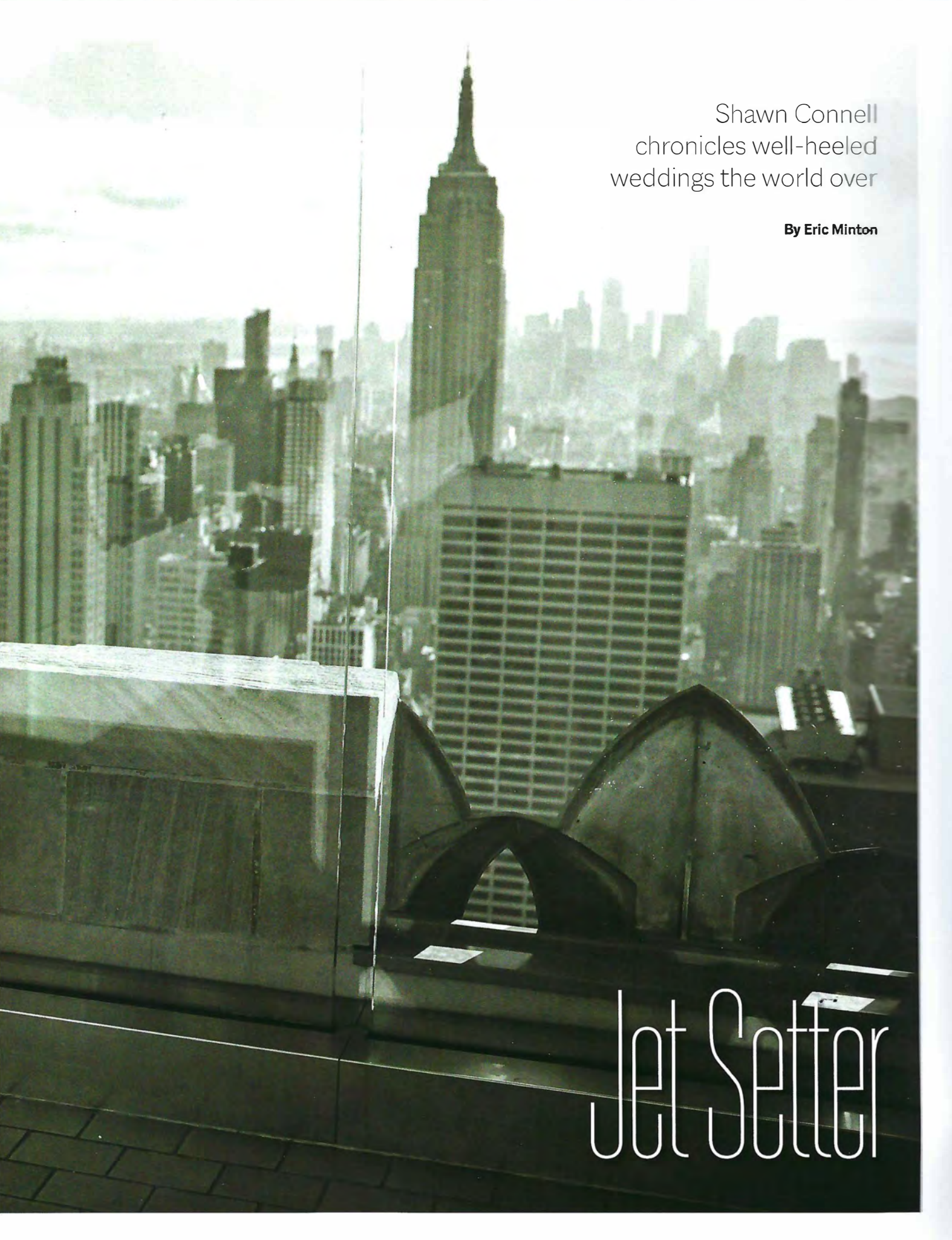




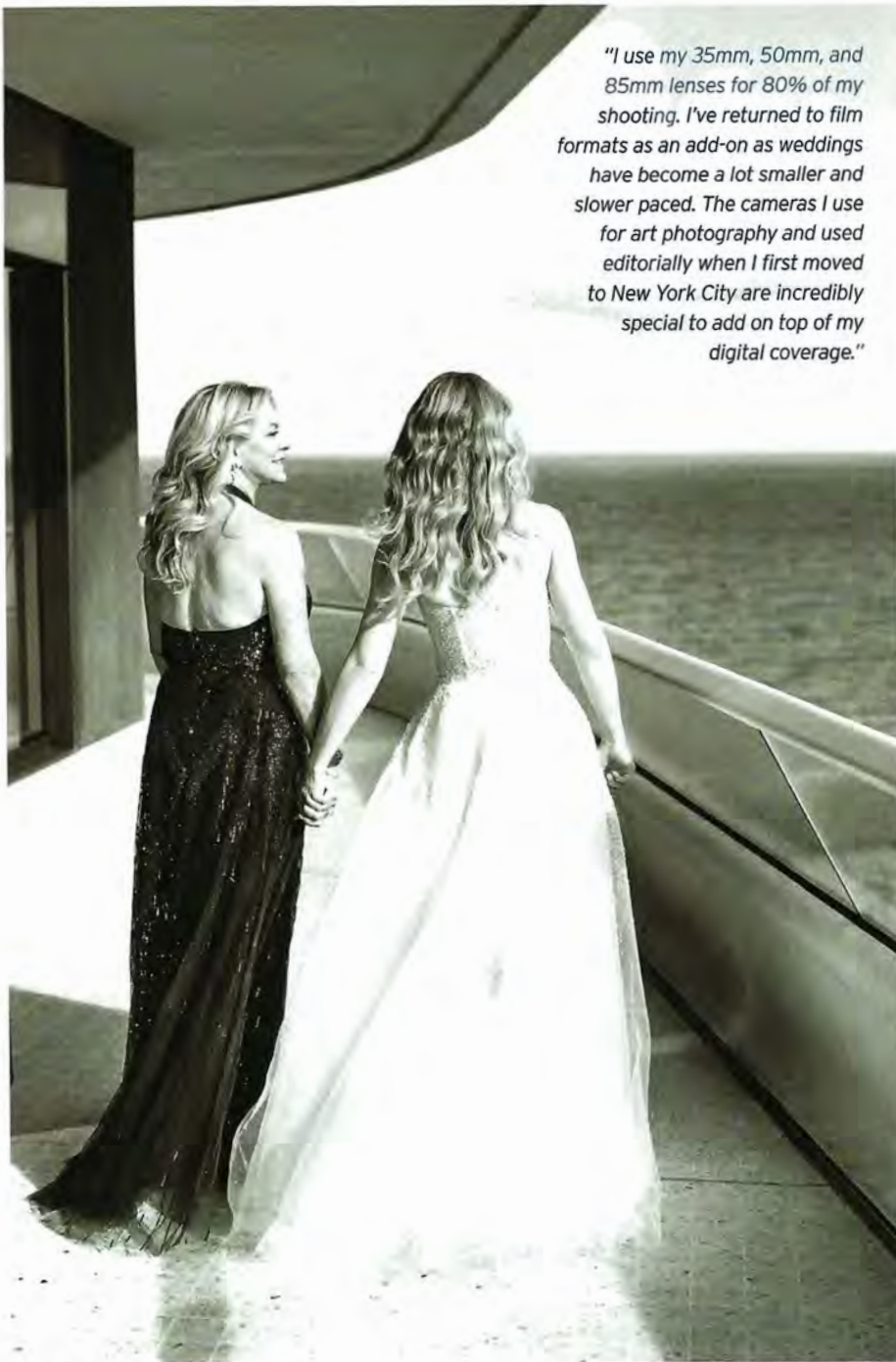
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Shawn Connell
chronicles well-heeled
weddings the world over

By Eric Minton

Jet Setter



"I use my 35mm, 50mm, and 85mm lenses for 80% of my shooting. I've returned to film formats as an add-on as weddings have become a lot smaller and slower paced. The cameras I use for art photography and used editorially when I first moved to New York City are incredibly special to add on top of my digital coverage."

