

Loyola University New Orleans  
Digital Humanities Studio

The Louisiana Art Project

Interview with Nathan Schweitzer

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Interviewer: Tristin Gaspard

**Abstract:**

Nathan Schweitzer shares his experiences and insights on pursuing a career in music photography. He emphasizes the importance of networking and being persistent in the industry, highlighting his own experiences sneaking into concerts and building relationships with musicians to capture high-quality shots. Schweitzer also discusses his approach to photography, prioritizing genuine moments and building relationships with his subjects, and shares his admiration for other photographers who have managed to capture intimate and unposed portraits of musicians in their natural environments. Later, Schweitzer discusses the importance of building relationships with musicians and using unique techniques to capture authentic photos, emphasizing the role of listening to music beforehand, drawing inspiration from past photographers, and maintaining his own unique style through minimal editing.

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Nathan Schweitzer (0:14): Hi, I'm Nathan Schweitzer. I'm a photographer from the Greater New Orleans area I live in, I live in St. Charles Parish for most of my life, and then currently living in a boathouse north of Lake Pontchartrain on Bayou Lacombe.

Tristin Gaspard (0:28): So how did you get started in photography?

Nathan Schweitzer (0:30): The short answer is I wanted to get into high school events for free.

And then I snuck my camera into an Aerosmith concert when I was 15/16, something like that. And I snuck my way into the front row. And I started talking to this guy, because he had a brand new Sony camera. So we're just nerding out for a while. And that turned out that that guy was Joe Perry's son, the guitarist for Aerosmith. So we started talking, I sent him my work after the show. And he had let me come up and shoot by him for the whole show. So I didn't get my equipment banged up. And then my photos ended up getting all over their social media and on billboard.com. And from that moment forward I figured it was a pretty sweet gig to get paid to go watch concerts, get free beer and stuff, you know. So a little bit, I had an iPod Touch, as did most kids and I shot I have a lot of siblings. So I always took pictures at family events for my family and the kids.

Tristin Gaspard (1:27): And you still do that now?

Nathan Schweitzer (1:28): Yeah, I do. As much as I can. I try and have a sort of Linda

McCartney-esque approach to photography, and I shoot everything I do, not just the more picturesque moments, so my family's a big part of my life, so I still take pictures of them. Anytime I get the chance, I do shoot a little bit of film, less and less, the more and more expensive it gets. But for a lot of for portrait shoots, I always try and shoot at least a roll of 120. I always keep a 35 roll in my car for day to day stuff. Point and Shoot snapshots. But for the most part for live concerts and anything that is a bit of a bigger production. I'm mostly shooting digital.

Nathan Schweitzer (2:08): Oh yeah. So what I equate a lot of the not to hate on Charlotte but when I equate the Charlotte cultural scene to is if you ever driving down Power

Boulevard in Kenner all the random statues they have in the neutral ground that are there for absolutely no reason. That's pretty much the Charlotte culture. It's just all so new. And it's just kind of infused culture for the sake of there being culture. So we've got some cool bands, I work with a lot of cool guys. Their music is mostly it's not deeply tied to the geographic location like it is in New Orleans. It's not an effect of growing up there. It's just an effect of listening to music from different places and meeting people from different places.

Nathan Schweitzer (2:54): So when I was 16 or so I snuck into an Aerosmith concert, they were playing at Jazz Fest. So I bought a ticket. But then I bought a big old lens, you know, I think the rule was like you can't have a lens over four inches or whatever. So I snuck it in really just the security guard said go take some good pictures kid, you know, he let me in with it. And I BS my way to the front row and I met the photographer for Aerosmith who happen to be Joe Perry, the guitarist for Aerosmith's son. And so we get to talk and he let me come shoot with him. And I snap some photos and send him my work after the show. And he actually was also the Social Media Manager, whatever the title is. So he posted all my photos on their Instagram and they ended up getting on billboard.com via the Instagram. And from that moment forward, I knew that's something I was very interested in. I love music. So that sort of work together. And that was my way of participating in the music for someone who's not musically inclined is photographing the music and hanging out in that scene. So after Aerosmith, I used all the photos from that show to get into other gigs. So I was pretty smart about it. So I shot you know, like vertical isolated images of each member of the bands. I got photos of Brad Whitford and Tom Hamilton and Joey Kramer and the guys that aren't as recognizable as Joe Perry and Steven Tyler. And I would send them off to venues and managers and bands. And what I started doing in the earliest days is if I saw an act was rolling through a venue like the House of Blues or the Fillmore or whatever, I would reach out to the opening band and offer to shoot for free and I'd send him those photos of the Aerosmith guys. And say you know, like I've been doing this forever. But I'm only in town for a couple days. I'm just looking to shoot a show or just BS like that. And then they let me come shoot the opening band for free until I had a decent enough portfolio that I could and then I'd stick around for the main

