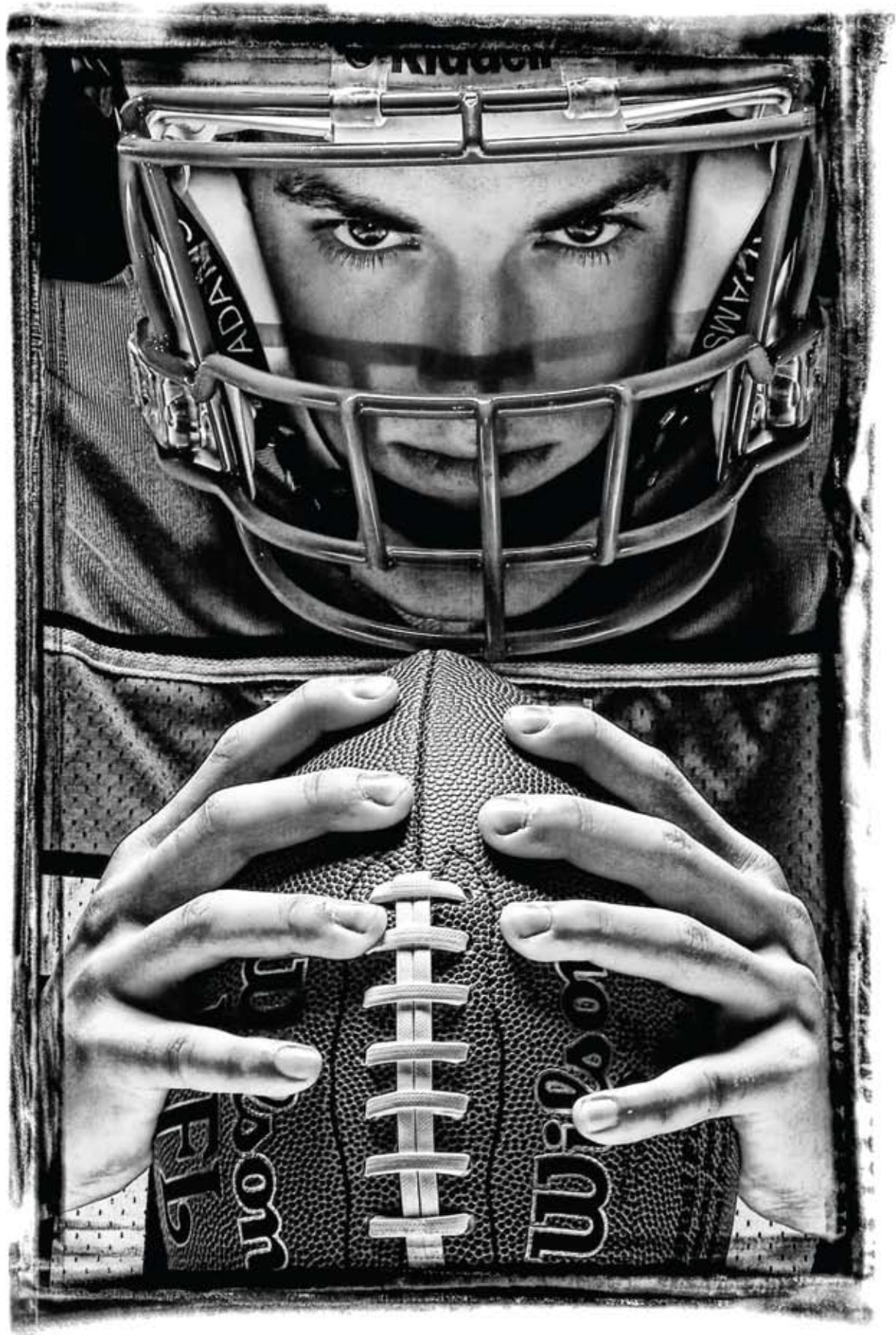


DOMINATOR





MTV-inspired Portraiture

David Humphrey

By Claude Jodoin

Now, more than ever, we have moms, dads and schoolteachers with digital cameras who know enough to be dangerous. Complimenting a photographer's work by saying, "You must have a great camera" is like telling an award-winning chef, "You must have great pots and pans."

To combat these notions in a competitive field, David Humphrey's images have an "artistic, fashion-style slant" with aggressive, funky posing. While his biology and anatomy background give him a strong understanding of the human form, his approach to senior portraiture is influenced by the 1970s and 80s glamour work of Ken Marcus. "I used to do a ton of boudoir portraits with regular optics," David says. "Now I do extreme low and high angles. I got that from watching MTV videos in the 80s. I use a wide-angle zoom for portrait work because I was told I should never do that. I like the strong perspective and it sells. Even though [my clients] may end up buying traditional [portraits], they come to me because they see my radical stuff in the marketing pieces."

