

# Studio Photography

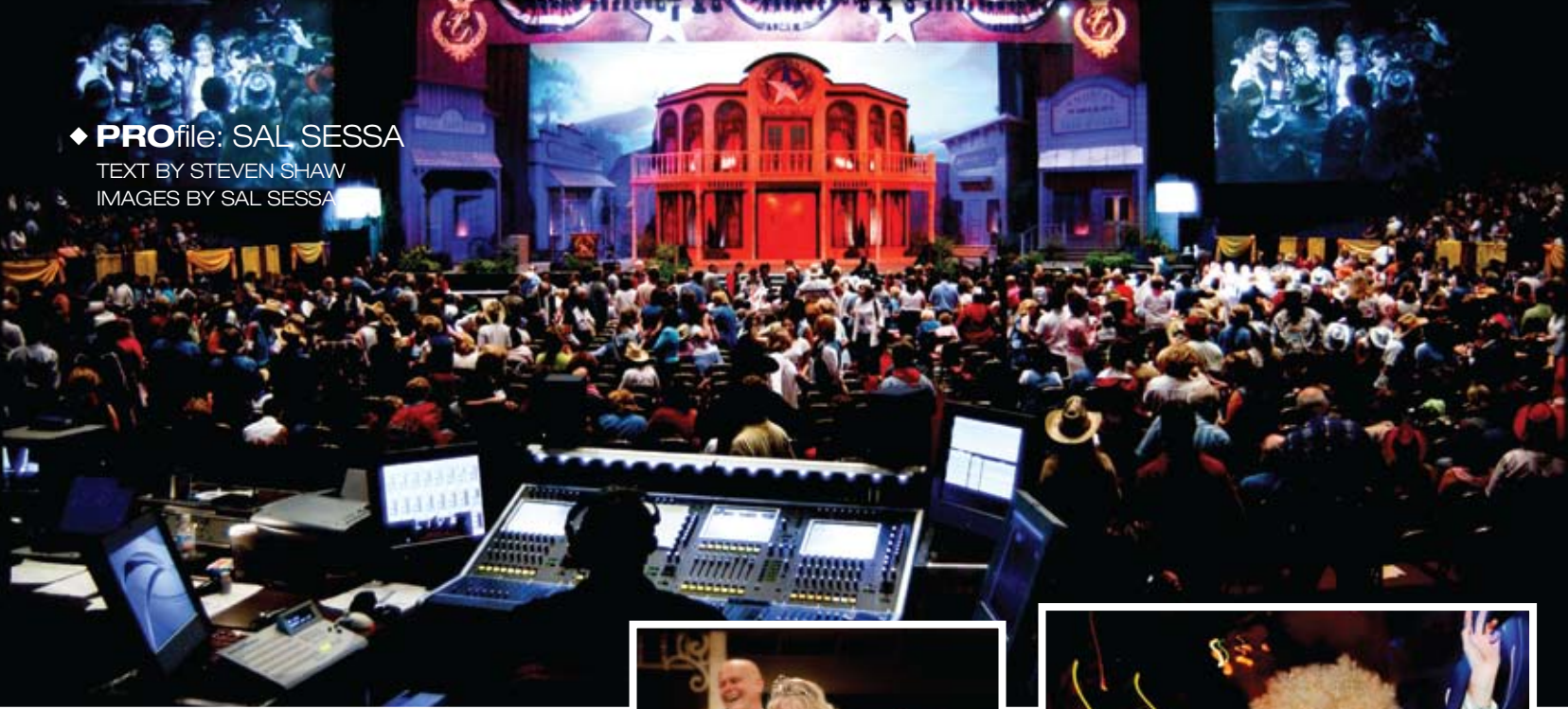
THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE IMAGE

## an eventful career

◆ **PROfile:** SAL SESSA

TEXT BY STEVEN SHAW

IMAGES BY SAL SESSA



SAL SESSA has seen (and documented) it all in 20 years of corporate event photography



As the locals like to say,  
“EVERYTHING IN TEXAS IS BIG!”

The cowboy hats are big,  
the steaks are big, and  
football is *really* big.

Another thing that’s really big, especially in Dallas, is corporate events. Companies like Exxon Mobil, Neiman Marcus, JC Penney, American Airlines, and Texas Instruments call the Dallas/Fort Worth metro area home. When they throw corporate events, they do it in a big way, and they want only the best when it comes to event photography. That’s where Sal Sessa comes in.