Gear Bag

- Two Canon EOS 5D Mark IV camera bodies
- Lenses: 35mm f/1.4, 50mm f/1.2, 85mm f/1.4, 100mm macro, 24-70mm, 80-200mm, 16-35mm f/2.8, 17mm tilt shift
- Canon Speedlite 580EX flash
- Two Canon EOS 5D Mark III camera bodies with wide-angle lenses and PocketWizard triggers for remote shooting, especially during the ceremony.

lick "Montana" in the pull-down portfolio menu of wedding photographer Shawn Connell's website. The page features an outdoor celebration on the range: gorgeous bride, handsome groom, the happy couple stroking a horse amid a field of tall grass, bouquet-bearing bride emerging from the ranch house, the couple exchanging vows under brooding storm clouds, the newly married couple strolling down a dirt road into a Rocky Mountain valley under fading light. In one heart-melting image, the couple nuzzle outside the reception tent, with ghostly figures of family and friends visible through the translucent tent walls. It's an image of both intimate and communal love.

Connell embraces three personalities on wedding assignments: the bride, the groom, and the place. "I try to get to my job a couple of days early and get to know the location and know where the light's coming from," says the Australian-bred, New York City-based destination wedding photographer. "I immerse myself and be as excited about that location as the client, who is spending a lot of money to be there and bring their closest friends."

Each of Connell's wedding portfolios contain these common ingredients but are singular in their personalities, from the *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*-outfitted wedding party at a Loire Valley chateaux in central France to the jazz-flavored wedding in New Orleans. His website includes two Lake Como, Italy, weddings. In one, the azure jacketed couple snuggles on the grounds of the Villa del Balbianello, and the wedding party arrives in a procession of aqua umbrellas. In the other, the bridal party arrives by speedboat, and the festivities emit a glow of soft golden light into the deep blue dusk of the mountain-environed lake. In Denmark, the casually elegant couple lovingly cavort in the rooms and on the grounds of Valdemars Slot Castle. In Santorini, Greece, the bride glances back at Connell's camera as the groom holds her close, both of them bathed in a glowing light off the Aegean Sea.

About half of Connell's 30 weddings a year are in premier New York locations: The Metropolitan Museum, the Rainbow Room, the New York Public Library. At Spring Street Studios, the groom readies for the wedding by playing pool while the bride poses for her first look portrait on a rooftop—a metal grate her stage,

A Pause on Grand Nuptials

COUPLES SCALE BACK IN 2020

COVID-19 has essentially brought the grand-scale wedding business, Shawn Connell's specialty, to a standstill. He normally does 30 weddings per year; he did a handful before the pandemic hit the United States in the spring, and 15 have been moved to next year. With his 2021 calendar filling up, he has fewer open dates for new bookings. "I'm taking a pretty big hit financially this year and next year," he says.

Also changing is the size and scope of weddings. The weddings that have shifted to the end of this year have been reconceived as micro ceremonies. "It's going to be a very interesting dynamic how that will play out," Connell says. Fewer events per wedding and shorter guest lists will challenge photographers both in terms of being creative and in the logistics of not being annoying.

"I don't know how our industry will change," he says. "It's going to be a different event; it won't be big dance parties. It's going to be very different times, and photographers need to navigate that and still be able to get work while seeing [the pandemic] through. I think we'll still be getting incredible images, it's just different images. And be mindful of what an honor it is to be chosen to be in this intimate group."

Since Connell gets his work through wedding planners, he has to trust those planners to continue making these events special just as they trust him to produce special images of those scaled-back events. That relationship is a lifeline for his business. "Even in these crazy times, we are getting calls from planners."



the geometric mishmash of Brooklyn's cityscape the backdrop.

"Honestly, my specialty is brides telling me what they want and what they are into, and I work it," Connell says. "I don't have a formula. It's like, go and get amazing images. That's it. I get a massive rush producing amazing images in limited time in crazy situations."

Let's qualify that phrase, *crazy situations*. Connell works the weddings of New York City's moneyed elite: the rich though not necessarily famous. "Forty percent of my stuff I'm not allowed to talk about," Connell says. "They are very wealthy and like their privacy." He describes working with 10 wedding planners screaming into their walkie-talkies. "It's the most beautiful girls in the most beautiful gowns and the best planners in the world putting on the most incredible productions. On top of that, I get to go to the most beautiful places in the world." He works only through referrals, mostly from wedding planners, with whom he's built incredibly loyal relationships over more than 10 years.

