

MOVING PICTURES A FINE ART

GTC member **Steve Fuller** made his own luck in forging a career as a TV camera operator; from the outset he grasped every opportunity that came his way. This resulted in him becoming a highly successful freelance jib op working across many genres. Not one for getting too settled in his ways, in recent years Steve decided to also branch out into professional photography, where his distinctive style combines with his natural ability for spotting the everyday beauty hidden in plain sight to make his images stand out amongst the crowd, initially in wedding photography and now in fine art portraiture too.

In the early 1990s, when I was 13 or so, I had the opportunity to be in the studio audience for an episode of *Noel's House Party* at the BBC. It was my first insight into what went into filming a TV show and I was fascinated. But what really hooked me in was seeing the camera operators racing around the studio floor and manoeuvring their peds on this big live show – I just knew that was what I wanted to do.

My parents were very supportive, as was my school, even if it turned out to be as big a mystery to them as it was to me how exactly I could get started in the world of TV camerawork. Upon hearing my new-found wish to become a cameraman, the careers advisor's best offer was that taking an A level in Physics would be wise. So I did, but I was only a year into my studies and really not feeling it, when I applied for a job that I hoped might rescue me from a world of atoms and soldering circuit boards. After a successful interview, and with the full backing of my teachers, I left school to become a studio assistant at Fountain Television in New Malden.

Fountain of knowledge

It was at Fountain that, alongside my everyday duties of painting the studio floor and making tea, I gained a true appreciation for lighting, learning so much through meeting some great lighting directors – the late and wonderful Brian Turner being one of them. Observing these experts at work and listening as they generously shared their wisdom with me was time well spent as it resulted in some invaluable insights and knowledge. This included an appreciation of the practicalities too with lighting, which would stand me in good stead much later on in my career operating jimmy jibs. Always befriend the lighting department as soon as you arrive on a jib job as it will make the day a whole lot easier. And that goes for catering too... but we all know that one.

As much as I loved working at Fountain, I was well aware that my friends from home were now off living it up at university. After two years, I realised that I too wanted to experience some of what they were enjoying, albeit on a meaningful course related to what I wanted to do. Back then (and still really to this day), there weren't many options for courses in TV studies in the UK, so Ravensbourne was the obvious choice – in particular, its two-year HND in Professional Broadcasting. The opportunities at the college were excellent and you could try your hand at anything (although I do seem to remember being particularly awful at autocue).

Stepping up into Upper Ground

Ravensbourne had a great careers team who, at the end of the course, informed me that interviews to recruit camera assistants were currently being held at LWT. I was offered an interview but was aware that I'd be competing with many others for just four available positions, so I decided to go in there and be as genuine and honest as possible, with no swagger and no waffle. I have no idea whether that helped or not, but I did get one of the jobs.

We certainly hit the floor running there; my first show, back in 1998, was *An Audience with the Bee Gees*. The London Studios was an incredible learning ground for live multicamera studio productions and I got to work on some great shows: *SM:TV Live / CD:UK* (undoubtedly one of the best kids' programmes ever made and the last of its kind), *Blind Date*, *Michael Barrymore's My Kind of Music* and *So Graham Norton* with its nerve-racking task of cable-bashing Mike Scott on Steadicam as he ran down the audience stairs at the speed of light.



Clearing up after the last ever show of *Loose Women* to be filmed at TLS, one of many poignant images from a photographic essay that Steve shot before the studio went dark for the final time and, on facing page, Steve's portrait of Lawrence Dallaglio

As a side note, years later in 2018, it was very sad to see such an iconic place close down, and it's even sadder that it's still standing empty now. Such great friendships and memories were formed there; I was so glad I managed to convince the powers that be to let me go in and take images of the vacated studios, control rooms and corridors before the doors closed for the final time. I created a blog post about it alongside my images and received the loveliest of comments from folk who had similar wonderful memories of the place (stevefullerphoto.com/article/farewell-london-studios). Where there is left to train new blood now is beyond me.

