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Paul McKelvey & Mario Romero

Vero Image Does Red Carpet Events

By Judith Turner-Yamamoto

Two years ago, while en route to yet another job they were shooting together, Paul McKelvey and Mario Romero formed Vero Image. Successful event and wedding photographers, respectively, the two met through a photography studio in Whittier, CA, where Paul was working part time and Mario had worked his way up through the company. "We were always working with one another—no one else could be relied on to deliver work of a complementary vision—and exchanging checks back and forth," says 41-year-old McKelvey.

"People told us we were crazy to do Vero Image since we each already had our own businesses," recalls 34-year-old Romero. "We've discovered we're stronger and better organized now by working out of the unified base our joint business gives us." Vero—that's "ve" from McKelvey and "ro" from Romero—means "true" in Italian. "That's what we are. That's our vision," says Romero. "As we go out there, we take the image as we see it."

Vero Image counts among its successes a high-end wedding business and a client roster that includes such brands as Diesel, Rock & Republic, MAX Factor, Hennessy and BMG, and events like the Screen Actors Guild Awards and post-Grammy events.

Judith Turner-Yamamoto: Tell me about the evolution of your partnership.

Paul Mckelvey: I was doing red carpet events—a focus that grew out of our proximity here in Whittier to Los Angeles, and to supplement my income I worked as a photographer in a high school portrait studio where Mario was the director of photography. When I had a job, I'd always take the best photographer with me, and that was Mario. I shot for designers, and

my job was to catalog the event, not shoot for the press. Having that second camera going introduced a whole other angle. My focus was interiors and the event itself, not the celebrities. With Mario along, it freed me to shoot celebrities with the second camera.

Meanwhile, Mario was shooting weddings as a side business. I had given them up—shooting with film, weddings were just too stressful. With the evolution of digital, Mario persuaded me to get back into the wedding market, and I began helping him on his shoots.

JTY: When did you start to venture back into weddings via the digital format?

PM: In May 2002 to be exact. We had a client with a large event who demanded the film the next day. At that point, the switch to digital was imperative.

JTY: What's a principal benefit from working in a partnership?

PM: We found the stress level dropped dramatically by just having a second shooter there who knows what he's doing.

JTY: How do the two of you

work with clients and manage the work on a shoot?

Mario Romero: Paul deals with clients from the first phone call to when we hand over the prints. Postproduction we split 50/50. At the weddings I am the point man. Paul is the contact person for commercial and event photography. You must have one lead photographer on each shoot. We learned that the hard way. The other photographer has to keep an eye on him, see if he needs something, or if something is going wrong.

JTY: And what exactly was the "hard way?"

MR: One of the first weddings we shot, we discovered since we'd been running independent businesses we were both accustomed to doing things our own way. Now it's become like a dance, if I have a long lens on, Paul is working with a wide lens, and vice versa.

JTY: How many images are you shooting on average and how many are ultimately delivered?

PM: Roughly 3000 between the two of us. Two-thirds are mine, unfortunately—I tend to overshoot.

We both edit each other's pictures. It helps to have that eye that's impartial to your own personal vision. After a number of rounds of edits, we deliver between 800–1000 images to the clients. With our higher-end packages the clients expect us there all day—literally. This makes the process of picture editing much more difficult because you're documenting more of the day.

JTY: Mario, you've mentioned that Paul provides the more traditional approach, while you shoot more photojournalistically. I understand the latter, but tell me about the traditional approach.

MR: Those pictures you need when you're documenting the family tree, the parents, the out of town guests. Paul is much better at that than me. He has a lot of patience. Usually Paul is behind the camera, and I'm helping him organize the shots. We don't want to leave anyone out, but we want to get the images as quickly as possible so we can get them off to the reception.

