

**A Conversation with Sandy Dyas**  
**by Kate Greenstreet (1/2008, Puremusic.com)**

Even if the camera always lies, some photographers seem more trustworthy than others. Maybe that trust is based on a preference for the kind of stories that their pictures tell.

University of Iowa Press has recently published *Down to the River: Portraits of Iowa Musicians*, a collection of black and white photos taken since the late 1980s by Sandra Louise Dyas. These are pictures that could only have been made by someone who was on the scene over time and genuinely in love with the music. The warmth in her portraits, the naturalness of even the posed publicity shots, invites you into a world she knows well. And she makes you feel at home there.

Her images have appeared in Puremusic many, many times, most notably in two interviews with Pieta Brown (in 2003 and 2007) and one with the inimitable Bo Ramsey (in 2006). Now here's a conversation with Sandy Dyas on the subject of her beautiful new book.

**Puremusic:** Putting this book together, was there sometimes a conflict between the desire to represent the scene as a whole and just wanting to pick your favorite pictures?

**Sandy Dyas:** A pull between being an artist and being a documentarian? Yes. I did feel a conflict once I began selecting the individual photos to go into the book. The book was to have 60 images only, so I knew immediately that I had to really edit my selection down. I had many, many more. Choosing was a difficult job. Lots of changing my mind during the editing process.

I went through my negatives and began printing the ones I liked the best for various reasons. But when I began thinking about how many of each person there should be, it was definitely complex. There would be many solo portraits of Dave Zollo, say, and I would also have one of Dave and his friend Ruairi Fennessy that I wanted to include, so I might have to delete one of the solo photos of David. I would print and reprint, look at the results, spend time with them, leave them alone for a while, come back to them, start it all over again.

Finally, when I had it narrowed down but still hadn't completely selected my final prints, I copied them all into a manageable 5 x 7 size xerox and put together a mock-up so I could easily lay out the photos and pay close attention to the sequencing.

When I shot the photographs, I didn't edit myself in any way that I was truly conscious of. Since in general the negatives were only going into my files and not into the hands of the musicians or the public, I feel that I shot the photos for myself. But there is that part in me that wants people to look good and not too strange. (I think my portraiture background is to blame.) I tend to see people through my eyes--and in a good light.

I mean, I think all art comes from a person's inner psyche. A portrait is a collaboration between the photographer and the subject. If they project a persona, I photograph them that way. If they are just comfortable being themselves without posing, I try to let them be as natural as they appear thru the viewfinder. I do use the frame to help compose though--I may ask them to stand differently or tip their head one way or the other, direct them a bit. But when I "see" someone through the viewfinder, I'm looking for an image of them that I feel is true to who I know them to be.

**PM:** You've had a portrait studio and that was your job for a time. Now you teach and are a freelance photographer. Is teaching providing your main livelihood at the moment? Do you still take wedding pictures and other kinds of portraits for people other than musicians?

**SD:** I wear many hats--most are photographic hats. I teach photography at Cornell College part-time, usually 4 or 5 classes per year. Since it is not full-time and my income is about half of full-time professors, I freelance for the rest of my income. Portraiture is one of my skills and weddings have been a big source of income since 1976. I do photograph musicians fairly often but I also am commissioned to photograph non-musicians. I also do magazine and newspaper shoots--I suppose they are more "editorial" in nature but they always involve some portraits.

Some of my recent portrait work was for Willie Wisely, a musician from L.A. who happened to be in Iowa City recently. He was playing a set at the Picador and asked a friend of his if he knew anyone who could do some portraits of him for his new CD. Earlier this year I shot an entire day's worth of photographs of Ray Bonneville who will be releasing a new record soon on Red House. That was a challenging but very fun shoot--we drove down to Arkansas to do it. Great location...little tiny town with lots of great environments to work in.

**PM:** What were some of the challenges?

**SD:** It was challenging for me because Eric at Red House told me to make some photographs of Ray that were "iconic." That was his wording. Well, that is a tall order, no matter who is being photographed. But I knew what he wanted.

Ray worked with me the whole time--he allowed me to direct the show. And he had found some cool places. Natural light. It was the longest shoot I've ever done. We shot from about 9:30 in the morning til the sun went down! It was hard work and I loved it.

**PM:** Do you find that most people resist being photographed? What's your feeling about people who like having their picture taken versus people who don't?

