

FOREWARD BY ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE SENIOR PHOTO-EDITOR SACHA LECCA

# PHOTO GRAPHY Q&A

Real Questions. Real Answers.

**ZACK ARIAS**

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Real Questions. Real Answers.

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VOICES THAT MATTER™

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REAL QUESTIONS. REAL ANSWERS.

### **Zack Arias**

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Find us on the Web at [www.newriders.com](http://www.newriders.com)  
To report errors, please send a note to [errata@peachpit.com](mailto:errata@peachpit.com)  
New Riders is an imprint of Peachpit, a division of Pearson Education

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ISBN-13 978-0-321-92950-1  
ISBN-10 0-321-92950-0

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Meghan, and our four boys:  
Caleb, Phoenix, Joshua, and Hawke Danger. Thank you for  
putting up with this weird job that I have. Meghan,  
I can't do what I do without you.  
I love you more than dust loves sensors.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank all of you crazy-ass photographers who hang out with me online and in real life. Together we've made a pretty amazing community of people who share, laugh, troll, criticize, and make fun of me, ourselves, and this industry and craft that we love. There's no other job in the world I'd rather have.

I also need to thank my editor, Ted Waitt, for believing in me a long, long, long time before anything with this project started. You have been a solid friend in this industry, Ted. Thank you. I'd also like to thank Charlene Charles-Will for her great work designing this book, and Lisa Brazieal for making sure it looked great coming off the presses.

Marc Climie—You pulled me out of a ditch, and I'll always be grateful.

Kevin Abeyta—Thanks, man. For everything.

Many, many, many people have helped me and continue to help me along the way. I cannot publish this book without giving personal shoutouts to: Mr. & Mrs. Carnes, Kim Harkins, Steve Schaefer, Sherri Finch, Michael Weeman, The 7:30 Club, Erik Dixon, Dan Depew, Hassel Weems, Joe McNally, David Hobby, Chris Hurtt, Mohamed Somji, Hala Salhi, Scott Kelby, Brad Moore, RC Concepcion, Jason Group, Jeremy Cowart, David duChemin, Andrew Thomas Lee, David Jay, Steve Schwartz at B&H, Mark Anderson, David Nightingale, Craig Swanson, Chase Jarvis, Mark Adams, Dan Milnor, Michael Schwarz, Phil Skinner, Matthew & Lani Martz, Rhonda Dixon, Amanda Dyson, Emily Sistrunk, The Carters Crew, David E. Jackson, Cary Norton, Syl Arena, and Joey L. To my family: Bob & Carey Lynn, Caitlin, Erin & Randy, Brett, Corey, Mom, Chris & Andrea, Mitch & Ginger, Elaine, and my late father, Martin Arias.

Dad, you gave me my first camera and set me on this path a long time ago. Thanks. I miss you.

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**Q:** HI SACHA. THANKS FOR TAKING MY QUESTION, AND THANKS FOR WRITING THIS FOREWORD. AS A SENIOR PHOTO EDITOR AT *ROLLING STONE*, YOU MUST SEE A LOT OF WORK FROM PHOTOGRAPHERS. I'M A FAIRLY NEW PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE EDITORIAL WORLD, AND I'M WONDERING WHAT CATCHES YOUR ATTENTION ENOUGH TO PICK UP THE PHONE AND CALL A PHOTOGRAPHER YOU HAVEN'T WORKED WITH BEFORE. IS IT THE QUALITY OF THE WORK? IS IT A GUT INSTINCT? YOUR NECK CAN BE ON THE LINE WHEN WORKING WITH SOMEONE NEW. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHO IS OR WHO IS NOT GOING TO WORK WELL WITH YOU?

**A:** Zack, knowing what this book is—and its aim to demystify for beginning photographers certain aspects of what it means to be a working photographer—I really should have expected this very question. I hope I can do it justice.

Most publications have a list of preferred photographers who do regular work for them, and breaking into that lineup is not an easy thing to do. That being said, picture editors like myself are always looking at photography and for new (or new to them) talent. I try to stay engaged in this process as much as I can by checking out emailed and printed promos, photo books, magazines, blogs, and zines, as well as attending portfolio reviews, gallery shows, etc.