band so I can get photos of more well known acts. Well Young Gravy actually was my friends and I were going to the show. And at that point I had been doing this and hustling the scene and a lot of the venues that touring acts rolled through. So we're standing in line and then I brought my cameras with me fully expecting to have to get put them back in the car. But I went to the box Office and this guy I knew was working in the office. So I just asked him, I was like, Dude, what are the odds, I can get into shoot Gravy? And he went and asked his manager, and thankfully, the manager was running around so much that he didn't really have time to think about or care if some kid came in and took pictures. So they let me in. And my friends were like, where do you go? Was he missing when they walked in? And I was in the press pit? And they're like, Oh, yeah.

Nathan Schweitzer (5:20): So Well, first of all, I love blues. I love jazz. And I love funk. And you're not getting anywhere better than New Orleans. And I think the scenes a lot better having hung out in the Charlotte music scene and you know, I've been to a few different places to shoot shows and Pittsburgh and Chicago and Southern California, it's the hangs are so much better. It's like, there's not so much of an air of, of cool about these guys that you're lesser of a person, if you don't know this obscure 1973 record with John McLaughlin and Santana, everybody's just there to have a good time. And everybody really loves music. And that's more of what it's about. And there's something unique about the New Orleans music scene to that even though these guys are playing less mainstream music, you know, like funk and jazz and the blues, it's, these are also the world's foremost experts in these areas. And it's masters of their instruments. So when touring acts, need musicians that come to New Orleans, if there's their solo act, they still need a band to tour live. So a lot of these guys have played with, you know, everybody, even in the mainstream. So you get a unique perspective into that scene, and it's a good gateway into the more popular scene if need be. I tell you what, compared to Charlotte, probably I really, it's actually hard for me to gauge like who my competition is exactly. I don't bump into that many local photographers. A lot of them are touring with the act that's rolling through. There's a handful here, there's this guy, Steve Rapport that settled down in New Orleans. And he's incredible. He's done everything he's shooting with Leicas. And he's at every show. I mean, he's all over the place. But there is a lot of like, a

lot of loyalty to like, even if I might not be the best at this specific thing. Guys who want to hire me just because I'm from around here, we speak a common language, we know common music, and it's a lot of loyalty to the area. And there's a lot of just appreciation for artistry. Whereas if you're shooting, if you're shooting a wedding or something, there's I think less free range that the photographer has, because he's catering to what the bride wants for the most part, you know, he's got to raise the whites on the photo and he's got to shoot film or shoot like that film look if that's what she wants, but most bands I show up to that hire me they just they don't really tell me anything. We just have a beer and then it's showtime. And they they let me do what I want to do.

Tristin Gaspard (7:40): They let you use your own artistic mind.

Nathan Schweitzer (7:44): Yeah, they look. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, they let me do what I do, because that's the way it should be with photographers especially is because you're not hiring me because I'm a photographer not hiring me. Because I know how to use a camera. There's a million people that know how to use a camera, you're hiring me because I use a camera the way I use a camera. Yeah, I just I love music. I really do. Believe it or not, the hang is more crucial to me. Like I also think I'm better at portraits and sort of the candid backstage or if I'm walking around the city with a band, I think I'm better at that stuff than I am at live concerts. Live concerts have just come as an auxiliary activity of hanging out with so many musicians. But yeah, I just love being surrounded by music and more so than, than music more so than just the you know, it's just that the musical folks that you encounter. They're just interesting. People always got stories. Like I said, I love the hang. I love good people. So I think I'm a I'm a people photographer, so I'm not great at landscapes. It's also something you think you think it's like landscape photography. I, I just I don't know how guys like Ansel and Chris Burkhardt. I don't know how they make them look so great. Because to me, it's like, okay, well, here's the scene, click a button, and that's where that's like, out of my wheelhouse, or, you know, macro photographers, or, or what have you even street photography. Well, I do do my fair amount of street photography, but there are people that are much better at it than me. I just love people. I really love having conversations with people and getting to know