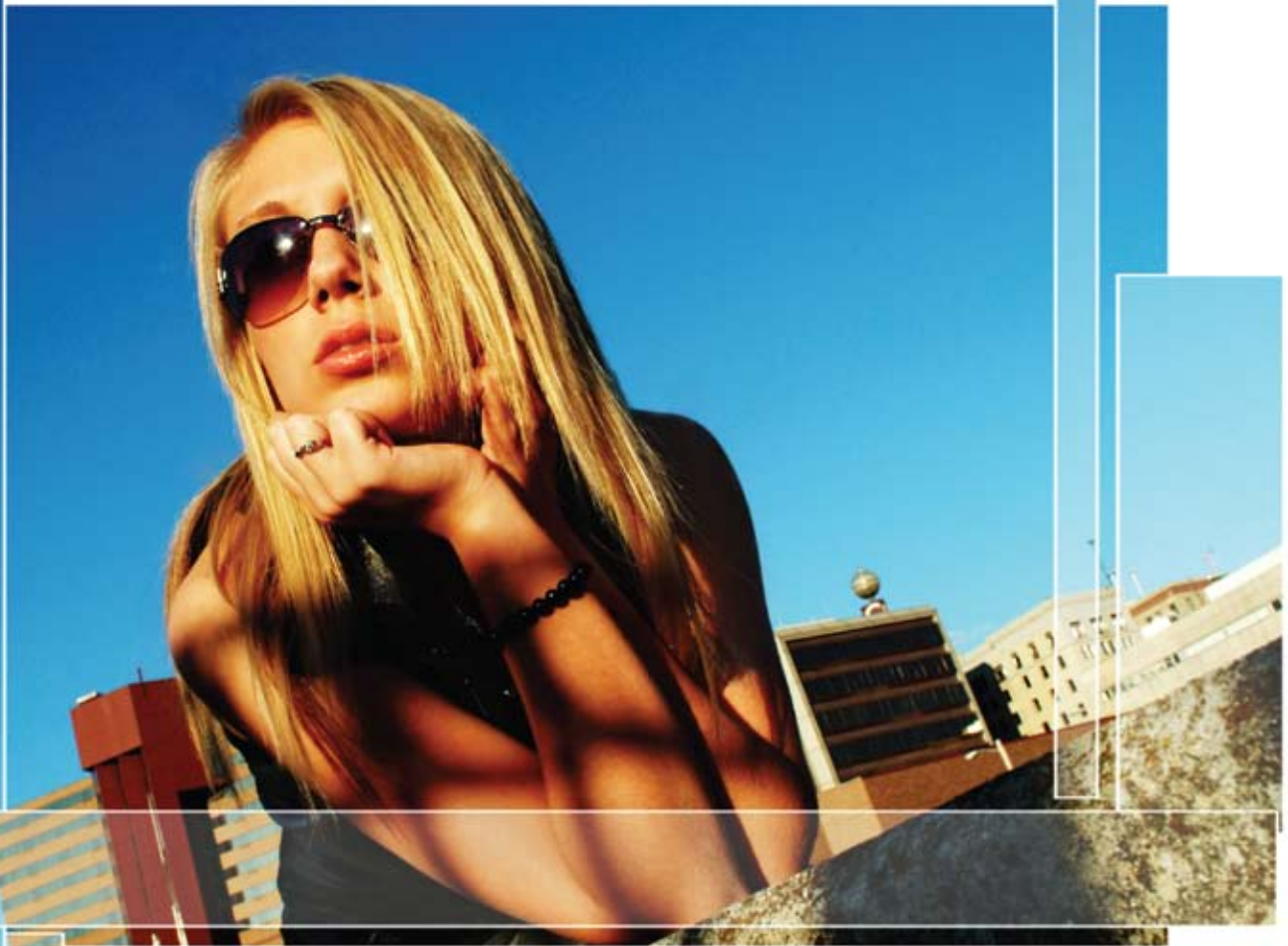
Known as "the originator" in his area, David presents new, cutting-edge photography products every year—mostly because he gets bored easily with repetition. While he is always seeking to create a new style by bending and breaking all of the rules, he admits that he had to learn them first.

"I want to create a character study of who

Left: A senior image done in Humphrey's Sports – Illustrated style.

Right: From the City Lights style of senior imagery.





NEW YORK STYLE

Above: David comments, "Even though this image was created in downtown Flint, MI, I used the setting sun and a low camera angle."

someone is or wants to be—not chronological documentation, which they can get anywhere else. Because they seek something different, 30 percent of our new customers come from the Internet."

David's target market includes students with the financial resources to afford his products. According to him, it doesn't take a marketing genius to look at what is current in the fashion magazines and where the kids go for their clothing. He just adapts what is currently popular to his marketing campaign. For example, because of the popularity of *America's Next Top Model*, he no longer has Senior Reps, but Senior Models. The choice of words can make all the difference in people's minds.

