 STROBES AT SUNSET
An Elinchrom medium
Octa right of the camera
illuminated this scene.
Nikon D3, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm
f/2.8G ED, 1/125 sec, f/8, ISO200



CLOSE-UP

JOE MCNALLY

This year Joe McNally chalked up 25 years as a photographer for National Geographic. He tells Keith Wilson about his life shooting big cover stories for America's greatest magazines

For someone with so many awards for his photography, it may seem surprising to learn that Joe McNally wasn't dreaming of becoming a photographer when he went to college. Instead, the young New Jersey-born student had hopes of graduating from Syracuse University in New York as a journalist and then getting work as a newspaper reporter. But the curriculum also included a small photographic course...

What happened to make you change from writing to photography?

I was about 20 years old and studying to be a journalist. I was in a writing curriculum that had one photographic course as a requirement. When I took that photographic class I was hooked. I immediately redirected my career efforts and instead of wanting to be a writer or a reporter on a newspaper, I decided I would rather push towards photography.

What type of photographer did you dream of becoming?

I wanted to travel, and for one of my first jobs, I managed to wrangle a student credential to the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City. I had limited access because I was still a student photojournalist, but I did have a chance to be on the floor of the convention and to work the political scene and shoot candidates, and just be in that mix of what was very intense ▶





MUPPETS' TRIBUTE TO JIM HENSON
Shot on film, scanned on Nikon Super Coolscan 9000 ED

competition with newspapers and wire services. I realised right then that this was what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to witness things, I wanted to be involved with people, I wanted to see things and record them on a regular basis. So that was very influential. Obviously, I didn't stay with press photography. My imagination drove me towards colour and magazines were a logical consequence of that choice.

So was the convention your first big break as a budding photographer?

It wasn't a break, really, it was an experience. It was a powerful learning

experience, but I was still in school and I had to go back to Syracuse and finish my masters degree. After that I moved to New York and got a job as a copy boy at the *New York Daily News*, which also could not be construed to be called 'a break'!

What was it then?

It was a foot in the door; a painful one, but definitely an entry point to New York and a job in journalism. I wasn't a photographer, I was a journalist... at least it was a job on a newspaper, and I started to see what the workings of a newspaper were all about.

How did you make the transition from journalist to magazine photographer?

It was fairly abrupt because the *Daily News*

fired me! I had migrated into a position they call a studio apprentice. It was very much a union shop, so you had to become a studio apprentice before you went out onto the street as a photographer. I was waiting for a crack at the street and the *Daily News* hit the skids financially and laid off people. I was one of them, so I had to figure out how to make a living with a camera.

What did you do?

Thankfully, I had at that point made a whole bunch of connections and I had started stringing for the AP, UPI, the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Enquirer*, various places like that. There wasn't a lot of money to be made but I didn't need a lot of money at the time just to live. Sometime after that



THE K-MAN INVESTIGATES
Nikon D3, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm
f/2.8 G ED, 1/4 sec, f/8, ISO800



POOL HALL Nikon D3x, 1/60 sec, f/4, ISO400. Joe used fill-in flash in combination with the ambient light

I was offered a job as a staff photographer for the ABC television network in New York city. So I went to work shooting stills for a television network, which meant that I would shoot ABC Monday night football, I would go to the set of a soap opera, I would go into the studio and shoot a still life of an Emmy award, all sorts of things.

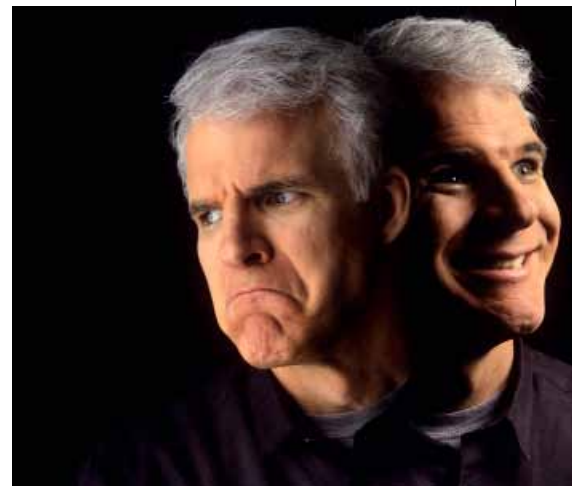
Plenty of variety then?

Tremendous variety. And it was also my first experience of shooting in colour, which I knew very little about. As soon as I did that I realized that my future lay in shooting colour material. I stayed with that job for about a year and a half and then I got an opportunity to shoot the first launch and landing of the Space Shuttle. So

I walked in and quit my job and took the freelance gig to shoot the Shuttle! That was my first big freelance job.

