

Amelie G

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GREG RHOADES

BY HANNAH SPARKS RANCK



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG RHOADES

You expect a lot from someone whose business card reads, “I STOP TIME.” Rest assured that New Orleans photographer, videographer, writer (and then some) Greg Rhoades has got the skills to pay the bills—a level unrealized by many artists trying to monetize. How does he do it? Simple. Market first, develop later. Of course, Rhoades’ drive for photography was not completely born out of his marketing and brand development experience, but it sure hasn’t hurt his successful photography career.

For Rhoades, it started with his decision to move to New Orleans in 2002 after graduating from high school in Tulsa, OK. After hearing an engaging story from a former Notre Dame seminary priest spoken in what Rhoades calls a “righteous Southern drawl,” he decided to come down to New Orleans and see what the father had been raving about.

At 18, Rhoades visited some friends at Loyola University of New Orleans and stopped by the now defunct Funky Butt inside Louis Armstrong Park. His evening there—the food, the music, the haze,

and a giant painting of a large naked woman—would be the ultimate catalyst in Rhoades’ decision to live here. “I was absolutely hooked from that moment on. I didn’t even need to see a classroom,” he says. “I knew I was coming here and I wouldn’t be leaving for a long time.”

Certainly, Katrina was a major wake-up call for everyone in the city and in the world. For Rhoades, it was a realization that his cherished haven was on shaky ground, and that the places he had come to love before the storm would not always be there. He embarked on a mission to document what he referred to as the “disposable nation.”

It’s safe to say that Rhoades’ photography career wouldn’t exist if he didn’t live in New Orleans. But it was specifically his love for New Orleans’ music culture that drove him to transition his photography from hobby to profession. Rhoades conceived of his brand name, 504otos, while listening to the Soul Rebels Brass Band’s song “504,” pronounced “five-oh-foe” in a proper New Orleans accent. Live music, especially the brass band scene, is where Rhoades truly, even

religiously, began his work as a photographer. “I was a music king,” he says. “Rebirth [Brass Band] at the Maple Leaf was my Sunday Mass, only it occurred on Tuesdays.” With a fervent interest in New Orleans music, and with the help of some friends already in the scene, Rhoades began to land gigs as a band, venue, and festival photographer. “It’s fascinating for me to go to the same venue night after night after night, and see the different crowds that pile in,” he says. “There’s so much emotion coming from the performers and the fans.”

He caught a huge break when he was asked to document the construction of Jazz Fest in 2007, and again in 2008. “I wanted to capture experiences that my friends back home in Oklahoma and non-New Orleanians wouldn’t necessarily believe or understand,” he remarks. Later, he began work for NewOrleans.com, where he covered lesser-known music on their blog. “They weren’t covering, for instance, the New Orleans hip-hop scene, the rap scene, the brass band scene, the bounce scene,” he notes. “I started providing things that no one else was claiming.”

Since then, Rhoades’ brand has been on multiple projects, productions, publications and festivals. He’s worked with Brad Pitt’s Make it Right campaign. He’s the official photographer and sits on the advisory board of PR and marketing for the United Way in New Orleans. He’s been an official photographer for Jazz Fest, Hangout Fest in Gulf Shores, AL, and most recently Essence Fest. He’s opened several exhibits around town at spots like Sugar Park, the Maple Leaf, and Bacchanal—a showing that inspired HBO and the producers of *Treme* to buy out the entire exhibit. And currently, aside from his music gigs, he’s working on production for two documentaries: one about life in Tremé and another on the brass band scene. He’s interviewed or photographed various popular artists, like Mannie Fresh, Taj Mahal, Big Boi, Twista (“He actually speaks very quickly,” he laughs), and the infamous John Sinclair (see John Lennon’s song “John Sinclair”). Soon, he hopes to explore more of the fashion photography realm. No question about it—he’s a busy man.

When asked from where he thinks his success comes, he gives a rather unanticipated answer. Besides a lot of practice and free work, he claims his best asset is his business savvy. “I’m a marketer,” he confesses. “I love photography and it’s a huge hobby for me, but without a doubt I’m more talented at marketing a product.” Luckily, the product in his case largely speaks for itself.

Rhoades is adamant about the fact that New Orleans is the inspiration and impetus for all of his work in photography:

“The things that I can take photos of here are absolutely endless. I step outside and I can take a photo of the house across the street and I can sell it because it’s interesting. And I could walk down and take a photo of another house and it’s equally as interesting... Everyone here is interesting, and everyone has a hustle. People are very willing to extend a hand and mentor and guide people...there’s not that much jealousy. There’s just plenty to go around. I don’t think I could do this anywhere else.”

For more on Greg Rhoades, his photography and other projects, please visit 504otos.com.

