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Motorsports: An Interview With Photographer Larry Chen



by **Sean Horton**
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I recently spent three days in Ensenada shooting with the talented [TEMPT Media](#) crew during the Baja 1000. On the second night while unwinding at our Airbnb, in walks a guy with three beefy rigs with all the lenses wrapped in gaff tape, underneath what would appear to be a layer of dust that most normal human beings wouldn't subject their [Canon 1DXs](#) to.

I asked him a question he gets about five times a day while out on shoots like this, "Hey man, what's the deal with the healthy dose of gaff tape wrapped around those guys?" That's how my conversation with [Larry Chen](#) started, a guy with a very humble demeanor, who snores like a chainsaw, and has a massive and impressive portfolio of car culture and motorsports images.



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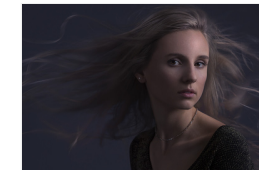
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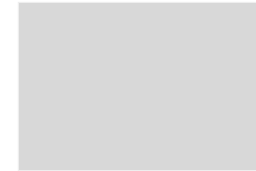
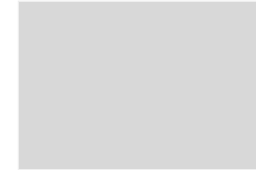


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Chen gave me an answer that in hindsight seems obvious. “I wrap my lenses in [gaff](#) to keep the dust out.” Which makes sense, considering he shoots in some pretty nasty environments for a majority of his client work. After a quick look at his portfolio while sitting across from him at the kitchen island I quickly learned why he’s the guy that shoots the top athletes of brands at the forefront of motorsports: he’s a monster when he’s behind the lens. While our intro was down in Baja, we were both too busy working to actually sit down for a chat, so we caught up via phone a couple weeks later.

Chen’s been at this for a bit but says his professional career didn’t start as far back as some people would assume.

“2004 was when I started taking the hobby of photography pretty seriously, but it wasn’t until 2006 when I really started pouring money into gear and the travel it took to get to the events I wanted to shoot. And it was another four years until I quit my job. I started contributing to [Speedhunters](#) as the hobby got more serious, eventually becoming a staff editor. By 2010 I was working on so much with them that I just didn’t have time for anything else.”



In the seven years since becoming a full-time photographer, he's had some gnarly adventures. He's ridden in helicopters chasing world class athletes, and he's traveled across the globe to shoot the world's top automotive manufacturers. You might be surprised to find out that the dude with a roster like [Toyota](#), [Hoonigan](#), and [Monster](#) financed his passion for photography by building and selling computers.

When shooting for his favorite clients he says he's pretty much got free reign when it comes to developing their content.

"Hoonigan gives me so much creative control and range in terms of what I shoot for them. I can almost go out and find what I want to shoot for them, on top of what they've got lined up for me. Monster has some of the most interesting athletes in the world to work with, on top of them being the 'bad boys' of motorsports. I absolutely love and am so lucky to be working with Toyota. With them being the top car manufacturer in the world, working with them has me constantly pushing to go beyond myself and exceed their expectations."



Larry Chen Photo

He says his favorite thing about shooting motorsports though, is the subtle nuances and fleeting moments that most spectators seated trackside don't even get to see. For example, one moment he likes to talk about to illustrate this point is during a [NASCAR](#) pit stop.

"What most people don't see is that these pit crews don't reuse those lugnuts during tire changes. They just let them fall and throw new ones on the wheels of the fresh tires. So every once in awhile you catch a moment during the burnout when a lugnut sparks across the pavement from under a tire going 100 miles per hour. I love capturing the speed, beauty, and danger of motorsports. It feels almost empowering to be able to capture that kind of raw energy."

While on the subject of beauty and speed I asked him to tell me about his first experience shooting from a helicopter, something I've yet to do in my career, and something I think about often. He was in the UAE, just a couple of hours outside of Dubai, shooting for [Ken Block's Gymkhana 8](#). They were towing a massive decommissioned 747 that Ken was simultaneously drifting around.



Chen says one thing he hadn't thought about when preparing for the shoot was that despite being in the air, "shooting from a helicopter is very limiting. You can communicate with the pilot when trying to achieve your shot, but it's not like you're able to make those micro-adjustments as if you're shooting on the ground. But you are shooting from the air so most of it comes out pretty good!"

When it comes to shooting for fun Chen shared he shoots almost exclusively on film. His go-to is the [Fujifilm Instax 500AF](#). He says it's his favorite "not only because its medium format, but it's the only camera to shoot Instax Wides on top of being autofocus.

“ I shoot film for fun because it really slows me down, and it's a major change of pace from the high intensity nature of what I do for client work. There's an aspect of validation to it as well. If I can create really good film images based on my digital experience I feel, in a sense, more validated as a photographer. I love the challenge of trying to produce nothing but keepers from a single roll of film.

When asked what advice he might have for photographers wanting to break into the world of professional car culture and motorsports photography Chen says "What people don't realize is that there's actually not enough people out there that are skilled enough to produce content for the masses. A lot of the time the sidelines are packed with guys just 'doing it for the likes', but those guys get weeded out pretty fast because they're not focused on the craft."



