

## **Interview with Stephen Johnson 7/11/2K**

I first met Stephen Johnson in San Francisco at the first ThunderLizard Photoshop Conference, where we were both conference speakers. Stephen is not one of those dress-alike, academic-type teachers who project a stuffy, authoritative appearance; he is a very gentle, soft-spoken, articulate, and confident artist who speaks from a depth of experience and an unbridled passion for his work.

When Stephen Johnson lectures, there are no rehearsed professor-typical three-point outlines, no prefabricated speeches, and no air of superiority; there is the disarming simplicity of a low-key man in love with what is doing and a desire to share his passion and knowledge. Stephen possesses the rarest quality of effective teachers... he makes you want to learn.

In the seven years since our first meeting I have spent considerable time with Stephen on many occasions (including one unforgettable trip to Luxembourg... a story for another time), and I can honestly say that in spite of his world acclaim, he is the same person today as the man I met so many years ago.

After I sat-in on two of his lectures, I knew that this was a man that I definitely wanted to learn from. And learn I have! I don't think I have ever seen Stephen wearing a coat and tie, he's just not the starched shirt type, in either appearance or demeanor. More often than not, he's wearing well-traveled denim shirt and pants and his hair in a ponytail.

Desiring to share the Stephen Johnson that I have come to know and respect with the readers of Professional Photographer and Photo Electronic Imaging, I approached our Editor, Terry Murphy, about publishing this interview. The following is a candid conversation that Stephen and I shared recently.

H-Stephen, how would you describe yourself on a business card?

S-Quite simply, I'm a landscape photographer

H-As a landscape photographer, do you think of yourself as an artist, a poet, a documentor, an educator, all of the above, or more?

S-Probably, most as a poet. I love poetry and the kind of expressiveness it gives to life. I love all of the emotional and eloquent expressions that the best of poetry and music can bring to us. That is small part of why I got involved in photography. In calling myself a poet, I am reminded of a line from Bob Dylan: "I am a poet and I know it and I hope I don't blow it".

It is all about expressing emotion in the most eloquent way that I can manage. People will have to decide whether I actually make all that happen.

H-When I look at your work I see a purist. We've spoken about this before, You will not move a broken tree branch from a setting even if it might spoil "the perfect shot?"

S-That would not be my inclination.

H-The reason for that?

S- More often than not photographers are out making self-portraits. I am interested in capturing the world as it is. I think that part of the challenge of seeing the world honestly is working with what we find. I think it would probably not be totally accurate to say that I would never move a stick around, the situation would have to dictate that.

H- Am I taking that too far?

S- Well I just don't know if there was a circumstance where there was no other way to get the shot that I wouldn't move the twig, but I can tell you one thing I would never harm a plant.

H- I know that.

S-That would go way over the line and would go for any other living thing for that matter. Although I do choose to eat plants, I do that reluctantly, because at this point I see no other way to live. Not that I don't like to eat. But I made a decision not to eat meat when I was very young. That is another standpoint that I hope my photography lives up to as well. I am infallible and subject to inconsistency as much as anyone else. I just try not to be.

H-Concerning your chosen venue... you have chosen landscape over portrait or commercial or any other more lucrative type of photography, which makes me think you are more passion driven than financially driven.

S-Oh I have to be (passion driven). Money is a tool. The only thing money does is to allow us to do the things we want to do. In that since it would be great to have more but my ambition in life has never had much to do with it. I think one of the things fundamentally wrong with our culture is the pursuit of money for money's sake. I want nothing to do with that attitude.

H-Money tends to make us into people we don't want to be.

S-That is not who I am. Given that, I certainly need more [money], but it has never been a goal. The issue for me is how to get enough to do what I want to do, and I have managed to do that very well. It is part of the ongoing struggle. The fact is that I am still here as many of my friends, including you, have pointed out. I am "doing it" whether or not it seems like I am prospering.

H- I think prosperity is unfortunately a very poorly defined term that usually has a dollar sign attached to it.

