

Daniel Coston

Interview by: Gideon Smith



Occasionally, I interview people I have crossed paths with over the years from artists to musicians, actors, authors, and more. I recently caught up with an old friend who is a world-class, ace photographer and author. Daniel Coston is a very cool, down-to-earth, incredible person who has worked with such artists as Johnny Cash, Son Volt, Big Star, Roky Erickson, and countless other great musicians. His photos have been featured in People Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, Us Weekly, TV Guide, Rolling Stone, FX, CMT, VH1 (TV networks), Mix, Spin, CMJ, Billboard, Blender, Maxim, Revolver, Playboy, Alt. Press, Stance, Acoustic Guitar, Guitar World, Guitar Player, Harp, Mojo, Q, Uncut (UK), Vanity Fair, and others. Coston is the author of several books, contributes to many local publications, and is always working on new projects.

GIDEON: What first inspired you to begin photographing musicians and where did you start?

DANIEL: I was first impressed as a kid by album covers. Beatles albums, '60's psychedelic albums, and '50's / '60's blues and jazz albums, in particular. I can still name all of the photographers that worked with the Beatles. Album covers, album artwork, and promo pics

were like a portal to this unknown world of music. I had toyed with taking pictures as a kid, but my heart was more in video and filmmaking back then. In 1995, I started writing sports for a weekly paper in Matthews, so I started taking photos for them. At the same time, I started writing for www.TangentsMag.com and taking photos of bands around Charlotte. Literally the first several bands that I photographed all bought my photos or hired me to do more. When I photographed Farm Aid in 1996 (with the Beach Boys, Neil Young, Willie Nelson, Son Volt, Doug Sahm, and so many others), I could feel something saying, "Go this way. See where this leads you." The marriage of music and photos was exciting to me, and I really haven't stopped since.

GIDEON: When you were starting out were there photographers that inspired you with their work and why?

DANIEL: Robert Freeman's work with the Beatles from 1963 to 1965. Stylistically, I'm closer to Ethan Russell's work on Let It Be (more documentary style, with use of muted colors). Jim Marshall, Henry Diltz, and all those that worked with bands in the '60's and '70's. My interests tend to fall into the visual artists of that era and further back. I love the work of Edward Steichen and his ability to re-invent his work every fifteen years or so. He still pushes to keep evolving and look at every project (music, and non-music) as part of the larger tapestry of creating. In working on a recent exhibition of my photos from 1996 to 2001, I was struck by how much my work was influenced by more documentary-style photographers of the early 20th century; Edward Curtis, and Walker Evans, in particular.

GIDEON: Do you have certain familiar techniques and inspiration or do you alter your perspective depending on the subject and theme?

DANIEL: I tend to stay pretty basic with my camera gear, I stay mobile, and I (just) keep moving with the subject. I tend to work more on gut feelings and what feels right at the moment. When you're working on your own all of the time, you learn to trust yourself and your instincts. More often than not, it proves to be the right thing to do. The rest of the ideas change with the subjects. Every person and moment is different, so I like to let those ideas shape the work.

GIDEON: Do you have a partiality for black and white over color photos?

DANIEL: I did, for a number of years. I still think that a lot of my best work has been taken on B&W film. Paring down the colors makes you think differently about the photo and the impact of the subject becomes more direct. Since I went digital (six years ago), I mostly shoot color. I feel like shooting digitally in color and then changing it to B&W is cheating a bit. It changes how you shot the photo and then present it. Sometimes the photos tell you what should be in color or B&W.

GIDEON: What is your writing history and do you have any news on the book front?

DANIEL: I have published four books to date. I wrote North Carolina Musicians: Photographs And Conversations. I co-wrote a book on the NC Rock & Roll scene of the 1960's entitled There Was A Time (now in its second edition). I also co-wrote two editions of the Double Door Inn book (with a revamped third edition coming next year). I also have a photo journal book of my years photographing the Briarhoppers. I have another book coming out that is a kids' book that appeals to adults and I'm also starting work on a larger project on one of my favorite bands.

GIDEON: Do you have any defining photographs you feel sum up chapters of your work and life and why those in particular?

DANIEL: The Cash photos from 2003 was an amazing experience. The fact that John Carter Cash has said that many of his favorite photos of his dad from that final year are MY photos is a tremendous honor. The work I did on the early Avett Brothers, Guided by Voices, and Drive By Truckers albums were defining moments. Wilco used some of my photos in their recent best-of. I don't have to be in the photo to see myself or my emotions at the time. They're all there in the photo... at least for me.

- Daniel Coston's 1996-2015 Photo Retrospective (On the Way to Here) is on permanent exhibition on the 2nd floor of the Charlotte Museum of History.

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