PM: One of the complaints we hear from brides about other weddings is that the effort wasn't made to record as many people as possible, especially family members. A wedding is also a big day for a family; it's when they all get together, and we don't forget that. While I'm concentrating on the formal documentation of the group, Mario is also picking off shots of group members, capturing the more candid moments. That was one of the most frustrating problems with shooting film. I'd see all these moments happening in the group, and they'd just
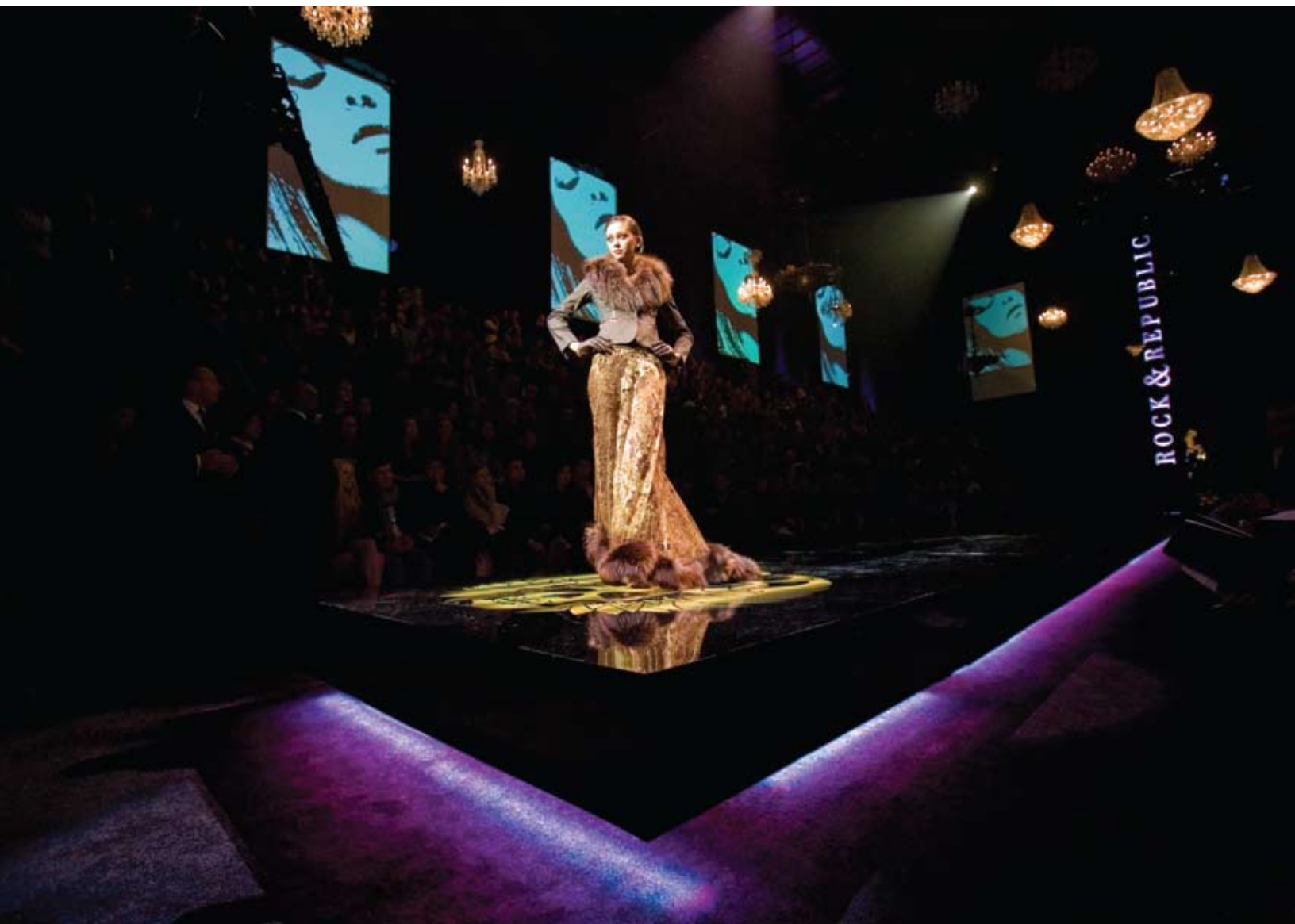
be lost, despite trying to pick up and capture shots with 35mm.

JTY: Combining two visions—do you find you can use this as a selling point when you're competing for a job?

MR: Absolutely. As the business continues growing, we're starting to double-book, and we're training other photographers who have a similar eye to work in a team as we do.

JTY: Do you use assistants at your weddings?

MR: No, not a whole lot. We find that with two photographers, adding additional numbers beyond that is overwhelming and a distraction for the wedding party.

JTY: How do you know when an image needs to be black and white? What influences that vision at that moment?

MR: Sometimes it's just the color that's around me—a white room, for example, an environment with low contrasts. Black-and-white somehow takes on a very intimate feeling. There are certain couples that really pop in sepia, for example.

JTY: How much of that kind of experimentation takes place after the shoot, when you're in post-production? Do you play around or is it obvious to you from the image's inception?