**SD:** Some people are more comfortable in having their picture taken--oh yes, this is true. Partly it may just be that if you get your photograph taken often enough, you learn to control your image. You have a very good idea of how you look in a photograph after having photos taken again and again. I would also say that part of it is confidence in how

you look. Some people really hate being photographed because they don't like how they look. Often that has to do with aging. And of course some people don't care about their appearance as much as others...they just are. Some people primp and others do not.

If I can create a photograph that my subject is happy with, I feel good about it. I certainly have not pleased everyone with my skills. But I enjoy the one-on-one experience that takes place when I do a shoot with one person. It is a special experience. It is rather intimate and revealing. I think it allows me to get closer to people. I like the shooting much more than the printing.

**PM:** You've been working on a series called "Lost Nation." Can you describe that project? Are you putting together a book of those images also?

**SD:** The Lost Nation Photographs are an ongoing body of photographs that I have been compiling for about 20 years. They are memories too, much like the photographs of the musicians, but these are more of a diary of my everyday life in the world. Some of the photographs are of people I know very well, others I have only met briefly. As a whole, to me they are about the human condition, the hope and the hopelessness of living life. Sad and beautiful, strange and surreal, what I see turns into a photograph that holds something beyond what is physically there. I guess if I had to describe my work, it is poetic. Some of the photographs come from the Midwest, others from the Czech Republic, and others from Louisiana and other parts of the country. I take my camera with me when I travel and I try not to take "tourist" photos...but of course I have to take those too!

Yes, I would love to have The Lost Nation Photographs turn into a published book. I am looking into self-publishing, like on Lulu.com. I see that as a viable option. Photographers always want to have books made of their work. Photographs, more so than paintings, really adapt well into a book form.

[You can see some pictures from the Lost Nation series, and other examples of Sandy's work, at <http://sandydyas.com>.]

**PM:** What do you recall about the day you saw *Down to the River* for the first time? You'd seen proofs, but was it different holding the actual book?

**SD:** Seeing and then holding my brand new book was quite an experience. It had been over a five year process...and then there is a birth of sorts. A book that held all of these photographs of mine and memories...and it had my name on it! Pretty cool. Sort of surreal too. I went to the Press' office to pick up the first copy. Holly Carver, my editor, presented it to me. The book surprised me. Just seeing it as an object--a beautiful object. At the time, I only briefly ran through some of the pages looking at it. Holly told me how much they loved it and how wonderful it looked. I was happy but sort of not taking it all in--I left soon after and got in my car with the book in the passenger seat. I kept looking over at it.

I drove to my friend Chris Offutt's house. Melissa was there and Chris's sons Sam and James were there too. I was glad Chris was home and that I could share my book with him. I knew he would understand how I felt, as Chris has had many of his own books published. I recall him showing me his newly published books...and many times it was my photo of Chris either on the front cover of the book (*The Same River Twice* and *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home*) or the author photo inside. We have been friends for a long time. He was in the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the late '80s and we met at The Foxhead.

Later I got home and I spent some time alone looking at each and every page. I was really thrilled that it looked so good. After that, I put it aside and slipped right back into my normal life. A long time passed before I picked it up again.

Having a book published of those photographs--many of them many years old--is a wonderful thing. But now that the photographs are in a book and out in the world, it is as if they aren't mine anymore. Difficult for me to describe this feeling, but I have also felt that way when I see my photos hanging in a show. Looking at the photographs in an exhibition, all matted and framed and titled, they really do take on a new life.

**PM:** When you make an appearance to publicize the book, what happens? Do you tell stories? Do you show slides or bring prints?

**SD:** I have given lectures and then I show a Power Point slide show and ramble on about the photographs and such. I enjoy an audience. At Prairie Lights, our independent bookstore [in Iowa City], I answered questions--I enjoy that too. I mean, how often do you really get to talk about your work? I think it is pretty wonderful to have people interested in what I do. I count myself lucky!

**PM:** Sandy, we first got acquainted when I asked to use a couple of your photographs for Puremusic. They were pictures of Greg Brown--an image from that same session is on the cover of your book. You've photographed Greg on a number of occasions over the years. Does a story come to mind from any of those times?

**SD:** About a year ago--for *No Depression* magazine--I enjoyed taking photographs of Greg. It felt more comfortable than earlier shoots. It takes me awhile sometimes to find my groove with people. I think part of why everything worked so well that day was because the night before there was a concert with Greg at the Englert Theatre in Iowa City and it was a phenomenal show. Greg was in a rare mood--sang his Ina Bell song ["Ina Bell Sale" from the *Over and Under* CD] on stage without his guitar...ranting and chanting.... Greg turned into a preacher. And at the exact right moment, all of the lights in the theatre went out. No, this was not planned. Everyone sat in the dark for a while...the music kept going. (My friend Justine told me years ago that the Englert has some ghosts that dwell there.) No doubt the music and the memorable night at the Englert added to how I photographed Greg the next day.