The freelance journey

After a few years of being staff at LWT, I went freelance as a camera assistant and straight onto *Survivor* for ITV, which took us to Borneo for 2 months. That was an incredible job, with a huge crew and everyone put in immense effort in very humid conditions. We were all as fit as fiddles by the end of it, mostly from carrying all the kit through the jungle day after day.

After you've put in your years grafting as an assistant, you reach a point when you start to seek out those little jobs where you can finally get on camera – and for me this was a show called *Good Food Live*, which was filmed at Capital Studios in Wandsworth (incidentally, now a cinema). This was a perfect show for gaining some cue light experience and I also started to use a Merlin arm for the overhead cooking shots, all of which would lead me on the path towards more crane work as, inevitably, the Merlin was replaced by a jib.



Steve, standing centre left foreground in white tee-shirt and cap, alongside fellow crew members in Borneo for *Survivor*



Capturing the newly-wed couple as they depart from the church service

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Getting to grips with jibs

This all laid valuable groundwork for my future of operating jibs, which I still do today. I enjoy the fact that the world of jimmy jibbing can get you onto a whole variety of productions and genres, from drama to live sport. That's not to say it comes without challenges, whether this is the gaining of access to tricky locations such as old Victorian theatres with their narrow corridors and nowhere nearby to unload the van; being faced with tight studio spaces to operate in; or getting away smoothly from, say, a royal event when all the roads have been closed. But it's going through all this that helps lay the foundations of learning and becoming better.

I'm lucky to work with some great jib techs who really 'get' the intended shots, requiring barely any instruction from me. Just knowing they are there, completely focused on the head as it swings over the audience, brings invaluable reassurance

and enables me, as the operator, to remain fully keyed into achieving those dynamic shots. Then there's tracking a ped base proficiently, which is particularly critical when covering music or creating content for augmented reality (AR), and is an art form in itself. There's no doubt, the techs are the unsung heroes of the jib world.

All that foundation building through my formative years really helped to foster the flexible and problem-solving approach that is so crucial – not just to getting the job done but to getting it done well. As a jib op, you often encounter situations that are beyond your control, such as a studio floor that is too lumpy to be tracked across, or a key light that becomes an issue but can't be moved. It makes you really think everything through and work around whatever obstacles stand in the way of achieving the shots – while remaining kind, courteous and patient with those around you. Big attitudes and egos get you zilch in return.

Life lessons

I think there are huge dangers these days of being drawn into the negativity of life comparison with others through social media. This can affect us all – children and adults alike – if we are not savvy enough to stay grounded and to remind ourselves instead that, all too often, people only post the best stuff. It's certainly something I initially failed to steer myself away from with my photography; I got sucked into comparing my own progress with what all the local competition were doing, which of course wasn't in my own best interest at all. Luckily, I did learn to unfollow and simply filter out the unnecessary noise from my feed that had been serving no purpose. As I now say to my girls, who love to dance: whatever it is that you want to do with your life, go for it and don't listen to the doubters. You want to be in the Royal Ballet? Go for it. Want to choreograph in the West End? Go for it. Someone has to do those jobs, so why can't it be you?

Following your own path

About 10 years ago, a friend asked me to photograph their wedding. I was, of course, nervous as hell because not only was it someone's big day, I was also being paid to do it, but, thankfully, it went well – in fact, so well that, before long, I was photographing more and more weddings. The great thing about it was that I was shooting them in a documentary style that I really enjoyed – and yet I kept this side of my work life quiet for a good number of years and didn't post much about it online either. This was mainly due to the stigma attributed to any involvement in wedding work that was prevalent within the TV industry.

But, with time, came confidence and so I began to showcase my wedding photography work, which is something I'm very proud of to this day. When it came to it, the reaction from my peers in TV was incredibly positive and I even ended up shooting weddings for camera ops as well as directors. I was keen to cap the amount I took on though, as I didn't want to be working every Saturday, and so I tried to strike that elusive work–life balance we all strive for.

