



SOUND FOUNDATION

Andy Ryan amasses a notable catalog

BY WILL POLLOCK

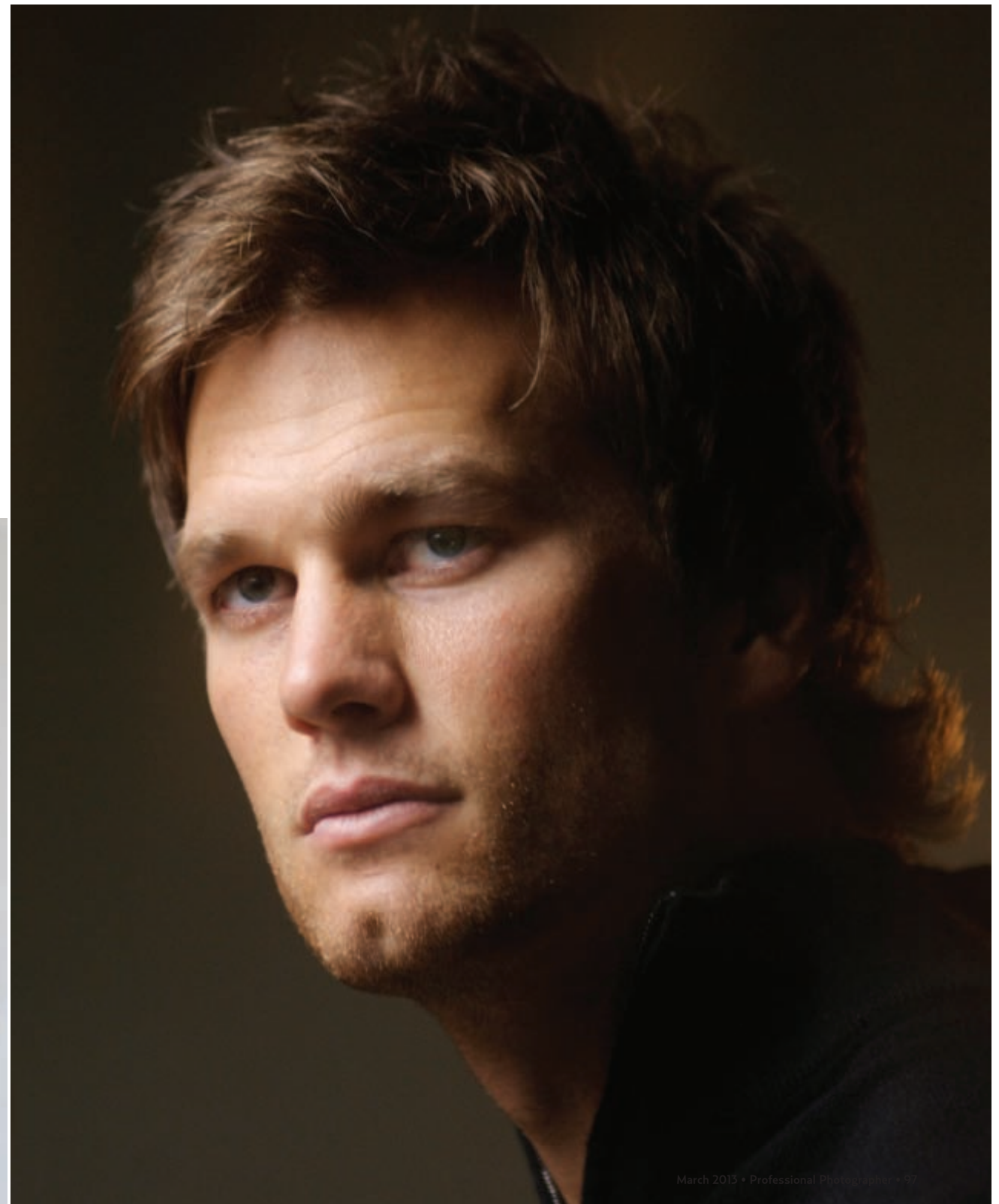
All Images ©Andy Ryan

In 1988, Andy Ryan needed to catch a break. An out-of-work filmmaker, Ryan had returned to his hometown of Boston and found himself down on luck and behind on rent. At the behest of a friend, he applied to a temp agency, a humbling scenario for any artist with delayed dreams. Midway through the interview, the agent's phone rang. Don Kindsvatter,

managing architect at Wallace Floyd Design Group, a subcontractor for Boston's Central Artery Project—also known, perhaps more pejoratively, as the Big Dig. Kindsvatter was seeking a temp who was handy with a copy machine and possessed one additional skill.

"If the worker knew how to take pictures, that would be a plus," Ryan recalls. He grabbed it. Boston was researching an effort

that would eventually involve 150 cranes, 3.8 million cubic yards of concrete, hundreds of separate construction contracts, and many thousands of workers—all in an effort to bury the city's primary artery, I-93, 90 feet below ground. The project included secondary tunnels, parks, green space, and other municipal changes, which would balloon the Big Dig from an initially budgeted



\$2.8 billion to a projected \$22 billion.

When the call came in, the massive project was still in the planning stages. The job entailed photocopying stacks of books and articles on urban planning. Ryan got the gig because the engineers didn't want to have wade through the stack of photographer resumes they had received.

The potential impact of this project, both on the city and on Ryan's career, was not lost on Ryan: "The word got out to the 800 people working on the project that there was a photog-

rapher on the ground. There was a huge need for in-house and public outreach photography. I just started doing it, and I got to the point where I was working seven days a week."

By the time Ryan left the Big Dig in 1996, his portfolio had grown from some 200 transparencies to more than 15,000 slides, transparencies, and prints. He had retained all rights to his shots, too, which would later turn out to be handy when a book publisher came calling.

