

An 18,000-watt HMI light placed outside a window boosted the existing daylight so that Seliger could set a smaller f-stop for this *Rolling Stone* portrait of actor Brad Pitt.

MASTER CLASS



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markseliger

Making pop portraits is his business. Making them interesting is **personal.**

As chief photographer for *Rolling Stone* and *US* magazines, Mark Seliger performs a delicate visual balancing act. (See page 52.) It's his job to make his famous subjects—the musicians, actors, and other artists of 1990s pop culture—look as good as their reverential public demands. But Seliger also wants to make interesting photographs. "I want my pictures to have an element of surprise," he explains. "At the same

time, I can't be so edgy that the people I'm expected to photograph are reluctant to work with me." For Seliger, the best way to accomplish both goals is to make portraiture a collaborative venture with his subject.

For his ethereal image of Fiona Apple (opposite), which ran on a 1998 *Rolling Stone* cover, Seliger's idea was to echo a line from the pop diva's song "Sullen Girl": "But it's calm under the waves/In the blue of my ob-

livion." (Seliger always immerses himself in a subject's work, watching an actor's films or listening to a musician's recordings before planning a shoot.) After he got the blessing of *Rolling Stone's* editors, Seliger had to convince Apple to submerge herself in a 4x8-foot custom-built Plexiglas tank of water. Apple was in the middle of a big tour, and, as Seliger recalls, "she was understandably worried about getting her ears clogged or

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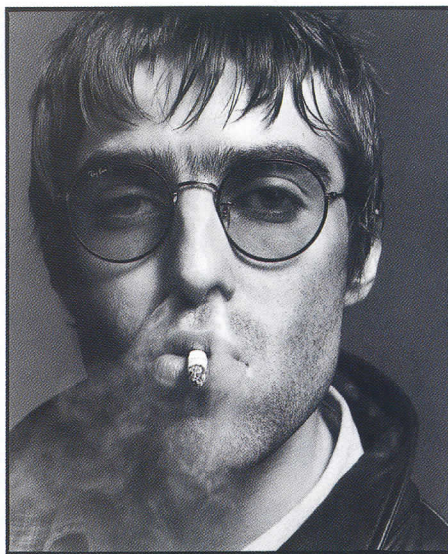


Seliger photographed Sandra Bullock for *US* magazine with a Nikonos V underwater camera and 35mm f/2.5 lens, shooting in a hotel pool in Anguilla when the Caribbean Sea proved too murky. The actress was lit with a slaved Elinchrom Octabank softbox above the water's surface; a camera-mounted flash triggered the slave. Seliger's film was Fujichrome 100 (RDP).



coming down with something." Fortunately, Seliger's human aquarium was heated, and when the Los Angeles tap water proved too cloudy, a filtering system was installed—though then the water became too clear. Solution: Clay was added to diffuse the strobes aimed through the bottom of the tank.

Why are artists like Apple willing to go along with Seliger's sometimes outlandish ideas? "They're usually picture-savvy," says the photographer. "They know my work, and they know I won't do anything that makes them look foolish." In fact, part of Seliger's strategy is to make the shoot "an experience and an event" for the subject. And he tries to establish a personal rapport. (With Apple, a shared fascination



Seliger used Kodak Tri-X for this smoky shot of Oasis band member Liam Gallagher. He shot with a 110mm f/2.8 lens on his Mamiya RZ67 Pro II.

"I don't worry about having a style," says Seliger.

with spiders helped.) "As it is, I sometimes have a sense of trepidation about how things will turn out," Seliger says. "And if I just go in thinking I'm there to do a photo shoot, I fail miserably. But when I have a chance to get to know the person, and have some laughs with them, I do much better work." Good chemistry pays off in other ways. "Though I always start by planning everything out, I've learned that the best pictures happen organically," says Seliger.

Seliger is philosophical about the meaning and artistic endurance of his magazine work. "I don't worry about having a style," he says. "And I try not to think about whether a picture will last past an issue. I think about whether the picture is going to have an impact at that particular time. I see myself as a visual entertainer." —RUSSELL HART



To light this magazine portrait of *The X-Files*' Gillian Anderson as *The Addams Family*'s Morticia, Seliger used an Elinchrom Octabank. Spot-gridded Dynalite strobes provided accent lighting.

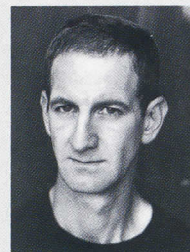
seliger's Solutions

ON COVERS There are lots of special requirements when you're shooting a photograph for a magazine cover. Naturally, the picture has to sell. But it also has to work with all the type that goes on a cover. If you come back with a really busy cover shot, you're not going to be the most popular guy in the art department. A cover shot has to be really simple and immediate. That doesn't mean just putting someone against a seamless background. It means finding a way to keep things clean but still make the image lively—and it's a great feeling when you manage that.

ON LIGHTING The most successful lighting is lighting you don't even think about when you look at the picture. I think lighting technique should be unobtrusive. I never think, "This lighting is really going to make this photo." Basically, I use all different types of lighting—we run Polaroid tests to see which type suits a particular setup. For a given session, we might have three different setups, with three different types of lighting.

ON STARS An artist is really putting a lot on the line when he or she agrees to be photographed, so you have to be respectful. You can't just have a "This is my idea, love it or leave it" attitude. But for many of my pictures, I really do ask my subjects to extend themselves, and I'm constantly amazed at how willingly they do it. On the other hand, sometimes you get good old-fashioned rock-and-roll attitude, and that can work for you too. I remember photographing Liam Gallagher of Oasis blowing smoke through his nose; when I asked him to do it for a second take, he said, "You got the shot," and that was that.

ON FILM I'm no longer caught up in the idea that everything has to be on chrome. We're shooting print film more and more, and I'm learning how and when it can be used to our advantage. Print film really plays into my need to work freely. When you're shooting print film, unlike chrome, you don't have to constantly take a new meter reading every time the subject moves away from a light or the sun goes behind the clouds. And I find that print film is softer in quality than transparency film, which for many pictures is better. We used mostly print film for the Fiona Apple shoot, and the prints were much more beautiful than the chromes—muted and creamy and a little fantastic in feeling. —R.H.



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Seliger photographed Fiona Apple for a *Rolling Stone* cover as she floated in a custom-built Plexiglas tank filled with blue-dyed water. Three Dynalite strobe heads pumped light through the tank's bottom, while one "beauty dish" lit Apple. Seliger used a 140mm f/4.5 macro lens on his Mamiya RZ67 Pro II; his film was Kodak Pro 100 (PRN) color negative.