S-Well I can't say that I don't need more of those dollar signs in order to not feel like maybe there is not a fairly constant crisis, but the fact is there is less of a crisis than there used to be. Things are improving to the point that I am taking on more responsibility and expenses. Which of course puts things under financial stress again. It is one of those ongoing battles that doesn't necessarily stop unless you do make

some sort of breakthrough which I am not above hoping for, but it is not an expectation that I carry around.

Another point on why I chose landscape photography is because I was moved by land. I realized that photography offered me the fulfillment of many of my desires... the desire to make things, the desire to be outdoors, and a fascination with technology. That is almost the definition of landscape photography. My childhood, growing up in the Sierra Nevada, it would have been quite remarkable if I would *not* have gotten involved in landscape photography. It is almost that clear of a path.

H-Was there a singular or collective influence that took you in that direction whether parents, role models, icons, Ansel Adams, Kent Duncan, those that have found their own life ambition to record the beauty of nature.

S-Certainly seeing Adams' work in Yosemite as a kid had its influences. But, I think you don't ever do anything in this life until it occurs to you that you *can* and in a sense that is part of what assessing Ansel's work probably did for me. And, as a kid it occurred to me that people actually do this for a living. Growing up in Merced, which is 70 miles down river from Yosemite Valley, it was a place we often went whenever we went to the park. And, it was a place that really touched me.

My family has a lot to do with all this since they had an outdoor bent to begin with. But their outdoor bent seemed to be focused on hunting and my moral structure was going in a very different direction. I was looking for other reasons to be out in the world other than just being out. That is why I started writing poetry when I was young and trying to express my feelings about things. This is all part of that whole trying to find a relationship to the natural world that really rebounds strongly in the heart. And for me, I think landscape photography became that reason. Not unrelated to poetry, or music, or the politics of the time... all of those things. The ecology movement was definitely a part of what was in my head growing up to.

H-Well, you grew up in the right neighborhood for the ecology movement.

S- Well central California may not have been, but California in general was not a bad place to be. That was an agricultural area where a serious chemical assault on the land was how agriculture happened. And it provided many wonderful things but it also poisoned a lot of people in giving them motives on the kinds of approach to a relationship to man that is not. Tenable long terms so that is the world that I surrounded by never occurring to that world that something might be wrong.

It is interesting that later I used a landscape photography project to explore that issue more deeply when I did the Central Valley project. That was about my homeland and one way or another it challenged a lot of the precepts of corporate agricultural and their use of chemicals.

H- Have you ever felt yourself getting more political involved not in a structured way but an expressive way because of what you see and record and where your heart is on nature and observing those who don't share your respect for it. Do you find yourself either desiring to or creeping towards more of a political statement or stand or involvement?

S- I have been involved in politics since 1968 because of the war in Vietnam. So actively being involved in trying to bring soldiers home to take care of them and leave the Vietnamese alone was certainly one of the things that meant a lot to me as a youth. I later became involved in the McGovern campaign in '72 when I was in high school. So that has always been the case.

I remember in 1970 when I was 14 yr. old, I worked for the California Coastal Industry because I really believed the coast was a special place here in California and that it needed special protection. That was long before photography entered into it. I would almost say that it is bent the other way around in that my photography was part of what came out of my commitment to the land.

H-So your photography became more of an expressive arm of your deep-seated philosophy.

S- Yes I think that is probably true.

H-I noticed that very little of your work if any in fact none that I have seen is black and white and yet the icon of prior age (Ansel Adams) was dedicated to black and white landscape photography. Why have you chosen color?

S-Well, probably half of my work *is* black and white. It has just become harder to print (black and white) the last couple of years with digital (photography). I think people notice my b/w work less because it probably is squarely in the tradition of Ansel Adams work. Where as my color work tends to break ground people haven't seen before; especially with attention to pastel and realistic color. So [my work] is definitely both and has been both for a long time. It is a good quadtone on digital printing solutions.

