

JIM HERRINGTON

# Every photo tells a story



*Meet Jim Herrington, a passionate photographer from New York City, who grew up on a diet of great storytelling and his father's collection of Life Magazines. Both have had an immense impact on him as a photographer and encouraged him to always look for the good story in his assignments. Jim has worked with some of the biggest stars in music and entertainment, including the Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, and Dolly Parton. However, what always seems to captivate people the most is his warm and heartfelt documentation of some of the world's finest and most iconic rock climbers and mountaineers. Jim was kind enough to sit down and share a few of his best photos and stories with us. Two hours never went by so fast.*

## How did you first get interested in photography?

My dad had a collection of old Life Magazines from the '30s and '40s. I remember looking through those when I was very young, marveling at the people, places, and things depicted in black and white with full bleed. It gradually dawned on me that the photos didn't just happen, somebody went out and made those photographs. This sounded like the life for me, traveling far and wide, hobnobbing with interesting people and being paid to show my version of the way the world looks.

## How did you find your direction, your style?

I practiced the age-old method of stealing and copying from my heroes, which is what you do when you're young – you mimic those that you admire. Hopefully by a certain age you stop doing that and your style ends up being some combination of those influences blended in with your own unique qualities.

## I take it you're interested in music—you've worked with a lot of great musicians. What's your taste in music?

My tastes run deep, wide and tall and just about every genre is fair game. But most of my musical interests are rooted in American music that was made between the 1920s and 1970s—soul, country, R&B, rock & roll, blues, jazz as well as the many hybrids, crossbreeds and mongrels that spun off.

## Any particular favorite?

If I had to choose just one... Jerry Lee Lewis. You'd have had to have seen him live back when he was still firing on all cylinders. Ferocious, leering, and dangerous, with vocal and instrumental talent to spare.



*Photo of Jim Herrington by Erin Wilson.*



**How did you start out in the music business? How did you get access?**

I started out by shooting live shows. I shot Benny Goodman in the mid ‘70s when I was quite young. Then in 1979 I started taking my camera to rock and roll shows and from there I’d end up doing a publicity shot here and there. Before long I had enough of a portfolio to show people and things progressed. I left North Carolina and moved to LA but I didn’t shoot live music as much out there, I was more interested in doing portraits and that’s what I concentrated on with the music stuff. The work started coming in from different sources—the bands themselves, management, the record label, magazines, etc. I made it my mission to get around and meet people.

**Who was the first musician you worked with? Do you remember the shoot?**

I really can’t remember the first musician that I actually worked “with” as opposed to just shooting live. I’d worked with a lot of musicians, some really good ones, but no particularly big names yet. The one that was the fork in the road, the one that changed things for me, was Tom Petty, around 1987. I got to know Tom via a mutual friend and he kept me around doing photos for a couple of years. Things started taking off for me after that.

**What’s it like to work with some of the biggest names in music? How do you approach them? How do you “sell” your ideas, your vision to them?**

It’s a lot of fun most of the time. I’ve been lucky enough to work with a lot of my all-time favorite musicians. Usually I’m assigned by a magazine or record label, so the approaching part is handled by someone else. As for the ideas, if I’m being commissioned for a job then it’s usually some combination of me being hired because of my previous work—they’ve seen how I shoot and they want that look. And then there may or may not be a concept from an art director that needs to be addressed. Again, it’s always different. Sometimes I have total freedom, sometimes there’s a more strict agenda. As much as I love having carte blanche, I also really like collaborating with smart art directors that have interesting and creative ideas.

**What’s your ambition when shooting them?**

Overall, and aside from visual/artistic matters, I suppose what I want to achieve in a portrait is to have someone who’s looking at the photograph—if they don’t know who the person is already—to be extremely curious as to who they’re looking at. I want the people to have a certain gravity or importance.

**Seems you’re rather accentuating their integrity or personal strength. You make them look even stronger. Would you agree?**

I would hope that it’s something like that.

**How long does a shoot take for you? With Cormac McCarthy, you were out there walking the hills. Is that part of your setup? Do you first try to hang out and get to know them?**

It’s different everytime. The Cormac shoot was one of those ideal ones. It was just he and I walking through the mesquite hills outside of Santa Fe for a couple of hours. Sometimes I’ll show up at a location and there isn’t enough time to scout things out. I might get there and have only an hour with someone and I’ll have to figure out things very fast: Is there anything at all photogenic here that works for me and my way of shooting? Does it serve the purpose of this shoot or this person? How’s the light? So there are important things to figure out fast and sometimes these places are just challenging and terrible. Sometimes I might have only 20 minutes,

other times I’ll have two days. It’s different every time. Ideally I like those situations where I can be one-on-one with people.

