

Jon Lowenstein

Many photojournalists gain international recognition for their overseas work, but **Jon Lowenstein** is best known for what he documents in the community where he lives. With a film and two books coming out in 2021, he tells Keith Wilson why he's never short of finding local stories with a global appeal...

All images: Jon Lowenstein



Jon Lowenstein Profile

- Photographer and film-maker Jon Lowenstein focuses on documentary projects about social injustice, poverty and the lives of immigrants.
- Jon is a TED Senior Fellow, John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, National Geographic Explorer and Nikon Ambassador.
- Although devoted to covering stories about his Chicago neighbourhood, he has also covered news stories in Afghanistan, Haiti and Uganda.
- Jon's latest TED Talk concerns the Central American migrant trail and is the subject of his new book, *Shadow Lives*, to be published in spring 2021.
- His new film, *The Advocate*, is open to subscription. Become a backer at: www.gofundme.com/f/TheAdvocate

www.jonlowenstein.com

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nown as the 'Windy City,' due to its location along the chilly shores of Lake Michigan, Chicago is the third-largest city in the United States. It may not

have the glamorous profile of New York or Los Angeles, but like its bigger siblings, Chicago is a metropolis packed with personal stories of adversity and recovery, conflict and community. Few people know these stories and the characters behind them more intimately than award-winning photojournalist Jon Lowenstein.

Like many of the residents, Jon is an outsider who moved to Chicago 20 years ago to study. However, it didn't take him long to become enthralled by the city's vibrant social and cultural rhythm. Nor could he fail to notice the protests about poverty and social injustice among Chicago's poorer immigrant and African-American communities. For an aspiring documentary photographer, here was a naked city with a million

stories, and Jon chose to settle in the thick of the action – Chicago's troubled South Side...

The South Side has been your adopted home for 20 years now, what made you stay?

I was in an undergraduate writers' workshop in Iowa and I thought I was going to be a writer, but I started to get into photography shortly after I went to Chicago and I loved it. I did a masters there, I didn't finish it, but I loved Chicago, so I went back. During a project that was called *Chicago* in the year 2000, I started covering the South Side and I was dating a woman who was from the South Side, so I started working there and then I moved there. The South Side is a great area to be based in. It's an amazing community and it's a tough place, but it's also beautiful.



The film will give you a sense that you, as an individual, have a choice how you can make the world better

Previous page: Solemnity and comfort among the protestors on the streets of Chicago, following the death of McDonald Laquan, 17, who was shot 16 times by a police officer after resisting arrest.

Camera: Nikon D750

Lens: 35mm f/1.8

Exposure: 1/320 sec, f/2, ISO400

Below: John uses Polaroid prints to help interact with local communities by showing his photos, and even giving some away. Here, a young man seemingly floats in the air as he jumps on a trampoline during a summer block club party in Auburn-Gresham, on Chicago's South Side.



What were you doing in those early days?

I was kind of a bridge between this foundation, who were helping to develop this small neighbourhood and community. I was also photographing, teaching, coaching basketball and doing a community newspaper – just getting involved as best I could with the community. That's how I got involved and, eventually, moved to the South Side.

As a documentary photographer, has 2020 given you plenty of new story ideas on top of those you're already doing?

It has. I'm doing a lot of film these days, I'm not doing as much photography, and it's been great.





I saw one of your films about the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. You were commissioned by Channel 4 in the UK?

That's right, they commission a lot of my pieces. I've done five or six for them. Right now, I have a virtual gallery that has my work and that film is being shown, as well as the teaser to my new film and a bunch of my photographs from the *South Side* book that's coming out in the spring. A lot of pressing stuff is happening.

Tell me more. What are the film and book about?

The book is called *South Side* and the film is called *The Advocate*. The book is looking at a community that →

Above: Anthony 'Lil Ant' Manuel holds his baby nephew as Aretha Franklin plays on the loudspeakers at a backyard barbecue party at his aunt's house on the South Side.

Camera: Nikon D750

Lens: 35mm f/1.8

Exposure: 1/160 sec, f/2.5, ISO640



MEETING RICHARD AVEDON

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING WITH THE LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER PROVED TO BE ONE OF JON'S MOST MEMORABLE EVENINGS...

Have you met any of your heroes?

