

Copy of Rangefiner magazine's article on David Mecey, by Lou Jacobs, Jr., yr. 2000.

INTERVIEW WITH A PLAYBOY VETERAN

Numerous photographers specialize in pictures of gorgeous, sexy women, and some do classy work that magazines like Playboy publish regularly to the vivid delight of mostly men. But all pretty girl experts are not created equal, and one of the best glamour practitioners is David Mecey who has been a contributing photographer to Playboy for more than 20 years. I once enjoyed a slide show of his images and was so impressed I wrote him a fan letter, and recently I interviewed him for this magazine. While he still shoots for Playboy, he's also collaborating on a new magazine devoted to men's fashion and lifestyle, he instructs performance driving for BMW, Porsche and Ferrari Clubs for thrills, and he's currently planning some photo workshops. Let's get acquainted with David.

Q. Please tell me about your early interests and ambitions in photography.

A. Wow, let's see if I can remember that far back! ☺ Well, it was 1974 and I had just recovered from a motorcycle accident that put me in recovery for about a year. I got a camera at the suggestion of my doctor who was an avid amateur photographer himself, who felt my art background would be a great base for it. So, I bought some gear and began teaching myself photography. I consumed tons of books on photography, experimented constantly with various films and lighting types and basically put myself through "school" with one of the toughest teachers around as my instructor. ME! I was relentless. Spending 20 hr days awake and sleeping only about 4. My learning curve became very steep very quickly too, much because of my insane schedule. I became very good on a fast track. It wasn't long before I became a big fish in a little pond, so to speak. In my first year I won a contest that an automotive magazine held and that gave me the confidence I needed to really pursue photography as a career. I began to shoot for them regularly, as well as, other car books around the country. I cut my teeth, so to speak, editorially by shooting for these car magazines. It was my first taste of travelling and shooting on location. I had no idea how much that lifestyle would later become my whole life! And yes, I've always been sort of a car nut! ☺

Q.How did you make first contact with Playboy? Did you shoot on your own and submit pictures first, or get an assignment?

A. It was around 1976 that I “discovered” women. Through a friend I was hired to photograph his buddy’s daughter and it was at that moment I knew women were MUCH more fun to shoot than cars. (Cars good. Cars fun. Girls, more fun!) After I did her portraits I began to shoot more and more girl “friends” for fun and experience. Then, one fateful night I ran into a young lady who had been a former girlfriend. We decided to do a photo shoot together at a location she knew about, complete with waterfall. The shoot went very well and though it was my first experience photographing a female nude (her suggestion), I handled it with complete aplomb and professionalism. And it was that day I realized I could photograph women with or without their clothes! And so I began to shoot more and more with girls I knew and some I didn’t know, while building a fairly good portfolio of nudes. In early 1979, there was a young lady from Shreveport, LA., who would be my “door opener” into PLAYBOY. She was on her way to Chicago to be tested by PLAYBOY for Playmate, when a photographer friend of mine said he could introduce us. We met and she liked my work and me. We shot together. She carried my film to Chicago and gave it to one of the editors who would later become my boss. Yes, fate does play into life on occasion.

Q. When you received a Playboy assignment in the past, did you usually visit their offices to discuss details? Today, are contacts by phone, fax or e-mail?

A. Honestly, when I first began to shoot for the magazine I was still living in Texas at the time so I would simply get the assignments via phone. That was in 1979. For almost two years I freelanced for the magazine until they hired me as a staff photographer and I moved to Chicago and worked out of PLAYBOY’s headquarters. I lived there through most of the ‘80’s and really began to grow as a photographer the tough way. On the job! But it was such a learning experience to be at the PLAYBOY offices and be the “road” shooter for the magazine. Which is what I quickly became. Being single and capable of leaving on a road trip at the drop of a hat, made me the “go to” guy. Which was fine with me. I was just happy to be at PLAYBOY shooting for the most famous men’s magazine in all the world! Since 1990, I’ve lived in Los Angeles. Photo shoots are now assigned by phone as they were when I first started for PLAYBOY. You might say I’ve come full circle.

Q.Do you have your own studio?

A.I rent space when needed because 90% of my work is done on location. And with the homes you’ll find in the L.A. area, you can’t go wrong shooting there.

Q. Please give me a “short course” on photographing beautiful women. Do you have to find new locations each time? Is there such a thing as a “new” pose? Is posing influenced by the model, the surroundings, and your aesthetic views?

