The power and the glory

By the early 1980s, Steve Martin was probably the most celebrated stand-up comic in America. He was well known for his appearances on television, particularly on Saturday Night Live, and his stage performances took place in arenas filled with thousands of fans. He was a self-described “wild and crazy guy” who would become an award-winning writer, actor, and musician. In 1981, he had just completed his first dramatic film role in the musical Pennies from Heaven. Martin had learned to tap dance for the film and Leibovitz decided to photograph him in a tuxedo for the cover of Rolling Stone. Martin was an avid art collector and had just acquired a black-and-white Franz Kline painting that he showed her. She had him painted in brushstrokes to match.

Steve Martin, Beverly Hills, California, 1981

“...this great book of photography reviewing the career of the incomparable Annie Leibovitz is a genuine work of art.” — Vogue, Madrid
George Clooney is a movie star, film director, producer, screenwriter, and human-rights activist. In 2005, he wrote, directed, and performed in Good Night, and Good Luck, a film about the broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow’s public stand against the red-baiting tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. He also starred in Syriana, a film about a CIA agent in the Middle East. Clooney received Academy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay for Good Night and Good Luck. He won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for Syriana. Also in 2005, Clooney was ranked number one on TV Guide’s list of the 50 Sexiest Stars of All Time.

George Clooney, Universal City, California, 2005
Lady Gaga, formerly Stefani Germanotta from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, had become the world’s biggest pop star by 2011, when she recorded a jazz version of “The Lady Is a Tramp” with Tony Bennett. In the music video for the song, she gave a playful, witty performance that evokes classical female jazz singers.

Michael Jordan is pretty much unanimously acknowledged to be the greatest basketball player of all time. Beyond that, a poll of sports writers and athletes lists him as the greatest athlete in any sport in the 20th century, at least in North America. He is ranked ahead of Babe Ruth and Muhammad Ali. Jordan was drafted by the Chicago Bulls in 1984 and given jersey number 23. Almost immediately, he dazzled fans with his speed, artistry, and phenomenal skill. His gravity-defying leaps and grace under pressure made him a folk hero.

Lady Gaga, New York City, 2011

Michael Jordan, New York City, 1991
Annie Leibovitz

“A design statement in your living room.”—The Daily Telegraph, London

Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi began performing informally as the Blues Brothers when they were in the cast of the television comedy show Saturday Night Live. They debuted in character on the show in 1978, soon formed an actual band, began performing live, and recorded an album, Briefcase Full of Blues. In 1980, The Blues Brothers film was released. The film and the accompanying soundtrack album were hits and spawned sequels even after Belushi’s death of a drug overdose in 1982.

In the late spring of 1991, Demi Moore and Bruce Willis were expecting their second child. Moore had a movie coming out soon and Leibovitz photographed her for the cover of Vanity Fair. She was seven months pregnant by the time of the shoot. Leibovitz made some close-ups and several full-length portraits with a green satin robe that had been chosen to camouflage the pregnancy. She had made private photographs of Moore’s first pregnancy for her and Willis in 1988, and at the end of the Vanity Fair session she shot some fully nude pictures that were intended for them. When Leibovitz got back to New York and looked at the proofs, she realized that the nude photograph was the best cover. Moore agreed.

Demi Moore, Culver City, California, 1991

Demi Moore and Bruce Willis

The Blues Brothers, Hollywood, California, 1979

Demi Moore, Culver City, California, 1991

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Demi Moore, Culver City, California, 1991
For most of his life, Dennis Hopper represented the drug-fueled counter-cultural ethos of the 1960s. His public character, which didn’t appear to be much different from the private one at times, was established in Easy Rider (1969), the motorbike road movie that Hopper directed and starred in with Peter Fonda. Christopher Walken has also specialized in unstable characters. He won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1979 for his performance in Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter. He and Hopper play a scene written by Quentin Tarantino in True Romance (1993) that has become a cult favorite for connoisseurs of twisted, over-the-top characterization.

Dennis Hopper and Christopher Walken, Chateau Marmont, Los Angeles, 1995
During the 1980s, Michael Jackson became the most famous entertainer in the world. In 1982 he released his sixth solo album, Thriller, which is still the world’s all-time bestselling record. The video made for the title track is widely considered to be the most influential pop-music video ever made.

Michael Jackson, Los Angeles, 1989

Sylvester Stallone is the quintessential action hero, most notably in his portrayals of the inspirational boxer Rocky Balboa and the lionhearted rogue soldier John Rambo. Stallone created the Rocky character for a screenplay he wrote when he was a struggling writer/actor in Hollywood, insisting, against great odds, that he play the lead himself. Rocky was nominated for ten Academy Awards in 1977. It won Best Picture and Best Director and Stallone became an immediate star. He is an art collector with a special interest in Rodin.

Sylvester Stallone, Los Angeles, 1993

“It looks like my healthier brother. It was her idea to take a Rodin sculpture pose but make it contemporary.”

— Sylvester Stallone
When Benedikt asked me to do this book, it was like getting a TASCHEN Oscar. —Annie Leibovitz

Did reproducing your pictures in such large sizes present any problems for you? I was used to seeing the pictures in intimate formats—8 x 10 inches or 11 x 14 inches—but I had made large prints before. The first time I did really big prints—which was only possible because we worked digitally—was for my “Women” show at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1999. I had seen Chuck Close’s very large prints—self-portraits—the year before at the Museum of Modern Art. He put four his prints together. Close’s printer was David Adamson, in Washington, and I went to David and asked him to create prints for me. For the Corcoran show, we blew up a photograph of my mother, and Patti Smith. These simple portraits became sort of visual guideposts for the show. When Benedikt Taschen wrote me a letter about doing a SUMO book, it seemed like a natural progression.