So, by the time I've picked up the phone to make that call to someone new to shoot for *Rolling Stone* (or even just for a meeting), more often than not I have probably been looking at their work for a while—basically stalking them. I might have been checking out their Tumblr, Instagram, blog, and/or web site from time to time; looking at their latest shoots; or discussing them with coworkers and photo editors at other magazines. It isn't always about seeing one amazing shot. It can help to see

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someone's progression over time. That way, I get a better sense of their personal style, how they handled a particular situation, and what kind of subjects they seem to best connect with. Watching their body of work evolve also helps to get to know them better, to get a sense of the kind of person they are.

More to your question...so what is it that makes me pay attention in the first place? You asked, "Is it the quality of the work? Is it a gut instinct?" Both are true.

I'm surrounded by photography—my parents are both photographers, my twin sister is a visual artist, my wife is also a photo editor, I shoot a bit, and every day I work with photographers young and old—so I'm frequently fascinated with the processes they employ, the tools they use (cameras, lenses, film stock), how a shoot went, whatever. I totally nerd out on that. However, when I see an image that hits me hard and really connects with me, it's as if all those details fall away and they're the last thing I consider...if I consider them at all. The greatness of an image is in the intangibles.

I have my own tastes, which may differ from those of my coworkers, and since one of our tasks is to consider how someone's work could be applied within the pages of *Rolling Stone*, some discussion may occur around the office about someone being the right fit for the magazine and/or for a particular assignment.

If you are thinking about submitting work to us, I think it's a great idea to be as familiar as possible with *Rolling Stone* (this would apply to any publication you'd like to work for). Know the different sections and the style of work used in each, the photographers that are employed and how. If you consider your work to be a good fit, then hit us up.

—Sacha Lecca  
Senior Photo Editor, *Rolling Stone* magazine

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## INTRODUCTION

I rarely, if ever, read the introductions to books. Now I'm writing one. Oh, the irony.

I have stuff to say about the stuff I have to say in this book.

This book was born from a Q&A Tumblr blog that I started during the summer of 2012. I began with a goal of answering 1,000 questions. I have since surpassed that goal. As questions come in from folks, the blog is a random brain dump of my thoughts and experiences as a photographer. My editor, Ted Waitt, and I have sifted through hundreds of pages of material to create this book. We started with the original blog posts and have edited and expanded that material for this book. The blog is the rough draft, the framework this book is built on.

I feel this book is going to be the grout in your photographic life. There are books on lighting. Books on marketing. Books on posing. I am not trying to write the definitive book on any one subject here. This book fills in the gaps. As much as I want to help explain what to do, I want to explain why you do it. I promise there is at least one sentence in this book that is going to impact your life as a photographer. At least one sentence is going to help you out and pay you back over and over and over for whatever you paid for this book.

Please do not think that I'm speaking from the mountain top of the photography industry like I'm some Grand Poobah of Light or something. If there is a mountain top, then I just recently made it to base camp. After 16 years of pursuing photography I feel I am just now getting ready to begin climbing. As I answer these questions, I'm doing so from the perspective of dealing with current issues in my own life, or I'm speaking to myself in the past. I'm saying things I wish I would have known "back then."

Here's the thing...I'm saying things to myself that, at times, I myself would not have wanted to hear back then. Some folks think I'm sort of mean and cynical.

Why am I doing this and why do people sometimes think I'm cynical?

Well, let's start with that question.

**Q: ZACK, I'M LOOKING AT BUYING MY FIRST SOFTBOX. I'M DEBATING BETWEEN THE 28" WESTCOTT APOLLO AND THE 50" APOLLO. NOT REALLY SURE WHICH ONE TO GO WITH FIRST. I MAINLY STICK TO PORTRAITS, HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS, AND COUPLES. THOUGHTS?**

**A:** These are different enough that some thought needs to go into this process of which one to buy. The smaller the light source, the harder the light will be. The larger the light source, the softer the light will be. The rule of thumb when using a softbox is that the maximum working distance from the subject should be no more than twice the diagonal measurement of the face of the softbox.

