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Don Giannatti

# WORKING OUT THE KINKS

By Bill Millios

**Don Giannatti is a photographer, graphic designer, art director, creative director, workshop teacher, musician, composer, blog writer and online personality.** He's a regular jack-of-all-trades who has worked as a successful commercial photographer for years, as well as a teacher who loves instilling the tools of the trade in budding photographers.

Giannatti originally got his start as a musician, majoring in music composition at Arizona State University. He played in a band all throughout high school and college and even went on tour for a while. After he got his fill of being in a band, Giannatti started working for an ad agency. Always interested in graphic design, he ended up becoming an art director for the agency.

One of his duties as art director was to hire photographers for shoots. Eventually he found he could do photography better than the photographers he hired. He soon took all his savings, bought some cameras, quit his job and moved to Los Angeles, where he began working as a commercial photographer, shooting mostly for designers and small advertising agencies.

Over time he built his photography studio up to be quite sizable, hiring multiple employees and working six-day weeks. At some

point, however, the work became unmanageable and no longer fun for Giannatti. "We were shooting garage door parts, towels, tractor parts," he says. "When a studio is that big you have to take every job that comes in the door to stay afloat. When I downsized, I focused on doing graphic design with photography. This was a big personal boost and allowed me to go in a different direction."

In 2000, Giannatti's graphic design business became Ocean Integrated Media Group—the third largest advertising agency in Arizona at the time. "We won a lot of awards, did a lot of work for biotech firms, medical stuff for doctors, a lot of work for dot com software companies, server technologies, shopping cart technologies," he says. "Then along came the dot com crash—then 9/11. That really hurt the business. So eventually I became freelance again, working on my own. I mostly was doing people, some still-life work. I still do advertising agency-type work, because I'm a graphic designer as well."

## Master and Apprentice

After noticing some of the photographers he worked with at Ocean weren't quite up to snuff, Giannatti had an epiphany.



“At Ocean I was hiring photographers because I was too busy to do photography,” he says. “I was really disappointed with a number of young photographers who could not light the scene or subjects well. I decided to do some mentoring in workshop format. I did this every other month in Phoenix for a year, and then started doing it all over the country.”

Giannatti remembers mentoring a new photographer who was stuck. He told the photographer he had to go back and study master photographers so that he could understand how the field has evolved.

His advice to the young photographer was, “Go and study Albert Watson, Patrick Demarchelier, Arthur Elgort, Peter Lindbergh, Steven Meisel, Jake Chessum, Kurt Markus, Dan Winters—go and see their work, see what they’ve done, study it.”

Giannatti left the studio and came back later to find the photographer still at his computer, studying photos and taking notes. “The before and after for that photographer was huge—his work just made a major jump in quality,” he says.

Giannatti himself often browses the work of photographers that he admires to see what they’re doing: “The work of Arthur Elgort—I learn so much, even if some of those pictures are 30 years old.”

Giannatti’s workshops focus on teaching photographers a variety of skills. Although at first he focuses on demonstrating how to use lights (strobos, reflectors, hot lights), his ultimate goal is to teach people how to become true photographers. Giannatti loves to teach. When he is teaching, his passion for photography shows, yet he is careful not to overwhelm the students, still al-







lowing their vision to come out in their own photographs.

“I want to get what’s in my head out to the students in a way that they can understand it, and then help them do it,” he says. “Ultimately, they can hear it, see it, do it at the workshops, and then take it home and do it again. When a photographer leaves my workshops I want them to feel like I’ve made a difference. I don’t want a clone; I don’t want them to do it my way. I want them to do it their way. I just show them how to use the tools.”

### **Evolving Style**

Giannatti’s style is always changing, and to him, his photos are much more calculated than just pressing the camera’s shutter casually. He says, “When I take a picture, I already see the end result in my head. I don’t take random pictures.”

Giannatti talks about his photography and some of the principles he tries to instill in his students, “I can’t make a picture I can’t see. When I get frustrated it’s because I can’t see it. I see everything finished in my head—the textures, the light, the finished print. Now that I see it, how do I make it happen?”

Although his work is always changing, Giannatti appreciates his own evolution. “I’m still working on my style. I want to make pictures that look natural, relaxed, not obviously over-lit,” he says. “I don’t want it to look like a photograph—I want it to look like somebody saw something and it burned indelibly into their head. I appreciate that kind of work by other people; I want my work to







be packed with emotion—emotion over technique.”

### Sage Advice

Giannatti says there are a lot of challenges that face photographers today: “The biggest challenge comes from inside.

Either they want to create something new, or they want to create something like everybody else. On the Internet forums you’ll see lots and lots of pictures that look the same. Some people only aspire to that level, that they get their image to look the same as somebody else. That will never

work. They will never be inspiring, they will only be copies.

A photographer needs to steep themselves in the history, in the amazing body of work that is out there. I don’t know how a photographer can say, ‘I am a great photographer,’ and not know who the greats were. In photography there doesn’t seem to be any interest in it, they don’t have any sense of the people who have gone before, what their legacies are.”

And where does Don Giannatti want to take his own photography these days? “I want to take my work to a place where it hasn’t been for 30 years. I want it to be much more personal than commercial. I started as a personal photographer, ended up being a commercial photographer, now I want to go back to being a personal photographer. There’s a big difference. I don’t necessarily want to create other people’s pictures—I want to create my pictures.”

Giannatti’s Web site is [www.dongiannatti.com](http://www.dongiannatti.com), and more information about his workshops can be found at [www.learntolight.com](http://www.learntolight.com).



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*Bill Millios is a photographer/videographer living in Frederick, MD. A former computer scientist turned videographer, he backed into photography and found that he liked it best. You can see his work at [www.hopelandstudios.com](http://www.hopelandstudios.com) and [www.billmilliosphoto.com](http://www.billmilliosphoto.com).*

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