**Have you ever failed?**

Oh yeah.

**I was more thinking of not getting that Herrington style or the Herrington atmosphere.**

Everybody has bad days and I’m no different. But it’s showtime and you have to deliver.

**How do you feel about that?**

Nobody likes having an off day. But at the same time, I do push the edge on the ways that I shoot. It’s a double-edged sword. When it’s successful I think it’s really great—like the Cormac McCarthy shoot, for instance. That was shot in what normally is the crappiest light on the planet; high noon in the desert, everything is bleached out and blasted with light. I decided to knock the sunlight down with the exposure and use a flash and kind of make it a studio shot. I think it worked great with his noir sensibilities and dark stories. That was to me a total success, because it was a very Herrington shot and I thought it conveyed Cormac in a great way. And it also solved a problem when I didn’t have that many options. But then there are other times, when it’s really tough to pull it together. I’ve been shooting a long time and I feel like “Damn it, I should be able to do anything anywhere!”. Sometimes the magic just isn’t there—and I rely on a lot of magic.

**Do people notice the difference between a good shoot and a bad one? Or are you just a slave to your own standards?**

Oh, I beat myself up. I’m definitely a slave to my own standards. But sometimes I’ll be distraught about a shoot and I turn it in and everybody loves it. And then I’m like “Aw, are you serious...?”.

**So about your way of working. I gather you “like anything that has a story” and that you don’t really go out shooting “visual candy”. How do you prepare for a shoot? Do you read up on them?**

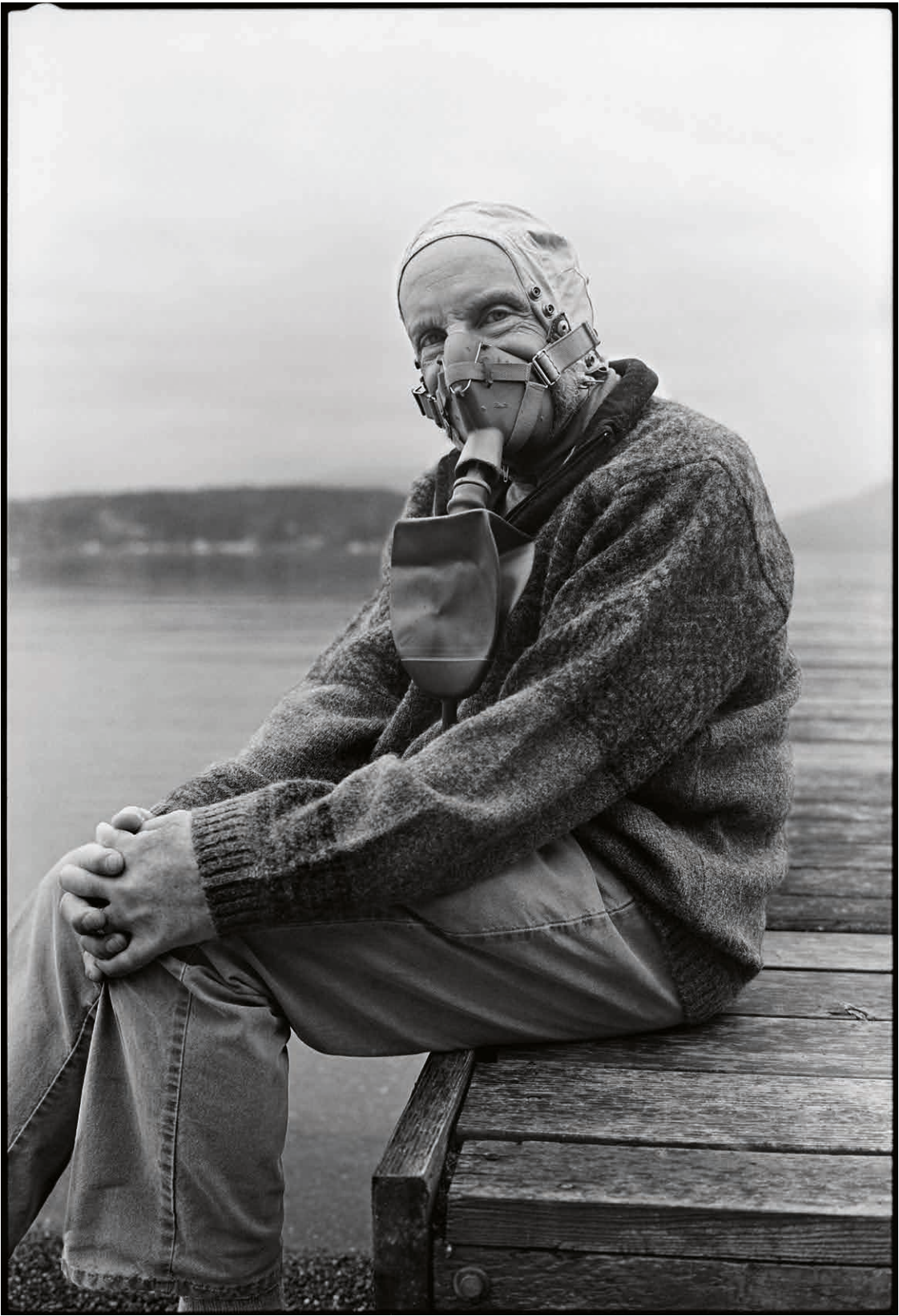
First off, not just any story. I have to connect with it on some level. But Cormac, for instance I knew a lot about him, I had read all his books, actually I was a big fan. But if it’s someone that I’m not familiar with then I do a lot of research. I prepare, but I do like leaving room for “spur of the moment” things.