H-Breaking a little bit more toward the technology end of things, is quadtone printer technology close, actually here, still an aspiration and not quite arrived yet? Where do you feel digital photography and printing are in being able to match the depth and richness that is currently achievable using various dyes and toners in the silver halide world? How do we achieve that rich black and white quality using the digital technology?

S- Well with some degree an Iris can do it. Especially if you load it with quadtone inks. The problem is with the Iris itself. It is a difficult machine to use. The problem is with digital challenges and I never had a situation where I could afford to not have it set up to color. So all of the b/w work I did on the Iris was done using 4-color inks. Although it would have been much easier if I would have just loaded 4 black and 4 gray cartridges.

It just wasn't a convenient thing for me to use in that way. Now I would very much like to load b/w inks into the Epson 9000 but controlling where the ink goes is as important as having the ink. And then you get into print drivers real quick and the fact that Epson print drivers really don't adequately let you control ink placement in the tonal range because there are nine different print color inks. And they don't know what to do with the rest of those color inks. As a consequence, I could put quadtone inks in these things [printers] and the ink will go anywhere the Epson color drivers think it should go but not where *I* need them to go. And people that have made third party drivers for these things don't seem to be able to make them with

the same kind of fine dot structure and intricate micro-weave technology that Epson does. So that is an issue.

H-Strange dicotomy. Do you feel like there are enough of your breed of photographers that would appreciate such a product if it were made available? And have you approached Epson about doing that?

S-Epson is not getting into the b/w. They have said that quite plainly. There is not enough of a market there for them to bother.

H-There is an unfortunate commercial profitability side to all of this, isn't there?

S-They have made that very clear.

H-That is unfortunate. Is there any other third party manufacturer that could accommodate Epson technology as far as their incredibly small print dot and that micro weave stuff? Is there another third party manufacturer that is more sensitive to what you would like to do with black and white printing?

S- Well it is not the ink that is the problem, it is driving the printer. We can get ink. We just have to have the software that drives the printer as well. The third party RIPs that I have used are all awful they just don't give good image quality out of these printers. This also make it very difficult to make judgements with regards to where the ink should actually go because if there's a RIP, you can almost guarantee it is geared toward prepress industry which have absolutely nothing to do with b'/w quadtone printing for the most part.

H-You're making a major distinction here that perhaps not many others might understand. You can certainly balance out the CMYK inks and arrive at a gray balance. In common understanding, you should be able to get and incredibly rich range of tones from a correct gray balance of CMYK. Why would this not be true?

S-Well, first of all that is a real misnomer. Reproduction in CMYK of b/w photos is a very tricky business because in the course of a press run, the ink can go way out of balance on a 4-color reproduction of a monochrome image. Especially the way that it becomes hideously

purple, green or even red. Can black and white reproduction be accomplished using typical CMYK inks? Well, yes can it be done, but if you're trying to please the 4 color magazine advertisers, probably not; because you have to do it [the project] in Photoshop's quadtone mode that your paying client has given you.

With regards to 4 color balance in a more controlled setting like the Iris, yes I have managed to get the Iris fairly gray balanced in making prints that are quite beautiful in b/w. I am not using Iris currently because I can not afford to keep [the Epson] working. It is too expensive to maintain. The Epson however has presented a unique and very different challenge to gray balance, because it needs to feel non-linear. When you get magenta and green shifts in and out of the gray axis, it prints severe waves that I have never seen anyone able to gray balance. And Epson also acknowledges that it is a real problem with their ink. Now they also think that maybe they'll have some solutions soon.

H- So what's the current outlook for alternatives to the Epson and Iris printing systems?

S-Right now the best promise is John Cone with the black and white inks he has developed for the Epson 3000.

H-What part does ICC color management play in your work? Is it a total solution or does it reek havoc?

S- I simply couldn't function without it.