Huh? Measure the diagonal dimension of the front of your softbox. The 28" Westcott has a diagonal measurement of three feet. By this rule of thumb, the furthest you want to get that softbox from your subject is six feet. The 50" has a diagonal measurement of five feet. You have 10 feet to work with from subject to softbox with this light.

Why does this matter? It depends on how you shoot. Shoot a lot of full-length shots? Like to add a good bit of negative space to a photo? If so, then you'd first go to the 50" box because you can back that thang up 10 feet from your subjects and still get a good quality of light from it. Like to shoot tighter? You do more headshot to 3/4-length shots? The 28" can work in that scenario since you are framing tighter to your subjects and the light can be closer in.

Also think about the light source you have. The further you back the light up from the subject the more power you'll need from your light. Using a hotshoe flash in a 50" softbox from 10 feet away? You'll be living at full power on that light and still only get f4 or f5.6 at best. Inverse square law is a bitch. If I'm taking my 50" to a 10-foot mark from the subject then I'm typically driving it with an Alien Bee or something more powerful than a hotshoe flash.

Now then, we're just talking about a basic rule of thumb. Yes, you can put a 28" box 10 feet from your subject. You can. But you will begin to lose the quality of light that you got that box for in the first place. As you move the box further from your subject it becomes a smaller light source in relationship to them. Think about moving a 50" box to 100 feet away from your subject. It would be a pinpoint light source on them. Move it 10 inches from your subject and it's massive on them now! A huge, soft, wrapping light source.

Another thing to think about is the spread of light from a softbox. Umbrellas and the like sort of wash an area with light. You can shoot one person or 10 people with an umbrella. A softbox is more directional than an umbrella. The smaller the softbox, the smaller the spread. I typically use the 28" when I'm shooting one to two people. Those two people need to be close together. I'll shoot one to four or five people with the 50" box.



.....  
Pictured here are the two softboxes in question. They are two of my favorite modifiers. These two softboxes have been part of my regular kit of gear for nearly 10 years. They work great with both hotshoe flashes and larger strobes.



.....

The 28" Westcott Apollo was used here. It is just outside of the frame to camera left. It creates a beautiful soft light with more dramatic shadows, as it is smaller than the 50". The 50" box would wrap more light around her face and open up the shadows. Maybe you want that in a photo. At that point, you then use the 50" instead of the 28". :: Nikon D3 / 85mm / f1.8 @ 1/250th @ ISO 200 with a hotshoe flash in the box.

You say you're mainly shooting seniors and couples. The 28" will be a good starting point. The 50" can work, as well. It would allow you to put a little more room between couples when you are posing them. You can increase the spread from the softbox by backing it away from them, but remember that rule of thumb I mentioned: You'll only want to take the 28" back to about six feet. Once you need to go beyond six feet then you'll either sacrifice quality of light or you'll jump up to the 50" box.

You could just about toss a coin and pick one. I guess I'd suggest the 28" to you first. Go with that and use it for six months. Get to know that light really, really well. Know what it will do and what it won't do. After six months of shooting you'll start to know if the 50" is the next step you need. You'll know this if you constantly find that you need a larger spread of light for couples, or if you always live at that six-foot range of the smaller box.

Another thing to think about is to get the 28" box and a 60" umbrella. The 28" is there for tight shots and single-person compositions. The umbrella gets pulled out when you are shooting more than two people or you need a wider spread of light for the situation you are in. A good umbrella can be had for \$30 or so. It's good to have one in your bag at all times. It's the Swiss Army knife of modifiers.





.....  
The 50" Westcott Apollo—or  
"Big Mama," as I call it—  
was used here. The face of  
the box was approximately  
four feet from the subject  
and was being powered with  
a Nikon SB-80DX flash that  
was somewhere around half  
power. :: Canon 5D Mk II /  
24-70mm L @ 40mm / f3.2  
@ 1/160th @ ISO 400.

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