people and your personality. Yeah, I like having there's a great photo set that Charles Peterson did with Kurt Cobain, and their portraits, but they're not really a portrait. It's not like they were planning on doing portraits. I believe it was after a show sometime in the early 90s. And Kurt was just back at his hotel room and Charles walked up to hang with them. And he said, Do you mind if I shoot some photos while we hang? And as they were talking to shots and photos, and these photos Kurt's like making these stupid faces, because he's just catching them between sentences. There's like, as he's talking and whatever, but I think they're great portraits. And that's very much what I try to do. I try to not make it a big deal. I'm not. There's not like a photographer here. There's just Nathan and he's hanging out and he happens to be taking some pictures. Another great thing about the New Orleans scene is that everybody knows everybody and everybody knows all the venues, all the people, all the places all the food, so everybody knows everything. So you've always got a common thread with these people that if I'm hanging out backstage and a trombone player walks in him. And I've got something in common. And we've got something in common. We both know this other trumpet player, we both know, we both say, oh, yeah, I was at that gig, too. I didn't see you. So there's that, that really works out, it makes for good conversation. And I've taken to use in a lot less intimidating of gear, a lot smaller bodies, and smaller lenses and whatever. Because, you know, I used to use the big old cameras and you want to feel more professional and you get into stuff and everybody looks at you like you're like, This guy's got a big lens. And but now, it's like, I'd much rather look like an amateur. And I'm just some guy that's hanging out. And I'm snapping pictures as I do it. No, they they really don't care. Like. Yeah, it's great. Because I do look like a hack. Sometimes. I don't show up with very professional equipment, for the most part. But I wasn't sure but the point is you right? Yeah, I have I have a Fuji X 100 V, which is it's got a price tag on it. If you're going to classify as a point and shoot, but it really isn't point shoot, it's a fixed lens, it doesn't come off. And I use that for the top of the line. It's top of the line point and shoot. Yeah, but it's a point and shoot all right. And equally think of professional cameras. Do you think of a black body? Yeah, you know, they go with detachable lens. Yeah. And I can't tell you how many like, like I said, I encounter a lot of touring photographers in the pit or whatever. And they'll look at me, I got my age working against me too. But I definitely think it's it's

the gear I'm carrying that people are always looking at me. I've been told so many things by like, man, I was shooting the show at the Fillmore last summer, and this keys player from Chicago gets in to do a Dr. John tribute with Dumpster Funk. And I think it's talked to him before the show. But he's I'm shooting for the keys player not for Dumpster Funk. Oddly enough, the guy that's not from here, but the all the horn section stepped off the podium, which was right behind the keys. And I wanted to get a shot with the whole crowd in the background. So I stood on the little mini stage at the horns were on and shot a photo. And then this guy came up out of nowhere, some touring photographer, I don't know who the hell this guy was. And he walks up, he's like you can't do that you can't step on. That's where the horns come in. And I'm like, Dude, I know the song. I know that there's no horns until like another 30 seconds. And it was just annoying. And when I actually shot when I went in the stairwell after the show, and there's some portraits and hung out with the keys player, Neil Francis. And he's like, how was the show for you? And I said, they had some asshole yelled at me. And he was like, screw him man, don't worry about that guy. You know this song, he don't, you know, he's just here to make a buck. I think that's important. I really don't even think about the money. Most of the local bands that even hire me now. We don't talk about pay before even I just I expect that they'll pay me what is reasonable. And if I have to come tell him something after like, I think I deserve more than I do. And they're respectful of that. But for the most part, it's just everybody's there to do you know, a good time. That's right, yeah, I very much resonate with that. It's certainly I enjoy the work. And I think part of the problem with shooting in the New Orleans music scene, like I said, everybody knows everybody. So if I'm shooting for, you know, insert some generic funk band, there's a high chance that 80 People from other bands and whatever will either sit in with them or be hanging backstage. So if they're hanging backstage, you know, that's a lot easier to network to meet people and to shoot other gigs. But if they're sitting down with them, then I get eight photos of the trombone player, and he's got those eight, you know, I'll send them to him as a courtesy, even though he's not in the band that I'm working for. And then he doesn't really need me for another gig. Because also since everybody knows everybody, it's not that hard for a lot of these local musicians to get gigs. So they don't need that many photos that often. So corporate events definitely pay more and I do my fair share those to

