



Gotta Dance

Portrait photographer Jordan Matter has struck a chord by taking his subjects out of their comfort zones and putting them onto the streets of America.

It was right there for me but I didn't really see it,' says Jordan Matter, the New York portrait photographer whose distinctive images have drawn the attention of the world's media and captured the hearts of the public.

'My grandfather was a very well known photographer (Herbert Matter, Swiss-born American photographer and graphic designer known for his pioneering use of photomontage in commercial art) and my grandmother was a painter. Everyone was a visual artist of some kind, my father is a film-maker and my mother was a model – but photography wasn't something I considered at first.'

Jordan spent the former part of his working life as a baseball player; turning to acting once his playing career came to an end. His choice of vocation, location and a chance bike ride, set him on a path to professional photography. As it turned out, it was quite a short walk.

'I was on a bike ride with my wife and we went up to the top of the mountain,' he explains. 'I looked out over the view, grabbed my Instamatic camera and tried to take a photo of the landscape – and then I realised that I didn't know how to take that photo. On the way back down I decided I would

take a photography class, so I would have a real hobby and could learn how to take that picture. From the first moment I picked those photos up from the developer, it was sort of a hallelujah moment. I knew that was what I was supposed to do with my life.'

'Because I was an actor, I had a lot of actor friends and back then headshots were basically a black and white portrait in a studio with a grey background. I didn't have any interest in shooting that way (and I also didn't have the technical skill to light it), so I started doing headshots but I went outside on a roof or in the woods, trying to get some of the subject's personality across – and I started to create this look that hadn't really been seen before. Suddenly, agents were sending me their clients to photograph before I was really ready to pursue the profession. So I figured, why not let people pay me to learn how to shoot – which was a great luxury.

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'I would think there are about a half dozen places in the world where someone could make a good, consistent living as a headshot photographer. There are two in the states, Los Angeles and New York – anywhere else, you've got to work in other fields to supplement. So I was in the perfect place and I was connected to the industry.'

Jordan had a steady supply of actors and actresses to photograph and one of the most iconic cities in the world for a backdrop. His shoots took him all over New York and it was during this time he heard about a peculiar state law that allows women to be topless in public in the State of New York.

'I thought it would make an interesting art project to photograph girls topless around New York. But when I did the first



LEFT: *Waiting for a Ride.* Michaela DePrince, Jacob's Pillow, Massachusetts D800, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II, ISO 1000, 1/500s (A f/3.5)

ABOVE: *Quittin' Time.* Chase Hamilton, Portland, Oregon D800, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II, ISO 1000, 1/500s (A f/2.8)

topless shoot in Times Square, the actress I was photographing hugged me and said, 'You have no idea what you've just done for me.' She told me she'd never been topless outside before ever, not even on the beach. This was because she had body image issues but the shoot was the start of her being able to resolve them. Then the idea really began to take shape I thought it could be more than an art project and could be about women's body issues in America. ▶

On one of the shoots a photographer from the *New York Daily News* saw me working and reported the story in the paper. Then it really got a lot of attention. *The Today Show* called me and did a piece on it, and then I started getting volunteers from around the country flying out to be photographed.’

The resultant book was *Uncovered* a beautiful collection of images of female expression with ten per cent of the profits from sales going to *The Breast Cancer Research Foundation*. The project got Jordan a lot of publicity, but he wasn’t ready to dive into the next project straight away.

‘*Uncovered* was a self published book and it was six years in the making, so it was a lot of effort and that experience really is the kind of thing you should do only once in your life (*laughs*). I was exhausted from it and I had a full time career shooting everyday, so I wasn’t really looking for anything else. Then a dancer called Jeffrey Smith hired me to do some portraits and invited me to a show so I could get an idea of what he does. I was really impressed with the athleticism of the dancers as I’d never photographed them before. Soon after I was playing with my son who was three at the time and he had this joy when he was playing that I couldn’t comprehend (because I’ve gotten older and cynical) and I loved seeing his imagination and fantasies play out. Suddenly it hit me that I could use dancers to create a world as if seen through the eyes of a child, showing the beauty and fantasy in everyday moments. So I asked Jeffrey if he could get me access to The Paul Taylor Dance Company and

that’s how *Dancers Among Us* started.’

Jordan worked on the new project as often as he could for three years, and although publishers loved the pictures, they were reluctant to commit to a book.

‘I heard it over and over.’ He explains. ‘They said it was because it was too regionally specific, “We love the pictures but our sales department says it will never sell in Kansas.”

‘So finally in my last meeting with Workman Publishing who eventually published the book, I told them I was going to be travelling throughout the states taking pictures of dancers. I had no intention of doing

‘By taking it out of New York it humanised the dancers even more and made it more relatable for people.’

that whatsoever. I just couldn’t hear no again. Then they became interested and asked to see the work, so I had to book flights and start going round the country. I realised quickly that there was a lot of enthusiasm for the project. It had already been popular online, especially with the dance community, but I also realised that everybody was right. By taking it out of New York, it humanised the dancers even more and made it more relatable for people.’

For dancers, Jordan says the usual portrait experience is a pretty staid affair. It’s normally standard shots in a studio or maybe some shots outside – so his idea of the story scenario, with dancers wearing regular clothes and just being

themselves was a unique concept and a very popular proposition. How much so however, even he was surprised to find out.