Finding the right kit

I started out using a Canon 5D Mk2 with zoom lenses, which were great, but after a year or so I ditched the zooms for primes and have never looked back. Primes forced me to physically search around more for interesting frames rather than hiding in a dark corner with a zoom, banging out shots. Also, fast primes are perfect for low-light shooting; I hate using flash at weddings as I find it incredibly intrusive. When silent mirrorless systems arrived, I jumped and switched to the Fuji X-Pro series, which was so light and compact compared to the 5D.

Initially, I did have concerns that, by having such a small camera rather than a huge brick with massive lenses, I wouldn't be perceived as a credible professional – client



Steve is always searching out those moments hidden in plain sight: "I love the anticipation here as the bride descended the stairs"

perception and all that (which incidentally still is a thing) – but actually, couples really don't care. My very light Fuji setup served me well for a while (and my back was thankful too) but when Sony started to up its game in its stills glass, I jumped ship again, this time investing in an A9 and some Sony and Zeiss primes. You always take a hit financially when changing kit but, in my opinion, it's been worth every penny; I had really missed the look from the full-frame sensor of my Canon days.

The A9 also benefits from a stacked sensor, which eliminates nearly all issues with banding whilst using a silent shutter under some LED lighting fixtures. I didn't want to invest in a system that would cause me issues in a church with dodgy LED lights, as those are the settings in which I needed to be able to shoot silently. Some vicars can be very twitchy about photographers – but then I have heard some horror stories of photographers being incredibly intrusive during ceremonies, loudly snapping away machine gun fashion and running around all over the place.



"This was a quick moment on this wet day, but I knew if I positioned myself correctly I could frame the umbrellas and make this shot work"



"A fortuitous combination of the room, the light, the moment, the rollers, me opening the door at the right time and a silent shutter makes this one of my favourite shots"

The art of seeing

It's very hard to pick favourite images from my wedding work, but one I've always liked is a candid moment when the bride's grandmother was putting the finishing touches to the cake on the morning of the wedding. I remember it so well; I had been wandering around their beautiful cottage when, through a doorway, I spotted this wonderfully endearing scene. I quickly fired off a shot before she noticed me – at which point she protested that she still had her rollers in! I like the fact that this stuff only happens once and then it's gone forever but by being ever watchful and attentive I can document these fleeting moments in a natural and non-staged way, which is really rewarding.

I'd say it's very difficult to teach this style of shooting and I think for me it has come from just doing it repeatedly. It almost comes down to an intuition that a moment is about to happen. I can see how this has been helped by my years of TV work, such as filming audience reactions, where you seem to hone in like a heat-seeking missile on people if they are responding well to what's going on, searching for all those little signs that they might be about to react. I certainly love capturing those moments that couples wouldn't normally see on their wedding day, like a proud parent watching on during the ceremony or a guest shedding a tear during the speeches.

It's all about being in tune with the moment and aware of what's going on. I love observing the different bonds between people and photographing it all as it happens. There is so much happiness at weddings and a great energy, which

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not only makes them a great place to be but also means you shouldn't need to stage anything as the magic is happening all around you anyway.

Workflow and business planning

Once home, all the data from my memory cards are uploaded and backed up onto external drives and a cloud backup. In the edit, I put the images through Photo Mechanic, which is a great tool for culling, and then Lightroom where I do minimal retouching – a simple colour or black and white edit and that's about it. Ideally, I try to get it right in camera as this saves me edit time later on.

Pricing is always tricky for this kind of thing; it's not just one day's work, but multiple hours in the edit as well as all the emailing and album creation, so you have to build all that in too. There is a price bracket that is incredibly crowded but I've always steered away from this sector as I wanted to target the higher end of the market. By doing this, I know I'll shoot fewer weddings than those whose fees are much cheaper but, as a result, I get clients who really value what I do, I earn an amount I'm happy with and I don't end up working every weekend.