The volume of work Ryan received through the Big Dig was perhaps less important than

RIGHTS, ROYALTIES ... AND A DEBT TO NEIL SIMON

Agreeing to usage contracts brimming with legalese, can feel akin to promising your first-born child. Any contract that involves restricting the photographer's copyright is cause for concern. Andy Ryan faced this professional dilemma when he emerged as the photographer of record of Boston's Big Dig project, having amassed a vast library of images documenting a historic achievement.

In 2003, Barnes & Noble acquired Sterling Publishing and contacted Dan McNichol, a Big Dig project leader and former colleague of Ryan's, in an effort to launch a book series. The new division was under the direction of a former notoriously hard-nosed Readers Digest executive. When it came down to negotiating the rights for the photography, things got dicey.

"Her view was, the photographer is no different than the copy editor," says Ryan. "She wanted all this photography I'd done for free. There was no way I was going to let that happen.

"I didn't fully realize it at the time, but I had a lot of leverage because I had been covering the project since the late 1980s," he says. He gained a valuable insight when he heard a radio interview with Neil Simon. The playwright was discussing his hit play, then movie, then TV show, "The Odd Couple," which generated very nice income for everyone except its creator. Simon sold the play and all rights for \$3,000. The experience ruined his first marriage, Simon said, and gave him an ulcer for 20 years.

Ryan went entered negotiations with the publisher with that story fresh in my mind. "I had just spent 12 years documenting this project, and she didn't want to pay me anything!"

"As we got close to the deadline, I was very nice, but I was not going to let her have the imagery for the price she wanted. Finally, she caved. I wound up getting the best royalty deal of any book I've ever had published."

The Barnes & Noble rep had downplayed the marketability of the book, predicting only 16,000 or so would be sold. Ryan's response: Deal. He negotiated a rate for the 6,000 print run and a bonus fee for every 10,000 books beyond that. To date, 80,000 copies have been sold.

"I really, really owe Neal Simon," Ryan notes.

the overall lessons imparted. "So much of what I do now has its roots in that time," he says.

After 12 months on the Big Dig, Ryan boldly told his boss he was taking a five-week vacation in China. He arrived in Beijing in June 1989, just as the student-led Tiananmen Square protests had begun. "I showed up Friday night totally jet-lagged, and the next

day, the soldiers were in the street," he says.

He shot stills of the uprising for NBC News.

"I was fighting my way to get into the square, and that night I was photographing the crack-down. I only slept for a few hours the whole five days, and it was intense. You know, I just really learned a huge amount about myself and about photography and about

how events unfold, how things happen.

"The experience in Tiananmen Square transformed me. I understood the importance of history, photography, and how to be in a situation where it's just utter chaos and insanity. That's when I realized that this is what I really loved. It was an extraordinary experience, and it all opened up for me."

PICTURE IN PICTURE: LET THE STAR SHINE

The grandest preparation doesn't guarantee compelling portraits. Sometimes the best shots are spontaneous, as in Ryan's portrait shoot with actress Scarlett Johansson for *US Weekly*. Despite her larger-than-life personality, Johansson has a petite, even ordinary appearance, Ryan says.

Ryan felt it was a lackluster shoot and that he'd blown the job for the client. "I was in a disappointed state, feeling like I'd missed it," he says. "I wanted something extraordinary. You don't have many opportunities to photograph someone of her stature, so you want to really make the most of it. I was really disappointed," he says.

But he did get the money shot after all, only it was during the March scouting round before the main shoot during her tour of Harvard University. "I was there to size her up, get into a groove with her before our shoot and to see how receptive to me and my camera she would be." Ryan drew on his knowledge of architecture, and how the March sun would be bouncing hard off nearby buildings. He made sure the light was behind Johansson, giving her a luminescent glow. That image stunned him later in the studio.

"Sometimes you make a great shot and you see it at 100 percent, and your focus was on the bridge of the nose and the eye isn't sharp," he says. "When I clicked on 100 percent on the eye and looked, I couldn't believe I nailed it. It was tack sharp, right there. And it was the best feeling in the world."

MORE SHOT DETAILS:

LOCATION: Harvard Yard, Harvard University

BODY: Nikon D2x

LENS: 70-210, f2.8

OTHER FACTORS: Mid-morning sun, March, intense depth of field



SPECIAL GENERALIST

Today, Ryan shoots architecture and other projects for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he has amassed a clientele for food, celebrity portrait, advertising, and editorial photography.

Tamar Kaprelian was among the celebrities he shot for Interscope Records. He remembers a long day of shooting, and sensing something novel was to come. “I was trying not to get in the way of her sound engineers because she was recording. We worked really hard to make shots, but what really happened was that magic moment.” Ryan says.

At the end of the shoot, the hot, bright sun

setting behind them, as they got in Kaprelian’s car. Ryan grabbed his camera and started directing in poses with the light behind her. It’s the kind of unplanned opportunity Ryan urges other photographers to be alert to.

“It’s like if you go bodysurfing. You catch the wave, and you’re in it, and now the wave is taking you. It’s about how you recognize where the waves are, how you need to go to grab them and have the strength and ability to swim into them. ... Tamar and I were laughing about it because we had just spent a whole day shooting, and the photo shoot ended up happening in her car,” he says.

In a profession in which specialization is

encouraged, Ryan urges photographers to seek their own path. “It’s seen as a weakness to have versatility, to specialize in more than one type of photography,” he says. “But that’s a very American view. My photographer friends in Europe don’t hold that opinion at all. You have to follow your own path. There are no rules about specializing. The truth is, if you love doing something and you’re doing it well, that’s what you should do. Only you can write your own history.” he says. ■

Andy Ryan’s online portfolio is at andyryanphotography.com.

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