

# AMERICAN CONNECTION

**Michael Wilson** first stumbled into photography in high school but has since shot more than 300 album covers and published four books. In his personal projects he continues to reinvent himself, as Susan Burnstine discovers.



**Mary with kitten, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1997.**  
From the series *People I Knew/Didn't Know*.



**Polly as Goat, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1998.**  
From the series *People I Knew/Didn't Know*.

In today's sea of flashy, shallow portraits of musicians and celebrities, Cincinnati-based photographer Michael Wilson's portraits stand out as uniquely authentic, warm and at times humorous. In viewing his images, we're able to spend a bit of personal time laughing and getting to know these artists through Wilson's eyes. And that's a truly remarkable gift.

Interestingly, Wilson unexpectedly stumbled into photography in high school. After becoming intrigued with it, he purchased a Pentax 35mm SLR. He hadn't planned to attend college and was surprised when he earned a scholarship to Northern Kentucky University. Not knowing what to select as a major, he learned they offered a degree in photography and without further thought selected it as his major. It was



**Rainy Boy, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1981.**  
From the series *People I Knew/Didn't Know*.

there that he immersed himself in photography and credits his first teacher, Barry Andersen, for opening his eyes to all the possibilities of the art form.

After college he began a succession of jobs, mostly unrelated to photography, but continued to make pictures. Following a four-year stint working as a photographer's assistant and darkroom technician for a textbook publisher, he decided to become a freelance photographer after he realised he was growing frustrated and his enthusiasm for photography was slipping away. As his wife, Marilyn, believed wholeheartedly in his abilities, she subsidised their finances by working in a variety of jobs in those early years. And, soon after, her faith in her husband's talent paid off.

In 1990, Wilson earned his

first commission, photographing BoDeans for Warner Brothers. He has since shot 300 album covers, worked on more than 500 album packages and has four books published, all of which are currently out of print. In hindsight, Wilson admits the path he took appears inevitable now. 'Music and portraits have been two of my strongest interests for a very long time. Much of my best energy has been directed to these two areas.'

In 1992, Tim Stedman, a designer who was working for MCA Records at the time, introduced Lyle Lovett to Wilson's work. Lyle had previously selected a photographer to shoot his upcoming album cover for *Joshua Judges Ruth* but agreed to do a shoot with him and the resulting images were used for the inside booklet of the record. Since then Wilson has shot all of the covers for Lyle's albums. His latest, *Release Me*, was the tenth album cover they did together.

As a sustained ongoing relationship with a top artist like Lyle Lovett is unique, Wilson views it as a rare gift and modestly admits, 'Though it sounds a cliché, I cannot find a better explanation for such working relationships other than respect and trust...the



David Byrne, New York City, 2003.

*'Music and portraits have been two of my strongest interests for a very long time.'*

same things that sustain any friendship.' Additionally, Wilson has enjoyed sustained working relationships with other artists, including Over the Rhine, Buddy Miller and Brad Mehldau.

Perhaps what strikes me as most remarkable is that Wilson continues to reinvent himself in his personal projects. One of his

most absorbing series, *People I Knew/Didn't Know*, is a rich collection of portraits that span a period of 30 years; the oldest representing some of his earliest encounters with photography. As making portraits has become his livelihood, this work is different in that none of the pictures were planned or scheduled and they were made free of commercial obligation or outside expectations. He says, 'I continue to be grateful to everyone who has let me stand in front of them and make a picture...no small gift.'

Currently Wilson continues to shoot album covers and packaging, but is not doing as much as in the past. His most recent commissioned project was an eight LP box set for jazz pianist Brad Mehldau. He's also working on a personal series that focuses on a couple of streets near his home in Cincinnati. He explains the images are not intended as documentary explorations and says he's 'just out collecting clues – fragments and found phrases that will hopefully make sense in some other, bigger collection further down the line.'

■ [michaelwilson.pictures](http://michaelwilson.pictures)



Lyle Lovett, Tioga, Texas, 2011.

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## EXHIBITIONS USA

### ATLANTA

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Until 10 January

Brett Weston

■ [high.org](http://high.org)

### CLEVELAND

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Until 7 February

Michael Cherney and Arnold Chang:  
Chinese Landscape Duets

■ [clevelandart.org](http://clevelandart.org)

### DENVER

DENVER ART MUSEUM

Until 8 May

Kenneth Josephson:

Encounters with the Universe

■ [denverartmuseum.org](http://denverartmuseum.org)

### LOS ANGELES

LACMA

Until 7 February

The Magic Medium

Featuring Matthew Brandt,  
Jo Ann Callis, Henri Cartier-Bresson,  
Harold Edgerton, William Eggleston,  
Matt Lipps and Nic Nicosia

■ [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

### NEW YORK

JEWISH MUSEUM

Until 14 February

Masterpieces & Curiosities:

Alfred Stieglitz's The Steerage

■ [thejewishmuseum.org](http://thejewishmuseum.org)

### PITTSBURGH

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

Until 2 May

HAC Lab Pittsburgh:

Imagining the Modern

■ [cmoa.org](http://cmoa.org)

### SAN FRANCISCO

DE YOUNG MUSEUM

Until 14 February

Willard Worden: Portals of the Past

■ [deyoung.famsf.org](http://deyoung.famsf.org)

### WASHINGTON DC

ARTHUR M. SACKLER GALLERY

Until 5 June

Lara Baladi: Perspectives

■ [asia.si.edu](http://asia.si.edu)