Freedom of expression

For me, it's unquestionably been great to have a creative outlet away from my TV work, because my photography allows me to shoot whatever I want, exactly how I want, without a director telling me otherwise. :-). The truth is, if I couldn't photograph in the doco style I love, then I simply wouldn't be doing it. Luckily, I seem to cross paths with couples who like this style too. Covering weddings also fits in well with my TV work, which helps. I think the experience of working on live TV shows where you only have one chance to get it right has really worked well in the wedding environment, where the same applies.

Portraits, a new direction

A couple of years ago, I decided to dip my toe into the world of fine art portraiture, as I had been inspired by some stunning examples I'd come across on Instagram, mainly by the likes of Annie Leibovitz and Mark Seliger. The thoughtful and at times moody, dark style they've crafted really stopped me in my tracks and I wanted to explore how I could start shooting this way too.

Coming from working almost entirely with natural light when shooting weddings, plus my familiarity with continuous lighting used on TV productions, I found working with strobe lighting really challenging. Another aspect to portraiture that was also new and a little daunting was finding the confidence



Robbie Savage

to pose my human subjects; it's something I rarely do at weddings as I like to keep the day as natural as possible. But you only ever improve by getting on with it for real and that includes learning from your own mistakes – there's only so much reading and watching tutorials you can do.

That said, I'm always keen to learn with photography, and workshops have helped a great deal, particularly with the fine editing in Photoshop, which is sometimes required with portrait work. It's a delicate balance when cleaning up skin or stray hairs to keep it all looking as natural as possible and not some kind of botox experiment gone wrong. But it's very different from wedding editing and advanced Photoshop work takes a lot of practice.

Cutting your cloth

When you watch some of the big names in photography doing their thing, more often than not they are shooting in cool, old warehouse-type spaces with high ceilings, and loads of assistants lumping kit around and holding reflectors. I knew that, in my reality, it would more likely be just me tucked away in a dark, cramped corner backstage somewhere, so I had to find a compact setup that would be stress-free and quick, whilst still enabling me to achieve the shots I was looking for.

Big, hand-painted canvases as backdrops look stunning but, in reality, they crease and are heavy to cart around. After a great deal of research, I decided on a compact backdrop kit from Westcott that ticked all the boxes. For lighting I tend to use a 90cm double-diffused softbox attached to my key light. Yes, I can add extra lights and reflectors for different looks but, in a lot of situations, less really is more, and a single soft light source angled in the right way can be stunning. As I wanted to be completely cable-free, I settled for a Godox

AD400 strobe which, as it can also fire at 1/8000 of a second, is great for outdoor portraits in bright conditions too. It only takes 15 minutes to rig the whole setup: perfect.

Fresh approach to familiar faces

I particularly wanted to photograph portraits of well-known faces in a way they haven't been done before. Of course, these are individuals who've been shot countless times over the years and are no strangers to a camera, but I wanted to do something different, a bit edgy. I needed utter confidence in myself to believe in this and to get each participant on board. There was a real possibility they would dislike my photos and reject the invitation without even giving it a chance – but if I didn't try and overcome my brain's niggling whispers of doubt, then I would never know.

And so came the biggest hurdle: access. I knew that going via agents generally results in silence unless bags of money are involved, so I made use of my various TV contacts as well as going through shows I was involved with. Luckily, I started to get a few yeses and the ball began to roll, in part due to good friends kindly recommending me to the on-screen talent they were working with at the time.

The time-consuming element is in the asking and the planning. If they do say yes, then what? When can we shoot?... it has to be convenient for them. Where can we shoot?... permissions, access, space, etc. At the same time, this is all about starting up a dialogue with them and making sure they're happy. Once you've got through all that, then pressing the shutter button is the easy bit.

Keeping it simple

As with editing, my approach to posing people is once again to keep things ultra simple. At either stage, doing something too extreme gets noticed and will detract from the shot, certainly to be avoided in the minimalist style I'm going for. I deal with everyone in exactly the same manner, whether they're famous or not. I want to be time-efficient too, as no one



wants to be sitting there for ages. I've had plenty of practice taking children's portraits, where attention spans are around 10 minutes (if you're lucky), so I have to be quick and nail the shots I need early on. Anything extra after that with different props or outfits, and so on, is a bonus.