stay afloat. I want to kill myself when I do them sometimes. But, you know, like, I shot a one year olds birthday party for 125 an hour a couple of weeks ago, and that type of stuff pays a lot more than eight piece funk bands. But I love doing it. So I don't think I'll stop. I mean, I still I still pay the bills in Charlotte, there's, there's a lot of bands, they're just mostly a lot of indie pop ends and indie rock bands and they kind of start to sound monotonous after a while, but like I said, Good Guys, I enjoy hanging out in the scene. Really, the conversations are a little bit lacking. Like, you know, I made a reference to a while ago, people talk about these obscure John McLaughlin records or whatever from the 70s. And like that kind of stuff. I love music and I love learning new music. So a lot of the guys in Charlotte don't have the same kind of knowledge of music that they do here in New Orleans or knowledge and appreciation. So their like repertoire of inspiration is pretty mainstream. And I do like the deep cuts that people here in New Orleans had because it's not it's not pretentious that they like these deep cuts. They just love these deep cuts.

Nathan Schweitzer (14:50): I don't really know like I said I really just started shooting because you know what, actually I thought I thought I would shoot a lot more sports when I first started because I shot a lot of sports events for my high school. I love doing it. But now that I've started shooting concerts, I can't believe I ever wanted to do that. No shade to sports photographers, that's awesome. But I like music more than I like sports. Like sports, photography is not that it's spraying and praying, but if the ball is going to the receiver, whatever you track the receiver and hold it on him, and then boom, I mean, concert photography, it's like, I've got my 200 millimeter locked into the microphone stand waiting for the singer to stick his tongue out or whatever, for five minutes sometimes. So there's a lot more slowing down and taking it all in. Both are waiting for that single moment. Yeah. But it also helps. I think, also, what makes my job easier than other sports photographers is that since I hang with the musicians before the show, and I try and get to know them or whatever, there's also so much playing up to the camera that they make my job easy. I could stay in one spot all night. And some bands that I've worked for a bunch, it's like they rotate to me if I'm like staying in one spot and having a beer, like, like, the lead guitarist will walk up to me and then he'll move so the bassist can



walk up to me and then the rhythm guitarist, they'll just ham it up for the camera and move on. I just get them all over. Everybody come to me.

Nathan Schweitzer (16:10): Yeah, I think there's a lot a lot of corporate bureaucracy going on back there. But I also think that a lot of people are just, people get starstruck, I don't really get starstruck. I just, yeah, everybody's just hanging like nobody cares. You know, that's why a lot of celebrities even moved to New Orleans, my buddies bumped into Robert Plant at Chickie Wah Wah a couple weeks ago, I didn't think I told you this. But my buddies bumped into Robert Plant at Chickie Wah Wah, and they walked up to him and they're like, what's up, Rob? And he was like, how you doing? And you know, that was it, then they let him enjoy his night and it didn't care. I mean, Robert Plant's, a seven foot guy with the most recognizable face on the planet, and nobody bothered him all show. I don't think anybody really cares here. It's just your another dude.

Nathan Schweitzer (16:50): More so than photographers and then I do have my fair share photographers, obviously, is the music. I love music and I think about music. If I'm shooting a band, I always listened to their album on the way there and leading up to it. I'm always listening to the music. As far as photographer inspirations goes, you know, a lot of New Orleans photographers that I'll see old photos from the warehouse or backstage at Tipitinas there's all sorts of incredible photos of Fats Domino and Dr. John and Allen Toussaint. James Booker, like the album cover for Spiders on the Keys that James Booker record from the maple leaf is great. Steven Rapport who lives in New Orleans now that guy I mean, we really shoot nothing alike, but you'd be surprised how much I draw from that even subconsciously I try not to look at too many photographers work leading up to shows leading up to band portrait shoots I definitely swipe a few ideas not not outright and we did want to do a band portrait to take inspiration from past Yeah, I go flip through it Danny Clinch book or something for sure. But more so it's the music like it really is the music like the band do the band's music. Direct, which I do I do like I shot for this this new band Milk in the Honeys which is a sweet band name. And they're sort of like a like a new age kind of soul funk bands. It's kind of got that r&b in it but also a little bit of a more modern r&b production. So sorry, I'm trying to compare them