You have been shooting for *National Geographic* for 25 years now. What makes their assignments different from other magazines?

Historically, it's been the depth and duration of the opportunity. In its heyday, when I started working for the magazine, a small story in the *Geographic* would take six to ten weeks. A major story could take 20, 25 or 30 weeks, which is unheard of really. In terms of publishing, even for a big



STEVE MARTIN – DOUBLE EXPOSURE Joe used two strobes to the left and one to the right, all fitted with softboxes



 SYDNEY OLYMPICS, SHOT FOR *TIME* MAGAZINE
Shot on film, scanned on Nikon Super Coolscan 9000 ED



 DANCER IN THE DUBAI DESERT
Nikon D3, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, 1/8000 sec, f/6.3, ISO320

picture magazine like *Life*, who I shot for a lot, a huge story would be three weeks. *Geographic* was just off the charts in terms of the resources they would devote.

Of all your assignments, which ones stand out for you as being special?

Certainly the most powerful and largest I got assigned to initially was a story called 'The Sense of Sight'. The contract was for 26 weeks of fieldwork and it was basically being assigned as a photographer to take a look at the human eye and how it works and the various functions, dysfunctions and problems. I got a chance to work on it in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, North America, the Arctic Circle – all over the place, just identifying issues about human vision. It

ran to 42 pages and it was a cover. That was a watershed event. It was not only an important issue, it was an opportunity I could really embrace as a photographer and I grew a great deal from that story.

How did you convince the editors of *National Geographic* to shoot digitally for 'The Future of Flying' story after years of being wedded to Kodachrome?

Well, my photo editor, Bill Douthitt, and I have done many coverages together, and you get to a certain point where you know how to incorporate a new challenge into the way you are covering stories. Digital was at the doorstep and Nikon had just come out with the D1x, the first camera I felt came close to Kodachrome in terms of

quality. So we went in and suggested that it was a future-looking story so we should use a future-looking technology – digital photography. After numerous meetings, they approved it and we went ahead. It was the first ever use of digital in the history of the *National Geographic*.


Do you have a 'desert island lens', the one you cannot do without?

Wow! Yeah, I guess. It's not exotic but the 24-70mm f/2.8 is my workhorse lens. It goes with me all the time.

What is the weight of your typical day's kit bag?

The dictates of the job will determine those speciality items that you might take with



 OZZIE SMITH
Ozzie stood next to Joe for this shot, with the mirrors angled to capture this 360° view of the St Louis Cardinals' legendary shortstop. Lit with a strobe attached to a movie boom arm.



PROFILE



Highlights of a career that's covered three decades and 50 countries... so far!

- Joe McNally is a Nikon Legend Behind the Lens and one of the world's most honoured photographers of the past 30 years.
- His photographs are held in numerous collections, most notably the National Portrait Gallery of the United States.
- In 2010 Joe was voted one of the 30 most influential photographers of the decade in a survey conducted by Photo District News.
- Joe's feature 'The Future of Flying' was the first feature shot on a digital camera to be printed in *National Geographic* magazine, and has since been incorporated into the archives of the Library of Congress.
- He has written two books to date, *The Moment It Clicks* and *The Hot Shoe Diaries*. He also has an entertaining, informative blog on his website, www.joemcnally.com



RUSSIAN LEADER Joe persuaded Mikhail Gorbachev to pose in the woods after an unsuccessful studio session

you. My core kit is two Nikon D4 bodies, 14-24mm, 24-70mm and 70-200mm lenses. And probably two or three Speedlights, and maybe a small sling bag with a couple of light shapers and a stand.

What is the most unusual thing in your camera bag?

When my oldest daughter was three I was packing to go to Africa and I was going to be away for a while. I came down to the basement and I found stuck in my camera bag a little rabbit's head, a little woolly, fuzzy-type rabbit's head. I turned to her and said: 'Why did you put that in Daddy's camera bag?' and she said, 'It's for luck.' She's 27 now! The rabbit's not in very good shape any more but it's still with me.

“It's a challenge to shoot a cover, but you've done your job as a photographer if you have made someone stop and engage with the magazine”

Joe McNally **Legendary magazine photographer**

You have shot covers for a wide variety of magazines including *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Fortune*. What makes a great cover?

