



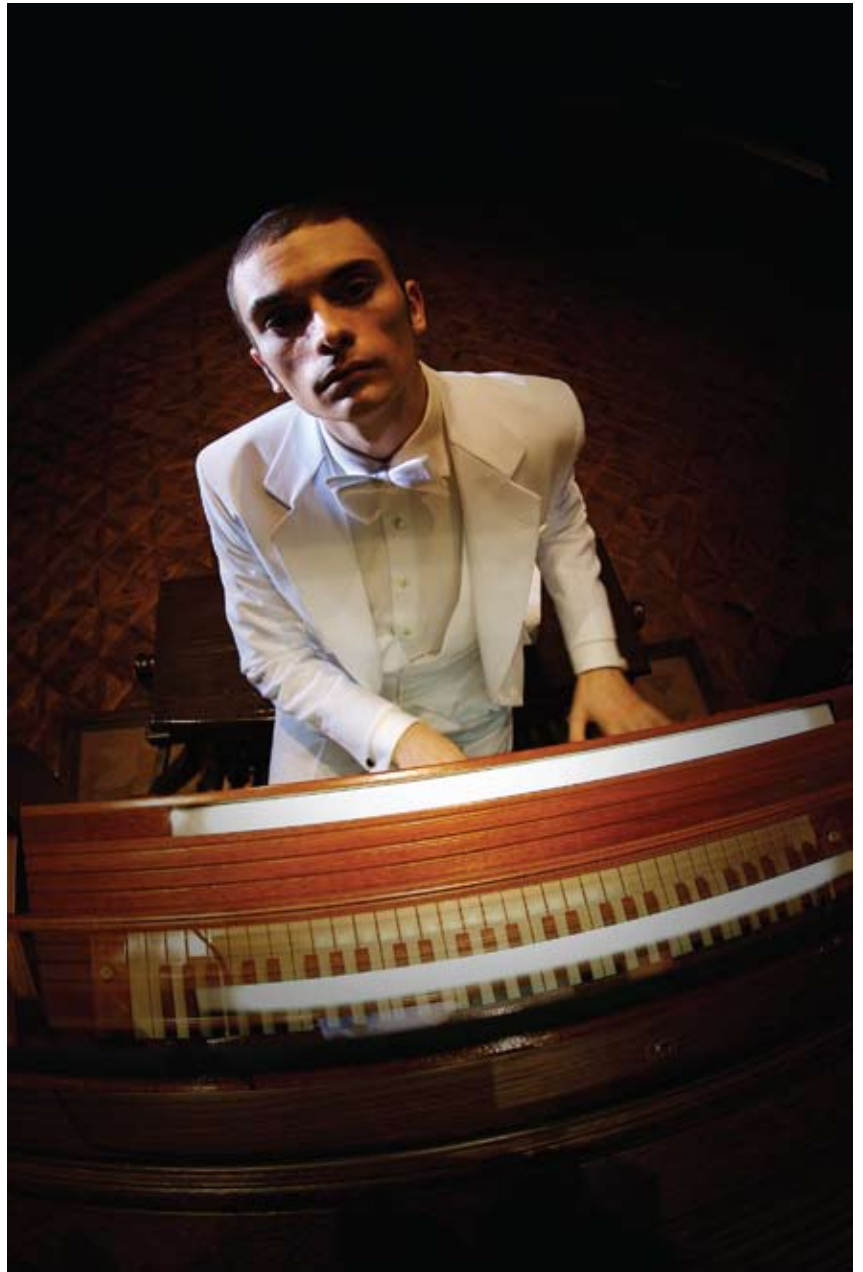
Randy Tay
By Patricia Mues
The Singapore Swing

Becoming a successful photographer in New York City is a tough assignment, but imagine starting out with only four dollars to your name. Along with his photography equipment, that was all Randy Tay had when he arrived in the city in 2003. Since then, Randy has worked very hard, building a portfolio of images that bring portraiture, fashion and art together. Not bad for a man who first picked up a camera because he wanted to avoid working.

Back in Singapore, Randy—born in Malaysia but a naturalized citizen of Singapore—served for six years as an enlisted man in the Singapore Armed Forces. One day, Sergeant Tay was assigned to help set up for the Change of Command Parade. It was a hot day and the work was grueling. As Randy hurried through a mess hall, he saw an acquaintance just lounging around sipping a cold drink. Randy asked him why he wasn't working when everyone else was; the answer was life changing. "I am the photographer for the parade," said Randy's friend. Within weeks Randy had purchased his first camera, a Nikon S, and began to study books and magazines on photography. "I wanted to take many pictures, but film and processing cost money," says Randy, "Every frame I took, I had to be very careful." As luck would have it, Randy was soon transferred to a new division, near the studio of a Master Portrait Photographer; Randy enrolled in his classes. When his national service ended, Randy approached the photographer about working with him. "He had a lot to offer, a lot to teach me," explains Randy. "When I asked him if he would take me in as an apprentice, he said he had no money to pay me. But after working for a month, he started to pay me 500 dollars." This photographer was Joseph K.S. Tan, the first person in the Far East to be conferred the title of Master Photographer by the UK's prestigious Master Photographers Association. For two years, Randy learned from Master Tan and was given the chance to shoot portraits. But Randy was restless: "In my youthful arrogance, I argued with him a lot. I thought his work was boring; everything had to be a certain way. I had friends who worked with models and he just called their work 'snapshots.' I finally decided to leave."

