

The **Digital Camera** interview

Documentary photographer **Nick Danziger**

He's a Renaissance man who wins the trust of everyone from AIDS orphans to Tony Blair. **Nick Danziger** discusses his passion for people with **Geoff Harris**



Blair at war

Taken in 2003 as part of the Blair at War collection. "A lot of people think Blair is admiring his own reflection, but in fact he's looking at George Bush. It's very fitting. I was in the right place at the right time and Bush didn't pay any attention to me."



Parkhead, Glasgow (above)

"These kids were playing in a broken fire hydrant – every time the fire brigade fixed it, they'd break it again. Parkhead was one of the few places I've been to where I needed a chaperone. Scary!"

Interview Nick Danziger

Profile

- Nick Danziger was born in 1958.
- He published the best-selling Danziger's Travels in 1982.
- He went on to write other award-winning books and direct documentary films.
- He's won first prize in the World Press Photo awards (portrait division) and his 'Blair at War' collection was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery.

Do you blame your lack of photographic success on your amateur-level SLR and lens? If so, Nick Danziger would like a quiet word. Danziger – a world famous travel writer and photojournalist – shot images that ended up on the cover of Newsweek magazine using nothing fancier than an Olympus E-410 SLR (yours for £300 online). We interview a lot of pros in this magazine who claim to 'travel light' but Danziger really does, packing nothing more convoluted than a couple of modest Olympus SLR bodies and fast lenses. He even tries to avoid using a tripod.

Social conscience

It's no exaggeration to say that Nick Danziger is one of the finest photojournalists this country has ever produced. He's a naturally gifted visual storyteller with a strong social conscience, following in the tradition of Bill Brandt, Don McCullin and Sebastiao Salgado. Socially committed writers and

filmmakers like George Orwell and Ken Loach have also had a huge influence.

Yet Danziger is very much his own man, with his own vision – a Renaissance Man in the truest sense, as he's also an accomplished writer and documentary film maker. Danziger studied fine art and was beginning to enjoy some success as an artist before finding fame as a travel writer-cum-photographer. "When my first book, Danziger's Travels came out, it became an immediate best seller. I wanted to go back to painting but the publishers wanted more." Book and press commissions came thick and fast, and Danziger found himself covering subjects as diverse as Saddam Hussein's war on Iraqi Kurds and social deprivation in East Anglia.

Indeed, one of his most famous books is Danziger's Britain. This is a fascinating chronicle of the ups and downs of modern British life (see Behind the Picture, on page 115) and a reminder of his determination to reveal



Nick Danziger/NB pictures



Nick Danziger/NB pictures

India (top)

Following the death of his father from AIDS, Ayaz has to work ten-hour shifts to support his family. "I like returning to big stories, such as AIDS. When I took this shot in 2005, there was a big stigma attached to AIDS in India."

Russia (above)

Another haunting AIDS-related image, this time of an abandoned child in a Russian orphanage. "I shot the child from behind as I wanted to convey the context, and to keep a sense of anonymity." »

In the bag

Nick Danziger is a dyed-in-the-wool Olympus user, both film and digital. He is particularly fond of the E3 and E410 digital SLRs and has also used digital compacts. He favours fast, non-telephoto lenses such as the Olympus 14-35 and 35-100mm f/2 models. He also uses a 12-80mm lens and a standard UV filter for protection with all lenses.





Interview Nick Danziger

poverty and social justice at home as well as overseas.

Focus on people

He turned 50 this year, but Danziger claims he's now more driven, more committed, than he was when he started his professional photographic career.

"I'd always been interested in pure landscape photography, but the big change came when I realised that it wasn't so 'stunning' to live in some of these 'stunning' places I was sent to photograph! My whole outlook changed. I've become much more interested in people, and how they live in a place. I focus on the people first, the place second. Even with my environmental work, the focus is on people."

It soon becomes clear that this absolute focus on the subject is key to understanding Danziger's approach to photography.