Most of my life I’ve sat down the night before a photoshoot with a pad and I’ll do all kinds of sketches and lighting scenarios. And I still think that’s nice, because it gives you something to fall back on if you show up at a place expecting magic to happen and it doesn’t. Then at least you have the rehearsed thing and can say, “OK, we’re just gonna do this”. But what usually happens is that I stay up all night, doing these sketches, and then don’t do any of them on the location, because I happen upon more interesting, unexpected things.

If you look at my pictures you’ll notice that a lot of times the locations aren’t very special at all. I don’t really like the “grand location”. I like these sort of off-hand places—it’s more about light and circumstance for me.

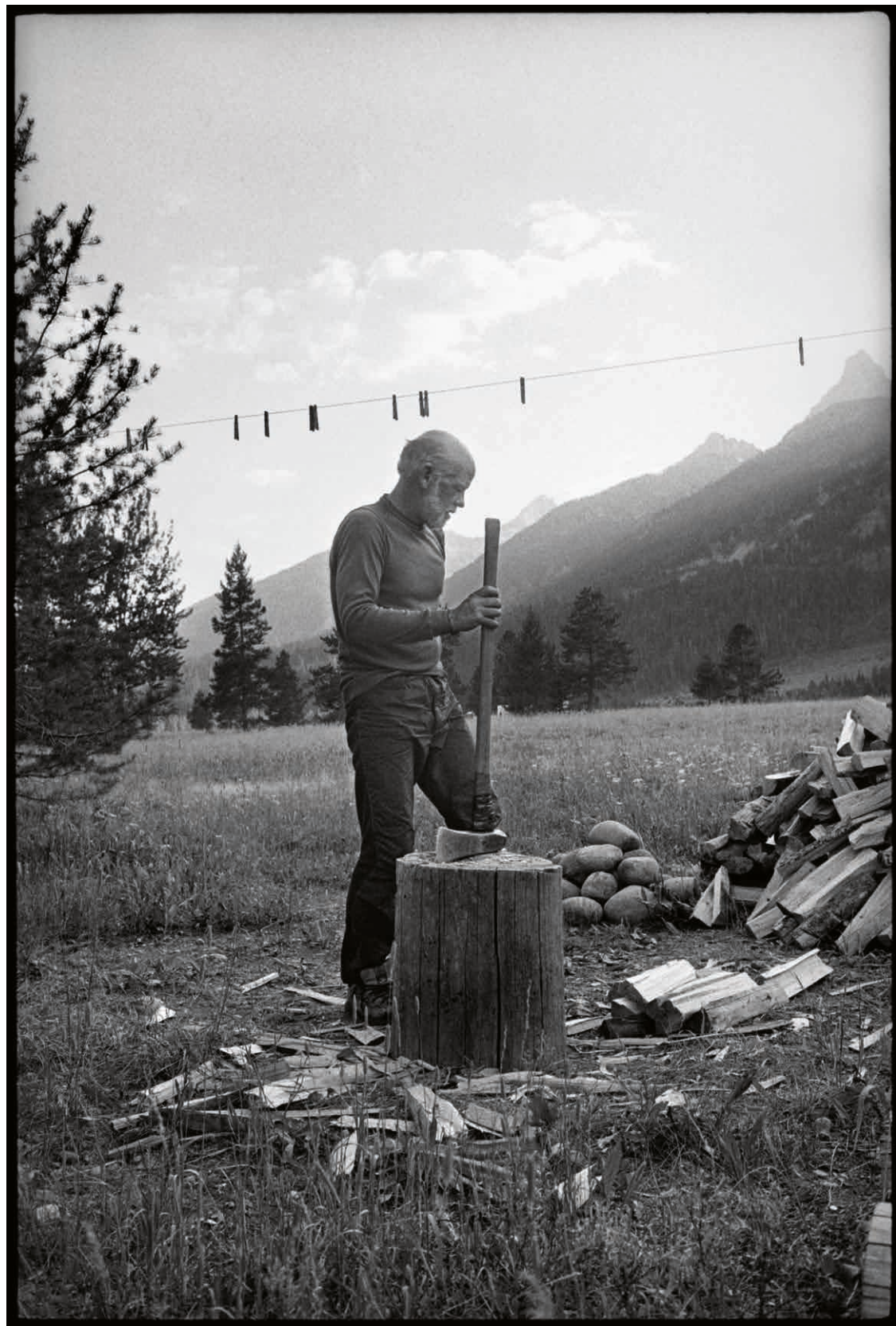
**So does that mean that you look for, and find, your story on location? You don’t necessarily have or need a plan beforehand?**

