

Fresh Views, Along the Edges

CHARLES HARRIS

By Monica Kass Rogers

Looking out from the garden at his home in Raleigh, North Carolina, photographer Charles Harris calls it green. “Green, green, green, as far as the eye can see,” says Harris, describing the 700 rambling acres of forested land across the way. But as we talk via laptops on this bright afternoon in May, the visual landscape shifts to make dramatic global leaps on our screens: A little boy kicks a ball across a red clay pitch in Rwanda. An old boxer, sweaty back flexed and gloved hands held high, shelters from the rainy evening in a dark Havana gym. Kigali villagers, baskets balanced on dhuku-wrapped heads, walk to work in Rwandan tea fields as clouds gather overhead. A Kuna fisherman perches in the bow of his dugout canoe as he heads out to sea off the coast of Panama. And then, we are back in the States, perched with a surfer on rocky Californian coast, having cut a coast-to-coast swath through Harris’s creative landscapes.

We parse the images, and one after another, Harris says, “Oh, I took that shot when we were going from point A to point B.” Or, “That was on the way to an assignment.” Or, “That was a side job.”

As this pattern emerges, Harris admits, “A lot of these *are* something I saw along the way. I think you find your best stuff there. You can script things all day, and I work with scripts all the time. But you know? You can’t predict life and all the weird elements that are going to happen when you are on your way someplace else. That seems to be what I look for, what I’m thrilled to find. I am always working along the edges.”

In a world where specialization is more common than versatility, Harris, who has a portfolio full of lifestyle and portrait and corporate photographs, says he has wrestled with what to put out there when showing his work. “I’ve always struggled with analyzing market forces,” says Harris, “trying to figure out what people want to see. You hear, ‘You need

to be concise.’ Or, ‘You need to narrow your focus.’ But to counter that, there is, ‘Be true to yourself.’ And that’s the road I’ve chosen. I can’t just do one thing, be one thing. I’m just never gonna be the guy who shoots everybody on a blue background.”

Harris’s mastery and comfort with many photographic styles, and his skill at capturing what he finds along the edges, has not gone unnoticed. “It’s amazing, the breadth of work he has done for us,” says Claudia Royston, design director at *Our State* magazine in North Carolina. “He’s been knee-deep in a creek; paparazzi at the Biltmore [historic house museum]; photographed fighter jets at the air force base and flowers at the flower show. Whatever the assignment, we know that he is going to deliver.”

“That’s what I really love about his portfolio,” says Jeff Griffith, of Jeff Griffith Creative in Minneapolis. “You don’t look at it and go, ‘Oh, that again.’ You’re more like, ‘Whoa! How did he get that?’ With Charles, it feels like he’s always experimenting, trying something different. He’s always got a new perspective, a freshness to his work.”

The perspective that Harris has developed over more than 30 years of work started with what he calls a “wilding youth” in the South. Harris’s dad was an Air Force officer and aviator, who headquartered the family in Waco, Texas. And Harris’s mother’s family lived a few hours away, on the outskirts of Shreveport, Louisiana, along the swamps and bayous near Caddo Lake. “I spent a lot of my early childhood on visits there with my cousin Hoss, chasing bulls, stealing boats, all the normal boyhood stuff,” says Harris. “I think that freedom and being dropped into all kinds of unexpected and sometimes weird situations bred in me my love for adventure. It also made it easy for me to go into completely unfamiliar places and just take each for what it is.” That adaptability, plus Harris’s easygoing nature, has opened doors for him in tricky situations.



Right: “While on an assignment in Dubai, we took advantage of the location for a personal shoot in the **desert**. Our producer hired two beautiful Middle Eastern models in traditional attire. My goal was to create a timeless and evocative image in this stunning location.”



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Griffith, who launched *Atomic* magazine in New York City while he was working for the ad agencies Young & Rubicam and Doremus in the 1990s, was doing a series on Medal of Honor recipients for the magazine. He hired Harris to photograph veteran Jack Lucas in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. “Jack was a real pistol,” says Griffith.

“When we got to his house, Jack told us he’d give us ten minutes, and where he wanted us to shoot. Charles wasn’t taken aback. He just said, ‘ok, Jack, let’s shoot that, but then I want to shoot something for me, ok?’ Jack grumbled but agreed. So we took Jack’s shot, and then Charles asked to do his shot. Sure enough, right on the front porch was the American flag, and from the angle that Charles took his shot, Jack looked monumental, like he was seven feet tall, with the flag behind his head. When Jack saw that shot, he was thrilled.”

Harris first grew interested in photography when a friend’s older brother showed him his darkroom and camera. “We’d always had some little snapshot cameras and Polaroid cameras around the house growing up,” Harris says. “But seeing that friend’s camera, I thought, ‘Man, I would really love to have one like that.’” Harris’s wish was granted with a simple 35mm Vivitar that he toted around through junior high, picking up what skills he could from the Kodak reference book that came with the camera.

