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The World of Wedding Photography



Wedding photography varies from other types of photography in that you must move from place to place throughout the day, constantly searching for tiny important details to record, and constantly trying to catch your clients in the act of doing something interesting. You'll be expected to create beautiful images at times when they may not appear to exist. The pressure to create art on demand (whether you're in the mood or not) can feel quite overwhelming — especially if the people or the settings don't inspire you. And the pressure mounts even higher when you have to set up and compose twenty group shots with a hundred thirsty people who have only you standing between them and the bar. However, all the external pressures are nothing compared to that internal nagging fear that you have to get it right. Unlike other types of photography, with wedding photography you don't get a second chance to do it over.

Capturing Weddings

Telling the story of an entire wedding day with still images is not something that can be distilled into a simple formula that you can repeat over and over. No two weddings are alike, and even if you go back to the same location over and over again, every day has different light and every wedding has different people and different customs. You can't just sit down the night before to plan your workday or make a list of the images you want to create. You have to be ready and able to handle all sorts of conditions quickly and without help from other people (see Figure 1-1). Your equipment must be reliable and self-contained, and you must have backups of the most critical pieces of equipment, such as the camera body and the flash. Further, everything you use must be fairly portable so that you can easily move it from one location to another during the day without causing much fuss.



Figure 1-1: This first dance took place in a very dark indoor location. You can make it look well lit if you know how to mix your flash to get the foreground, while adjusting your ISO and shutter speed to get just enough of the background.

If you are considering diving into the world of wedding photography as a career, or even as a part time job, you will soon learn that this job is not just about creating a few artistic images

on the wedding day. Much more important, wedding photography is a performance art. Those who do it well glide through the day with grace and confidence as they anticipate and capture hundreds of tiny moments of the day. Each picture becomes a fleeting glimpse of everyday events preserved in a way that brings out a hidden beauty that was simply not accessible to the average person until it was captured and then revealed through that particular photographer's vision. And each image is far from a random event captured in a haphazard manner. Each image says something important about the day (see Figure 1-2). And each image is crafted very purposefully; sometimes with the goal of including all the essential pieces of the story; sometimes eliminating all but a single detail; sometimes capturing the light in a specific way; sometimes playing with a shadow; sometimes showing motion; sometimes capturing an emotion. Later, when the best images are viewed together as a slide show or in an album, the collection captures and distills the emotion and the story of the day down to the absolute essentials.

The art of wedding photography is in seeing beauty in everyday life.



Figure 1-2: These items are examples of things you might find in the bride's dressing room, but they were not arranged like this. I gathered them up and placed them here. Teaching you to see opportunities like this and then capture them with your camera is the goal of this book.

A Challenging and Rewarding Profession

The world of digital wedding photography can be both challenging and rewarding. You set your own hours during the week and then work on the weekend at what is probably the grandest party a couple will host in their entire lives. You get to be a “fly-on-the-wall” for one of the most important and emotional days of a new couple’s life, inconspicuously following every move the bride and groom make from the time they arrive in the morning until they leave at night. If you become good at it, couples won’t hesitate to pay you large sums of money and fly you around the globe for your services.

As glamorous as the job may sometimes sound, in reality, the digital wedding photographer spends long hours sitting in front of a computer, editing images, building a website, working on album pages, answering e-mail messages, burning discs, and much more. The actual wedding shoot is only a small fraction of the job.

A common industry adage about photography is, “You can be the greatest photographer in the world and still starve; or you can be a mediocre photographer and make millions if you’re good at running a business.”

I’ve had young people ask me what sort of college classes they should take to prepare them for a career in photography. My advice is to take classes in this priority:

- Business management

- Advertising

- Website development

- Computer technology

- Art

- Photography

Yes, photography appears last on the list. This is because without a strong basis in the other skills, your photographic abilities are useless.

Using the Tools of the Trade

The tools of the trade are few. As businesses go, wedding photography requires a relatively small cash outlay to get the few pieces of high-quality equipment necessary for the job. Learning how to use the equipment is the real challenge, because, fortunately for photographers, having the best camera in the world won’t make you a good wedding photographer, and having the fanciest computer won’t get your color correction right, nor will it build beautiful albums. Many excellent wedding photographers use old, beat-up cameras with far fewer settings and capabilities than the high-end cameras many wedding guests will have slung around

their necks. However, as you probably already know, cameras don't take pictures — photographers do! A good wedding photographer can take better shots with a point-and-shoot camera than the ones most people can take with a top-of-the-line digital camera.

What camera should you use?

