





VARIETY IS A MUST

TIM SCHOOLER

By Michelle Perkins

“The one thing that we hear over and over again is kids complaining that their friends went to so-and-so and all their photos look the same—and they want theirs to be different,” says Lafayette, LA, senior portrait photographer Tim Schooler. “Unfortunately, it’s

Left: This young lady is an aspiring country music singer, so she wanted a senior portrait that could do double duty as a promotional image for her music career. “She wanted a Shania Twain type of image,” says Tim, “but not quite as sexy—something appropriate to her age.” Tim selected this setting of urban decay to contrast with her beaded dress and high heels.

Above: For this senior portrait, the subject wanted an image with her horse, Joe. Tim and his subjects waited until the sun was setting and created the shot in the last 20 minutes of the day’s light. Waiting for this moment was critical because the field was completely open, so no overhead obstructions were available to soften the light or give it some direction.

hard to go out every day and stay within the confines of the rules that you know are going to make them look good while still doing something different. During our busy season, we often have to focus a bit more on the images we know the parents and grandparents will want—but at the slower times, when we have time to experiment freely, we really push the envelope!”

Pushing the envelope is one thing, but Tim understands the necessity of pushing in the right direction for each client in order to assure a good sale. “It’s not mandatory, but it’s very strongly suggested that we have a 20- to 30-minute consultation with them before they come for their session,” he says. “We show them a slideshow of images set to music, projected on a 10-foot screen. We

let them see our latest work—things we may not yet have had time to put on the website. Then we sit with them and talk about what they liked and what they didn't. Do they want indoor images, outdoor images or a combination? Do they like bold colors or muted colors? We make notes on all of this and put it in their file. Then

Right: The waterfall shooting area behind Tim's studio is popular with seniors. Here, a high camera angle pairs with effective tonal blending (the dark clothes receding into the setting) to keep the face the center of attention—even in a fairly complicated scene. **Below:** Portraits with an urban look are popular with Tim's senior clients. In this case, the young woman's outfit inspired Tim to select an offbeat location for her portraits—an abandoned building that had its face blown off by Hurricane Rita in 2005. The destruction revealed a great shooting area covered with colorful graffiti. To camera right, the building was totally open to the street, so the opening created a soft, directional main-light source. Tim just added a little reflected fill to complete the image.



when they come back, we go over it again so I'm sure I can shoot something they will like."

A specific complaint heard from many seniors is that, in their friends' photos, all the backgrounds look too similar. "When kids think about a background, they don't think about it in the sense that we do," says Tim. "To them, a background is a building, or a field, or a door. They're not thinking of canvas or muslin backgrounds—but, again, they're all telling me that the backgrounds look the same, that they're all alike. So one thing I strive to do during the peak season is change the backgrounds every three to four weeks, so everybody doesn't end up with pictures on the same ones. I also try to shoot on different parts of the backgrounds."

When it comes to back-



ground selection, Tim also has an important resource: He has a friend in the business. “I’m a big fan of Dave Maheu’s backgrounds (www.backgroundsbymaheu.com), and I have a lot of new ones from him—new things that he’s working on,” says Tim. “It’s been a good symbiotic relationship, because I get a constant fresh supply of backgrounds and he gets images for his catalog. Dave has some beautiful traditional painted backgrounds, but he is also really attuned to seniors’ preferences. He stays up on trends and knows the latest colors that seniors are going to want. I also try to give him feedback on things that kids have told us.”

Tim thinks it’s critical to get his seniors involved in the shoot. “I’ve talked to some photographers who don’t let seniors pick backgrounds. They feel that they are the professionals and that they know what looks good and what doesn’t,” he says. “Fundamentally they are right about that, but ultimately it’s the client’s image—and if they don’t like the background, they’re not going to like the image, no matter how awesome we think the lighting and everything else is.” Tim adds, “When a client comes in, I look at their clothing selections and walk them out to look at a few backgrounds. Then I let them pick. Of course, if they pick something that’s going to be a bad match with what they’re wearing, I’ll steer them in another direction—I’ll say something like, ‘I don’t think that’s really the best choice. How about this one?’ So I guide them, but I give them a choice and have fun with it. When they leave, they’ve had a good time. That’s as important as the images themselves, because that’s what makes them go out and tell their friends.”

Like many photographers, when Tim first entered the market as a professional, he operated his business out of his home. As a result, he had to quickly become a master of location portraiture. Eventually, he saw the need to open a small studio to do cap-and-gown and other more traditional images. For many photographers, gaining the convenience and control of working in a studio would have spelled the end to much of their location photography—it’s an impulse Tim can appreciate. “Location work is difficult,” he says. “It’s often hot during senior season, and working in a studio is much easier.”

Still, Tim chooses to spend about half of his time on shoots outside the studio; he considers location work part of his signature style and recognizes the instant variety it adds to his portfolio—helping to avoid the sameness many senior portrait clients bemoan in their friends’ images. “My specialization in location photography has helped me create a niche market,” he says. “While it started as a necessity, it turned into an opportunity when I realized how much seniors love shooting on location.”

Because his time is now split between the studio and other locations, Tim chose to locate his studio space in a downtown area. This gives him ample shooting areas all around him—and many seniors particularly love his urban-style portraits with graffiti or brick walls in the background. For students who want a more pastoral

A vibrant Dave Maheu background paired with the pale pinks and whites in the ballerina’s outfit create an unusually dramatic image.

look, the University of Louisiana is nearby and has beautiful grounds. For other sessions, Tim will also travel to a location personally selected by the student.

Since Tim’s style features portraiture with a fashion edge, he helps to ensure variety in his work by keeping up on the latest styles in magazines like *W*, *Glamour* and *Vogue*. This study of cutting-edge looks isn’t just a creative exercise. The kids that Tim photographs have grown up in a virtual deluge of media—magazines, websites, videos and movies that all set the bar very high when it comes to imagery. These teens demand something beyond the traditional senior portrait—and Tim delivers it. To learn more about Tim Schooler and his photography, visit his website at www.timschooler.com.



Michelle Perkins is a professional writer, photographer, and digital-imaging specialist. She has written for PC Photo and is the author of numerous books, including Professional Portrait Lighting: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (Amherst Media, 2006) and Professional Portrait Posing: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (Amherst Media, 2007).