The planners also get his work published. "If I deliver them beautiful images that I know the magazines want to have—that are inspiring and with a lot of interesting stuff going on and lovely—they get published." Connell's images have appeared in *Martha Stewart Weddings*, *Town & Country*, *Vogue*, and many wedding magazines. "Personal relationships, having those planners, is really paying off right now," Connell says, right now being during the coronavirus pandemic.

To meet the photography demands, Connell hires as his assistants young photographers with the Associated Press, Reuters, and *The New York Times*—as well as established still-life photographers, "who need time and quiet. They come in two hours before."

Connell gets to work two days before the wedding, looking for places imbued with creativity and dramatic lighting. "So many nooks and crannies," he says. "I'll scout the place, go through the whole house, the whole property. I find the best 10 or 12 spots." He draws cartoons positioning the couple, but the resulting images are not posed. "I run the couple through [the locations], laughing and giggling, and in 15 minutes I've got an amazing set of images that are light-beautiful compositions of a very happy couple. It's loving and full of life because they haven't been worn



out, they haven't been posing. It's like being a sports photographer. They don't have time to think, I don't have time to think, but I know where the lighting is and what lens to use."

Connell says he doesn't have a formula, but one emerges: place plus people times logistical ease equals drama and interest. "You put them in the space, and the picture takes itself."

WHERE DREAMS ARE MADE

Connell grew up in Manly Beach on Sydney Harbor and picked up a camera when he was

15. His father allowed him to build a darkroom in the backyard. Connell told his art teacher at the time that he wanted to be a photographer in New York. In college he connected with a mechanic who worked for P&O Cruises, and almost overnight he was on a ship, circumnavigating the world with moneyed English ladies and gentlemen. "We were encouraged to mingle with the passengers, allowed up deck and below deck." When the ship was in port, Connell got the day off and, camera in hand, explored the locales.

Back in Australia he worked at an advertising agency and photographed weddings on weekends. Through a friend, he landed an assignment to photograph the wedding of the prime minister's daughter. He still had his sights set on New York—"I was 29 years old and wanted to work with the top photographers in the world," he says—and looking up the best of the best on the web, Connell flew to New York with eight interviews lined up. He landed with Christian Oth Studio, where he worked for 14 years before starting his own

How Shawn Connell Got the Shot

ANATOMY OF AN IMAGE

DATE: March 9, 2019

LOCATION: The Carlyle Hotel, New York City

SUBJECT: Bride Ruthie getting ready

EQUIPMENT: Two Canon EOS 5D Mark IVs, one with a 35mm lens and the other with a 50mm,

both ready on about f/2.8 aperture priority

PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE: "Shooting in New York City, especially in winter and indoors, is incredibly challenging. I take note of any natural light, and when Ruthie was walking to the bathroom to grab something, I asked her to pause for a second. I got two frames. To shoot a white dress into light, I always open up two stops quickly by using the 5D back wheel. The dress was custom made for her by Vera Wang, and Ruthie comes from the fashion/editorial world. It was important to get a clear, full-length shot of the dress. I prefer portraits of people while they are in motion, especially natural movement. The image becomes dynamic and more interesting, and all stiffness disappears."



studio two years ago. Connell also spent three years traveling the world as an assistant to celebrity fashion photographer Ruven Afanador.

Connell seems to have taken an opportunist track to a dream come true. However, there's more to the 15-year-old Connell telling his art teacher he wanted to be a photographer in New York.

"Back then I had a speech impediment, and you couldn't really hold a conversation with me." Connell stuttered throughout his childhood and into his adulthood. Through sheer

determination, he overcame the impairment.

"Stuttering is something you do when you try to stop stuttering," he says, no hint of a stutter in this conversation. "I'd talk to 100 people a day and make 100 phone calls a day, and I'd tell people I stutter. I spent years working on my speech. Having a speech impediment teaches you to keep working at it, and each day you get a little bit better, and one day it doesn't own your life anymore. Same with photography. If you work very hard, you can go a long way. Every day opens

for you." That reflects his drive to become expert in lighting, composition, and equipment that achieves amazing images.

His speech impediment also accounts for his philosophical underpinning. "As a child, I couldn't talk, or it was too hard to talk. People couldn't understand me. So you watch human interaction. As a photographer, you watch the family interactions, being attuned to people's emotions and recording it in a way that is not intrusive but a way that is very meaningful, in a way that makes them very grateful." •