This has to be taken in context. A cover is a bit of a trained seal of a picture. It has to jump through some hoops, right? It's not ▶



THE BIG LIFT Olympic weightlifter Shane Hamman jumped from a standing position for this shot



US COAST GUARD Nikon D2x, 1/125 sec, f/4.5, ISO100.
Fill flash from SB-800 Speedlight on boom



LOUIE CACCHIOLI
Nikon D3, 24-70mm f/2.8, 1/10 sec, f/16, ISO200



LOUIE AND THE FIRE TRUCK This shot was lit with just one softbox – the natural sunlight provided the rest



just a lovely photo. It has to be vertical, it has to have a certain amount of impact, it has to literally sell the magazine, it has to have room for the logo, it has to have a well for the type and the barcode. It's a challenge to shoot a cover because it has to do so many things, but you've done your job as a photographer if you have suddenly made someone stop and engage with the magazine for more than a nanosecond.

Have there been any covers that have surprised you in terms of how well they have worked?

Yeah. The *National Geographic* ran

a picture of mine, it was a story on globalisation, and I had photographed a beautiful young DJ in India. She was a star with the MTV of India and she designed her own fashion. She came out in this skin-tight cat suit – it had a slit down to the navel, just about. She sat down and I made a portrait of her next to her traditionally dressed Hindu mother. I was surprised that *Geographic* ran it because it was quite edgy for them, but I'm very pleased with that particular cover because it was very human and it addressed the needs of the story.

You are very versatile at lighting portraits. What are the 'golden rules' that you apply to lighting?

It's a game without rules in lots of

ways. Having said that, I try to create an appropriate response to what I am presented with, whether it's the face that drives the picture, the scene, or the combination of those elements. I assess the situation as best I can and try to make sure that whatever light I apply is appropriate for the subject matter and doesn't completely trample the nuance of the location.

How many gigabytes of pictures do you shoot a week?

That varies a lot. This morning I shot 60 or 70Gb of photographs. Next week I'm teaching, so I probably won't shoot that much. So the amount really, really varies from week to week.

GROUND ZERO

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Joe McNally embarked on a project to photograph fire fighters, police, rescue workers and survivors.

Joe's book and touring exhibition, *Faces of Ground Zero*, raised more than \$2 million for the relief effort that followed...

What was the biggest challenge?

■ Challenges come in different shapes and forms. I did a project after 9/11 where I used the world's only giant Polaroid camera – *Faces of Ground Zero* – and that was not only a difficult and emotional assignment, it was also difficult in terms of making the camera work.


How did you go about choosing the subjects?

■ In lots of ways they chose us, in the sense that we'd go to a firehouse and ask them to come by. We'd scour the newspapers, find people with interesting stories and we would invite people. Word of mouth spread; we were getting phone calls from people saying, 'This was our experience,' and we'd take them in. We made sure we had a variety of people.

Why did you choose to use the giant Polaroid?

■ It has a tremendous stature. It's a life-size camera and the image the camera renders lends itself to a certain heroic stature. It was an appropriate thing to do at that time.



 NEW YORK FIRE TRUCK,
TIMES SQUARE
Nikon D700, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED,
1/2 sec, f/5.6, ISO200. Lit by three SB-800
Speedlights controlled with Nikon SU-800

What percentage of shots do you delete?

Space is becoming an issue as camera files get bigger. We do a fairly stringent edit on things – we do not strip something to the bare bones, but after a period of time we will go back into the image archive and try to keep that which is essential and get rid of everything else, because if you don't it just becomes overwhelming to try to shepherd it all.

How important is it to stay on top of image workflow?

It is pretty important. I don't lay any claims to be completely stellar at it, but we manage to keep on top of workflow fairly well. I'm blessed in that I've got two young assistants who are more computer-savvy

than I am and we kind of feel our way along like anyone else. This last month – we're still not done yet – we've been switching over our entire array of external hard drives. We're at a storage capacity now of about 60 terabytes. That's a lot of storage, so when you make a move like that, it's expensive. It's part of the cost of doing business, but man, it's not easy to keep up with!

From where do you derive your photographic inspiration?

I really revere the people who have gone before: there are the great *Life* staff photographers – Carl Mydans, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Gordon Parks, David Douglas Duncan – a crew of people who laid



 **FACES OF GROUND ZERO** Joe used a giant Polaroid to capture 246 life-sized 9x4ft photos of the heroes of 9/11



THE FUTURE OF FLYING: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC GOES DIGITAL
Nikon D1x, 400mm f/2.8, 1/2000 sec, f/5.6



down a great track record for the rest of us to follow. At *National Geographic*, Jim Stanfield was always a source of inspiration. His determination, his work effort was astonishing. And Bill Allard. I don't have one style of photography that precludes me from liking a type of work, from a serious photojournalist like David

“The most important thing that stems from any lengthy career in photography is the relationships that you develop”

Joe McNally *Legendary magazine photographer*

Burnett to a wild and crazy guy like David LaChapelle. I like all that stuff.

Can you really combine stills and HD Movie successfully?