Look up “event photography” in Google, and the first listing to appear is [www.salsessa.com](http://www.salsessa.com). When a big corporate event takes place in Dallas, the first person called is Sessa. Not bad for a journalism/psychology major who saw an opportunity and ran with it nearly 20 years ago.

“I was working at a photo lab as a sales rep, just trying to make ends meet, when a client called looking for a photographer,” recalls Sessa. That client was Angela Enright, the director of PR for the Four Seasons Hotel. She needed a photographer to do a PR shot of her boss with Motown legend Smokey Robinson.

“I said, ‘How about me?’ She knew me from the lab, but had no clue I was a photographer,” Sessa reports. Enright needed someone quickly and gave Sessa the opportunity—an opportunity that changed his life.

“I went out, shot it, and gave her the images a few hours later,” says Sessa. “I had no clue about fees, and had to ask her how much to charge. When she told me, I realized it was more than I made in a day, and well, the rest is history.”

#### THE CORPORATE WORLD

Aside from the large paycheck, Sessa enjoyed the experience and

decided to take his photojournalism background and get into what he called “documentation.”

“In a town like Dallas, there is a lot of stuff going on,” he says. “Big events, parties, meetings, conventions, etc., so ‘corporate event photography’ kept ringing in my head.”

At the time, not that many photographers were doing event photography, so Sessa saw a need and filled it. “It wasn’t rocket science,” he modestly says.

The JC Penney Company and GTE were two of Sessa’s first major clients. “I worked with each of them for 10 years, and they accounted for 60 percent of my income.”

While this sounded wonderful, Sessa realized that it was also a problem, at least according to his “three-year theory.” “My theory is that you lose 30 percent of your business every year, so if you don’t replace at least that much each year, within three years you’ll be gone,” he explains.

While this is a considerable challenge, Sessa says it keeps him sharp, active, and visible. The internet has played a key role in helping get new business, he offers, and Google has been a godsend.

“I think most clients these days find photographers via the internet,” he remarks. “I get about 80 percent of my business from search-engine inquiries to my web page.” And those inquiries have led to some very interesting assignments.



#### FROM BUSH TO BEYONCÉ

Sessa covers all kinds of events for corporate clients, from conventions, trade shows, and award ceremonies to fund-raisers, concerts, and golf outings. “I have shot every type of corporate event you can imagine,” he chuckles, “from as few as six guys



in a bar to 10,000 screaming women in a convention hall—and everything in between.”

On a shoot for the Gladney Foundation (a charitable organization that helps children get adopted), Sessa was assigned to do photo ops with former President George Bush and former First Lady Barbara Bush. “Thirty couples in 30 minutes,” recalls Sessa. “One handler leading them in, one handler leading them out. A lot of pressure, especially since I had the flu.” But the shoot went so well that, at the end of the night, the former president gave Sessa a little applause and asked if he would mind taking a photo with them. “That photo is now on my wall, signed by both George and Barbara,” he says.

Sessa has also photographed Beyoncé for GTE. The singer was performing in concert at the American Airlines Center. GTE was sponsoring a contest where 10 winners would have their photos taken with the pop star before the show. “I had to escort 10 positively giddy young ladies to Beyoncé’s dressing room,” says Sessa. “That’s where we met her bodyguard, Terrell, the biggest man I’ve ever seen.” Sessa claims that Terrell is so intimidating that nobody even tries to talk to him. Seeing yet another opportunity, Sessa walked up to Terrell after the shoot and told the bodyguard that if he needed anything, to just let him know. To his surprise, the kind gesture paid off.



“When the press got escorted out of the concert after one song,” recalls Sessa, “Terrell kind of gave me a little gesture to come up to the front of the stage.” The bodyguard allowed Sessa to stay and shoot the first three songs from up front. “I got some great shots and then glanced over at him at the end of the third song,” says Sessa. “He just looked at me; there was no need to say more. I knew it was time to go, but I was happy for the extra help in getting some great shots of Beyoncé in action.”

Of course, things don’t always go so smoothly. “I had the total opposite experience with Eric Clapton’s personal assistant, Mick, who kicked me out of Texas Stadium during the rehearsal, thinking I was paparazzo or something.” Sessa chalks it up to the “sometimes you win, sometimes you don’t” theory. “Not only did I not get paid, but my ego was bruised for months,” says Sessa, adding “and Clapton’s music just never sounded the same after that experience.”

