minutes later, I look up and she's standing next to me. I asked her where in the world she was able to park? She turned around and pointed. There was our truck camper about ten car lengths down from where I was standing. Somehow she was able to find a spot and parallel park our rather large truck camper on Hollywood Blvd on a Friday night!! I made the most of this opportunity by setting up on the roof of the camper and was able to get some great, elevated shots.

What does being a photographer mean to you in your life?

Being a photographer is not just something I do, it's something I am. It means I choose to spend my life visually interpreting the world around me. Hopefully, I also get to give something back and there is value in how I see the world. I have often been inspired and motivated by a picture I've seen in a magazine or on the web. I'd be pleased to know that one of my images has had that effect on someone else.

To see more of Bryan's work, visit his website here.