I met Avedon in England in 1995. I'd just moved there for a few months and I was living with my girlfriend at the time and I said, "Richard Avedon, he's a hero of mine and he's talking today, let's go to it." So we went and I didn't know anybody and everyone is hobnobbing, and this guy comes over, to me and my girlfriend, and asks if I'm a photographer. It's Richard Avedon! And I say to him, "I'm trying to be a photographer." And he said, "You know, my mom wouldn't even put my pictures on the wall!" He was the nicest guy, and then we watched his lecture and Avedon was just electric. His personality was like this force and you could understand how he was able to do the work he did. When you met him it was like this jolt of electricity.

was systematically left behind and forgotten. Like many forgotten communities in America, it's about what it means to be left behind in the post-industrial meltdown that happened in the United States in the '70s, '80s and into the '90s.

The film is about the young people who came out of this generation, the ones we're seeing all over the country who are really fighting for a better America and for a better world. They're not accepting the world that they've been given. They grew up in the ashes of this post-industrial devastation, all the wealth, the inequality, the segregation and racial violence that has been meted out to their families for generations, but they're saying, 'No, we're not going to accept this. We don't want to accept the world as it is.' That's what the film is about.

It's a story that resonates in other cities of America too?

It's a story that will resonate all over the world, I believe. The South Side is like a heartbeat of America for black culture, it really is, but there are communities like that all over the country and they're fighting many of the same struggles. The film will give you a sense that you, as an individual, have a choice over how you can make the world better.

These guys are no different to any one of us in any situation, and I think that's the powerful message that Jedidiah Brown (an activist and the main protagonist in *The Advocate*) brings to it. There's a human cost to what's going on with the systems that we have in place. I believe this film and the book can be a good addition to the conversation.

Did you work on both the film and the book simultaneously?

I worked on the photographic part of this for a decade, from 2004 to 2014. In that time, I started to get interested in film-making. I stopped shooting the photographs and at that point I started doing the film, because I felt like I had said what I wanted to say with the photographs. When I was shooting with Jedidiah, I did photographs to start with and I was working with a friend of mine, an amazing writer, Ben Austin, who did a profile piece. Ben wrote an amazing story about Jedidiah's life, but the photographs didn't do the story



justice – I felt like I needed to film him, so we started filming instead.

Creatively, what is the main difference between a photograph and film?

For me, a photograph is like poetry, it's not really about a specific character. Photographs are more about the sense of a moment that you can't capture in anything else but a photograph. It reveals a moment in time, or a certain place, or a feeling, more so than a specific person.

My films are more arc-driven, character-based, at least this film is. It's meant to give you an idea of how this dude, Jedidiah, and these people see the world as they try to grow up and confront the ceiling of what they're being told is their world. And they're like, 'No man, this is not what we accept. We don't accept that everything is all crazy.'

Of course, one of the overriding needs of a film is to have a central character...



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Above left and right: A man who was caught and accused of armed robbery is 'interrogated' in the back of a local police station in Guatemala City by members of the National Civil Police.

Right: Robert Almodovar hugs his aunt Mary Rodriguez following his release from Cook County Jail, where he served 23 years for a murder he didn't commit. Almodovar was framed by a Chicago police detective. The state dropped all charges.

Camera: Nikon D750

Lens: 35mm f/1.8

Exposure: 1/800 sec, f/3.2, ISO50

Yes, I feel it is super-important in a film to have the characters that you can relate to. I feel we can reach a much wider audience with character-driven, narrative-arc stories that are meant to tell you what this guy and what these folks are thinking, and where they're going and the battle they're fighting.

Have you also shot the film on a Nikon camera?

Yeah, I'm shooting it now, but before they didn't have 10-bit, so I was first shooting with a Panasonic GH5. Now, I've got my rig with the Atomos and the sound and I'm shooting it all with the Nikon Z 6 – it's beautiful, but with all the pieces and batteries I wish Nikon would come up with a real video camera and stop playing around! We're really pushing the bounds of what you can do with those cameras.

Are you shooting exclusively with the mirrorless cameras for your stills, or do you use a DSLR?

I shoot film and stills mainly with the mirrorless now, the Z 6 and the Z 7. They're good. The cameras are solid, they're great workhorses and I'm amazed with what they've done, they do amazing stuff.

The Noor agency has a great stable of photographers, how much do you support each other with ideas and projects?

We work closely together a lot. →





I've been there since 2008. We do group projects, we bounce ideas off each other, we run the business together and it's a good thing to have at this time when the world is so fragmented. Nikon Europe is supportive of Noor too. I needed 24mm and 45mm tilt-shift lenses for this film and they helped out. Those are not cheap lenses. It's great to have their support and they've been with us for 12 years.