Randy became a wedding photographer, an industry that thrives in Singapore, where the culture recognizes two distinct and separate ceremonies that occur at least a year apart. Before the formal second ceremony, many couples have a lavish photography session that lasts at least a day. "It will be like a fashion magazine shoot," says Randy. "And then on the actual day, there will be another P] sort of session. As you can imagine, this paid very well."

In 1997, another parade marched into Randy's life. "I was approached by an ad executive to





photograph Singapore's National Day Parade. It's a huge event, like the opening ceremony of the Olympics," says Randy. "I recruited a couple of friends to help and the project was really successful." Randy became an account manager for the agency, and left photography behind. He worked on major accounts and found the business interesting, but at heart he was still a photographer. After three years, Randy abandoned the advertising business and picked up his camera again. But this time he was interested in work that was about more than just weddings and extravagance. "In Singapore, it is all about economics. When you say you are an artist, people tell you to get a real job"

That said, it's no surprise that Randy's next move was to the United States.

When Randy arrived in NYC's Chinatown, he had little money, but a great skill; he could speak English, Mandarin and



five other Chinese dialects. His first day, he walked from restaurant to restaurant, asking for a job. At the sixth one, he got a yes. Within a few days, he bumped into his cousin and they became roommates.

In the meantime, he sold his photography equipment to pay the rent and buy food, and just focused on making a living for a while. In November 2005, Randy bought his first digital camera, a Canon EOS-1D Mark IIN. "Photography had become my calling," Randy says. "I started doing small jobs, parties and weddings, and then I decided to offer photo shoots like I did in Singapore." When a friend explained that it was considered bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her wedding dress before the ceremony, Randy gave up the pre-wedding shoot idea and shifted his focus to making a mark in fashion and portraiture. Jobs with small magazines kept him solvent, while other work expanded his portfolio and provided important connections. He admits to being "shameless" at times about asking people to call him if they ever needed a photographer. His boldness paid off, however,



when he met organist Cameron Carpenter through a friend; Randy is now his exclusive and official photographer. Through that connection, he's landed other photography commissions from independent musicians in New York City.

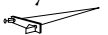
By late 2006, Randy had a portfolio of fashion shots, portraits and personal images. "The result was a mishmash of work which couldn't be defined, but yet contained a little element of everything from fine art to fashion," says Randy. "This made it extremely hard to market myself as my

work is neither here nor there yet everywhere and nowhere at the same time." Randy decided to hire a consultant from Workbook to help his company—Khayman Photography—become a brand. "I didn't want to become just the photographer down the street, so I hired Allegra Wilde. She gave me focus. She told me my work was much more portraits than fashion. She has become my ally, and that has made me more confident. I do a lot of house calls [to do portraits]. Before Allegra, I would have been hesitant to do that, now

I'm much more comfortable shooting portraits." Eventually Randy hopes that his work will become strong and distinctive, so that it is seen as art, not just imagery. "I am working to reveal more of myself," he says, "so art buyers and directors will relate to my work. I am more interested in creating rather than just capturing."

With all the difficulties for any photographer trying to make a name for themselves in New York City, Randy has two longtime allies—Buddhism and the martial arts. "For me, Buddhism isn't about chanting and meditation, it's about how you conduct your life. I have been a Buddhist for a long time, so generally I don't worry. Impermanence is a teaching of Buddhism. I think that's reflected in my work." Randy finds that his martial arts practice helps him in negotiations with prospective clients. "Most people see it [martial arts] as a purely physical activity, but it is actually more mental—it's about being aware of the other's awareness and reacting without aggression."

Although Randy has a small studio in Brooklyn, he prefers location work, specifically indoors. "I enjoy doing lighting to set mood and ambience. Being in NYC, the most cost-effective way is to rent a studio if I need to have one. That said, I have access to several artist lofts in Brooklyn where I would build sets inside to simulate real interior locations. In my opinion, that is much more versatile than a studio." Currently, Randy uses a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II, EOS-1D Mark IIN and several L series lenses. Most of his lenses are zoom lenses because, he says, "I would sacrifice some negligible quality for vastly superior versatility." He also does his own prints using Canon W6400, iPF5000 and Pro9000 printers.

Randy Tay wants to create portraits that are timeless, not trendy. Ask if there are any photographers that inspire him and the answer is a simple "no." Ask him about what artists inspire him and the answer is almost as brief—"Rembrandt and Wong Kar-Wai." Pressed as to why he chooses the 17th century Dutch master and the modern Hong Kong film director, Randy doesn't hesitate: "Their work is very dark and moody, like mine." 

Patricia Mues is a freelance writer living in Escondido, CA. Her work focuses on the creative and decorative arts and has appeared in HOW, Inspired House and Living in Style. She is a regular contributor to Rangefinder.