BODY ART

FOR CHRIS RAINIER, THE SECRET TO SHOOTING PRIMITIVE CULTURES, FROM TEXAS TO TIMBUKTU, IS SIMPLE: TAKE YOUR TIME.

BY RUSSELL HART

It's difficult to picture Chris Rainier in the jungles of New Guinea or in the beery halls of a Texas fraternity house, two of the many places he has taken photographs. Tall, blond, and mild-mannered, 39-year-old Rainier is as exotic in one place as the other. Yet whatever the culture he's shooting, something about him creates a profound sense of trust in his subjects.

The result of that trust can clearly be seen in Rainier's most recent book, *Where Masks Still Dance: New Guinea* (Bulfinch Press; see page 9 to win a copy). More than documentary, his photographs of New Guinean tribespeople in full ritual regalia have moved critics and the public alike with their technical and interpretive bravado. "I tried to create pictures that were both mysterious and foreboding," says Rainier, whose virtuoso printing skills took root during his four years assisting Ansel Adams. "I wanted to say that although these cultures are strong in their belief systems, they may not survive."

That commitment harks back to the work of turn-of-the-century photographer Edward Curtis, who managed to evoke Native American culture so powerfully even as it was fading. Rainier's penetration of tribal society is especially remarkable because he was the first white person many of his subjects had ever seen.

Over the course of ten years, Rainier made eight trips to the island, staying for months at a time. He was driven to go back again and again, he says, by his feeling that the way of life he was recording might not last long. "The Japanese and Malays are cutting down the rain forests, and CNN has arrived by satellite dish," he says. "I've seen people in grass skirts watching the O.J. Simpson trial." The change is inevitable, he says—and not necessarily bad. "I don't believe in putting people in a human zoo and cutting them off to keep them the way they are," he says. "The idea was to do an art book that also had anthropological value."

That same idea lies behind Rainier's

Left: A Malian woman displays hands stained with henna for a wedding ceremony.
Below: A New Guinean man flanked by tribal dancers in spirit masks.

CHRIS RAINIER (2)

ambitious new project, which is about tattoos. "While I was in the South Pacific I became aware that its young people are returning to tattooing as a way of reclaiming their ethnic or tribal identity," he says. "Even though they're westernized, New Zealand Maori and native Tahitians are getting full-body tattoos in the style of their warrior ancestors."

Unlike the New Guinea project, Rainier's tattoo survey also encompasses the recent interest in the practice in the United States—both in the cultural mainstream and in ethnic subcultures. "It's not just middle-class white kids who are doing it," he observes. "Latino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Samoan gangs are taking their countries' old tattoo motifs and modernizing them. And then you get the eccentric stuff. I visited a fraternity at a well-known Texas university whose members cattle-brand their chests with the house symbols." Rainier's new project has also taken him to Egypt to document Arab women's practice of staining designs on their hands with henna, to Brazil to record jungle tribes using bamboo shoots in facial piercing, and to Timbuktu (no kidding) to photograph the practice of scarification (making small cuts in the skin).

Remarkably, Rainier manages to do all this traveling despite limited personal resources. His secret? Taking assignments from travel and adventure magazines. *Time* frequently calls him with jobs, as do *Outside, Islands,* and *Condé Nast Traveler.* Web publications such as Time Online and Mungo Park, Microsoft's new Internet adventure magazine, are also offering him more and more work. Rainier usually spends the first week or two of a trip working on his assignment, then stays on for a month or more for his personal work.

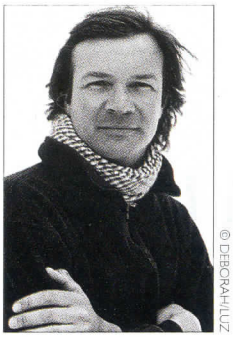
In the past, magazines have often asked Rainier for color photos. But recently, with the success of *Where Masks Still Dance: New Guinea* and his 1994 book, *Keepers of the Spirit*—both in black and white—his editors are requesting black and white more often. This makes the photographer happy. "Color is beautiful, but I think you can get sidetracked into shooting it for its own sake," he says. "Color becomes the content."

For Rainier, black and white has "a unique

Below: Two New Guinean women mourn the death of a fellow villager.
Center: A camel caravan in Timbuktu.

CHRIS RAINIER (3)

RAINIER VISITED A FRATERNITY AT A WELL-KNOWN TEXAS UNIVERSITY WHOSE MEMBERS CATTLE-BRAND THEIR CHESTS WITH THE HOUSE SYMBOLS.



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way of evoking emotion." But his approach to it is anything but a decisive-moment, existing-light affair. Even in tribal settings, he must often ask his subjects to dress up for a photograph because the more extraordinary rites are rare and may not occur during his stay. And he uses sign language to communicate his requests because after he establishes contact and provides explanations, he prefers not to rely on translators. "I find people are very excited to share their customs with me," says the photographer.

Only after Rainier has arranged such opportunities can he concentrate on technical matters. Shooting Kodak Tri-X ("It has the gritty quality I need") in both 35mm and medium format, he uses flash almost half the time; his standard rig is a portable 400-watt-second power pack and a single lightbox-softened, radio-slaved head atop a monopod supported by a local recruit. But for more active subjects, he will mount a Canon 430EZ Speedlite on his Canon EOS-1N, powering it down with the flash-compensation control for a subtler fill effect. "It's especially good for photographing dances," Rainier explains. "I combine it with a slow shutter speed for motion effects." (His standard lens for this kind of tight shooting is Canon's EF 20-35mm f/2.8L USM zoom.)

Rainier's long-term approach to a subject is an important part of his success. "Magazine assignments usually only give you a week to do the work, and sometimes it takes three," he says. "And to cover a subject in detail takes more than three weeks. But when you tell editors you're going to invest your own resources to stay another month, they usually say great, we'd rather wait and get even better images."

However, getting better images isn't just a matter of having more time to take more pictures. It's a matter of getting to know the subject more intimately. "I do run into animosity and outright rejection," Rainier admits. "In fact, for every successful photograph, there are a dozen missed opportunities. But the key to overcoming resistance is developing the camaraderie that only time can bring. One of the things I've always felt strongly about, photographically speaking, is just giving myself enough time."

Below: A New Guinean family's spindly tree house perches high above the jungle floor. Above: Photographer Chris Rainier.