Obviously, if I’m on an advertising shoot or a shoot with a lot of people and shots involved there needs to be a plan. I’m much looser when I’m on my own, but either way I prefer having surprises



**Thomas Hornbein** *Photographed at his home in Washington state.*  
Hornbein is a climber from the Pacific Northwest who’s most known for making the first ascent of the West Ridge of Mt. Everest in 1963 as part of the American Everest Expedition.





**Chuck Pratt** *Photographed outside of his cabin at the Teton Climbers' Ranch in Wyoming.*  
Pratt was a California climber known for his superb free climbing abilities as well as being a pioneer in big wall climbing, especially in Yosemite Valley. Active climber from the 1950s until his death in 2000.



**Jim Bridwell** *Photographed at his home in Palm Desert, California.*  
Bridwell is an American climber who's been active since the mid-1960s. Known for pushing standards in big wall climbing in Yosemite Valley, Patagonia, Alaska, and elsewhere.





**Doug Scott** Photographed at the Royal Geographic Society, London, UK.  
British climber active from the 1950s through the 1980s with over 30 expeditions to Asia. Including first ascents of the southwest face of Mount Everest and his epic climb of The Ogre in Pakistan.



**Doug Robinson** Photographed on the first ascent of Backside of Beyond on Temple Crag, Sierra Nevada mountains, California.  
Robinson is a climber and a pioneer of "clean" climbing and off-piste or backcountry skiing. Active since the 1960s.



**Sir Chris Bonington** Photographed at his home in Cumbria, UK.  
Bonington is a British climber known for nineteen expeditions to the Himalayas, including four to Mount Everest and the first ascent of the south face of Annapurna. He started climbing in 1951.



**Charlie Rich**  
*Photographed at his home in Memphis, Tennessee.*  
Charlie Rich was a singer, songwriter and piano player  
whose career started at Sun Records in the 1950s.



**Dolly Parton** *Photographed outside of Nashville, Tennessee.*



**Chuck Mead** Singer, songwriter, guitar player.





**Morgan Freeman** *Photographed in Mississippi. Actor.*



**Willie Nelson** *Photographed on his bus in Beverly Hills, California. Singer, songwriter, guitar player.*

happen and seeing how things unfold. The best photos are almost never planned, in my opinion.

**How would you describe your style?**

You know that photo of me that you've got at the front of this article? In a way I feel like that describes it. It looks like I fell out of a moving vehicle and got up and started shooting my Leica like it's a weapon. Otherwise, it's not my place to talk about my style... that's what the photos are for.