“ If you're outstanding at what you do, it's easier now than ever to produce good work and get it recognized. The biggest thing is to just get out there and do it. Be there, be there in the dirt, versus the guy that says 'I wish I was there.'”

Larry, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me and for sharing with the Fstoppers community!

The arsenal:

Bodies:

3x [Canon 1DxMk2](#)

2x Canon 1Dx remote cams

[Canon 5DSR](#)

[Canon 5DMk3](#) remote cam

[Canon T6i](#) remote cam

Lenses:

[Canon 16-35 f/4](#)

[Canon 24-70 f/4](#)

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[Canon 50mm f/1.2](#)

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Sean is a commercial photographer and DP based in San Diego. He can usually be found petting the nearest dog, drinking beer, or watching the lowriders cruise his neighborhood while doing the aforementioned simultaneously.

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Ian Wood - December 2, 2017

Great interview, thank you! Larry Chen is a huge inspiration to me, has certainly helped my automotive photography develop through studying his incredible output. A master of light for sure, brings real art and craft to a subject area that is usually just 'documented'. Always great to see automotive photography go beyond that and capture the many details that are of the fleeting moment like he does.

1 0



Sean Horton - December 2, 2017 Ian Wood

Thanks Ian! Glad you like it. He is an absolute master and I was shocked to find out he hadn;t been covered here before. Thanks for reading!

0 0



Daniel Schenkelberg - December 2, 2017

idol now rival

0 0



michael buehrle - December 3, 2017

you spend almost 2 paragraphs talking about his wrapped cameras but don't include a pic of them ? dude, come on. am i the only one curious about them ?

3 0



Sean Horton - December 4, 2017 ↩ michael buehrle

Damn! I don't know how I let that one fall through the cracks. Thanks for the reminder!



1 👍 0 🗨️



Brett Turnage - December 4, 2017 [Edited] ↩ Sean Horton

You know at first I did not think it was a big deal, but upon seeing the picture it does help to illustrate what you were saying. I originally took it that the entire camera body was also covered with duct tape, so good for Michael for asking.

0 👍 0 🗨️



David Moore - December 3, 2017

The panning shot from the helicopter is always the one I point to when I talk about Larry Chen, it is one of my favorite photos ever.

1 0



Christian Berens - December 4, 2017

Larry is amazing! His images are not only spectacular, but beautiful as well! You can definitely tell he puts a lot of thought into his photos!

Great interview too

1 0

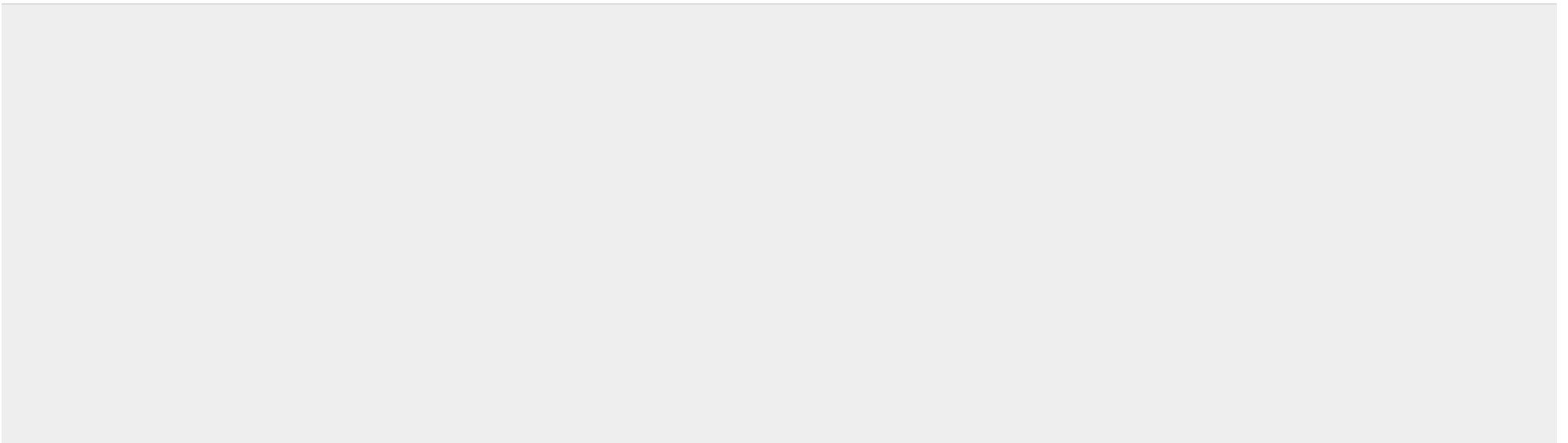


Balazs Kiss - December 5, 2017

I just realized that most of the photos I've been collecting for future analysis and inspiration from Speedhunters are made by Larry... what an amazing work! I hope my Lego car photos and videos will get close to this level :)

1 0

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