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## How I Got Here: We Talk Automotive Photography With Larry Chen

Posted November 27, 2017

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**Look how serious this guy is.**

Making a living doing what you love is an ambition that many aspire to, but few are able to accomplish. For gearheads, getting your foot in the door of the automotive industry can be particularly difficult, regardless of specific vocation, due in no small part to the very finite amount of jobs available and the abundance of who are people happily willing to do them. For a multitude of reasons, automotive photography is arguably one of the most difficult areas within the industry to carve out a space for one's work. So when we meet someone who's managed to do so, it's legitimately noteworthy.



If you've ever scanned the big, panning action at [Speedhunters.com](http://Speedhunters.com), or admired the photography on the cover of [HOT ROD Magazine](#), chances are you've already come across Los Angeles-based photographer Larry Chen's work. Larry is not only adept at homing in on the essence of what makes a particular car compelling to look at, he also has a knack for documenting car culture at the ground level, where authenticity often supersedes corporate sheen. But the path leading Larry to where he is today was anything but obvious, and none of it can be attributed to luck. We sat down with him to find out how he found a foothold in the industry, get his perspective on some of the most important aspects of automotive photography, and score some valuable advice for would-be photogs.





RK: Tell us about your background with cars – has this been a lifelong passion or something you discovered later on?

LC: *I grew up around a bunch of guys who were obsessed with cars, even way before we could drive. I grew in Santa Monica, California, and that area has always had so much car culture to feed off of, so I was exposed to it early on because of that. But for me, it almost wasn't even a choice. Part of it was that, generally speaking, when someone gets their first car these days, they don't do their own repairs on it. But when we got our first cars, anything that went wrong with them we had to fix ourselves. At a certain point you kind of start to love the whole process.*





RK: It definitely helps form a bond – whether you want it to or not. Can you tell us a bit about the career path that led you to where you are today?

LC: *It's pretty simple actually – I never went to school for photography and I didn't go to college. As soon as I got out of high school I just started working, and all the money that I made went into my cars for autocross, track days, time attack – pretty much whatever driving events I could go to with my friends. At some point I thought, "Hey, maybe I should take pictures of these cars," because I liked that aspect of it too. So I would shoot some photos and make videos of my friends and I at the track or wherever.*

*Not long after that I also realized I wasn't very fast as a driver, but I could take pictures and that I really enjoyed that. So I started saving up my money and paying my own way to check out all these big events just to be able to photograph them. At that point the photos were just for myself, just to create them. I flew to Japan, Europe, China, and whatever events I could go to across the U.S. just to document car culture – this was in an era before YouTube existed and social media had really taken off, so these events weren't as readily accessible online as they are now.*



RK: So how did you turn this into something you could make a living from?

LC: *It didn't really come until way later. Right out of high school was building and repairing computers while also shooting photos. I spent so many years just building up my portfolio and making friends in the industry – it took a long time just to get my work in front of the right eyes. I think I operated at a loss for about four or five years. While I was shooting a Formula Drift event I met this guy who worked as a paparazzi. I thought that was kind of an interesting job, so I became a paparazzi for two years full-time. At that point I was shooting celebrities and shooting cars at the same time, and all the money I made as a paparazzi I would use to pay for my travel to car events. There was one SEMA show from around that time that I went to cover and I slept on a different hotel room floor every night for four nights. There was one point when I was covering the Formula Drift series where I would help the teams trailer their cars to the track just to be able to get to the events so I could be there to photograph. So it was kind of tough for a long time. I appreciate being able to do things properly now, but I also miss those days sometimes because of how simple things were – I was just out there to take pretty pictures.*





RK: Yeah, sometimes it's nice to get back to the basic elements of what drew you in to begin with. What's your favorite kind of car-related stuff to shoot these days?



LC: *Right now it's super easy for anyone with a nice camera or some press credentials to go to any of these big public events and cover it. So for me, what really excites me is finding real grassroots car culture – just embedding myself in car clubs and underground meets. I feel like that is my favorite thing to cover now because other people aren't covering it and no one is really paying me to do it – I'm just doing it to make sure this stuff is documented for generations to come. Wherever I travel to, whether it be in small islands like Barbados or Singapore, or China, or anywhere else I go, I try to cover the local car culture there. Whether or not these guys think that what they're doing is important or not, from the outside I think they're doing interesting things and they're doing it their way. I'm lucky that get to just go there and these people are willing to share these experiences with me and allow me document the whole thing. I love telling that story now.*



RK: What kind of advice would you offer to upstarts looking to get into the industry?

LC: *For me, my goal is to pick up my camera every day, whether it be just shooting my cars in my own garage or a new part that got in the mail, or out at a crazy event like Gymkhana. The thing that I always preach is that when you're on your couch watching TV or whatever, you're not making good pictures. It's such a simple concept. But when you're actually out there, in front of something cool, it's easy to make good pictures happen. You could have a cell phone, or a toy camera or whatever – anything – as long as you're in front of a good subject, you'll end up with interesting photos. With the popularity of social media, it sort of naturally weeds out the people that just don't have that passion. When you're actually talented and you're doing something great, it'll show and that work will rise to the top. If you push really, really hard, people will notice. But you have to have fun when you're doing it, and you have to do it every day – you have to live it and breathe it. For me, even if things hadn't worked out the way they did, I'd still be doing this anyway – even today I still do things out of my own pocket for fun just because, you know, that's just the way I am. For example, this year I paid my own to the Goodwood Festival of Speed because I just wanted to see what it was like. No matter where I am in my career down the line, I'm still going to be doing stuff like that.*



Be sure to check out Larry's photography work on [his site](#) and follow his automotive adventures on [Instagram](#).



**TECH TALK – Does The Gear Make The Shot?**

There's a common misconception among folks who're just getting into photography that in order to get good shots, you need to have a bunch of expensive equipment. But Larry offers a different perspective.

"The first thing to do is just play around with your phone," he says. It's a camera that you have with you all the time, and it makes you to focus on composition, especially when you're shooting cars. It forces you to zoom in and out by walking around, raising the lens higher and lower to achieve different shots. I still try to replicate that on the camera side – I always like to shoot with fixed focal lenses because it does force me to take a step back or forward, climb on top of a ledge, etc. For me, the point is to focus on the composition of the shot."

With that said, Chen also offers some gear suggestions for those looking to step up to a DSLR. "I like shooting with full frame cameras, but I still have a lot of crop sensor bodies and I still shoot with them. They all have their own strong points. But a good starting point for a DSLR is to invest in some sort of full frame body and maybe a 50mm f/1.4 or a 50mm f/1.8 lens. Heck, you could even just use a zoom lens, tape it to a specific focal length, and just force yourself to walk around and not touch the zoom. To me, that fixed focal length really pushes you to be a better photographer."



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