**What do others usually say about your style? I guess they source and commission you for a reason, wanting that “Jim Herrington style”.**

I don't know. Gritty. Edgy. But I think those words are useless really. Maybe a kind of film noir quality? I guess there's a darker edge to a lot of them. I've heard “honest” and “real” but that could also describe a cow, couldn't it? Words always seem to fall short. I hate hearing someone talk about their stuff in that kind of way. My style? I don't know. I think you just look at the photos and you can tell. That's my style.

**What's your take on “passion”? What does “passion” mean to you?**

Well, I told you how I like stories and the way I approach the people I shoot. I get obsessed by these people. Like my monkey picture. Have you seen that? The picture itself doesn't mean much without the story.

It's a photo of this chimpanzee that for decades was rumored to be the original Cheeta from the Johnny Weismüller-era Tarzan movies from the 1930s. It's incredible he's still alive. He's in the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest chimpanzee.

So I take my last—literally my last—250 dollars and I flew out to Palm Springs to photograph him. This was a natural Herrington story. An aged showbiz monkey who drinks beer and smokes cigars and has a swimming pool. He's like Sinatra, or an old Hollywood actor, living out his retirement on a chaise lounge. Right down my alley in every way. So I took the last bit of money I had and went out there to photograph him. Is that passion or insanity?

**What about the old image of artists suffering for their art? Have you suffered anything?**

Oh, I've had my share. Except for a few jobs I had when I was young, photography is what I've done my whole life. I was a paper boy, I sold shoes to old ladies when I was sixteen, I was a waiter once for about ten minutes. Otherwise I've been doing photography forever, so sure, there's been some up and down times.

Photography has gone through a lot of changes since I started, along with the economy, the music business, and other factors. Aside from the occasional financial dips, hopefully you're also always trying to evolve. I think anyone in business for themselves has periods of suffering. It's probably a healthy process if you don't wallow in it.

**Ever felt like giving it all up and getting a 9-5 job instead?**

Not really, no. Once in a long while I might wake up and say “Man, it must be great being a garbage man. You just wake up, you empty trash till 5 PM and then go home and you don't give work another thought until the next day.” But this is what I do. I couldn't quit it even if I tried and I would definitely still do it even if I never made another dollar doing it.

However, stability is nice. I'm 50 now. And there have been periods in my life that haven't been that stable. But I'm stubborn and I love what I do, whether it's for money or not.

It's as much about the stories and experiences as it is about photography. The camera's there to connect me to these things. I love cameras and I love the art and craft of it all—and I can be quite fetishistic about gear. But had I picked up a paintbrush first I'd have been just as happy.

It's not my place to talk about my style... that's what the photos are for.







For decades, there were rumors that the original Cheetah, from the Johnny Weismüller Tarzan movies back in the '30s, was living the life of an old retired Hollywood star out in Palm Springs, drinking beer and smoking cigars by the swimming pool. These rumors sounded too good to be true, so Jim Herrington took his last 250 dollars and flew out to Palm Springs...

**Have you always been a storyteller? Even as a kid? Without the camera, I mean.**

Before me, my family was. I'm from a small town in North Carolina. I think when you're in a somewhat boring place the stories get better. We had some very good storytellers in the family, all prone to flourishes and embellishment. My grandmother, my aunt, my mother. There was an enthusiasm for the outside world within my family that I think helped a lot in forming my somewhat journalistic, butterfly-collecting approach to these stories that I like.

**Was it always visual for you? What about writing?**

I've always enjoyed writing, that was my favorite subject in school. I've posted some of my stories on my Tumblr page... they're more like long captions really. A lot of the things I photograph have a story that may not be readily apparent, like the monkey photo. "Oh, look, he shot a cute picture of a monkey". But if you read the story you'll find out that monkey had a secret!

**What about climbing? When did you pick that up? And why?**

When I was very young I had seen climbing depicted in my family's old Encyclopaedia Britannica and in those old Life Magazines of my father's. It immediately seemed like something I wanted to do – the combination of physicality, adventure, exploration, wilderness, and aesthetics appealed to me straightaway. I had a lot of physical energy as a boy but I wasn't that interested in normal ball sports. Climbing seemed perfect for me. Trouble was, I couldn't drive and I didn't know anyone who did this activity.

