

From Bermondsey to Beijing: confessions of a South London snapper

Excerpt from a biography of Jasper James, a Beijing-based British Photographer.

Photographer Jasper James was born in London in 1966 and grew up playing in bands with artists that included future members of Billy Idol and Big Audio Dynamite. He went onto work on a range of international titles, photographing Samuel L. Jackson, Jude Law, Russell Crowe and a wide range of successful bands.

I was singing in a band, but I also had to face facts. I knew guys who had it, friends who were becoming really successful in the music scene, but I knew I wasn't going to cut it. In a way that was painful but it also gave me the chance to find a different creative outlet.

Photography became my own thing, it was a way for me to put my own spin on things without needing other members of a band.

It's a way of engaging with the world around you.

When I was starting out getting jobs takes time and persistence, but gradually you start to get more and more.

Often you don't get offered the job. And when someone you know gets it, part of you wants to go "well done". But there's also a part of you thinking "bastard".

As a photographer you get sent off to interesting places and you meet unusual characters. For me it was a way of having adventures and making money at the same time.

When I was still starting out I got a call asking if I wanted to photograph Samuel L Jackson for the cover of Guardian Weekend Magazine.

The editor said she knew I hadn't done anything on that level before but she wanted to take a gamble on me.

It was an amazing opportunity.

From what I'd heard about Samuel L. Jackson he seemed like an interesting, kind of quirky character - the kind of guy you'd like to have a conversation with at a bar.

I flew out to LA, rented a car, got an assistant and drove out to Hollywood to the hotel we were meeting at.

I was super nervous - I'd never done a shoot on that level before.

At that time my thing was to shoot lots of material with lots of different cameras. In the edit I would figure out what worked.

I found these amazing locations around the outside of the hotel. I didn't have many lights so my plan was to take the pictures outside.

Then PR lady turns up and says: "You'll have to do it in the hotel room. He won't leave - you've got ten minutes."

I wasn't grabbed by the room - it was generic and bland. If you're shooting in a room like that you have to have a definite idea of what you're going to do - I didn't feel any affinity with the space. I didn't see anything I could use.

I asked if there was any way we could go somewhere else and they said “forget it. He’s not leaving the room.”

I’m thinking, this is my big break and it’s turning into a disaster.

When he turns up I decide to throw myself at his mercy.

I said: “Actually, Samuel, this is my big break and I’m really nervous. But I’ve got this idea to take some pictures outside. I’ve found some great locations outside. They’re close by and I promise you, if you give me ten minutes it will be no stress.”

He goes: “what’s your name again?”

“Jasper James.”

He smiles and says: “Oh yeah. I heard about you. They call you Jasper “no-stress-shit” James, right?”

I started laughing. Yeah that’s me. I started to feel better.

He says he’s happy to go outside. His PR is really pissed off and is like “we haven’t got enough time.”

Samuel says “come on, give the guy a break, it’s his big shoot and he’s stressed, and he’s no-stress-shit.”

He puts me at ease and we head outside.

Straight away people start coming up and asking for autographs - I realise that’s why you don’t go outside.

We go into these little alleyways and I start using all my different cameras. I’m taking loads of pictures but I could tell I didn’t have the cover yet.

Then his PR calls time.

I knew I didn’t have the right shot. I ask Samuel if we could have a bit longer.

He says: “Yeah, give him more time.”

We carry on shooting outside and I end up getting some really nice moody shots.

I think people often see those shoots and have no idea how it comes together - it’s not like you’re hanging out with these stars.

You really don’t know them and a lot of the time the photographer is at the mercy of that celebrity or their PR.

Samuel could have easily said “I haven’t got time for this”.

Looking back now I realise how he really went out of his way to help.

I flew back to New York, processed the pictures, sent them to London and it came out as a really great cover.

People started asking about it and I started getting calls from other magazines in London.

It really opened doors for me.

I ended up getting Jude Law, Russell Crowe and all kinds of interesting jobs off the back of it.