**PM:** You did a live radio interview--I heard it later online--and during a segment where listeners could phone in and ask questions, Bo Ramsey called the show and kidded with you about the idea that taking a photo of somebody might be a way of stealing their soul. You've shot a lot of great photos of Bo over the years and made a very cool video of him. How is he for you to photograph?

**SD:** Live shows, hands-down my favorite is Bo. He is the king of cool and just has this look--you know? He has a presence on stage and can really front a band. And he, as far as I know, is the only musician who can really direct and lead an audience in the way he does. Back when shows used to be three whole sets with one band, it was crazy how Bo could build up the crowd...slowly, and then bring them down a bit...just so they'd be asking for more. The night was almost always magical because his timing was impeccable.

**PM:** I like Chris Offutt's essay "Iowa Waltz," the foreword to *Down to the River*. Was there a lot of back and forth between the two of you about it?

**SD:** Chris Offutt's honest and true essay was a gift. No, we didn't go back and forth on it at all. He wrote it and let me read it, asked me if I wanted anything changed or if I liked it. I loved it.

When Chris read from his essay at *Prairie Lights*--prior to me taking the stage, I was so nervous. Then I listened to Chris and his words. Everything he said was honest, real, and described how we all felt at the time about the music and the times, the music scene then. He and I were there together along with all of our friends and this is how we both remembered it. A few paragraphs into listening to Chris read, I just felt this calm wave take over my being. I knew I really didn't have to say much of anything--therefore I did not have to worry about forgetting to say this or forgetting to mention this person or--well, you know. Chris's essay said it all for me.

**KG:** Were there any surprises in assembling the book or having it published?

**SD:** The good surprise was that Holly told me to hand in quite a number of extra photographs that could possibly be used in the foreword of the book and at the end of the book. I was really impressed with the way the designer used those images in the space. And they used every one I included. So, a wonderful surprise! I know people who say their publishers and/or designers really changed the feel of their work and they were disappointed with not having the final say. I am extremely grateful to the University of Iowa Press. They worked closely with me and were very open to all of my ideas. The sequencing of the photographs in the main body of the book is identical to what I had chosen.

**PM:** Was the possibility of including a CD with the book an idea you had from the beginning, or was it added into the project somewhere along the way? How did you go about choosing the songs? And how does it work with the musicians--do they get a royalty of some kind?

**SD:** No royalties for the musicians from the CD. They all gave us permission to use the music--no one told me that I could not chose a certain song. Some I chose just because I loved the song, and others because they seemed to fit better than another one I had picked out. I think the songs truly add another layer to the photographs. The photographs are as much about the music, the songs, as they are about the people photographed.

I pitched the idea early on but Holly, my editor, was hesitant about the idea because of the possible costs involved. David Zollo, Holly Carver, and I had a pinnacle meeting one morning about including a CD of songs and I think Dave won her over. He also calmed her fears about high costs. I credit David with getting the CD into the book. And I know it was a very good marketing tool for the book...I mean you get an 18 track CD AND a hardcover book of photos. I get as many compliments on the CD as I do the book!

There were two Kevin Gordon songs from later in his career that I really wanted to use and we couldn't because his record company owned the songs and it was going to cost the U of I Press a thousand dollars per song. Well, that did not happen. I chose "Lucy and Andy Go to Arkansas" instead. In many ways that was a perfect choice, since Kevin and his band played that song a million times at Gabe's and we all danced and sang to it.

The songs of his that we didn't use, one is called "Pauline"--it's so sad, poignant. It's beautiful and it brings up many scenes of the Mississippi River and the life of people in this area of southern Iowa--near Moline, Illinois. The other song is "Jimmy Reed is the King of Rock and Roll." I love the line "Dark sunglasses, sharkskin suit, standing in the broken glass of East Dubuque on a Sunday morning." We used to do a lot of dancing in East Dubuque and would head across the bridge after a great night of listening to Bo Ramsey and the Sliders at Cooper Wagon Works. The picture that Kevin creates in the words of his song, for me it's a picture of Bo Ramsey standing in the streets of East Dubuque. That song brings back so many memories.

All of the songs on the CD are so well written--more like poems--and they bring images to my mind: of living in small rural towns, the Midwest, hardships, love. You know...life.

