

Empire strikes back: Chris Lupton on becoming the creative force behind Empire magazine

By **danibacon** -



'I get to play in this massive sand pit of photography, illustration and design' - Chris Lupton. Credit: Steve Schofield

Creative Director, Chris Lupton, 50, has spent more than a decade shaping *Empire* magazine's most iconic film covers. From bold concepts to big-name collaborations including Steven Spielberg—this movie lover's role is anything but routine. Dani Bacon chats with Chris about his creative process, the reality behind the scenes, and where he sees the future of magazines.

What have you been up to today?

I'm working from home today. I've actually got a shoot tomorrow, I can't tell you who, but it's very exciting, and I've been working on some visual ideas for that. With *Empire*, as much as it's a monthly, sometimes it feels like you're working on a weekly because there are so many things that change. News happens and we have to stay very up to date.

Could you explain what being Creative Director at *Empire* entails?

I've been at *Empire* for 13 years now. It's the longest I've ever worked on any magazine, and I've been in the industry over 25 years. I work across the visuals of the brand as a whole. With that comes, the design of the magazine, commissioning shoots, social posts, event artwork and event photography. We have an amazing photography director, Joanna Iran, me and her are like two peas in a pod, we're kind of like the creative force behind *Empire* in that sense. You know, that's my role.



What initially drew you to *Empire*?

Previous to *Empire*, I was freelancing, and I was deputy art director for *The Observer*. I felt like as much as I loved it, I probably had done it for too long. I really got to a point where I needed to shake myself up a little bit, get out of my comfort zone.

Then the job came up on *Empire*. I will be really honest with you, I was more interested, at the beginning, in having something that I could get my teeth into that was new and different. But it wasn't till I got my feet under the table that I realised its full potential, and that was when the light bulb moment happened. I was like, 'oh my god, I can literally do anything with this magazine'. Creatively, it's been the most fulfilling thing I've ever done in my career.

Can you walk me through the process when designing a new cover or feature spread for *Empire*?

We have four covers a month, and a lot of people say, "Oh my God, how do you do that?", but a lot of it comes with planning and having my time really carved out.

As well as the Focus and Spotlight covers, we create a newsstand cover, which is always a movie, so it's someone in character. Those conversations start literally two years prior, mainly because when you want to photograph someone in costume, you have to do it when the movie's being made.

Then it flips to the creative part. So, the dedicated *Empire* subscriber cover is always illustration or photography, it's a sort of 'money can't buy' thing. You're not getting that anywhere else, it's made by me and the artists that I'm lucky to work with. It purely comes from the heart of *Empire*. It's been one of the most amazing rewarding things, because I get to play in this massive sand pit of photography, illustration and design. I have to pinch myself sometimes.





A shoot inspired by the mind of Chris Lupton inside the April 2025 issue of Empire. (Photo: Dani Bacon)

Where do you get your creative ideas from?

Music, fashion, art, and popular culture in general, of which film is a big part of that. I've got a Madonna reference for everything, much to my photography director's annoyance. Madonna is the greatest visual creator in the world ever. I can think of something in my head and go, oh, I'm sure Madonna's done that, lo and behold, she has!

If you had to choose, what are your top three movies?

It's easy for me. *Star Wars Empire Strikes Back*, *Death Becomes Her*, and *The Hours*. *Death Becomes Her* is fun, it's camp, the performances by everyone are so over the top, so brilliant, so quotable. A recent fave of mine is *All of Us are Strangers*, because it's not often you can see yourself on screen. There was something about that movie that tapped into queer culture lifestyle and lives of gay men at a certain age that just resonated with me. I have seen it and cried so many times.

Looking back on your time at *Empire*, is there a particular day or moment that stands out to you?

I mean, there's been so many. I'm so lucky and feel humble to work with the people I work with, to say, go to Hollywood and work there. But my big one was meeting Steven Spielberg. He's a huge hero of mine from childhood, and I was lucky to spend a whole day with him doing a shoot, and a little bit of video. It was just such a lovely perfect day. He was everything you'd want him to be. He still is. And since then, we've had other times where we've done stuff with Steven. His time is precious, but he always finds time for us, and we're very grateful for that.

Have you always wanted to work within magazines?

From the beginning I wanted to work in the music industry. That was really my first thing. I was always inspired by artwork and photography that was used as album artwork. I'm a product of *MTV*, so all of that was the stuff that fed into me, and I felt it was where I wanted to go. But it wasn't until I got entrenched at art school that I realised the stuff that was inspiring me was probably magazines.

How did you first you get into the industry?

I was really lucky. This was a world pre LinkedIn, pre social media, pre how anyone gets jobs these days. The Guardian used to have a media section on a Monday, and I saw a job for a junior designer for the *Gay Times* and *Diva*, and on a whim I applied. I got an interview, and they gave me the job based on my fine art portfolio. The job came with training, but also as a young queer man, I was very much looking to work in a safe space with community, where I didn't feel out of place. Looking back on it now, it was the best gift of my career, because someone saw potential in me, and I was hungry to learn.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Having a good night's sleep. Sleep is forever my enemy. I want to sleep. I can't remember the last time I had a good night's sleep. But also, I see myself hopefully still at *Empire*, but who knows what the future might bring? Because I think the industry is morphing itself in a different direction. I'm interested to know where the industry is going and what's happening in a world that is being pushed towards machines and AI.

On that note, lastly what do you think will happen to the magazine industry in the increasingly digital world?

It's difficult to predict right now. But I do think that we are in an age of the independent magazine, they're thriving. If you look out there or go to any of those stores dedicated to selling magazines, you hardly see any consumer magazines in there. What you see is beautifully crafted magazines by passionate people, passionate creatives. That world seems to get bigger and bigger. So, I think that print is not dead, by any means.

It comes back to that tangible experience and collectability of print, there's a reason that some of these magazines do multiple covers, like we do, they're tapping into their audience. But I feel that the magazines that know their audience and their reader inside out, are the ones that are going to survive. And print will always be there in some way or form.

I think those big consumer players are going to move much more towards digital and it'll just be where we all end up, I just hope that mass and digital also equals creativity.



I believe that a photographer is what they do, and an illustrator is what they do, you know? And I'd hate to think that the machines would take that from them.

