

# RESOURCE

## MAGAZINE

For the Professional Photo Productionist

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# MARK HIGASHINO

The bassist of the NY Dolls was sleeping on Mark Higashino's couch when Resource finally wrangled the DP into an interview. "Let's do it on the roof," he suggested, ever the problem-solver.

INTERVIEW:

# Mark Higashino

Portrait and interview by Emily Anne Epstein

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From the view of his Union Square apartment, he reminisced about the times when the neighborhood was a tad different. Andy Warhol's Factory was down the street, Union Square was known as Needle Park, and he rolled his own Tri-X to photograph punk shows at CBGB's. He watched the city take on all different shapes—and his career has been just as polymorphous. He has worked in advertising, fashion, and film across the globe. We're talking the arctic here. We're talking Toyota. Jim Jarmusch. Even a little David Bowie.

The unbelievably approachable and always all black-attired photographer took an afternoon to share how he got started... and how he's never going to stop.



### How did you move to New York?

I studied a little bit of fashion after I graduated from high school. My parents wanted me to be an architect, but I was into fashion because of all those new things going on in glam rock, like David Bowie and Led Zep-pelin. So I decided to go to the Fashion Institute in Japan.

I studied space design and window display. And then one summer my friends and I decided to go on a road trip. We spent about two months together. We were three crazy, young, Japanese arts kids cruising from San Francisco to Mexico and then Los Angeles—the car was like seven hundred dollars from an ad in the newspaper. When we went back to Japan, I met two artists from Boston and told them my story. I told them about Route 5, that beat up car, the desert, the Beatles, the Doobie Brothers, the sun and all that, and they said, “California is not America. If you are interested in art, you should come to New York City.” So three days after I graduated, I came here by myself.

### What were those first few years like?

When I was a poor artist with big ambitions, I assisted Marco Glaviano, one of the founders of Pier 59 Studio, and one of the top five fashion photographers at the time. I interviewed with him, he liked me and asked me to come to his studio. He had a duplex, a huge penthouse on Central Park South. When I walked in, there were all these supermodels and makeup artists... and I said, “Wow! I’d like to be a fashion photographer, but this is impossible.” My dream was crushed because everything seemed so gorgeous and unattainable to me. I could not be like that—it was too much. I stayed one week and gave up. I was disappointed, but I liked music so I turned to shooting music.



### Who was the most memorable person you have worked with?

I'm still in contact with him. His name is Sukita: he's seventy-three years old, a photographer, and still shooting. He worked with David Bowie and shot the "Heroes" album covers while he was in London. He came as a DP when I was doing TV commercials, and I stopped him and said, "I know your name and your work. It's great to finally meet you." Since then, whenever he comes to New York he always asks me to work with him.

### What's your favorite thing to photograph?

When I was young, a beginner, I was too shy to shoot models. They always complain, so I got into tabletop photography. A product never complains; even early in the morning you can get up and say, "OK, I'm going to make this lipstick beautiful!" But I was interested in shooting models, people, and portraits. It got easier when I came to New York; there were just so many interesting people.

### Where do you like to watch people in NYC?

I like music, especially rock music, and when I moved here there were all these punk and new wave things happening. All these characters, Studio 54, Andy Warhol's Factory, every night I would go to nightclubs like CBGB's to shoot. I would use film, but I had no money, so I would roll my own film, Tri-x, and shoot one roll a day. And I would just spend the weekend in my bathroom darkroom, processing, processing, and processing. Eventually, a magazine found out there was this guy shooting music and they asked me to shoot KISS at the Palladium. It paid five hundred dollars for a couple hour shoot. And that was my first job.

### What is your day like when you're working as a DP?

Pre-production is very important. We have to go on location scouting and find a spot, decide what camera to use. Most of my shoots are commercial; I make all the decisions. Lighting, everything is calculated. When time comes for the shoot, it's about the emotion between the characters and me.



### What do you see when you photograph people?

There are two types of people: real and famous people. With a real person, I try to see a strong impact in their eyes, nose, whatever, and then I decide on lighting. My lighting is very simple. Like sunlight: I put two lights, a key light and one more. When I work with famous people, it's different. The talent has to approve every photograph. I check old magazines to see which angle of their face they prefer. I set up the lighting based on my research and shoot them, and they say, "Ah, you know my best angle!" After that they loosen up. Basically, they're human and I'm human. I just open up my whole heart.

### What sort of advice would you give photographers who are looking to have careers as multifaceted as yours?

I grew up as a classic photographer—making black and white prints, using temperature controls and manipulating developers... Whatever the client wanted me to print, I could control all the fine qualities. It's like cooking food: I just keep testing and trying to make something new. It's a dash of salt, pepper, maybe some cayenne... For young people, my advice would be to just keep shooting. Find a theme. Trying to find a theme is very difficult in a big city. There are so many elements; it's confusing. If you go to Switzerland, there are beautiful landscapes, but everyone is shooting the same beautiful landscapes. In a city, the beauty, the idea, and the point of views are always changing, so just believe in yourself, in your eyes, and keep shooting. Remember to put your soul into it.

### What was the craziest shoot you've ever done?

Michelin. That was a crazy one: they built an ice castle and polished a frozen lake surface. It was windy and minus forty-five degrees; I was very nervous about using the camera in this weather. I got a heat pack with temperature control to put on the camera, and my assistant would take the camera apart and put it back together to keep it warm. Since they had polished the surface of the lake, the place got very slippery. We couldn't wear spike shoes so we were sliding everywhere. I had to put a sharpie dot on the surface of the ice to mark where the tripod would be. When I got ready to shoot, the tripod had moved and I told my assistant, "Don't move my tripod! I need to shoot!" But he hadn't touched it—it was the wind.

### What do you look for in an assistant?

I don't like people to come without their books: if you are a young photographer, I want to see your work. And then I ask, "You are in the darkroom loading 4x6 film and someone knocks, 'Hello? Hello?' What do you do?" Some people answer, "Hold on! I'm in the darkroom!" And that's the wrong answer. You know why? Because they are in the dark, they can't see anything. If you say something, maybe spit will get on the film. Don't say anything—just kick the door... That is an important test.

### What's next for you?

I think of my friend Sukita who is still shooting motion pictures, so my mission is to shoot until I die. Until my body has stopped.

