

Tommy Colbert's Wedding Moments

by Lou Jacobs Jr.

Tommy Colbert is an outstanding wedding photographer in the New England area whose bailiwick, he says, includes Boston, MA; Newport, RI; Cape Cod, MA; and New York City. What these areas have in common for Tommy is a clientele that appreciates his modern style of wedding photography as well as his outgoing personality. Tommy believes that with constantly evolving digital technology, "There's literally nothing we cannot create or manipulate." And he proves it with the innovative albums he designs for his clients.

Tommy discovered the joys of photography at age 14 while snapping attractions during a family trip to Denver, CO, and went on to join his high school photography club where he honed the basics.

His pleased parents bought him a Nikon FM2, which nicely encouraged his photography efforts. By age 18 he was running a microfilm company darkroom where he also processed his personal photographs "that were a lot more exciting than blueprints of old buildings," he recalls.

At 21 he moved from Boston to New York and for a few months worked as a second and third assistant on fashion shoots, but wasn't paid enough to make ends meet. Then he heard that a new sports gym, called Sports Training Institute, catering to upper echelon exercisers, was looking for personal fitness trainers. Though he had little experience in the fitness field, they offered to train him. During this period he declares, "I was introduced to a lot of influential people. For example, I trained Jane Fonda years before she wrote her first fitness book; plus Kris Kristofferson, Don Imus and more who became friends, and helped open new doors."

At Sports Training Institute some of Tommy's clients were writers who helped him improve his vocabulary and articulation skills. "My most influential mentor was a dapper gentleman, author Gay Talese, who wrote about my personal training escapades in the *New York Times Sunday Mag-*



azine. That introduced my services to an even more celebrated clientele overnight, and I decided to start my own photography business in a downtown Manhattan loft. For several years I juggled personal fitness training with my first love, photography. But the latter was phased out because I was making 10 times more money with my own company, One-on-One Personal Fitness."

That success lasted about seven years, until Tommy's mother passed away and he returned to Boston to be with his dad. During that period he met the woman who would become the mother of his first child, a daughter named Felicia, and decided to stay in New England. As a work substitute, he started to shoot weddings for friends and family, and he "muddled through" for a couple of years without a studio, shooting traditional weddings. In 1995 Tommy was inspired by Denis Reggie who he discovered was using basically the same portable lighting setup he used, a Metz strobe with a Stofen 80/20 Light Modifier and a Hasselblad camera.

He explains, "Actually, I had a Bronica 645 with a motor-drive grip when it dawned on me there was a photojournalist inside me yearning to emerge. Shooting weddings in a non-traditional format—capturing moments, as opposed to creating them—was the key. Shortly thereafter I hung out a shingle at my home, which I have since expanded by adding a small studio, sales and digital production areas."

When a good friend in the business, Peter Silowan, took Tommy to his first photography convention, he heard Joe Buissink and realized, "Joe's unobtrusive style

coupled with his quiet, dynamic personality set him apart in the photojournalism category. I told Peter that Joe shoots from a distance and captures fleeting moments that brides would most

likely not realize happened. Peter said I was already getting some similar shots because I didn't know the rules of traditional wedding portraiture. By then I had my first digital camera, a Nikon D1, and usually grabbed my favorite pictures of the day with it."



Asked how he developed the clientele he craved Tommy responded, "Web site, web site, web site. I can't say how important it is to showcase your work and give potential clients information about your photographic philosophy, your accomplishments and your price range. Local advertising misses many potential clients. Couples worldwide are learning to look at photographers' web sites before their big event.

"Dan Spellman from Pebblehaven, my hosting company, worked closely with me to design my web site, and over the years we've tweaked the site to keep up with the constantly changing wedding world. I once sent out hundreds of promo pieces. Now my web site offers much more information and has resulted in far more responses. I know that clients who call liked the work I display, and more importantly, didn't choke on my prices." Tommy's prices, posted on his web site, start at \$5000 and graduate to \$8000.



Tommy explains that after initial contact, "We usually meet, and I do a comprehensive sales presentation for each potential client that includes a 20-minute digital slide show or PowerPoint presentation, followed by a segment where they can flip through many sample albums. Then we discuss prices and packages, and since they have seen prices on my web site, my fee is not an issue."