You have a real love affair with black and white. Your Polaroids and your Ferguson film were shot in black and white. Why is that?

With black and white you really get to the heart of the matter. There's nothing distracting. This latest film is in colour and I love colour too, but my main bodies of work were shot on film in black and white. I choose the style of the photograph based on the

subject matter. With the Polaroid work, what was great about that was there was a history of people using Polaroids on the South Side. In the clubs, people would walk round and sell those things. Everything has changed with smartphones, but up until 2010 or so, the average person in the community didn't have a lot of access to photography, so the Polaroid was this interaction between me and the people. I would take their picture and give them the



I would say if you're a documentary person, you have to choose something that you care about

Above: Two protestors embrace during demonstrations that followed the police shooting of Michael Brown nine days earlier in Ferguson, Missouri.

Camera: Nikon D800

Lens: 35mm f/2

Exposure: 1/100 sec, f/2, ISO6400

photo and they would go and put it in the house and it would become this collaborative experience.

It helped break down barriers?

People were not always happy that I was there, just in terms of being an outsider, but giving them the photograph meant they could see what I was doing, so it was taking away the mystery.

The meaning of photography has changed...

It's changed because people now have the ability to make their own photographs and share them, so the meaning of the photograph has changed, the meaning of the Polaroid has changed. How people represent themselves and how they share their story with me has changed. That's where *The Advocate* comes in because the main two characters



Left: Civil rights activist Lamon Reccord demonstrating on South Side's West 47th Street.

Camera: Nikon D750

Lens: 35mm f/1.8

Exposure: 1/4000 sec, f/2, ISO50

Have you also worked for a newspaper?

I did some internships and then I worked for these community newspapers outside of Chicago. Each week we'd do a photo story and we had to generate our own stories. I was in these suburbs in the southwest, just outside of Chicago. I do international stories and I travel, but the heart and soul of my work has been based around covering stuff that's not too far from my home. What I like about that is that I'm able to build relationships over many years with people. I think people reveal their stories in the community in the time when they feel comfortable and they feel the trust with you. It's not a place where you can drop in and immediately get to the heart of it.

Are there other photographers that inspire you?

I get inspiration from people like James Van Der Zee. He was an early influence on me, and Avedon also. I think the three main influences as a kid when I first started looking at photography were James Van Der Zee, Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon. Then in college I got way more into William Klein, Mary Ellen Mark and the Magnum photographers like Gilles Peress, James Nachtwey and Eugene Richards. Donna Ferrato too, real socially concerned photography.

What is the best piece of advice you'd give to someone who is trying to follow in your footsteps?

Take another career. No! I would say if you're a documentary person, you have to choose something that you care about. The more you take that passion for something you care deeply about and invest in it, the more that people are going to see that and want to support you. When you look at the people whose work you admire, like Avedon, usually it's something they just love.

The other thing I would say is value artistic friendships, because those people will keep you going as a human. Being an artist can be hard because, like me, I get so intense about it. You have to get into that locked-in space or the work suffers. That can be hard for people around you to understand. **N**



OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Jon has a new book, *Shadow Lives*, scheduled for release next spring...

What can we expect from the new book?

Shadow Lives focuses on the migrant trail that connects Mexico and Central America to the USA. I have spent years photographing mixed status families living in the USA and humanizing this important issue. I'm working on a series for *National Geographic* about a mixed status family living

in the suburbs of Chicago. While my book shows the extreme levels of poverty and violence that force many migrants to flee their homes, this new body of work will focus on a family I've known for two decades. This work goes beyond life at the US/ Mexico border and shows what it means to live in a constant state of limbo in the United States. Many of the individuals who will be in the story are also in the book. Luis Alberto Urrea is writing the story.

spend a lot of time telling their stories and reaching their audience through their own camera, through Facebook Live and through their own photos. So, with the film we're mixing my footage with their footage.

The film is in colour, but what about the book?

The book is black and white *and* colour. It has some colour, but it's mostly the black and white Polaroids.

Are you still shooting analogue?

I am still shooting analogue, I do wet plates. I've done a series of what I call 'historiologies', which are these shots that I then do these rubbings on, like brass rubbings, so I take a shot and then I put graphite on. I'm doing a *National Geographic* project that's stills with a Mexican family who I've known for 20 years, but I'm also doing some film-making with that.