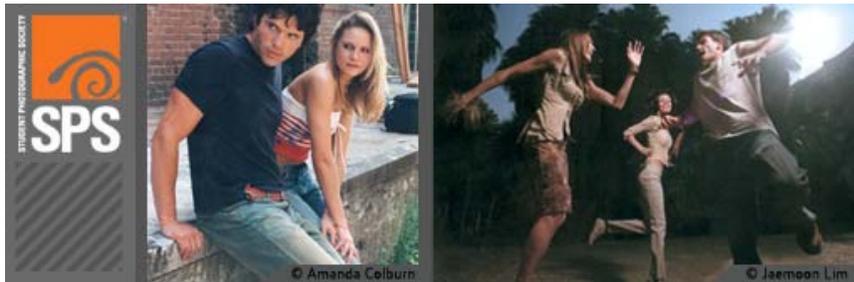


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PHOTO CONVERSATIONS: DARNELL WILBURN

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Darnell Wilburn takes a dream of photo success and runs with it

A well-rounded talent with a background in illustration and writing, Darnell Wilburn is one of the nation's fast-emerging forces in fashion, beauty and editorial photography. His projects range from the executive boardroom to the urban hip-hop scene, covering a truly diverse mix of people. Wilburn's poignant portraits have appeared in national ad campaigns and in some the country's leading magazines.

StudentPhoto.com recently tracked down the Atlanta-based photographer and asked him to share some insights on what it takes to make it in the pro photo business.

StudentPhoto.com: How did you first get involved with professional photography?

Darnell Wilburn: I was the editorial cartoonist for the University of Cincinnati's student paper. As time went on, I got curious about everything to do with print. That meant writing, design and photography. When I first picked up a camera, I thought I'd be a photojournalist, but after shooting a couple of assignments, I knew I wanted to control the action as opposed to just recording it.

At that time, I was a fine arts major focusing in illustration. Having illustrated most of my life, photography was a new challenge. So I switched over and took it up full time both in and out of class. There was a time when I was being published professionally while still pursuing my degree. I had to make the decision to put my education on hold and run with my dream. That led me to Atlanta, with stops in New York and Cleveland.



StudentPhoto.com: What made you decide to focus on editorial and commercial portraiture?

DW: I never got over the excitement of seeing my work in print. I found that the assignments that really piqued my interest leaned toward portraiture. I used to pick up the *Cincinnati* magazine, and Ryan Kurtz shot just about every page. That got me thinking. I really liked how he paid attention to his subjects—the detail, the environment, expressions and lighting. That's where I saw myself. It was just a question of how to get

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there.

StudentPhoto.com: What about the different approaches required by your work? For example, do you approach a shoot differently when you're photographing an executive for a magazine cover vs. photographing the subjects in your "Hood" series?

DW: I love what I do in part because I get to meet so many different people. I know the further along you get, the more you specialize. However, I've learned that specializing too much can be constricting creatively.

My business portraits are my bread and butter. I get more assignments shooting entrepreneurs and executive types than anything else, so I've learned how to interact on a professional level. At the same time, I am segueing into more hip-hop and fashion-oriented work. I'm building my book and trying things that represent each genre but also taking elements from each and applying them to the other to get a different feel beyond what you normally see.

I used to get in trouble with art directors when I'd shoot and process a straightforward portrait assignment in a very stylized way. I've since learned to temper myself and balance the needs and look of the magazine and my own personal tastes. After all, you have to give the client what they want if you expect to keep getting assignments.

StudentPhoto.com: Artistically, what inspires you as a photographer?

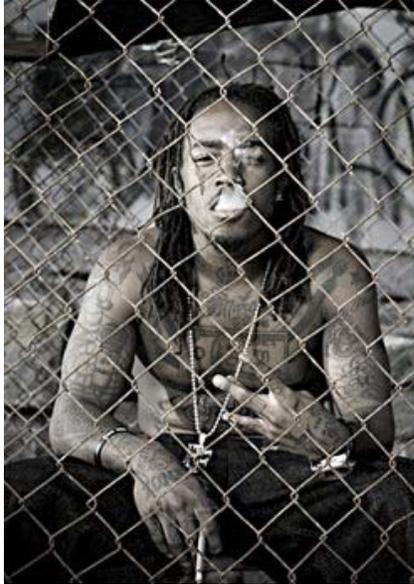
DW: I saw a Gordon Parks exhibit early on in my photographic journey. His work moved me. And it wasn't just one element but the totality of his catalogue—photojournalistic, fashion, portrait, abstract. All were inspiring. Add to that his directing, composing and poetry. I felt that opened up any boundaries I may have placed on myself creatively.

As for what drives my work, it's the love of creation and competition. If you think about your aspirations, you constantly compare yourself to the top people in that particular field, as well as your peers. You study, you learn, you experiment and you try to come up with something that can hold its own in this competitive field. Beyond that, I kind of like the idea of leaving a legacy, taking steps to answer the question, "What do you want to be remembered for?"

StudentPhoto.com: How would you describe your style as a photographer? How did you develop that style?

DW: I like to think my work is an evolution of Baroque and Neoclassical style of paintings. The signature of the artists of those movements, like Caravaggio & **Jacques-Louis David**, was dramatic lighting and composition, two things I consider essential to creating memorable images. I also draw inspiration from a number of modern day photographers like Annie Leibovitz, James Russell, Mark Seliger and Marc Baptiste.

In the beginning I could only afford hot lamps. Diffusion wasn't in my vocabulary at that time either, so hard light it was. The more I experimented and learned, the more I found myself drawn to the simple yet dramatic look of having a single light. I've since become familiar with rim lighting and tend to switch between that and a single light depending on



the subject and desired affect.

StudentPhoto.com: Tell me about how photography has impacted your ability to give back to your community or to particular charities.

DW: I've always had the desire to give back. It's a trait I got from my mom. It has long been a goal of mine to build a school. I've given time back as a mentor as a part of Upward Bound, a program dedicated to helping high school students. When I started getting busier with work, I knew I couldn't dedicate as much time, so I started a scholarship as a way to continue my commitment to education and to helping students.

StudentPhoto.com: Do you think photographers have a particular ability to make a difference in the world around them? Just how powerful are photographic images as tools of promoting awareness and affecting change?

DW: We live in a visual world. So much of what we do is influenced by what we see. Hence the need for photojournalism to enhance a story or commercial images to sell a product. There are numerous historical points of reference. Think of the most poignant stories that have permeated the collective psyche. There are most likely particular photographs attached to those memories. The most effective and memorable images illicit emotion, and in the most extreme cases, can serve as a catalyst for change. To that extent, the photographer who understands the power of imagery and applies it to his particular work will find himself successful in multiple ways.

To see more from Darnell Wilburn, check out www.darnellwilburn.com.



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