#### **MOST IMPORTANT PRODUCTS FOR PRODUCTIVITY:**

“I would have to say there are two things I could not live without. **THE ROCK N ROLLER CART** holds tons of equipment and glides along effortlessly. Craig Minielly’s **CRAIG’S ACTIONS** sets are indispensable, especially for headshot and portrait work. These Photoshop actions, created by a working photographer, have totally changed the way I work in Photoshop.”

— SAL SESSA

## SAL SESSA'S GEAR BOX

### CAMERAS/LENSES

- Nikon D300 bodies with MB-D10 battery grips, Nikon D3
- Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8G ED AF-S, Nikkor 24-70mm f/2.8G ED Nikkor AF-S, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8G ED-IF AF-S VR, Nikkor 20mm f/2.8D AF, 35mm f/2D AF, 60mm f/2.8 Micro AF, 85mm f/1.8D AF

### LIGHTING

- AlienBees 1600 monolights
- Nikon SB-800 AF Speedlights

### ACCESSORIES

- Lightware cases
- Tenba cases
- Domke bags
- Rock N Roller Multi-Cart

### DIGITAL DARKROOM

- Apple Mac Pro desktop, MacBook Pro laptop
- Western Digital external 500GB hard drives
- SanDisk 8GB Extreme III CompactFlash cards
- Adobe Photoshop CS3
- Adobe Lightroom
- Craig's Actions

## ONE-MAN SHOW

Sessa reports that, for the most part, he works alone. Preferring not to assemble a staff, he says he used dozens of assistants over the years until he met his current assistant, Clint Swisher, about 10 years ago. Swisher has his own studio photography business now, but Sessa says Swisher still helps out on big jobs. "He knows I'm lost without him!" grins Sessa. "Besides, my stuff is more exciting than shooting sweaters," he adds with a wink.

The move to digital has been great for Sessa. "I embraced it from day one and never looked back. Now I spend a lot more time in front of the computer instead of having to make constant lab runs." He has two computers—a Mac (with tons of RAM, and internal and external hard drives) and a MacBook Pro laptop (15" with 4GB of RAM). He uses Adobe Photoshop CS3/Bridge and Lightroom for just about everything.

"I would say, if I'm not shooting an event or doing headshots, I'm pretty much in front of the computer from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.—I'm a Photoshop maniac and have been using it since Version 4," he says. "I'm new to

Lightroom, and I hated it at first, but now I'm totally enjoying using it for cataloging, organizing, and some editing as well."

## CORPORATE HEADS

Sessa admits that the event photography business has been drying up in recent years, due mainly to the bad economy. There aren't as many events, and there isn't as much money to go around. "Companies have decided that photography has become a luxury item, rather than something they could afford to toss into their event budget without missing a beat. First the golf tournaments stopped, then the corporate parties slowed down. Eventually it got to the point where I wanted to add in a few services to make up for the income reduction."

With experience doing portraits and working with big corporations, Sessa saw yet another business opportunity—corporate portraiture. Figuring that Dallas has tens of thousands of executives who sooner or later would need a headshot or portrait, Sessa went to work.

With a catchy domain name (*dallasheadshots.com*) and a great spot on Google, the portraiture took off, accounting for over 60 percent of his business.

What makes him so successful? A system and style that makes it pretty easy to get in, get out, and keep it reasonable for the client. "I do everything on location; I don't own a studio," says Sessa. "That's a service I sell. I come to you. To take a dozen executives out of the office to get headshots is a huge waste of time and money. I can get them done at their offices—all they lose are minutes, not hours." He's shot as few as one, and as many as 50 executives at client offices, knocking out as many as 900 in a day at conventions.

When he goes on location, Sessa brings three cameras/three lights, umbrellas, and backgrounds, setting

up wherever he can (usually a conference room). "Clients will usually send in one person at a time, and I can shoot their headshot in as little as a minute, or as much as five minutes—I can usually get a dozen people done in under an hour."

Sessa's portrait style is simple but effective. He uses long lenses on a tripod, wide open with slow shutter speeds so the backgrounds go out of focus with warm ambient light that creates shapes around the subject. He only uses one AlienBees light with an umbrella on one side, and a silver/white reflector on the other. "I blow in there, get the job done, and get out as fast as possible," he says.

Still, event photography is what he does best. "I won't use anyone but Sal to document my most important events," says Enright, the one who gave Sessa his big break. "I love the way he is able to recognize and then capture the emotion of the moment. You can literally see the difference in his work, and it's because he puts so much energy into each shot." ♦

FOR MORE OF SESSA'S IMAGES,  
GO TO [WWW.SALSESSA.COM](http://WWW.SALSESSA.COM)