But when he dropped the Vivitar from the top of a set of metal bleachers at school, “and that thing just bounced down, hitting all the girders like a pachinko ball,” the camera was stuck at the depth of field preview-mode setting forever after. “Every time I went to stop down the lens, the viewfinder went dark. So I just never stopped down. And I got used to it. It made me accept this not-so-sharp background in photos as normal. When I finally went on to shooting without that defect, I’d grown so used to that soft background, I never liked having everything in sharp focus,” he says with a laugh. To this day, Harris says he is a “wide open junkie.” His favorite lens is the Leica 50mm f/0.95 Noctilux.

Before getting a degree in photography at the Colorado Institute of Art, Harris followed his father into the air, spending two years in the aviation program at a nearby community college. “I loved flying—amassed a bunch of flight hours in single engine, multiengine and instrumental flight,” says Harris. “But after all that training, I realized I didn’t want to do that for a living. Too many rules.”

The flight experience did lead him to work as an aerial photographer in Denver for a short stint. But, perhaps more importantly, “being a pilot made me very aware of how much things change depending on your vantage point,” says Harris. “We all walk around in a six-foot world. So few of us actually see anything from a different perspective. Change the vantage point, and you change everything.”

After years of assisting in Dallas and North Carolina, Harris ran a photography collective called Stone Soup with four other associates in Raleigh until 2006. He has been based in Raleigh ever since, throughout a career that has taken him around the world. He’s shot for ad agency, editorial and corporate clients that run the gamut from the *New York Times* to the Royal Caribbean Cruises lines to Duke Energy.

Many of his global explorations were at the side of photographer and former ad agency creative Christopher Wilson. “I met Charles long before I even considered becoming a photographer,” says Wilson. “I was the creative director for Audi North America at McKinney & Silver, and we hired Charles to shoot some work.” Wilson admired Harris’s skills, how he worked and how he shot. So when Wilson started doing more photography, he brought Harris on as a camera consultant, and, eventually, to be the second shooter on jobs.

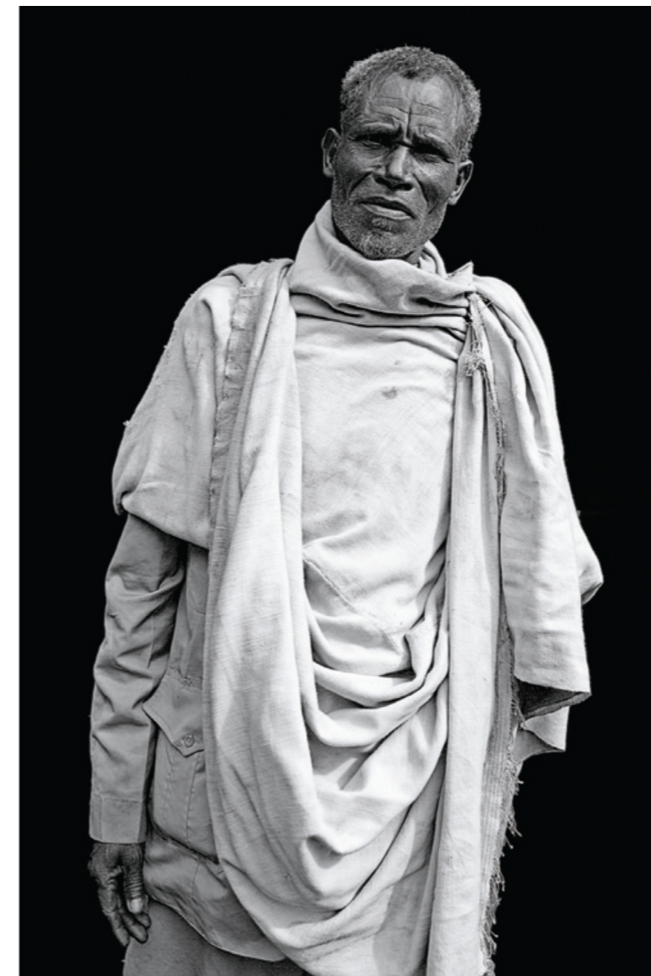
“It was like I was Oz—the not-so-great-and-powerful—and he was the man behind the curtain pulling all of the levers, making me look great,” says Wilson. “I will forever be indebted to him for helping me start my photography career. There aren’t many out there who would be that generous.”

The working relationship between Harris and Wilson progressed to become symbiotic, as they traveled to jobs in Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa and India. They photographed in Brazil, England, Belgium and Singapore. Also, Dubai and Mexico, and all over the United States.

Right: “My friend Christopher Wilson and I were on an assignment in Colorado, and tacked on a personal trip to the **Bonneville Salt Flats** in Utah to photograph the cars and racers at Speed Week. Our friends Andy Anderson and Shaun Fenn joined us one day, and we drove out to the ‘drop,’ which is where the racers slow down after a run to get picked up by their team members. We had a hilariously uproarious time chasing down the racers and attacking them like paparazzi.”