NOTE: Steve, you should elaborate on this profile answer a little more. Actually, I think you did though that may have happened during my taping difficulties and thus it did not get recorded. At any rate, could you take the question a little further please?
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H- Tell me about your books. You have produced several haven't you.

S- I am now working on my fourth book. The first book was on Mona Lake in 1980, Second was Sierra and Yosemite, the best book was on the Central Valley in California, which was a major ten-year project of shooting. I then did a booklet from that on how it was done called

“Making a Digital Book.” That makes 3 books, and my fourth is on National Parks.

H-This National Park’s book has been a rather extensive, ongoing affair for years for you hasn’t it?

S-Most photographic projects that I get involved with have taken the better part of a decade to complete. Central Valley work started shooting in 1982 and was published in 1993. These things take a long time if you are going to do them well.

H-Which harkens back now to what you define your role, your purpose, your drive, your mechanism, whatever makes your clock tick. It is a passion for maintaining what nature has given us and documenting at least what may remain in the future without some environmental safeguards, right?

S- Well I wouldn’t say that I am a documentary photographer. I define myself as a fine arts photographer. And because I am not going out to make documentary work that’s just about what’s there. Obviously I am very selective about what I photograph. I am not trying to do an inventory of anything, though I am trying to be a witness to the events as they unfold as we generally think of documentary photography. It is much more clearly for me about trying to go out and understand the eloquence that is moving me and trying to record that in a straight forward and faithful way. And I do this so that what ends up being on the piece of paper, in the final analysis, is what moved me, not something I added to it.

Now that is not to say that I can take light and the planet earth and regurgitate it out even on the best of printers on the finest papers. But, it is not even about ethics so much as it is about inclination. *That* is what I am reacting to and seeing and relishing. Even if I had inclination to doctor images I probably wouldn’t do so on this Parks project because this is *the* first large-scale digital landscape project. And it needs to be understood that digital is not about manipulation. That is one aspect of digital scanning or originals. But it is also more fundamentally about being able to see more accurately and with greater freedom than we have ever been able to see before into a photographic realm.

And given that, the *last* thing I want to do is associate this project with changing things. So in that sense it fits right in with what probably is my ethic; which is trying to really show people what I've seen. And if I want to show people what I have seen I can't go screwing with it to make it something else. And besides, and I think your own faith gets towards this as well, this world is a stunning and absolutely miraculous place already. If I can rise to the challenge of trying to record it in a way that it gives in to what my eyes are taking in... man, I have done something remarkable right then. I don't need to have Photoshop to manipulate it or make it something else.

H-Allow me to delve into the issue that you just raised. We have been blessed with a wonderful human mechanism which plays an ongoing concert between the eye and the brain that seems to be able to adjust colors and tones automatically, in real-time. We are still trying to develop machines and computers that can "adjust" color and tonal imbalances on-the-fly. We do seem to have the ability to balance colors and tones within our own heads and eyes and perhaps heart and we do it without so much as a conscious adjustment of any kind. Is it too much to hope for to be able to capture an image and print it out automatically color-balanced and tonally corrected?

S-Well I think doing a gray balance as the image is being captured from a highly color capable system is the starting point. Then bringing it into a highly calibrated monitor (where an equal balance of RGB actually produces something that is actually neutral gray), is attainable through our current understanding of color management. And then tweaking the profiles as necessary. That's the system I use.

So I can't take the real world and get it onto that hard drive and then get it back to a piece of rag paper. But, I am closer than I think photography has ever been able to before and in fact, so close that I think it provides a kind of uncanny realism to my work even though the subject matter is a little abstract.

H-What is your current output preference. What do you currently use as your printer d'jour?

S-I use the Epson 9500 and rag paper.

H-And you're happy with what that is producing?

S-Pretty happy.

H- Are you using textured papers for any of the canvas-type appearances?

S-I'm going for the smoothest rag I can get.

H-Do you find that the manufactures are assisting you in the degree that they can (or should) in your attempt to break new ground here?

