

In Conversation with Guardian portrait photographer, and Leica Ambassador, Sarah Lee

by Philip Gray

While she was at university Sarah Lee used the time not spent in libraries to train herself as a photographer by working for the student newspaper. That must have been a very effective training because within a few days of leaving she found herself working as a photographer on the Guardian - where she has been ever since.

● What fired your initial enthusiasm for photography?

It all dates back to my eighteenth birthday, in the mid-nineties. I was hoping I would be given one of those very 'cool' Olympus point-and-shoot cameras that were being advertised at the time, but my father decided to buy me a Pentax K1000 instead. At first I was quite disappointed, but as soon as I was shown how to use it properly I quickly fell in love with it. That's where it all started.

● You then went to university to study literature. At what stage did you begin to plan a career in photography?

I went to University College London and very soon discovered opportunities offered by the intercollegiate newspaper, *London Student*. I was very lucky to have

walked right into the middle of a 'golden period' for their young photographers. There was Abbie Trayler-Smith, who was the picture editor and went on to work for the Daily Telegraph, and Ed Alcock, who later joined the New York Times. They taught me how to print and I began to see photography as a way of opening doors: it was almost like having a second degree.

● How soon after university did you find yourself working as a photographer for the Guardian?

While studying for an MA I worked as a researcher on Peter Conradi's biography of Iris Murdoch, visiting her once to take a series of portraits. After winning second place in the Guardian Student Media Awards I met Eamonn McCabe, their Picture Editor at the time. He liked my Iris Murdoch portraits, having photographed



Coldplay by Sarah Lee

her himself the same year, and asked if I would like to start working for the paper on Tuesday. I went straight from university to the Guardian the following week. That was in 2000 and I have been working for them ever since.

● **Do similar career opportunities exist in photography today?**

The landscape of professional photography has changed so much in recent times. I joined the paper as a trainee, which basically meant that they paid me to learn, but it doesn't work like that now. Things are so much tougher for any young photographer hoping to start out today. I realise I was very, very lucky.

● **You now work as a contract freelance photographer. What does that entail?**

I am one of a number of photographers who are contracted to work so many days each week for the paper. It is a very fortunate position to be in as few publications still offer these opportunities. I love working for the paper as meeting and photographing such a variety of people makes it an intriguing job. Being contracted to work three days a week means I can undertake other commercial work on days when I am not on a Guardian assignment, giving me the freedom to broaden my experience. TIME magazine, Rolling Stone, The Sunday Times and Vanity Fair are a few of my other clients and I also work as an official BAFTA Photographer.

● **Working with a Leica rangefinder must be an unusual choice for a press photographer today.**

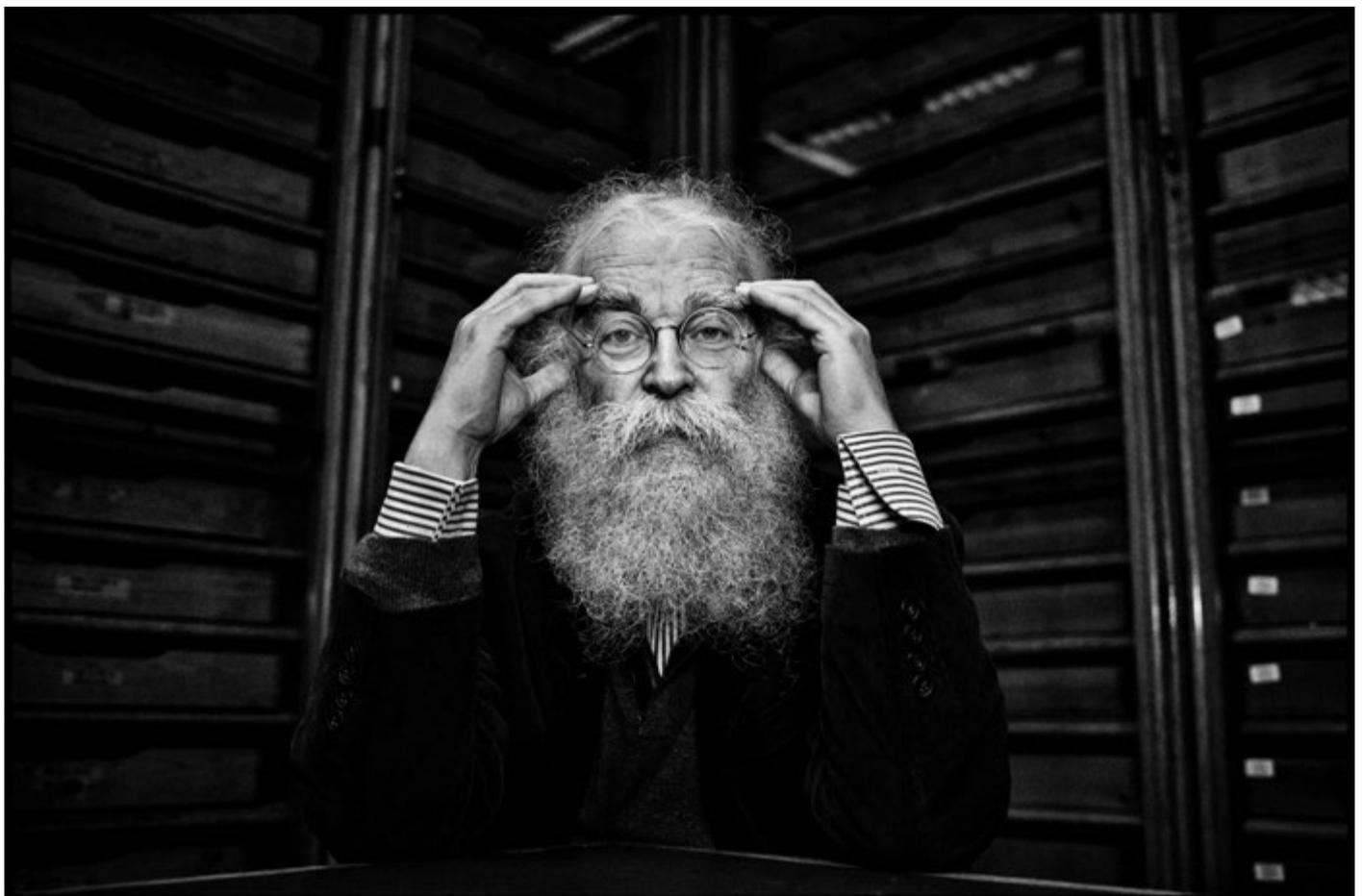
I have always been aware of Leica's role in the history of twentieth century photography and what working with a rangefinder meant to all those photojournalists and humanist photographers whose work I admire.

