

Work I Love *by Greg Cohen*

I specialize in animal portraiture. Every time I say that, I remember my Dad at the dinner table, his mechanic's hands permanently stained black, grumbling that only lucky people pursue work they love. Well, I must be the luckiest man in the world. I spend my days with pets out in sunny parks, at their homes or in my studio. A pursuit that doesn't quite pay *all* the bills, but when coupled with other freelancing to keep me in the chips, it pays the bonus of many unique, priceless moments.

Portrait photographers dread the inevitable pet that must be included in the family portrait. "Patience squared" is how one fellow summed up working with animals. Photography books imply you're entering a den of lions, lucky to escape intact, let alone sane. The lesson for me was that there's a market for this, as long as you're crazy for animals.

I started out mostly shooting family portraits, with pets, which made me doubt my own sanity and believe the books. If one of the family wasn't blinking or sneaking small finger horns behind the head of another, the dog would leap, blurring half the people in the shot, or the cat would win it's battle against a child's vise-like arms. After my principal subjects drifted away though, I'd leave one camera out as I slowly packed my gear. I'd speak softly and steadily to their pets. Once they relaxed and we were pals, I'd start snapping away. Amazing, how many of them were actually hams of the first order, worthy of any fashion runway. I added those shots to the contact sheets of the family portrait, and soon began getting more orders for portraits of the pets alone than reprints of the group pictures. I was on my way.

But nothing is as simple as it seems. My first commission to photograph *just* the pet was Moby, a coal-black Labrador. I knew it would be difficult to capture any kind of highlights in that pitch-dark wall of fur. I *was* smart enough to know I didn't want to deal with lights, reflecting umbrellas and the resulting vulnerable rat's nest of cords. I decided to photograph Moby outdoors, where he was in his element, not mentioning how much easier it would make my life.

The light that morning was vivid and clear, and Moby was everything I could have hoped for; well-behaved but playful, running through all his tricks and then some, just Mr. Adorable. And knowing it. I drove away eager to develop my film, certain I'd gotten a winner. The shot glowed in my mind - Moby soaring through the air, his ears streaming behind him, his jaws open in what looked for all the world like a smile, a hovering frisbee inches away.

Imagine my shock...no, panic really, in the amber privacy of my darkroom, when my test prints revealed the totally featureless outline of a dog dully silhouetted against a brilliant sky, as if I'd cut out a cartoon shape and pasted it there. A more experienced photographer, whose dinner I interrupted, calmly told me that despite the bright sunshine, I should have used a technique called "pushing film speed" to compensate for the dense blackness of Moby's fur. Overexpose the film, and fix it in the printing process.

Desperate to avoid calling the client to say we had to redo the shoot, I reacted like any reasonable person. I pored over every negative I'd shot that day, waiting for the bad news to miraculously change before my eyes. In every shot, even those where the sun bathed Moby, that mass of fur remained a stubborn, blank, dull ebony. Despondent, I wondered if I'd be lucky enough to learn all these little tricks quickly enough, or if I ever would. I took the negatives to my desk, tossing them down with casual disregard as I reached for the phone. They slid across the polished wood of my desktop with a crisp, thin plastic sound.

Dialing the number, I glanced at the negatives, then looked again. The grained texture of the desk popped out through the highlights. Just as the first ring sounded in my ears, I realized I was staring at a large pair of hopeful, sincere, wood-grained eyes. I hung up the receiver so fast, I hurt my thumb. I rushed to the darkroom, flicked the switch and slid the negative into the enlarger. A square

foot of brilliant white filled with Moby's massive, sleek head, looking up at the lens, so close to the camera he had to actually be touching it...then I realized. We'd gotten juicy polish hot dogs from a vendor at the park. When I'd picked up my camera, my finger slid on the body, and I reminded myself to wipe it down good when we finished.

At that moment, with the camera lowered at my waist, Moby approached with begging tail wagging. His eyebrows twitching like Groucho Marx's, he looked hopefully at me for about a half second before he started licking the camera. My finger was resting on the shutter button and the pressure of Moby's wet nose and tongue caused me to click off a shot. A shot I'd deemed a wasted one at the moment. Yet here it was; the most expressive side of any black lab; those great, sweet, huge brown eyes, emphasized by the same blackness of fur that had worked against me the rest of the day.

When Moby's owner saw that print, (which I'd put on top) she barely bothered to look at the rest. "Oh my god. That's *him*. You've caught him."

I never told her that it was actually Moby who had caught, and then rescued me. I also never tell my marveling clients these days that one of the reasons their animals take to me so well is not just my abiding love for them, but the thin smudges of fresh bacon grease on the legs of my tripod and the lower front bodies of my cameras. Tricks of the trade, as my Dad also used to say.