One day in 1976 a man from the YMCA came to our school looking for kids to sign up for a program called Discovery. If you signed up you could go backpacking, caving, skiing, biking, and, best of all, climbing. So that was my first time doing proper climbing with ropes, there on the local crags outside of Charlotte.

This was a natural Herrington story. An aged showbiz monkey who drinks beer and smokes cigars and has a swimming pool.

**“Legends of climbing”. You're shooting some of the world's most iconic rock climbers and mountaineers. Tell us more about that! How did you come up with the idea?**

I've been interested in climbing since I was a small boy after seeing pictures of Himalayan expeditions, maybe in those old Life Magazines and National Geographics, and photos of the Eiger and the Matterhorn. It really made a huge impact on me. This suddenly seemed like my thing.

I always wanted to be an explorer, to be the one at the front of the ship, sailing into some desolate, unknown polar region. So there was an exploration quality to climbing that was attractive. Maybe a bit of a nerdy scientific aspect as well since it's helpful to know about weather, geology, maps – I love maps and geography in general.

As a young boy I fancied myself as someone who was a good climber. I thought "This is a talent I have". I'm definitely not dunking a basketball. But it took a long time, I had to meet people. I was a small boy with no car. Finally I found others to climb with and then I got heavily into it and started traveling all over—at the same time getting more into photography.

My home range, my favorite place to climb and ski, is the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. I call it my home range, I'm from North Carolina, but the Sierra Nevada is my home away from home. Sierra Nevada, east side. My original plan for the climber series was just to photograph the old guys that had climbed in the Sierra, but obviously the project got much bigger than that.

**So did you just stumble upon these climbing legends?**

Again, like most things, I got into the history of it. The Sierra Nevada, being close to San Francisco and LA, attracted some interesting people, not least climbers. Ansel Adams, Jack Kerouac,

some great writers, artists, photographers... I've always been drawn to that area.

So back in the '90s I thought I would do a short photo essay on the old Sierra Nevada climbers. I started shooting them and it was great but then I had the chance to shoot Bradford Washburn. He was not a Sierra Nevada climber, he was from Boston and he had climbed important first ascents in Alaska. So, you know, there's no way to turn him down. He was 95 and had quite the climbing career as well as being a great photographer of mountains. So I went and photographed him. And that's when I decided, it's not going to be Sierra Nevada climbers, it's going to be American climbers. But then I shot Riccardo Cassin in Italy, Doug Scott and Chris Bonington in England, and others, and the project became what it is now—climbers from around the world that were active between the '20s and '70s.

**Any climbers left to shoot?**

Yes, I have roughly 20 more to shoot. Some in Europe, quite a few in America, a handful in Asia. Once I finish the shooting part of it I can finally get the book finished and published.

**You started this final phase yet?**

I did. I just shot three people in the last few weeks, all in the NYC area. Most of the final 20 have agreed to do it, and I'm still trying to contact the ones in Asia. I'm trying to get funding to help with this. I've been paying for it out of my own pocket for the past 15 years or so. There's plane tickets, travel, film, and processing. I'm still shooting the whole project on film.

**Are any of them still climbing?**

Pretty much none of them. Riccardo Cassin was 100 years old when I visited him and was literally dying in front of me. He died a week after I left him. There's a few of them climbing, Doug Robinson for one, who's my favorite climbing partner. He's in

his late sixties now. But a lot of them are quite old and infirm. Half of the ones I've photographed have died already.

**Will that scare the rest of them off?**

My whole career has been like Dr. Doom of the camera. I'm interested in these old musicians, old people in general, I guess. For a while it seemed that everyone I shot died a month later. "Don't get Herrington to shoot you, you'll die". I had to come up with a sheet of paper saying, "Look, here's all the people I've shot who haven't died, they're living robust healthy lives after being photographed by me!". I just have a preternatural interest in old people. So the odds are against me. Or rather, the odds are against them!

**What's next? In your photography and in your climbing?**

Besides doing regular photography jobs, the main thing now is definitely finishing the climbing project. That's what I'm putting all of my energy into completing by the end of the year. I've had one gallery show for the project, and I'd like to have a few more as well as get the book out.

There's a lot of travel involved that I would like to do this summer, through Europe, Asia and America to get all these people. Time is of the essence, to really get some of the older ones. And then there's a lot of work to do on the pictures.

It's been interesting to see how people are reacting to the climbers series, quite positively. It's surprising to me, because I thought it would have been one of my more quirky, under-the-radar projects. ■