A. Whoa! A “short course” on photographing beautiful women? NO WAY! ☺ Well, I’ll throw you a few items, which you can take or leave. Basically, the first thing I try to do when meeting a new model is to win her trust in both me personally, and, as a photographer. To do that I’m friendly, yet not too friendly. I don’t want her ever thinking she’s a contestant on “the dating game” instead of a model on a photo shoot! I will show her my work to win her over and I will talk to her about my ideas for her shot and ask for her feedback. I think it’s important for the model to be more of a participant than simply being in front of the camera. I try to find interesting locations that will help both in the look of the shot and even with the lighting. By that, I’ll try to find a location that might have a building or some other structure adjacent that might serve as a reflector or even as a background itself. This helps in cutting back on equipment you need to lug around and cuts your time needing to move gear from one spot to another. As for posing, it’s always a work in progress I think. I’m constantly watching how women move and stand, looking for natural movements that might translate into a sexy pose later. And there really aren’t any “new” poses, just new ways to apply them. Poses in places you least expect them will make them appear new though. Because it’s being used in such a diverse way, you see it a little differently. And yes, the model will often move into a pose that will look sexy and different without even trying. I try to allow them room to move and ask that they move very slowly from one position to another. I’m constantly studying each nuance for something exciting. And more often than not, it will eventually show up.

Q. I’m interested in how you light women so smoothly. Is most of the lighting reflected or diffused flash? Do you use soft daylight too?

A. My lighting is whatever I feel works with the model and her location and the mood I’m trying to create at that moment. I might use both reflected and diffused light in the same shot. In fact, I often do. Or, I may use non-diffused, direct light from a strobe or tungsten light or even direct sunlight. In daylight, I most often shoot backlit using white reflectors for fill. Again, it’s whatever I’m trying to create in mood and style at the moment. For PLAYBOY, most of my light is very soft and diffused. Should I shoot for another client, especially one like my magazine, EGO, or say, FHM, MAXIM, GEAR, etc. the lighting will be less diffused, yet still very flattering in its final form. My background, literally my entire mindset on how I photograph women, is based on making them look as beautiful and as sexy as possible. And that’s something I can’t really control. It’s literally etched into the deepest recesses of my brain. Give me a beautiful model, some film, a few hours of daylight and I’m driven to make her look as amazing as I can during that time I have with her.

Q. You've been shooting Playboy college girl features for years. How do you go about it?

A. In 1976/77 David Chan did the first few college layouts on his own until I started splitting the list of schools with him in 1980. David retired in 2000 and Playboy added two other photographers to work on that feature with me. We're each assigned to a set number of colleges. Though an editor is in charge of the project, he/she usually doesn't tag along. We're basically left to our own devices on these shoots. On location I have a makeup artist/stylist and an assistant and we carry a fairly good arsenal of equipment (my own). That includes three 1000 Watt Dynalite powerpacks, 6 fan-cooled heads, several styles of soft boxes, rectangular boxes, strips, etc., a couple "C" stands, reflectors, and an assortment of grip equipment and other styles of light stands. We fly to our locations and rent a minivan or SUV. A week or so ahead of our arrival Playboy buys an ad in the college newspaper about our upcoming interviews, and in two days I narrow the field to about a dozen candidates. I do half-hour mini-tests on each girl the third day, and from those we choose the girls to photograph at locations around the college towns. Shooting takes about three more days, after which time we move on to the next college where the procedure is repeated. In March 2001, I interviewed and shot in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida. The film is shipped to a lab in Los Angeles, and slides are returned to me on the road where I do a first edit, then send the film to the editor in Chicago. There are no re shoots. We have to come back with usable images in every town, which is always an incentive not to screw-up!

Q. Have you considered doing tests with a digital camera?

A. I've experimented with only a few digital cameras. And though it might be a way to go in the future, for now, Playboy still prefers images on film. The film in Chicago is digitally archived. I think editors still prefer sorting through trays and tossing the "outs" on the floor though!

Q. Is photographing beautiful women a major part of your professional life, even when Playboy is not the client?

A. I also shoot for swimsuit and lingerie manufacturers' catalogs, and I've shot covers for American Photo, editorial for Forbes, and the swimsuit issue of the old Sport magazine four times. I've shot celebrities for movie studios, for promos, ads, etc., and assignments for ad agencies. Clients have included Allstate Insurance, Lowry's seasonings, and various camera companies. For well over a dozen years I've done lectures and seminars for the Tamron / Bronica Company all around the country, and I've been a speaker at the Hunt Show in Boston, and also at the Minolta booth at Photo-East in NYC. Recently, I shot a rather nice "Women of the South" calendar for a wine and cigar bar down in Baton Rouge, LA. It will be on sale nationally for 2003, using all Southern girls. It looks gorgeous.