"We limit our volume to about 200 kids, but we market to the top five to 10 percent of the students per schools in our area. Once we reach the 10 percent mark for any given

school, we are considered 'sold out' and turn away other kids. We want to be exclusive, and as a result, our gross sales average is almost four times the average studio with four times the volume. Our record single sale exceeds what most local wedding photographers get for their top package. To encapsulate my philosophy about senior pictures: It's all about the kids. The parents determine the amount invested, but the kids choose where they want to go. I have cultivated a market that sees me as the go-to place for creative stuff."

David continues, "I don't have packages in my price list. I give them a huge field of numbers that they can wander around in. I always tell my clients 'yes' and the charge for that will be X dollars. I'm a proponent of exceptional customer service, and I try to implement all the ideas I get from other speakers. We give a free file that the kids can use on MySpace and Facebook from every pose they buy, while everyone else charges for it."

He shares, "Occasionally I get the 'What's your cheapest 8x10?' type of call. So I ask, 'How important is cheap to you?' You are only concerned about price one time—when you are paying. Your happiness with that investment is forever, so you may have regrets for a lifetime over cheap. We try to educate people on the phone, and if they persist, they are politely sent elsewhere."

David credits Ann Monteith and John Hartman for his business success: "It took me 20 years to get out of the starving artist mode and get down to business. I remember the old days when I never knew if I made a profit until my accountant did my taxes. I won all the gallery awards, degrees, Loan Prints at Epcot, etc., but that is not what's most important. Just because it's new, cool and you get peer compliments doesn't mean it's going to sell. You have to cover your bases with products you know will sell, then go off and experiment. It's all about balance. I have the heart of an artist



Above: Red, one of Maria's favorite colors, was the inspiration for this image. David used his custom-designed circle brushes to create the background to enhance the image.

and the mind of a businessman.

"There's so much good education out there if you will just avail yourself of it. Don't reinvent the wheel. You must do what you learn, otherwise you are on a stationary bike."

When David meets a high school senior, he simply asks them what they like. They have a voice and a choice, irrespective of their parent's opinions. This is a surprising revelation to most teens, as sometimes David is the first one to really care about what they think and who they are in the process. Sometimes he finds out that the teens' artistic or sports endeavors are a good outlet for the frustrations of their everyday grind, and they want him to

express that in his images. This places his artistry at the opposite end of the scale from the run-of-the-mill production photographer. He feels that senior pictures should be a reward for 12 years of hard work and accomplishments.

That said, he will typically tell his clients, "You represent all the colors of paint we will use; I represent the tools to manipulate the paint that we will translate onto the paper. The more colors you give me access to, the more things I can incorporate that are unique to you." A typical question he asks is, "What's your favorite color and what do you like to do when you're by yourself?"

Another great question is: "Aside from what your parents have in mind for you, if you could walk away with only one image of yourself today, what would it be?" David finds that taking five to 10 minutes with each senior to find out these things

makes a huge difference in their attitude towards the time spent and makes for a smoother session.

"Girls are easier to photograph. Most guys don't want to have senior portraits done. That's part of the reason I have cultivated my sports and interests images, which are also applicable to female athletes. There are three things that have to come together to make guys want to be photographed: They want to think they look good, their friends to think they look cool, and ladies to think they look hot. They would rather be shot than be seen in a suit and tie smiling, like their mom wants. This is why the consultation is so important!"

Most of his images don't have smiles because a smile is not always the best image. David spends considerable time and effort convincing parents about this.



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Left: From the warehouse series of senior portraits.

Bottom: David shares, "In response to girls requesting one of our Sports – Illustrated images, I created 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' for Alyssa. She was the All-star catcher for her softball team and wanted something special to commemorate her accomplishment."

"Occasionally I get a parent that says, 'Excuse me, but I'm paying for this.' So my reply is: 'Okay, then why did you come here?' The typical answer is: 'My son/daughter liked the way the pictures look. They look real and capture the essence of who they are.' To which I say, 'How many times a year do they wear a suit and tie versus their favorite outfit? And you are trying to force them to do all their photos in a shirt and tie?'"

When asked about postproduction, David says, "I have created actions in Photoshop that give me production automation in 30 seconds instead of 15 minutes, so I do control production time with my added graphic effects, which, of course, there is a standard charge for. Even if clients request the image without the effect, the same fee will apply to undo it, since it's been presented as unique to them." He continues, "People ask me why I did certain things in their images. I just explain that it was my artistic vision to create something just for them. So they see it as me going the extra mile and this creates a buzz because they bring their friends."

All product offerings are part of the total experience in the sales room on a seven-foot screen with a 5.1 Surround Sound system David calls a "Premiere Showing." The shows contain royalty-free music from Triple Scoop; ProSelect software sells the poses. Visit www.mastersphotography.com.



Claude Jodoin has been involved in digital imaging since 1986 and has not used film since 1999. He can be reached at claudelj1@aol.com.



Diamonds are a girl's best friend

David H. Humphrey