S-In the long haul I think people have been very supportive I have gotten a lot of corporate support for this project to begin with. From Apple to Adobe to Epson, Dicomed, BetterLite, Iris. All of them were very helpful. They come and go with how helpful they are depending on what their current corporate climate is. Do they fully understand on a corporate level? They are probably not allowed to from an economic bottom line point of view. But they have been extraordinary supportive via some empathetic individuals. Even though they may not get the whole picture (because there own life is full of other concerns), they have clearly tried to help me do what I am trying to do and have made it possible for me to do what I do.

H- If you had your life to do over again would you still pursue the same goals?

S-Oh yeah. There is not a single thing I've done that I regret. I still am somewhat amused when people ask me if I am still working on "that parks project." These people have no concept of what it takes to investigate and shoot a significant number of parks and travel 100,000 miles. Although I definitely want to get [the project] done, it is still going to take awhile to do what I want to do and travel as far as I have to travel. This is a *very* complex project.

H- It seems that what you are doing with this parks project, is that you're recording what your heart sees. And I think to those that are task-oriented haven't got a clue what this must take. When you're faced with a hard deadline, it puts so many things out of reach. You just cant put a deadline or timetable on a project like this.

Then there is always that blown shot. The shot that you were certain that you got *exactly* what you wanted and then you got back and get hooked up to your equipment only to say “oh no what happened?”

S-Well that happens less than it ever did before. Now I can look at each shot in the field and make that judgement and (if I have to) I can redo it right then.

H-Give me some insights into the new technology that you are working with. What is it that gives you more of a comfort level in the mechanics of the shooting, so that you can spend more time on the art and the emotion of the shot and less on the technology?

S-Well we can't ever separate ourselves from the fact that photography is a technological medium and it has always been about the highest technology of our time. So naturally in the computer era it has gotten very complex. But having said that, the ability that I have now to be able to look at the finished photograph while I am still standing right there with the camera set up is amazing. Not only can I check for stupid mistakes that I have made, like focus or depth and field issues, but I can look to see if the gray balance that I looked for was really achieved. I can look at exactly how the shadow recorded, and exactly how those highlights registered in shade as the light went up and down.

Since I'm dealing with a scanning camera I certainly have to check for nuances of movement that may have hurt the photograph, but I am finally now in a position to make *no* mistakes if I take the time to look and inspect the photograph. Because if I make a mistake I can fix the and reshoot.

That just happened to me in Scotland, where I was photographing last March. There was spectacular late afternoon light, which I said I was still prey to. This was all happening at a place called Glenco. And, I was photographing away and I thought, “you know, I am spending so much time under the dark cloth with the wind blowing, I better open one of these images and see what I've got. So, I turned around and opened one and the photograph was out of focus because I had not adjusted the lens properly.

I would have walked away thinking I was in pretty good shape, but would have gotten back in the dark(?) room a month later and

been very disappointed. Well, I didn't have to. I fixed it right there. I readjusted it, reshoot and looked at it to make sure I fixed it. Then I went on to shoot another 20-30 minutes. So that is a small example of how if you are really careful and take the time to look at what you've done, the stupid mistakes will be gone because you saw them and you corrected them.

H-Within this ability to make on-the-fly adjustments so that you don't have any surprises in the darkroom, how reliant are you on tried and true Photoshop versus some of the standalone applications that are out there now? Photoshop is the granddaddy of the digital photography realm now and it is ultimately the Mecca that everyone seems to bow toward. But, many of the digital camera manufacturers are coming along with their own standalone applications now that offer a lot of the talents that Photoshop offers "after the fact." As they say in music business, "we can fix it in the mix." Some of these camera applications give you the ability to measure and adjust the image on the spot of recording. Where do you feel your personal balance is concerning these alternative packages? Or is there a balance?