Q. What 35mm equipment do you use now?

A. I've switched to the Minolta Maxxum9 and I love it – and yes, I purchase them myself. A Minolta rep found I was using the Maxxum9 and I was invited to several photo shows in 2000 because of it. My lenses include a 14 mm f/2.8, 28-105 f/2.8, 70-210 f/2.8, and a 300 mm f/2.8. I also use the Bronica 6x4.5 Etrsi medium format camera and I love it too. With the quality of scans and printing today, it's really not that necessary to shoot anything larger. (Unless the client dictates it!)

Q. This may be a touchy subject, but what can you tell people who insinuate that your kind of photography exploits women? Do you hear such comments?

A. Strangely enough, I hear it every year when I'm on the road to photograph college girls. I'm interviewed at every stop by local TV stations or newspapers, and I always try to answer it pretty much the same way: I'm a photographer whose expertise is making women look beautiful and sexy on film. PLAYBOY is the premiere magazine for presenting my photographs of this style, and we offer these women an opportunity to model, and yes, to be paid, and their photographs to appear in PLAYBOY. Girls try out of their own free will and if they feel it's something appropriate for them, the decision whether to pose nude or not is left up to them. I don't dictate to them and neither should the nay-sayers.

Q. You've told me you're photo director of EGO, a new magazine, and I'd like some details.

A. A writer-friend and I spent the better part of a year-and-a-half putting together the first three bi-monthly issues of EGO, a men's lifestyle magazine, similar to the look you may have seen in Gear, GQ and maybe even a little Esquire. Our layouts include beautiful women, mostly movie and TV stars, but there's no full frontal nudity (ala PLAYBOY), and only hints at other body features. Look at current fashion ads and you'll see pretty much of what's in EGO. We also deal with literature, art, travel, cars, etc., for men 25 to 45. It's very cool. I shot the first two covers, and also shoot pictures for stories dealing with auto racing – I'm the car nut, remember? – and I do pictorials on travel. Shooting for EGO has helped me open myself up, away from the well known Playboy style, and do what I feel is my own true personal style. As of late 2000, our national distribution was about 80,000 copies per issue, and they pretty much sold out. But, we were under funded and we've spent this year searching for a publisher and additional funding to help us move forward. My editors at Playboy have seen EGO and were enthusiastic and excited about my venture into publishing I'm happy to say.

Q. Assuming you own rights to enough of your pictures, will you try collecting them in a book someday?

A. I'll probably do a book some day. I tried one in the early 90s without success, although I've been told the man with whom I dealt did in fact without my knowledge, publish a book we had been collaborating on. I've never seen it, but I've been told it's out of print. It was titled Beautiful. I have no idea where he is, nor do I know how much he made on it! At the same time, I'm also thinking of a couple other ventures that might be other avenues to share my work with the people as well. I'll have to let you know more about that once I've put the deal in motion. It's very exciting though.

Q. What sort of pictures do you shoot for yourself?

A. Pictures for myself are still mostly of women. The images have a more editorial look to them though, and I tend to shoot more wide angle in my personal work. Hanging on my walls at home are a cover photo I did for Japanese Playboy from the 80's, which was hand colored (one of a signed and numbered set of two ever printed), a recent image I shot in the desert of actress/Playmate Jaime Bergman, and a series on a model shot using tungsten film in daylight. There are also a few B&W portraits of actors I've photographed. I'm hoping that if EGO continues to become more of a presence in the marketplace, that it will help me grow as a photographer. It allows me to challenge myself and adventure into new directions. However, I still would like to maintain a relationship with Playboy because I love what I do for them (it's been my life for over 20 years!). I guess I should also mention my plans for a very special type of seminar, sort of a training camp series for the advanced amateur we're trying to put together now. FotoFantasyCamp will be photographic workshops, and I'm looking for a location now for the first one that may be in the Florida Keys, Cayman Islands, or Puerto Rico. It would be limited to about a dozen photographers, two models, and a makeup person. We're still figuring out how long the workshops will run and how much each will cost. Stay tuned...

Q. Who are some photographers whose work you admire?

A. Let's see, I dig Hiro's large format stuff, so clean and graphic. Same goes for Dennis Monarchy out of Chicago, always a nice use of vivid, saturate colors. Then of course, Richard Fegley of Playboy. I've always admired his work and to be totally honest, secretly tried to create a style somewhat similar to his. I also like Alberto Tolot for beauty, Mario Testino for fashion, and Michael Grecco for editorial portraits. And I respect the heck out of all the shooters out there who've made photography their life-long career!

Ed-Playboy and its founder Hugh Hefner started an evolution in magazines by combining the vicarious thrills of viewing beautiful women both nude and semi-nude. With his contribution, David Mecey has been in the forefront of that pictorial and social change.