I've hugely enjoyed this journey so far and I'm looking forward to shooting more portraits this year. I was incredibly proud to have my portrait of Lawrence Dallaglio published in the most recent *Portrait of Britain* book, which is created each year by the *British Journal of Photography* with Hoxton Mini Press. This is certainly one of my favourite portraits to date, but I would never have dreamt I'd see my work printed in such a prestigious book, which is sold all around the world; it all seems slightly surreal.

Going with the flow

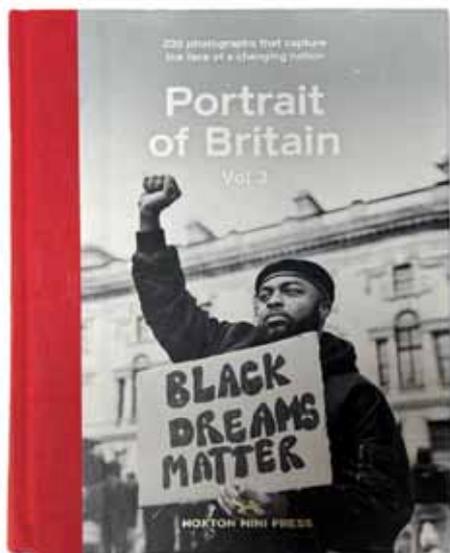
There's a lot said about having a business plan when starting up a new venture, but I also think a lot of the good stuff lies hidden in the unplanned: chance encounters, random crossing of paths and simply being in the right place at the right time – 'sliding doors' and all that.

To have an outlet that you really love doing, whether it's paid or not, away from the 'day job' is hugely beneficial, both mentally and physically. It's time and space for you where you can explore new avenues and push yourself without risk of being judged. Whether you sing it from the hilltops or keep it just for yourself, that's completely down to you.

I'm lucky in that I enjoy what I do and that the photography brings in an extra revenue stream, but of course, like most of us during lockdown last year, all of a sudden I had zero income.

In an effort to stay focused and to avoid utter boredom I decided to offer free video tutorials for children on my Facebook page, teaching them about basic composition just using a phone camera and then exploring how you can play around with photography apps to make photography fun. I was happy having something to do, the kids were happy having something to do, and their parents were happy they had something to do too.

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The 2020 edition of *Portrait of Britain Vol 3*, in which Steve's portrait of Lawrence Dallaglio was included

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I encouraged interaction and parents to share their kids' work in the comments, where I made a point of always responding positively to each effort posted. The whole thing gave me a focus, even though it pushed me hugely out of my comfort zone to film myself. There was no motive involved other than to get young folk interested in taking photos and observing the world around them.

Delving into photography and doing something else have been hugely rewarding for me on many levels. It has led me to cross paths with some really lovely folk whom I would probably never have met otherwise. They have put their trust in me to photograph for them, whether it's the biggest day of their lives or a portrait of themselves or their children.

Find a passion and just do it.

I would highly recommend to anyone reading this to persevere with an idea or a passion you've been meaning to explore. It could be something totally different to TV work, or it could be an idea for a show or documentary you've been sitting on. Whatever it is, now is the time to make the next move. Why wait? I've always found that by pushing past all the excuses and the 'what ifs' your brain throws at you that can deter you from doing something, you can achieve such incredibly rewarding results and, even better, you'll never regret a single moment.

Fact File

Steve Fuller has been a jimmy jib operator for 20 years and has worked on a variety of productions.

Having originally trained at Fountain Television and LWT, where he started out on the likes of *SM:TV Live* / *CD:UK*, *Blind Date* and *The Graham Norton Show*, his subsequent work has included royal weddings, *Survivor*, live sporting events such as Wimbledon and the Olympics, drama productions and music promos.

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