S-Well, most of these cameras don't give you the ability to vary much of the recording. They give you the ability to edit the file after the image has been acquired. None of them actually change the acquisition. Most digital cameras do not. Especially the little ones. Most of them have preset color balance and even their auto balance functions are funky. You have no ability to control how an image is recorded. You have some ability to try and recover from it after the fact. Although most of the tools are crude as compared to Photoshop's tools. I am balancing a photograph as I am shooting it. We are rebalancing the sensitivity of the "gain" on top of the CCD as we're making the photograph.

H-That was my key question. Is there an advantage to using the software that comes with the camera to adjust the image before it opens in Photoshop?

S-When it is coming into the hard drive, it has already been color balanced in the camera.

H-So you can attenuate each color to establish your balance in the camera? I am going to use “cross over” terms here from the audio industry that I am much more familiar. There are graphic equalizers and there are parametric equalizers in the audio industry. The graphic equalizer lets you adjust individual tones (similar to the Transfer Curve tool in Photoshop’s Page Setup), while the parametric has more of a sweeping effect on the adjacent tones (similar to Photoshop’s Curve tool). Do you have the ability to balance tones within a 40-tone gray patch area? Can you isolate tones and attenuate each RGB channel individually throughout the range, or is the control more parabolic, more of a treble and bass overall control?

S-It depends on how you save the file. With Mike Collette’s BetterLite software Dicomed and the BetterLite scanning camera, you have an ability to do overall gray balance to fix it. Which means, whatever you point you decide to balance gray, it will be dead-on, neutral gray. Temperatures are fairly linear with their response to light, so that generally means that gray balance is maintained throughout the tonal range. You can also then choose to save the file in the highest bit-depth possible, which gives you a great deal of ability to fine tune color in the broadest sensitivity range of the camera or in fact you can save it as an 8bit file and 24bit color file.

In the process of that you can apply color curves to it for highlight, shadow, overall brightness, and all sorts of other things. You have custom film curves on sight (location?). Given that you have the ability to both do the global balance, (which essentially means you have recorded the scene, and then what you do beyond that in terms of tonal interpretation than can be done in the camera), and output to 24-bit files, or saving it as a high bit-depth file or doing it carefully later in Photoshop.

H-Let’s assume you’ve captured a scene that you’re looking for and you’re pleased with the overall or global balance. Now from there, I assume that you take numerical measurements, since you can only do so much with an LCD screen at any time (let alone in daylight) to make visual judgements.

S-Well I have [a densitometer] built right into the software.

H-That's my point. Do you rely more on the numbers game more than the accuracy of that initial monitor image?

S-For gray balance and for highlight and shadow placement yes. For overall color tones, I've got the LCD balanced enough so that it is feasible even though not terribly accurate.

H-How do you deal with the ambient light?

S-I've got custom 4-ply rack boardlets, or I should say screen hoods that I have made for every PowerBook I use.

H- Were getting back to the late 1800's and the hooded view camera, are we?

S- Then I used a dark cloth and the ground glass. So, it is only natural that I would use a dark cloth initially on the PowerBook. Then I got tired of that, so I made something custom. I have made 3 of them now, for 540C, 3400, and now for the "Wall Street".

H-Is that currently what you're using?

S-I was until 2 months ago when my Wall Street starting acting up. I have been unable to recover it, so now I am back to my 3400. So, I am using a 4-yr. Old PowerBook, which I am not happy about at all.

H- Is there one portable, one laptop, that is clearly "the ultimate" for your kind of work. Does it exist? Or would you have to heavily modify one currently on the market?

S-Well you want the fastest and the biggest and that sort of thing. The "Wall Street" was pretty good. But, now there are 500mhz processors for PowerBooks. It doesn't have anymore RAM or hard drive capabilities. I can do the same thing with the 2-yr. Old "Wall Street" version. The problem with the new one is that it has no SCSI board. And the camera still works via SCSI. So I am not sure how effective the new SCSI PCM/CIA card will be. Some people have tried it and had problems. Others seem to be making it work. So, I may in the stage where I need to buy a new PowerBook, and it will probably be a PowerBook with no SCSI.

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