The specific tools each photographer uses have nothing to do with whether or not the person can be a good photographer or run a successful wedding photography business, but they will play a major role in the styles of images you create. As shown in Figure 1-3, the important part is how skilled the photographer is at seeing a beautiful moment and capturing it in an artistic manner. For example, when you admire a painting by Picasso or Rembrandt, you don't ask what brand of brush they used. The tools they used are as irrelevant as the choice between a Nikon and a Canon. The artistic vision of the person and the technical expertise necessary to capture that vision are what make the real magic of photography. It doesn't matter if the person used an old beat-up camera body, or a funky lens, or an expensive lens; all that matters is that the equipment produces the image qualities the photographer is trying for.



Figure 1-3: While the tools used to capture an image like this are important — they must be of the highest quality — the vision of the person holding the tools is the most important part of the creation.

With that said, I will add that the difference between a low-priced “consumer” camera compared to the speed and added functionality of the “pro” cameras is *huge*. In the right hands, the professional-level cameras and lenses will contribute a tremendous amount to the type and quality of images you can capture, as well as the ease with which you can make them.

Personality goes a long way

One of the most valuable tools you can have as a wedding photographer is the right kind of personality. You don’t have to be the life of the party, but you should have a friendly, outgoing personality that puts people at ease almost immediately. If you don’t like people, or if you are impatient or easily frustrated by people who are always late and generally can’t seem to get it together, then this job isn’t a good match for you. But if you function well under pressure (a lot of pressure), and if you’re flexible enough that you can go with the flow when the bride is late, or it rains all day, then this job might be a good fit.

Training your mind

Last but not least, the most valuable tool you need as a wedding photographer is knowledge. You need to develop your skills and understanding of photography to the point that taking a picture is no more difficult than walking across the room. Eventually, you will be able to create the vision of what each picture should look like before preparing to take the shot. When you see an activity taking place — or better yet, about to take place — you’ll envision the image and know which lens to grab, how to set the camera settings, and what angle to shoot from to tell the story. And you’ll put it all together in the span of about 10 seconds or less.

With practice, you will become in tune with the types of locations that make good portrait backgrounds, such as the one shown in Figure 1-4. Eventually you’ll find yourself noticing places with good light or great angles, even when you’re not at a wedding. You’ll find yourself thinking things like, “These converging lines look so cool, I could put the bride right there and shoot it from down low with about a 20mm lens.” Or, “That long line of trees would be so nice with the bride looking around the trunk of the fourth tree. I could shoot it with my 200mm at f/2.8 to throw all the other trees into a blur.” Once you get to the point of thinking like that, things will come together quite easily on the wedding day.

Getting experience

A trained eye can only be gained through experience. Practice on your friends and family and anyone else who might be willing. Kids and pets make great subjects because it’s so darn hard to control them that you’ll soon give up and just start capturing whatever it is that they want to do — hey, that’s just how a wedding works! Ask a caterer or florist to help you find couples who don’t have the budget to hire a professional photographer, then approach the couple and

offer to volunteer your services for free. It's actually much better for you to work for free when you start out because once there are contracts and money involved, you have a legal responsibility to perform and will be held accountable if the couple is not happy with your results.



Figure 1-4: Finding the right light and posing a romantic scene takes a lot of practice. When you've done it well, it looks as if it happened naturally, without any forethought. Soft focus effects like this can be added later in Adobe Photoshop to further complete the effect you envisioned when the scene was happening.

With this book, you can read all about how to make great images, but no amount of reading can substitute for the experience you get working at a real wedding. I highly recommend that you seek out wedding professionals in your area and ask them if you can assist or shoot as a second photographer to gain experience and confidence before you take on your first paid wedding. In the beginning, you should expect little or no pay for the education you get while working with established wedding photographers. Consider it the cheapest college course you ever bought and learn everything you possibly can. In fact, I'd go so far as to tell the photographer you don't want money; you're willing to work for free just so you can pick his or her brain at every possible moment throughout the day.

As your skills progress, you should start getting paid, but don't expect to make much money at first. The point of working as a second photographer is to gain all the experience you possibly can. When you reach the point where your first mentor has little left to offer, take your portfolio and seek another mentor. Eventually you will have to shoot a wedding on your own to understand the full impact of the job, but I don't recommend that you do this until you've shot at least ten weddings (unless you're already an accomplished photographer in some other field).