Were there any curatorial surprises when you started working on the book? Not when I started, but what happened was that the process ended up taking place over a fairly long period of time. When I realized that we weren’t going to make the first deadline for getting the book out, I let it sit for awhile and when I looked at it again, I realized that it needed more work. I had thought initially that I just had to imagine what photographs looked good big. It was more complicated than that. The first ideas I had were put aside, although there are remnants of them. My books are usually arranged chronologically. There is more early work in the beginning of this book than later, but I tried to throw off the idea of chronology. I didn’t want anyone to look at the book and call it a retrospective. That was important to me. When you put so many of my pictures together, you can’t help but say, Oh, is that her greatest work? But this is not a retrospective. It is a kind of polymorph. A roller coaster. As you go through it, you forget what you saw in the beginning. You’re in another place toward the end. I had thought that I would put a lot of photographs in this book that might not otherwise be used in a book. As it evolved, I found myself going back to some more popular photographs that seemed to be nice to have as state-ments. The book is very personal, but the narrative is told through popular culture. There are no pictures of family or friends. The nature of my work changes constantly. I was finishing up a project called “Pilgrim-age,” a book and exhibition which include still lifes. I found myself putting in some of these still lifes, which in my mind are portraits of people who are gone. I put in a photo-graph of the TV that Elvis took a shot at in his house in Palm Springs and a page from Emily Dickinson’s herbarium.

It’s not really a book. It sits on a stand. You can find a photograph that you care about and leave the book open to that and sort of dwell on it. There was a lot of discussion with Frank Goerhardt, the production manager, about paper. He would say, oh, when it sits there, you don’t get the glare with this or that paper. I didn’t realize at first why that was important. It’s hard to design a book that is not really a book. Everyone who worked on this built it as a book while trying to understand it as an installation. I’m not sure we succeeded completely, but we tried. This is not a book that you’re going to put in your lap. Your going to look at it from a distance. One picture at a time. It’s nice to go through it in sequence, turning the pages, but I don’t know how many times anyone will do that. The supplement book that comes with the big book is essential. It allows you to quickly see what the pictures are and then you can turn to what you want.

You’ve said that you thought that one of the major themes of the book is “performance.” Having your photographs taken involves a performance, portraits particularly. The photographer provides the subjects with a stage—but then they have to project. You are taking a real picture in real time no matter how perceptual it is. There is reality in the performance.

My background as a photographer is as an observer. I’m a terrible director. The performers I have the most rapport with are comedians, who make up a very special group. They’re sort of like manic depressives. I sympathize with them. They are usually also very intelligent. For me, the classic photograph of a comedian is Charlie Chaplin just leaning. That is such an extraordinarily funny picture. It’s as perfect a photograph as you could ever have of a comedian. Chaplin came from silent films. The challenge for a photographer is to create a visually funny picture without it being stupid. It’s difficult to take a funny picture. You’re known, particularly by magazine editors, as a master of the group photo-graph. What special challenges come with a group? Group photographs make great images historically when they make sense, but sometimes the groups are put together for no particularly good reason. The photograph of the American patrons of the Tate museum was a challenge. It runs over several pages in this book. There are over seventy people from the art world in the picture, sitting on bleachers set up outside, before a benefit dinner. The photograph that was finally published was taken before the “real” photograph was made. I was in a state about not wanting to take group pictures anymore because I thought they were anti-portrait. When I got back to the studio and started looking at the pictures, I saw that the pictures that were taken before we actually started to take the picture were the people. People were chatting with one another or talking on their cell phones, one person was taking a picture of someone else, other people were smoking and staring into space or try-ing to figure out what I was doing. That became the picture.

“New dimensions
An interview with Annie Leibovitz on the publication of her SUMO
“There is just one word that describes Annie Leibovitz… WOW!” —Vanity Fair

“A fantastic portrait of our time.” —Süddeutsche Zeitung, Munich

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- New York City, 1986, size: 51 x 51 cm (20 x 20 in.), Frame not included
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*“It is kind of potpourri. A roller coaster. As you go through it, you forget what you saw in the beginning. You’re in another place toward the end.”* — Annie Leibovitz
Annie’s gang comes out to celebrate at the legendary hotel which was the setting of many of her portraits.

1. David Hockney, Udo Kier
2. Shari Herson, Matt Groening
3. Benedict Taschen and Annie Leibovitz
4. Kelly Lynch, André Balazs and Mario Testino
5. Melanie Griffith
6. Quincy Jones and Annie Leibovitz
7. Leon Max and Edward Menicheschi
8. Annie Leibovitz and Graydon Carter
9. Terry Richardson
10. Lawrence Schiller
11. Michael Richards
12. Mario Testino
13. Sylvester Stallone and Annie Leibovitz
14. Annie Leibovitz and Lauren Taschen
15. Linda Perry and Sara Gilbert
16. Charlotte, Benedikt and Lauren Taschen with Annie Leibovitz

“IT'S FITTING THAT HOLLYWOOD'S CHATEAU MARMONT PLAYED HOST TO THE BOOK LAUNCH; IT'S A STAR-STUDED SPECTACLE WORTHY OF ALL THE Fawning IT'S SURE TO GET.” — Advocate.com