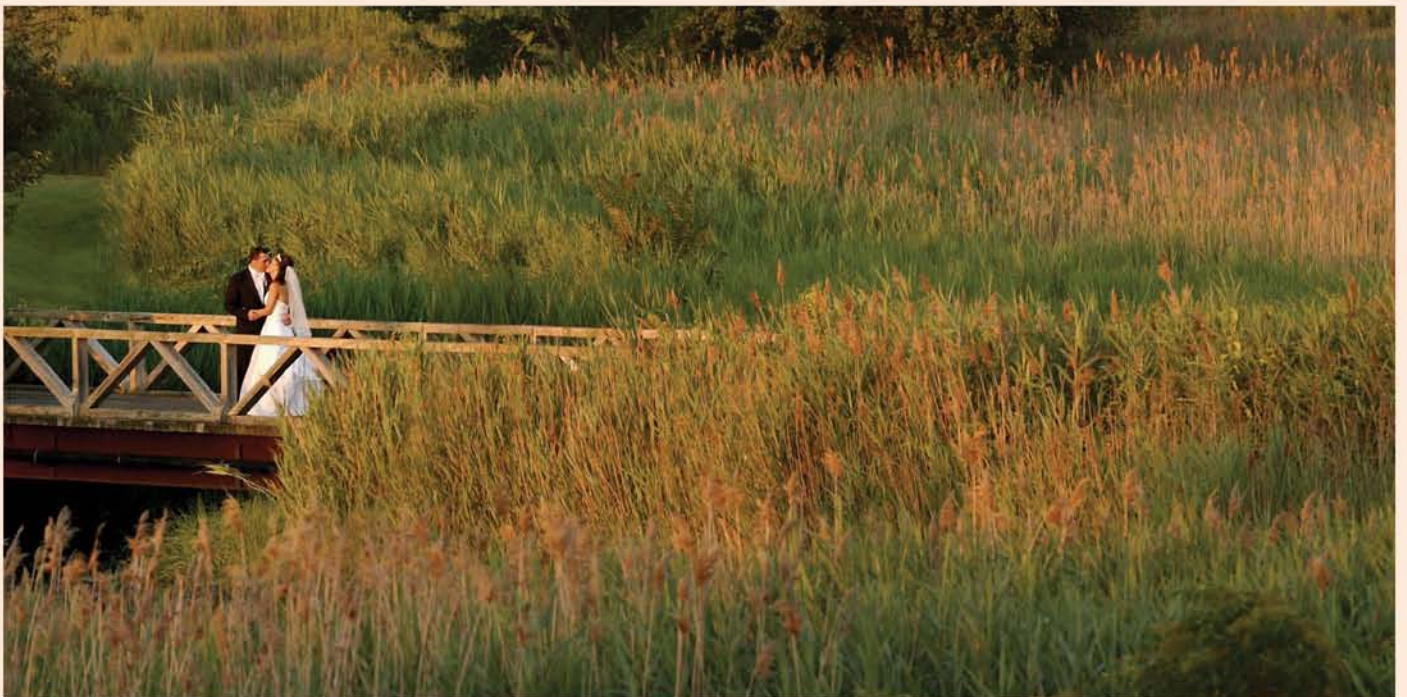
Tommy believes the photojournalistic wedding style be-

came popular because brides want their albums to be a little more artistic and different from traditional albums. He admits that initially his less affluent clientele didn't appreciate the style as much

as those in the upper strata. He found himself directing brides from "blue collar" families, but more affluent brides were usually in leadership positions, and didn't need to be directed. They simply wanted to have a good time, and have the event documented as it unfolded.

"Every wedding I shoot is different," he states. "In the past all my albums looked the same except for the faces. Photojournalistic coverage has turned my albums into what one client called, 'a unique combination of fresh storytelling, coupled with brilliant artistic expression.' Tommy feels that though the photojournalistic style has caught on widely, traditionalists attempt to keep up by shooting what they call "candid" pictures. "They may shoot 25-30 percent of their photographs as candid, but they take full control of situations the rest of the day."

About his post-production activities Tommy says, "When I



return from a wedding, I download all my images and burn two DVDs, and then copy everything to an external drive. I keep four working copies of my originals because you can never back yourself up too much." In Photoshop he downsizes the files and eventually sends the bride and groom from 1000 to 1500 images on a disk, along with instructions for editing. He asks couples to choose 50 to 100 photographs for their album. Then he and an assistant methodically design a series of 12x24-inch pages over a period of days. Page layouts are emailed to couples for whatever changes they want before he sends his album files via the Internet to Charlie and Kimberly Poole at Natural Color Lab located in a Boston suburb.

"They bend over backwards to accommodate my ever-changing requests," Tommy explains. Album pages are printed on 12x24-inch Fuji Crystal Archive photographic paper and form the basis of 12x12-inch pages laid out meticulously. Some photos are in color, some in black and white and some in sepia. Post-production work takes the better part of



a week. One of Tommy's staff specializes in album creation and Photoshop manipulations.

He often shoots two or three weddings, Friday through Sunday, and he has worked weddings that last all weekend in a resort location. After couples book with Tommy, he meets with them a week before their wedding, sometimes to scout the venue, and to be reacquainted with them. He gets together with some clients from out of state for the first time in the week before their big day.

On days off Tommy and his daughters, Felicia, now 13, and Sophia, four months, may travel to a lake for some water sports or to the beach. To better acquaint yourself with Tommy Colbert and his work, tune into his web site, www.tommycolbert.com/, where you may also read his very informative article on wedding photojournalism.



Lou Jacobs Jr. is the author of 28 how-to photography books, the latest of which is Studio Lighting (Amherst Media). He has taught at UCLA and Brooks, and his photographs and stories have been published in numerous magazines. He is a longtime member of ASMP and enjoys shooting stock during his travels in the U.S. and abroad, which is leased through several agencies.