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CIPS Connections

Internationally recognized expert in digital photography and Adobe Photoshop...

Interview by Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P.

This week, Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P., has an exclusive interview with Carla Rose, an internationally recognized expert in digital photography and Adobe Photoshop.

Carla has authored or co-authored more than 28 books on desktop publishing, telecommunications, Adobe Photoshop and digital photography. She is contributing editor for Photoshop User magazine and has written for the Atlantic Fisherman, Adobe Magazine and The New Yorker.

A recent reader favorite is her book, *SAMS Teach Yourself Adobe Photoshop CS in 24 Hours*.

Discussion:

Q: Carla, with your many talents and busy schedule, we appreciate the time you have taken in doing this interview.

A: I've just finished yet another book, (I think it's number thirty.) so it's sort of nice to kick back and answer some questions instead of doing more "serious" writing.

Q: Can you detail your most remarkable and interesting history. Please share the many lessons you have learned and a few interesting stories—both humorous and thought provoking.

A: I got into computers more or less by accident. I went to art school and studied photography and film animation. That led to a job as a film editor, and eventually they gave me a client who needed a script written. So I wrote one, and found that the work was easy and I seemed to have a knack for it. I tried to stay with film and TV but my life took a series of interesting turns, including managing a recording studio and writing advertising copy.

My husband was intrigued with everything technical (it was his recording studio, too) and brought home one of the first TRS-80 computers, about the same time our second son was born. The computer crashed every time I walked into the room. I never saw it working for more than a minute or two, and I thought they were a waste of time. He kept upgrading, from a cassette tape drive to a floppy disk, and eventually moved up to one of the very first 128K Macintoshes. He showed me this thing that looked like a bar of soap and had me roll it on the table. It drew a line. I drew another line, a wiggly one. Then a box, then a house. I was hooked. When I found out that it could also work as a typewriter, I was hooked even harder. That was 19 years, and about twenty Macs ago.

I wrote my first computer book in 1987. My kids were both using Macs in school, and I thought there might be a market for a children's book on how the computer worked and what you could do with it. I spoke to an editor at Macmillan, whom I'd met in an online writers' conference, and he was interested, but needed one written for adult beginners. I enlisted my husband as co-author, and we wrote "The First Book of Macintosh". The critics liked it, and the editor called and asked if I could do one on PageMaker. "I said, "Of course, I LOVE PageMaker." Then I quickly looked at a catalog to find out what the hell PageMaker was. I got a free copy from Aldus, spent a week learning the program, and then six weeks writing a book about it. The book was another success. And if there's a moral to the story, it's that whatever you don't know, you can learn.

Q: You have been involved with many books, including writing articles. What do you consider your top three-

to-five best books and articles; can you provide some details, shortcuts, solutions, and helpful pointers from each?

A: The “best book” is always a tie between the one I just wrote, and the one I’m going to write next. Each time I tackle a topic like Photoshop, I learn a little more, the writing gets a little smoother, and the explanations get clearer. And of course, the product gets better too. It’s very exciting to be involved with software at the beta test level. We actually have a chance to influence what new features are added.

I do have to say that my favorite of all the books I’ve written is *Teach Yourself Digital Photography in 24 Hours*. It’s out of date now and probably out of print. Unfortunately, we jumped into the market too soon, and the camera situation changed too quickly to keep up. It used to be that a 640 x 480 pixel resolution was pretty good. Now, you have to have a 5 megapixel camera for anything more than a snapshot to go on your web page. But that book covered everything I learned about picture taking in four years of art school, plus everything there was to know at the time about digital cameras. It covered composition, lighting, how to shoot things like food and jewelry as well as people and scenery... it was a very thorough book.

I’ve written some good columns, a couple for *Adobe Magazine* that got great response, and some years ago, I had a monthly column in the now-defunct *Portable Computing* that won me a Maggie Award from the Western Magazine Publishers Association. One of my favorites was an article about portable printers called “All the Print that’s News to Fitz”. It was about my friend, a travel writer, who had to give up his battered typewriter and get a laptop. And he called me to find out where to feed the paper in...

Q: What do you consider the key points to consider when selecting equipment for digital photography, digital imaging, and computer equipment?

A: The one key point is to consider what you’re planning to use it for. You don’t need to spend a thousand bucks on a camera to shoot pictures of the new baby or kitty for your web page. You don’t need a 23” LCD display for surfing the web or reading your e-mail. On the other hand, you need the best equipment you can afford if you’re planning to do professional photography. You need the best scanner you can get if you intend to do photo restoration. And if you intend to do fine art photography, as I do, you need a good printer that takes wide, heavyweight art papers and archival inks.

Color is an issue for me, so I invested in a good monitor and a calibration system. I chose a Nikon CoolPix 5700 camera because it has good resolution and a very good zoom lens. I am slightly handicapped and it’s helpful that I can compose a photo by zooming in or out rather than walking an extra hundred feet to get closer to a subject. I also use the Nikon telephoto and wide-angle accessory lenses.

Of course, you also have to remember that no matter what you buy and how much you spend; something both better and cheaper will be out next week.

Q: How did you get into writing and why do you do what you do?