MR: When shooting I may visualize the image as black-and-white or sepia, and then in postproduction I will tag those images and see which ones work best in black-and-white or sepia.

JTY: Can you think about a favorite wedding you've shot recently and why it was a good experience?

PM: The bride was American, the groom was Argentinean, and there was almost a Mardi Gras ambiance around the celebration. It was just a dynamic, stimulating family environment. At one point, for example, the groom was picked up, and he was literally dancing on these guys' hands.

MR: The well organized, higher-end weddings are much more fun to shoot. Everything is timed correctly, and there's a wedding coordinator staying on top of everything. We try to stay away from budget brides;
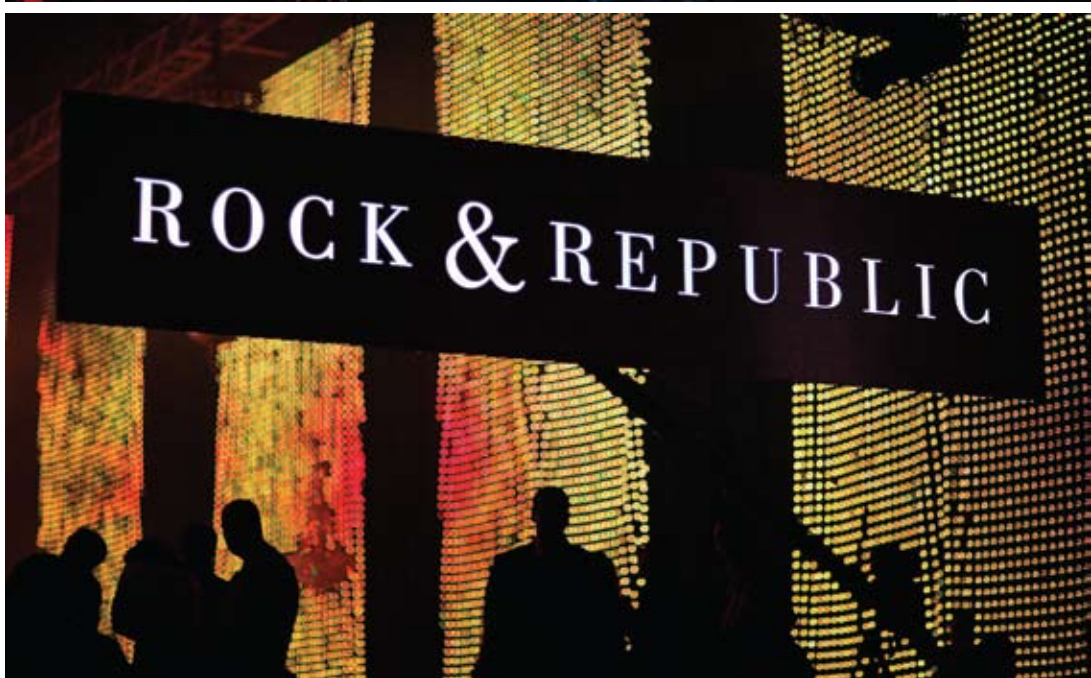
there's so much disorganization and stress. When a wedding runs smoothly, it frees us up to be more creative.

JTY: How do you differentiate yourselves from other wedding and event photographers? What separates your particular vision and final images from what other people are doing?

MR: First, it's how we shoot with fixed rather than zoom lenses, which gives our work its unique look. We use Canon Mark II and 5D cameras with bigger L-series f/1.2 lenses. We focus on available light, no flash or fill, and if we use flash, we always bounce it off the walls. It's only when we come to do group shots that we use direct flash.

PM: The fact that we also shoot high-end fashion and celebrity events differentiates us from our competition. Conversely, we take what we learn from the weddings into these events—working with available light with wide open lenses. Our clients tell us, "You guys make our event look better than it was." And we're further differentiated from other event shooters in that our focus is not a potential editorial or agency sale. We're exclusively serving the interest of our client, be it the event organizer or the fashion designer. Our images are exclusive, and our clients realize that. Now fashion clients are coming to us for post-production work as well, so we're doing the retouching, keeping the integrity of our vision throughout.
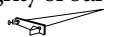
Judith Turner-Yamamoto is Deputy Director of Marketing and External Relations for the Cincinnati Art Museum. As a features writer, her articles have appeared in Elle, The Boston Globe, Finnair, *the* Los Angeles Times, Travel & Leisure *and* Southern Accents.