“Shot on assignment for the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce, which is essentially the tourist bureau. After a long three days with a ton of talent and crew, I was left alone for a couple of days to finish up a few ideas I had. The subject is a **local fisherman** casting his net. Another shot from these two days on a boat was in the *Communication Arts* Photo Annual a couple of years ago.” Charles Harris, art director/photographer; Kathy Winings, project manager; Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce, client.





CHARLES HARRIS

“Charles has a really good eye for seeing things in the moment,” Wilson says. “That’s a real gift. He can be very spontaneous, and can just look and see what’s in front of the camera and shoot it quickly. We would divide and conquer. I might do the more formal stuff, while he did the lifestyle stuff. And he is so easy to be with.”

“Charles just gets it,” Griffith concludes. “When you are on a shoot with him, he takes everything you give him—all the information, the background, the side stories, how you got to this day—and he just distills it and does his thing. I think that is magical. Working with a photographer, you don’t want to have to tell them what to shoot or how to shoot it. That’s their job. With Charles, you give him the info, and he just runs with it. And you are always pleased with the result.”

For his part, Harris is looking forward to the next assignment “so I can continue to wander and see what’s along the road,” he says. “Photography is like a backstage pass to life. You are given the opportunity to peek inside, behind the door, view things others might not normally see. It’s unpredictable, but it certainly keeps things fresh.” [ca](#)

Left: “Shot in the courtyard of the famed Rafael Trejo Boxing Gym in Havana during a personal trip to Cuba. While roaming the streets on a rainy evening, I came across the gym and ambled in to have a look. The only one there was the caretaker, a 75-year-old retired **boxer**. He spoke no English, and my Spanish is minimal, but we had no real need for words. He showed me around and was kind enough to sit for a few photos. It was so dark that I could not even see to focus, so the whole thing was a leap of faith. This image was used as cover art for *Workbook 36*.”

“A personal photograph of my daughter Dani. We were visiting her in New York City and having ice cream at the Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory. It being dark out, I asked her to light herself with her phone with the **Brooklyn Bridge** in the background. I used the Leica 35mm Summilux to achieve a luscious and stylized look.” Dani Harris, model.

This page: “From an unpublished feature in *Our State* magazine about the potential partnership between the North Carolina government and tourism resources such as river guides and outfitters. The writer and the director of the North Carolina program are pictured while fishing along a river deep in the **Pisgah Forest**.” Eddie Nickens, writer; Claudia Royston, design director; Our State, client.

“For the nonprofit IntraHealth International, which has worked in more than 100 countries. Christopher Wilson brought me along as a second shooter on the assignment. Our goal was to create dignified, compelling and empathetic portraits of locals who come to the clinics and the other services IntraHealth funds. One of the things we did was set up simple white and black backgrounds for the subjects, which Christopher and I would trade between. This portrait was taken in **Ethiopia**. We traveled all over Ethiopia and Rwanda, including an adventurous side trip to hike the dense mountain jungle to see the giant silverback gorillas.” Christopher Wilson, art director; IntraHealth International, client.

This page: "After completing a personal assignment for a friend in Mumbai, I set off for a two-week solo journey across India. While I considered myself fairly well traveled, I was not prepared for the emotional impact of what felt like an upside-down world. It was intense, and I've since returned once on a commercial assignment. I would love to go again. This image of a mother and child, taken in the **Agra Fort** not far from the Taj Mahal, captures the near-mystical quality of India and its beautiful people (top). This hookah-smoking holy man was found as is in the alleys of the golden city of **Jaisalmer** (bottom). Both were taken with a Leica film camera using Kodachrome."

Right: "This portrait of **Jack Lucas** was shot at his home in Mississippi for an *Atomic* magazine feature on Medal of Honor recipients. Magazine creator Jeff Griffith and I drove there from New Orleans after quite a big night in the French Quarter. Jack was a tough and ornery firecracker. After taking some token shots of him at his desk with memorabilia—his idea, not ours—I wanted to portray him as the larger-than-life hero he was, a real hero who saved lives in Iwo Jima by throwing himself on hand grenades. His jacket, his medal, the flag, the low angle and his obvious pride created exactly the look we wanted." Jeff Griffith, writer/creative director; Leslie Rosenberg, editor in chief; Atomic, client.

"For an *Our State* magazine feature on North Carolina swimming holes. This young girl was in one of the many swirling pools of **Looking Glass Creek**, which feeds the insanely fun Sliding Rock, deep in the Pisgah Forest. I've long been drawn to the abstract patterns of ripples of water and could not help but notice the similarity in her bathing suit top. She graciously allowed me to photograph her just below the surface of the cold rushing stream." Claudia Royston, design director; Our State, client.

"Shot for an unnamed credit card company at a **restaurant** in New York City. I was hired as second shooter with Christopher Wilson. While he had specific conceptual and layout concerns, I was free to shoot lifestyle images of our talent. I used the Leica Noctilux extensively to achieve a luscious and stylized look." Kristin Haley, art director; Teddy Brown, creative director; fcb Chicago, ad agency.