A: I think I already covered the first part of that question. My boss needed something written, so I wrote it. Why do I keep on writing? I ask myself that, usually about half way through a project when it’s three in the morning and the words aren’t coming. But then I get e-mails from readers thanking me for explaining something they never understood before, or telling me how happy they are that their pictures are looking better. And the royalty checks on the books are nice, too.

Q: Of the available software packages, why do you focus heavily on Photoshop? What are the compelling reasons?

A: Quite simply, it’s the best. I am a dedicated Mac user. I’ve tried Windows and Paint Shop Pro, and I just wasn’t happy. The people who first created Photoshop — Thomas Knoll, Marc Pawliger, Chris Cox — to name a very few of the many, must have spent some time in the darkroom. They’ve made tools that work the way the “real-world” ones do. Dodging and burning, for example, are so much a normal part of making a photo enlargement from a negative... Sponging, too. Many times, I’d swab fresh developer on a print in hopes of bring up more detail. Photoshop does the things I used to wish I could do to a picture, along with many more other options than I’d ever have dreamed of. The filters... I could go on for days about what you can do with Photoshop filters.

Q: What is the current state of digital imaging and where do you see it heading in 2 years, and five years?

[equipment, software, processes, techniques and so on]

A: The current state is changing as we speak. I don't know where it's going. I almost think we've reached the level of what's practical as far as resolution. Do we really need more than 5 megapixels when the monitor's showing 72 dpi? We have screens that can display millions of colors. The best trained human eye can't distinguish more than about twenty thousand. I think HDTV might bring us much better monitors in the near future, and that will at least let us see what we already have.

Really high-quality ink jet printers are coming down in price, so we'll all be doing bigger, better prints soon. That will be a good thing for the art.

Down the road, I am looking forward to hologram cameras. It may be more than five years away, but maybe not, if we can create a demand for them. I think 3D imaging is fascinating, and I can't wait to try it.

Q: What do you see on the horizon that professionals "must" be aware of to stay competitive?

A: Styles change and tools change, but the fundamentals of art don't. Good art and good photography still depend on knowing how to compose a picture, how to light it, and how to shoot it. Where you go from there is a function of your own creative imagination and knowing how to get the picture to communicate what you're trying to say with it.

Q: Do you see major changes on the horizon; new "killer apps"; winners and losers?

A: No, but of course, I haven't exactly gone looking. I'm sure there will be some. I always check out anything new from Alien Skin. Those guys do some great plug-ins. Flaming Pear and Auto F/X are also doing some very neat stuff. As far as I'm concerned, nothing's going to replace Photoshop, or MS Word, or InDesign for the basic tools of my particular trade. I guess I'm old fashioned... Heck, I still play Tetris.

Q: What would be your recommended top 10 references for casual and serious professionals?

A: First of all, join NAPP, the National Association of Photoshop Professionals. Whether you're a novice or a working pro, you can learn a lot from them. They have a monthly magazine called *Photoshop User*, and a members' web site at <http://www.photoshopuser.com/> as well as a public web site at <http://www.planetphotoshop.com>

Beyond that, my book — *Sams' Teach Yourself Photoshop in 24 Hours* — is a good start for beginners. For anyone more advanced, *Real World Photoshop* is terrific. I also like Scott Kelby's *Down and Dirty Tricks* for inspiration when nothing's coming, creatively speaking.

Okay, that's only six. Google "Photoshop" and there are literally thousands of places to go, starting with Adobe's own Photoshop pages.

Q: What are the top ten specific challenges facing professionals in your field?

A: Probably the number one challenge for any of us these days is staying sane, staying alive, and not doing any additional harm to the planet or each other. Making a living doing something you love is a good way to stay sane. Staying alive — we learned a horrible lesson on 9/11. It's not up to us. Doing no harm *is* up to us, and we also have a duty, I think, to do our best to make the world a safe and healthy and beautiful place for the next generation, and to guide them in thinking that way too.

Q: For those who are newly entering your field, do you have any suggestions to save them time?

A: It's like the old joke about getting to Carnegie Hall, "Practice". Spend some time every day just fooling around with your tools. Shoot pictures of anything and everything. Mess around with them in Photoshop. Use filters you'd never ordinarily try. Liquify something until you can't remember what it was. Combine filters. Try posterizing, inverting colors, all the weird stuff that's not immediately practical. Have fun with it. In the process, you're learning your way around the program and building your speed as well as your skill level.

Q: If you were doing this interview, what three-to-five questions would you ask of someone in your position and what would be your answers?

A: "How much are we paying you for this interview?" "I've spent three hours at \$75 an hour..." But seriously, I think everything's pretty well been covered.

Q: Do you have any additional free-ranging comments you would like to make?

A: I've been incredibly lucky. Over the years, time and again, I've been in the right place at the right time, and landed the opportunities that came along. Some of it was simply believing that I could do whatever I set my mind to do. Some of it was having an incredibly supportive husband and kids. Some of it is having a reputation for fast, accurate work and not missing deadlines. And there are factors beyond my control. Somebody out there must really like me.

Q: If you were to do it all over again, would you do things differently?

A: Well, I wouldn't have taken a dive off a step ladder and injured my back. Aside from that, no. I am the happiest person I know.

Q: Carla, thank you again for coming in to do this interview and sharing your in-depth knowledge and experiences with us?

A: It's been fun digging back into old memories. Thanks for listening.

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