We combine them, yes. Increasingly our studio is being asked to do HD SLR video and increasingly we find that is a component of our workflow. Absolutely.

You think that trend will increase?

Yes. There's no way I think shooting video will not increase.

Which Nikon bodies are you using to shoot for video?

We're shooting D4s and D800s. We've got three and three.

What has been your greatest moment as a photographer?

I've had far more disappointing moments! I guess the most important thing that stems from any lengthy career in photography is the relationships that you develop. In the aftermath of 9/11, I photographed a firefighter, Mike, who was initially quite reluctant to be shot. He was very withdrawn. He had been blown out of a building but numerous other firefighters trapped in this building had died. He was struggling and I got to know his wife a bit and she kept talking to us and said, 'Please include him in the project. I think he's ready to talk.' Which he did, and he eventually became part of the project. Over the years we've become friends, and every



THE MOST POWERFUL LASER
It took just one strobe to light
the interior of the laser test chamber

year on 9/11 I spend the morning with him at his old firehouse.

His wife is the family documentarian and every year she has photographed Mike and I. Last year, the anniversary, we had a show, she came to me and she had a small book of pictures and said, 'I want to give this to you.' She had collected all of the pictures that she had shot for 10 years of Mike and I, and had ended the book with Mike back at Ground Zero. It was the first time that he'd physically been able to go back down there. She said, 'Thank you for the way you have been photographing the two of us and thank you for sticking with this project because I have my husband back now.' The pictures that we collaborated on helped him heal. There you



THE FUTURE OF FLYING:
X-47A PEGASUS
Nikon D1x, Nikon 12-24mm f/4, 1/2 sec, f/5.6
with 12 Nikon SB-80 strobes



SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT
Nikon D4, Nikon AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED IF, 1/40 sec, f/8, ISO100, SB-910 and a Lastolite tri-grip



MERVYN THE POLYNESIAN FIRE DANCER
Nikon D2x, Nikon 12-24mm f/4, 1/40 sec, f/6.3, ISO100

see a good outcome, a good repercussion that you can bring to a project.

Have there been difficult times for you as a photographer?

Just staying alive can be a problem! There have been times in my life where I have been broker than a church mouse. There have been times where there's been no work, no good work, where the studio laboured and those times are very trying. It tests your ability, it tests your tenacity. You have to put your shoulder to the wheel and keep producing work no matter how difficult the situation may be. Those are

stressful times and I have had a number of them over the course of my career.

Any embarrassing moments?

Well, I lost five motor-driven cameras in one shot! That was during a Space Shuttle launch and the cameras got knocked over by wind and rain and ended up in a saltwater estuary, so I had just destroyed five motor-driven Nikons in one day! That was a difficult day in the field.

Is it more difficult now for a magazine photographer to get jobs?

When I started my career I was able to walk into magazines with a portfolio and get jobs. If you did a good job for *Newsweek* this week, *Newsweek* would call you next week.



Once you started getting your pictures presented in a variety of publications you were on your way to having a career. Those publications would continue to use you, they would have a certain measure of loyalty, you would know they'd ring back. That's very different now. The idea of walking in as a young photographer and getting assignments from *Time* magazine, I think it's no longer possible, or much more difficult than it was. *Time* doesn't have a glimmer of the budget it used to have.

You turned 60 this year; if Joe McNally were starting out today, would there be anything he would do differently?

Yes. Absolutely. The magazines now that are in the ascendancy are very different



LUCIANO AND
CHANCHO
Nikon D4, Nikon AF-S
14-24mm f/2.8G ED IF,
1/250 sec, f/8, ISO100

to when I started. They're hipper, they're edgier. If I were starting now I would go after work from magazines, but I'd also go after work from graphic designers, from small design firms, from local commercial enterprises. I would look at this patchwork quilt of an industry and realise that I couldn't afford to do just one thing, to be a magazine photographer. I would have to reach out to a variety of clients and stitch together a basis for a professional career.

So, what is the best advice you can give to someone starting as a photographer? Understand the difficulties. Be smart about your choices, not just pictorially, but also in terms of business. Be very wary of taking on too much debt. Try to work as simply as

“Try to find what you truly love to shoot. If you truly love to shoot it, you'll shoot it well. If you shoot it well, people will notice.”

Joe McNally *Legendary magazine photographer*

you possibly can and, most important, find what you truly love to shoot. If you truly love to shoot it, you'll shoot it well. If you shoot it well, people will notice. If people notice, they'll give you work. There's no better situation, no better job in the world than getting paid to do that you love to do. And that for me has been photography. ☐



LAKE SWIM Nikon D3, 24-70mm f/2.8, 1/80 sec, f/5.6,
ISO200, SB-900 through a largely blacked-out umbrella