‘I would tweet and Facebook where I was going to be and up to 60 dancers sometimes would volunteer in one city. It was crazy. I had no time to shoot them all. We had dancers driving eight hours one way to do it. They’d drive all night and arrive in the morning and then hang out all day, and then we’d shoot for an hour and they’d go back. It was unbelievable how excited they were to do it.’

Being in the right location and mixing in the right entertainment circles was certainly a great head start for *Dancers Among Us*, but the real leg up was being able to share the images before the book was published. The reaction Jordan received was a great temperature check that told him he was definitely onto something.

‘I’d say the primary reason that I’ve had the success that I’ve been fortunate enough to have, is because of social media.’ he explains. ‘I mean completely. Of course it starts with the idea, the concept and the shooting of it, but once you have imagery that can resonate, having that kind of platform is essential. And I could see the difference because when I was doing *Uncovered*, that medium didn’t exist, I can see how much further I went with *Dancers* due to the reaction online.’

The online reaction was spot on with *Dancers Among Us* making it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list and being cited by *Barnes & Noble*, *Amazon* and *Oprah Magazine* as one of the best books of the year. ▶



LEFT: *Rockstar*, Matt Oaks, Astoria, New York
 Nikon D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, ISO3200, 1/160s @ f/2.8

‘This image is the only one from the book that was shot as a jpeg and the reason for that was my camera got steamed up halfway through. I wanted the hot water and steam in the image – but because it got steamed up, I switched cameras and that camera was set to jpeg. I still had it blown up for exhibitions to 40 ins wide and it looks great even though it was only jpeg and we used no special lighting. The shots that work the best merge everyday life in a dance context, it’s something we can all relate to.’





ABOVE: *Cupid's Arrow.*
Alex Jenkins & Chad Dawson, San Francisco, California. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, ISO50, 1/2000s (q) f/2.8

LEFT *Under the Boardwalk.*
Jill Wilson & Jacob Jonas, Santa Monica, California D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 28-70mm, f2.8D, ISO 640, 1/160s (q) f/4

RIGHT: Chansi Stuckey, Fort Tryon Park, New York. D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f1.4G, ISO1000, 1/500s at f/3.5



'I really don't think there are any secrets any more' says Jordan. 'One of the benefits of social media is, it humanises you, people who follow you feel that they know you and the more you show them, the more the images resonate. For example, when I post a BTS video and people see what I went through to get a shot – they have a greater investment in what I'm doing. But you still have to have the strong ideas first.'

Of course being so active online, for all its benefits can have it's problems. Jordan get's his fair share of 'tribute acts' but with a project as well documented as *Dancers Among Us*, it's pretty easy to see where the original idea came from. Sometimes however, the fan worship can be a little too close for comfort.

'Sometimes people come to my shoots, and this is the craziest – stand next to me, take the photo and then post it on their website like it's their shot. After I've conceived and executed it and everything – it's crazy! I mean, I totally understand the impulse to hide a great idea – but you don't want somebody to steal it before you've done it. But then if you hide all your ideas away, nobody knows about them, so they will probably never happen.'

'When the plagiarism is that blatant you just have to keep telling yourself that imitation is the greatest form of flattery – I've had to remind myself of that a lot and I think it is true, it is a huge form of flattery but I'd prefer it didn't happen quite so frequently.'

To see more of Jordan's work visit:

www.jordanmatter.com

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Need for speed

When you're shooting athletes, you need a fast camera.

Jordan's new project is *Athletes Among Us*, some of whose images have already been previewed online. For this particular type of photography, it has to be Nikon.

'I'm using the D3S and the D800 as my primary cameras of choice. Early on I was using the D3 too, but ever since I started photography professionally, I've been Nikon. As far as lenses go I use the 14-24mm a lot, the 28-70mm and the 70-200mm all f/2.8 and then the fixed 28mm f/2.8, 50mm, 85mm f/1.4.

'I shoot at high shutter speeds in natural light – I don't do any lighting at all, so I only used what light is available at the time. For interior or evening shots, I tend to use the D3S. I don't use the D800 for that so much because the noise is a little more pronounced with the higher ISO, but the D3S is amazing.

'I was asked to test the a medium format camera recently, which I don't really shoot, but they asked me to test it anyway. The photograph that I was trying to take as the test shot was of a football player diving to

catch a Frisbee that's been thrown for a dog. So I was using the MF camera but it's a very hard shot because you've got a person and the dog jumping, as well as the Frisbee flying. There's a lot of movement so you've got to really rely on your camera. I had nearly ten tries with the MF but it just wasn't fast enough. It didn't look sharp in any of them. So I abandoned the MF and went back to my Nikon and it was sharp every time.'

To see more, visit: athletesamongus.com



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CLIENTS:
Actors, dancers and models.

WHY NIKON?
Reliability, familiarity and durability. I shoot over 20,000 frames a week. I need to completely trust my equipment. Most importantly, I need the low noise at high ISO of the D3S, since I shoot with all available light, often at night or inside.

WHAT'S IN THE BAG?
Nikon D800, D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED, AF-S NIKKOR 28-70mm f/2.8D AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II AF NIKKOR 28mm f/2.8D AF-S Nikkor 50mm f/1.4G, AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G

NEXT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT?
I have everything I need, but I probably won't be able to resist the next generation of the D4 series. I'm still waiting for a body that has the file size of the D800 with the high ISO quality and sharp focus of the D3S

KIT BAG



Nikon D800



Nikon D3S



AF-S NIKKOR 14-24mm f/2.8G ED



AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II



AF-S NIKKOR 28-70mm f/2.8D



AF-S NIKKOR 85mm f/1.4G