

Indie

Getting your foot in the door with independent publications.

by JESSICA GORDON

Beyond the magazine rack at the checkout aisle of Whole Foods, there is another world of publishing. It exists on the back shelves of bookstores, in your favorite boutiques (the ones that sell Palo Santo sticks and mugs with Beyoncé quotes) and, if you're lucky, your local library. On these shelves, alive and well—pending funds to print—is a display of independent magazines with the kind of innovative imagery you set out to make when you checked “photography” as your major.

Examples of these types of pubs include *PUSS PUSS* for hip cat lovers, *Cherry Bombe* for progressive female food enthusiasts, *TIDAL*—which “pairs East Coast sensibilities with a laid-back West Coast vibe”—and a slew of others devoted to fashion, niche lifestyles and concepts. These are not the kinds of magazines that publish monthly—many of them are self-funded passion projects that publish quarterly, biannually or even yearly, pushing them more into the sphere of a collector's item.

However, it's these types of magazines where young photographers with dreams of mass circulation are free to explore, building their portfolios from the ground up and showing bigger names and brands what they're capable of.

“My whole portfolio was built on those kind of assignments,” says New York City-based Spencer Wells. Shooting professionally for five years and focusing on editorial portrait work, Wells's early professional experience depended on independent publications like *Stereogum* (for which he shot The National at the Eaux Claires music festival) and *Bitchslap Magazine*. He also collaborated with *BEST*, a print offshoot of BEST Creative Studio, to shoot a

beach series for its spring/summer 2014 edition. “All of my strongest work has come from these collaborations and independent projects,” he says. “Generally these projects also allow my work to live alongside other content that I'm excited about and contextualize it editorially.”

Lifestyle photographer Sidney Bensimon has had a similar experience after moving from Los Angeles to Brooklyn in 2012. Needing to establish herself in a new city, Bensimon contacted “literally every magazine,” and was eventually introduced to *Cherry Bombe* creative director Claudia Wu through a friend. After seeing her work, Wu hired Bensimon to shoot for the magazine's second issue. “Through them I've met so many people,” says Bensimon, who's shot for every issue since. While editorial projects for independent publications may not be the most profitable, they're valuable when serving as a foundation for commissioned work.



PHOTOS OF SUITED SHOT BY SHARON BER



PHOTO BY JON GORRIGAN

With the *Cherry Bombe* photographs in her portfolio, as well as work for Soho House's internal magazine *House Four*, Bensimon went on to shoot images for *Bon Appétit* native ads, *Vegan: The Cookbook* with Phaidon Press, and creative agencies that represent food brands. "When you shoot for smaller companies, you have more creative input as a photographer, so it's a good way [to help] shape your portfolio," she says.

Plus, a fact that will never change: "Bigger [clients] always want to see a similar thing that you've shot already," Bensimon says. "If I want to shoot for REI, for example, I'll take my friends camping and take some photos of that, so if the opportunity ever comes, [I can say] 'Here are some camping photos, I'm totally good for this job.'"

But another truth remains: Thousands of photographers exist, and there are only so many publications. How do you get an independent editor's attention?

Bensimon starts with a trip to her favorite bookstore: "I take every magazine that I like, look at the masthead and try to find email addresses

"Bigger [clients] always want to see a similar thing that you've shot already."

of the staff." But before she contacts anyone, she does her research. "It's really good to be up on what they've been working on, so for *Down East* [the magazine of Maine], I contacted the art director and was like, 'Your summer issue was so cool; I checked out two of the swimming holes that you suggested and I really appreciated that story.' And in the email, I attached a photo I shot of my friend at the swimming hole they mentioned. That went over really well."

Ashley Owens, founder and editor of *SUITED*, a thick biannual fashion and art publication using black-and-white photography to highlight what its subjects are "well-suited" for, says many of her collaborations with photographers come from hearing their name. "When a photographer is active in the field, you start to come across each other," she says.

Personal introductions beat all forms of communication, and second to that, "messaging us on social media; Instagram is a great way that people review portfolios now," Owens says.



PHOTOS BY JESSE LAITINEN (ABOVE)

LEFT AND ABOVE: *PUSS PUSS* celebrates gorgeous photography, thoughtful writing and interviews—and, of course, cats. The UK-based publication has published five issues to date.

Photographer Joshua Woods, who shot his first fashion editorial with *SUITED*, got in contact with Owens through mutual friends and on Instagram. "We became friends and I saw his work develop," Owens says. "We set up an editorial shoot with him, and it was a risk in some sense because we hadn't seen his work in a multi-page editorial, but seeing how he was working hard and being consistent allowed us to take that risk. [The shoot] turned out to be one of everyone's favorites for that issue."

PUSS PUSS editor Maria Joudina says that