Other valuable sources of education include seminars at big photography conventions like the annual Wedding and Portrait Photographers International (WPPI) convention in Las Vegas, or your state branch of Professional Photographers of America (PPA). Of course, there are also many photography schools where you can take classes to develop your photography and your business skills. Some classes may be as close as your nearest community college, while other classes are at schools like the Brooks Institute, which specializes in teaching just photography. Another good educational tool is, of course, the Internet. You can learn all sorts of techniques on YouTube or with a Google search. You can also check out the website, Best of Wedding Photography (www.bestofweddingphotography.com), to peruse the websites of the cream of the crop of current wedding professionals throughout the world.

Recording Life's Milestone with Pictures

In almost every human life, there are at least four major milestones: birth, marriage, birth of the first child, and death. A wedding photographer has the privilege of being a witness and a historian on one of those four big days.

If you've ever looked through old albums of pictures from your childhood, you may realize that the memories you have of your childhood are actually somehow tied to the pictures. For example, you probably have many pictures where you can't remember anything else that happened during that day or even the month it was taken, but because you've looked at that picture many times over the years, the events immediately surrounding it are burned into your memory. While I can't explain how it works, I do believe that photographs help us store memories in a way that makes them last for the rest of our lives. Seeing that photo every few years reinforces that memory and embeds it in a way that causes it to remain present.

The first time a bride looks through her wedding pictures, there is a very high likelihood she will be moved to tears. If you've done a bad job, they will be tears of deep sorrow. If you've done a good job, they will be tears of joy — the same sort of tears she may have cried when the groom said his vows and when her father made a toast to their happiness. These are memories, such as those shown in Figure 1-5, that you've frozen in time for her. Other types of photography are important to our clients too, but nothing will be as emotionally charged and profoundly important as their wedding photographs.



Figure 1-5: Allowing the couple to create their own pose takes very little coaching but it requires a lot of ability on your part to realize when they've got something good and press the shutter before it disappears.

Breaking Into the Business

What is it that attracts so many to the lure of wedding photography? Having been the paid photographer at hundreds of weddings, I still find myself amazed at the number of people who recognize the best angle, and stand up in front of me and my camera to try their hand at getting a good shot of the bride and groom. They are all interested in wedding photography on some level. Few have professional aspirations, but many will come up to me repeatedly throughout the day and ask questions because they are genuinely interested in the wedding photography business. You can see the gleam in their eyes as they think to themselves, "I could do that!" Their eyes sparkle even more when they find out how much it pays. When they hear that I've shot weddings in Mexico, Jamaica, and the Virgin Islands, and that my next few weddings are in Aruba, Greece, and Hong Kong, their eyes become wide and their jaws drop in disbelief. After all, wasn't it only just a few years ago that "real" photographers didn't shoot weddings? It simply wasn't cool.

Even today, remnants of those feelings persist among older photographers, but the younger crowd is embracing the new world of wedding photography like never before. With the likes of photographers Joe Buissink, Mike Colon, and Denis Reggie not only shooting celebrity weddings, but also showing up on TV shows as celebrities themselves, the world of wedding photography has taken a decided turn in popularity. It's becoming downright stylish!

Of course, reading this book won't make you a celebrity wedding photographer, or get you a bunch of calls for destination weddings, but it will give you the information you need to start down the path in that direction. Who knows where that path may take you? Even if you don't want to shoot celebrities or jet off to exotic locales, shooting weddings right in your own neighborhood is a great way to make a comfortable living while doing something that is fun, creative, and extremely enjoyable. And never underestimate the power of determination. After all, every established wedding photographer out there today — no matter how famous — started off at the beginning, right where you are standing today.

Summary

The world of wedding photography is an exciting and challenging place to be. If you are an aspiring professional photographer or simply an amateur who wants to learn more about digital wedding photography, you'll find the business surprisingly easy to enter. After you've built a small portfolio, either by working with an established photographer or shooting a few weddings for free, I'm sure you'll find no shortage of eager clients who are more than willing to try you out. It may take several years to work your way up the ladder into the higher price bracket, but if and when you do, you may find clients willing to pay extraordinary fees to reserve your services.

The job definitely has its challenges. You have to learn to control your equipment in any sort of lighting conditions imaginable, with a lot of hectic activity going on around you, and with a lot of people watching and waiting on you. And, unfortunately, you'll end up spending far more time running the business than shooting pictures.

Not only can you make a comfortable living, but also you get to work at something you can truly enjoy, while performing a service that is extremely important to your clients. Many of them will tell you that your pictures are one of the most important things happening on the wedding day, second only to the act of getting married. This is a day they will remember for the rest of their lives and they want those memories to be formed by an artist. When clients hire you, they are entrusting you to create images that will shape their memories and become part of their family history.