someone that's not what this is about. So when I'm shooting for this new band Milk in the Honeys I remember I took my first photo and I was like okay, let's let's stagger. You get we're at this like trailer park and I was staggering the guys there's like, chicks there in a blue dress. It's a female, lead and then three guys. And then there's a blue barrel back here and she's in a blue dress. I'm trying to contrast those two things actually ended up throwing in black and white, oddly enough, but in my mind, all I was thinking was based on because I was there for a rehearsal and all I was thinking as I'm listening to them is like, dude, all I've just got all these Radiohead and Phish photos going through my head all these photos of Radiohead and Phish. So as I'm shooting, I'm like, this is gonna end up looking like a Danny Clinch Radiohead shoot. And that's exactly what it looked like just all those kind of goofy, surreal, they're all standing like this and whatever. Or like, you know, Tom York's just a weirdo. So that type of stuff.

Nathan Schweitzer (19:12): So there's definitely the old adage rings true that definitely if a photo is bad throw in black and white and it looks better. That definitely tracks a lot of the times. But I think as a general rule of thumb, I also I like to I really try to stray away from disingenuousness and I think so many photographers, style nowadays relies heavily on editing and it's that if I have the same preset on every one of my photos, it doesn't matter how I'm shooting or what I'm shooting. There's my style. So I really try to stray away from that and edit as little as possible. Like I consider editing more of Andy Warhol's style that editing is more so selecting and narrowing down.

Nathan Schweitzer (19:50): Maybe a lot of modern photographers design their style around how they edit and insofar as They slap a preset on every photo they shoot, no matter how they shoot it no matter what they're shooting it of, and called out their styles, I really try and stray away from editing. And, you know, back in the 30s, you see a great photograph that Ansel Adams took, and it's like, oh, my gosh, how did you capture this moment in time, what a great photo. And now you see a great photo. And it's like, well, it was probably photoshopped. So I try and steer away from the disingenuousness of relying on post processing too heavy. So really, when I think of editing, now, I think of editing less as less of adjusting contrast and whatnot, and more of selecting the best photo. So there's

that famous photo that Andy Warhol took of Debbie Harry, and everyone's seen it, it's very simple photo, it's just a tight headshot up against a wall in his studio in New York, there's a photo that not a lot of people have seen. And it's Andy Warhol and Debbie Harry on a big ol, you know, fold out table, and they've got all the photos of Polaroid of her. And they've got all these Polaroids from a big old Polaroid big shot that they discontinued in '72. And there's probably 80 photographs of Debbie Harry that all look more or less identical to the one that everyone knows and it's one of those famous photos of of her. And just the idea fascinated me that of those 80 photographs, Andy Warhol knew that that was the one to publish and he knew that that was the one and you just can't help but think what if he had chosen another one where her face was just slightly more squinty eyed or jaw dropped or whatever would it be the the THE Debbie Harry photo that we all know today? So if you know especially with digital, you have the luxury of click click click click click click click click click. So I really try and sit with if I have 10 photos in a sequence of more or less the same thing I always shoot single shot I never spray and pray I don't ever do the continuous 11 frames a second I think it's hacky. But I really try and sit with I shot a photo of this case player from Chicago, Neil Francis a couple weeks ago at Tipitinas and I was shooting with a wide lens I was way up in his face I overstepped my bounds by like leaned over the keys because he hardly ever see photos of keys players, especially live photos where the keys and the guy's head are in the shot unless you're shooting from like the rafters but then it looks bad. So I really got right up in there on his face and shot it and I probably fired off like six or so. And of the six I really sat with them for a long time to pick the one that I thought was better than the other even though there's such minor differences between the six that you were editing in terms of selecting which pictures to choose instead of editing and narrowing down. Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. I really try not to touch lighting at all. I think if I am a professional photographer if I screw up the lighting, shame on me I'll mostly fix things like sometimes I'll fix some some shadows I guess everything's lighting, but temperature if if like if I'm shooting in the heat of Louisiana and the photo comes out a little bit cooler because also white balance just screws up sometimes if you leave the white balance on auto or whatever so any editing I make is to make it more authentic than what I think the camera input itself now shoot all on manual obviously but if it's a super hot New Orleans day, I

might turn the temperature up slightly not so that it's like orange and you know saturated but just make sure people know we're sweating our balls off at this photo shoot you know.