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THROUGH THE LENS OF TOM BARNES
Commercial Portrait Photography Tips

TOM BARNES

Ask most artists to break down their craft into tips for beginners and you'll probably hear about equipment or technique — use this sort of tripod, go for that effect with the lighting. Such bits of wisdom are valuable, but they're ordinary and somewhat obvious. Tom Barnes, a self-taught commercial portrait photographer, takes a different approach.

Some portrait photographers objectify their subjects as if they were another prop — pose like so, look over there, think about puppies. For Barnes, every portrait shoot is a collaboration and a melding of artistic visions. "You have to be good with the camera," he says, "but you have to be really good at dealing with people. What can you do with your subject? That is the crux of it all."

At 6' 6" (a pinch under two meters), Barnes is imposing and impossible to pigeonhole. From gritty to genteel, there is always something unpredictable in his work, but, of course, this is why his client list reads like a who's-who of the music industry. Can some of his people smarts and career acumen be bottled and passed on in the form of ten tips? Yeah, we think it can.



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DO YOUR RESEARCH

Get inside your subject's head before the shoot by being diligent in your research. Are they famous? Do they have an online presence? Can you watch old interviews? Gathering this information will help you to come up with some ice breakers or establish things you may have in common with your subject. Find out their likes and bring something to the set that they may enjoy. Try to avoid contacting them and asking them for personal information. If you show up prepared, it shows that you care about who they are and they will immediately respect and trust you to do your job.





CHOOSE THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

People are always the most important element on any set, but if you have to focus on just one piece of equipment, make it your lens. If you're shooting a portrait, you need a flattering lens. Most photographers find that 70-85mm lens hits the sweet spot. Personally, I find 100mm to be my perfect length. A longer lens compresses the perspective and can do things like make a person look thinner or a nose look smaller. If you want a pin sharp shot, use the highest quality lens you can afford. A wide lens, even a cheap one, will give you a sharp image from a distance, but when you get closer in the focal range, you want to use a faster, higher-quality lens. The 85mm f/1.2 is considered to be one of the ideal portrait lenses. I have the 100mm f/2.8 with image stabilization, which I consider perfect. Have a truckload of lighting gear. But if I'm stripping all weight possible, then all but the barest lighting is out.





BRING PROPS

If you have an awkward subject, give them a prop and watch them come alive. When you give them something to interact with, people will automatically relax. Props can inspire creativity in the subject while it calms their nerves. You may also find it helpful to use something that the subject brought with them. Using a personal object as a prop will bring familiarity into the process and further calm their nerves. It lets them focus on the prop instead of the awkward fact that they're being photographed.

THE ESSENTIAL S.U.B.

Before you ask, it stands for Seriously Useful Bag. This is my favourite thing on a job. It changes from shoot to shoot, but it contains everything I could possibly need to fix any situation that could occur. I have clips to fix the fit on a model's shirt that is too big or baggy. I have needles and thread for button repair. I have a mini tool kit, walkie talkies, gaffer tape, bungee cords, a first aid kit. You name it. Experience will teach you what you want in your bag and the contents will always be evolving.





ESTABLISH THAT FIRST CONNECTION

During the first three minutes, you have the chance to introduce yourself to the subject, show confidence, and put them at ease. Let them know they are in safe hands. Be professional, but personable. Be confident, not conceited.

When you first meet up with your subject, take three minutes to stop what you are doing and give them your undivided attention. Chat with them. Ask how their day is going. Was their trip OK? Make some small talk. Do what it takes to make this feel less like a shoot. It gives them the impression that you care. Most people do not like getting their photo taken, and this effort will relax them and make them comfortable. This time invested will allow you to get the shoot off to a good start.

BE IN A GOOD MOOD

I always have music on shoots, and I always let the model choose the music. The familiarity relaxes them right away. It also helps me to relax and be in a good mood. Bad moods are contagious and can torpedo a shoot. What if I'm having an off day? Well, I'm a professional. I just suck it up and put on a good mood. We're not getting paid to throw personal baggage all over the place.

ALWAYS USE POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Work to build up the subject's confidence. Bring them into the process and help them feel they are part of the shoot. Show them the photographs so they can see what they look like. They might have some helpful input. Tell them you like how they posed or that they're doing something that makes for a strong image. Take the focus off of them and make it about the work. The more relaxed you make them, the more they will trust you. The more they trust you, the more likely they'll be to take your direction. All of this will build their confidence and foster a sense of teamwork.





ALWAYS SHOW YOUR SUBJECT RESPECT AND PRIVACY

Always remain professional and be careful how you speak to a subject. This is the most important thing to me on a set. If a subject needs to get dressed or changed, I make sure they have a separate, private area to do so. Some models don't mind getting changed out in the open. When this happens, I make sure to leave the room.

Avoid anything remotely sexual. Aside from the handshake at the beginning and the hug at the end, there should be no reason for you to touch your subject. Never talk to a subject like they are an object. They're people with insecurities and strengths and vulnerabilities and boundaries, just like you and me. Show them you acknowledge and respect that, and they'll more often than not return the favor with more confidence and enthusiasm to help you do a better job.

NEVER KEEP PEOPLE WAITING...EVER

Boredom will absolutely kill a shoot. You never want people idling around while you move your lights or figure out a shot. It undermines their confidence in you, and they'll start to switch off. Once they switch off, they become detached from the shoot. Then you're challenged with bringing them back into the mood of the shoot and trying to build the momentum you had back up. It's almost like you have to reintroduce and validate yourself all over again.



DON'T GET CAUGHT "CHIMPING"

Chimping is a term in digital photography that refers to the habit of checking every shot immediately after capture. Aside from keeping people waiting while you check your screen, it also tends to compromise their faith in your abilities. Your pictures aren't going anywhere. Shoot now, check later. You can always delete the bad ones some other time. For now, focus on your subject and the shoot.

Now, if the reason you're chimping is because you don't trust your equipment, then address that. This is especially true with storage. You should never have to second-guess whether your work is getting backed up safely.

This is why I use a full collection of G-Technology drives throughout my workflow. If I'm in the field, I protect my files with the G-DRIVE® ev ATC with Thunderbolt™. I back those drives up with the G-DOCK ev® system in record time. In my studio, I'm working with everything through my G-SPEED® Studio with Thunderbolt™.



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