After working for a while I was able to buy an M6 and really enjoyed shooting black and white with it, but the paper soon wanted me to start shooting in colour, and with a digital camera. Funding one of the early DSLRs meant trading in the M6, plus 35mm and 50mm lenses. This was at a time when many other editorial photographers seemed to be selling their Leicas for the same reason.

I noticed the M8 when it came out, which didn't seem quite right for my type of work, but that was followed by the far more interesting M9. I eventually managed to buy digital Leica, an ME, plus a couple of lenses - which of course cost considerably more than the trade-in price for the first 35mm and 50mm lenses.

● **How often were you able to use the ME rather than your DSLR?**

At first I wondered if I would only keep the ME for personal projects but once I started to use the camera it wasn't long became my main choice for work assignments as well. I went on to use an M(240) and now work with an M10. I no longer own any DSLRs and haven't even used one for at least five years.



Irving Finkel by Sarah Lee

● **Now you work exclusively with a rangefinder system do you find it brings particular drawbacks as well as advantages?**

When I am doing portrait work for the National Theatre for example I have to tell them I don't use a lens longer than 90mm, which means I can't sit at the back of the stalls with a 300mm telephoto. Instead I have to do what works best for me and offer a sort of bespoke service: my advice to any photographer is to stick to what works best for them.

On many portrait assignments for the paper I often meet people who are not used to being photographed. Creating an effective portrait means putting a subject at their ease, helping them to give you what they may have been very wary about at first. When you point a rangefinder at someone it somehow seems much less of a barrier and sometimes it even become a talking point. With only 20 minutes or so to take a photograph you need things that work in your favour.

My cameras have to stand up to quite a tough life as I use them day in and day out, taking them everywhere with me. I do upgrade them from time to time and currently carry an M10 and a Q everywhere.

● **You had a solo show in the Los Angeles Leica Gallery earlier this year. Do you often get a chance to work in America?**

I started working on a long term project on the urban American experience, Sidewalk America, soon after getting the ME camera so I visit California fairly frequently. Now I am working on a new project, West of West, with Guardian features writer Laura Barton.

We are looking at life on the 'edge' of America at the end of Route 66 and Santa Monica Pier, exploring what the American West means in an age of political turbulence ... and the West of West hardback book will be published by Unbound next Spring. photographs are different. I have a large archive of my still photographs and there must be many that have never been seen.

The one problem I have is that nobody seems to be collecting digital images centrally. There are national print and negative collections, and the V&A now has the Royal Photographic Society archive: what I found extraordinary is that they said they do not collect digital images.

The early Sunday Times Magazine pictures may well be historically significant now but they were all taken on transparency film and are now beginning to fade: we did not make prints from them in those days. This is why I am scanning and working on most of the important shots, trying to sort them into an organised archive. If any members of the Society have suggestions about ways of making that archive more widely available perhaps they could share them by contacting the Editor.



MORE INFORMATION

There are several portfolios of Sarah's photographs on her website at www.sarahmlee.com and her newspaper work is featured on the Guardian website at www.theguardian.com/profile/sarahlee.

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David Byrne by Sarah Lee