"I rarely use flash or lighting in my portrait work and try to rely the ambient light. This is also one of the reasons I like black and white. It focuses the mind on

the subject. Colour can get in the way, and I want everything focussed down to the person. Of course, colour can be valid, and I do use it, but it sometimes adds an extra dimension."

We've referred to Danziger as a photojournalist, and while he has no problems with this label, he's not preoccupied with some ideal of journalistic objectivity. "My work isn't objective – it's difficult to stand back from all I see. How can you be objective when you're photographing a starving woman? I'm there to tell a story, but I also try to understand the particular mechanisms that have put her in this predicament. Wherever you go, there are

Luanda, Angola

"The kids in this shot saw my two colleagues and myself with stills camera, video camera and sound boom and came back with the 'cameras and sound equipment' made from the local rubbish dump!"

always a combination of factors that create the context."

The Blair years

It's clear that Danziger is a passionate, driven man who's convinced that photography can still make a difference in our media-saturated age. "I'll give you an example. I did a project for Oxfam to raise awareness of an imminent famine in the Horn of Africa. Some of my images were picked up by the big TV stations, and the money started rolling in – to date they've raised over £1 million."

Yet, paradoxically, he's also able to remove himself from the equation when photographing famous politicians and

Danziger on his subject matter

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Behind the picture Leiston Suffolk



LEAPING DOG

"He's not throwing the dog, he's actually exercising it by throwing it a frisbee! When I noticed this, I shot on a 21mm lens, fully open, from the opposite corner of the room. Shutter speed was 60-125th/sec."

LIGHTING

"As with most of my black and white work, I only used the available light when taking this image – no flash equipment or studio lights were used."

DANZIGER'S BRITAIN

"This image featured in my book Danziger's Britain. I was taken to see this guy by a social worker. He'd come down to Suffolk from Scotland in search of work. He was very stoned on something!"

Nick Danziger/NB pictures

other celebrities – the classic example being his 'fly on the wall' shots of Tony Blair. The subsequent collection, Blair's War, was shown at the National Portrait Gallery. "I didn't direct these shots, how could I? With Blair, I had to be quick on my toes, almost like a sportsman... You really do have to subsume yourself and be like a fly on the wall. When people are working they tend to forget about you, so I think after a while, he wasn't bothered about me."

Wasn't he ever tempted to take Blair to one side and discuss the deteriorating situation in one of the many trouble spots he's photographed? "No, I had a job to do, and I was there to make pictures. The only time Blair and I got into a conversation about such things was with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel."

Photography matters

At the beginning of this interview, we referred to Danziger's determination to keep things simple, equipment-wise, and his enduring affection for Olympus cameras. Why does he stick with the

brand at a time when many pros seem to be changing to Canon or Nikon? "I love fast lenses, and with both film and digital, the Olympus lenses are of excellent quality. Olympus offers good service, particularly when it comes to replacement, all over the world. I also like to use Olympus SLRs because they're quite light and discrete. I've even had a go with the Olympus compacts and got some great results. The size issue is an important one. In some places I shoot, you don't want to draw attention to yourself!"

So what challenges are left for Danziger? "I'm trying to return to the same people I photographed for the charity World Vision in 2005 on a United Nations Millennium Development Goals project. Unfortunately World Vision aren't able to fully fund the follow-up, so I'm trying to raise the cash myself." Hopefully some rich organisations or philanthropists will read this interview and get in touch... 📷

SEE MORE of Danziger's images at www.nickdanziger.com

Be inspired Danziger's tips

- Be engaged with your subject, but at the same time be considerate – you are the guest.
- Think about combining the composition of the shot with the context of where you're taking it. The two shouldn't be separated.
- For my kind of work, I try to use natural light wherever possible. It's more natural!
- Ask permission to get in close. It's much better than trying to shoot people farther away.
- I only use Photoshop very sparingly as I believe I shouldn't add or remove anything from the kind of portraits I take. I just use software for dodging and burning in black and white for example.