

LOCAL

From Christina Aguilera to Weezer and Linkin Park: Fort Walton Beach photographer Sean Murphy's story



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EDITOR'S NOTE: Some expletives have been removed from quotes.

FORT WALTON BEACH — If a picture is worth 1,000 words, Sean Murphy has a million.

When the photographer tells a story; it's like he is telling it for the first time, every time — his presence suddenly bigger than the room, matching the volume, inflection and gestures of the person he is impersonating — himself included.

One could lose a day to Murphy's stories, though a conversation with him can seem more like anecdotes wedged between F-bombs. Hey, he isn't running for president. Well he did take a stab at Fort Walton Beach City Council — he lost.

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“This is another long story,” he says as if to premise a nutshell version of how he photographed Christina Aguilera on the precipice of her burgeoning vocal career; captured a chunk of Weezer's album covers or shot Kid Rock. He knows full well he has no plans to abbreviate his stream of consciousness style of conversation.

No one wants him to.

The walls of Murphy's makeshift compound near downtown Fort Walton Beach are covered in photos. Along one wall beneath a spiral staircase are portraits and album covers; another wall is plastered with Polaroid snapshots and through a door underneath a red neon sign that reads “goddamn” is a negatives room, archiving 15 years of photography — bands, celebrities and advertising jobs — from 1990 to 2005.

Behind each shot is a story.

Like the time he photographed alternative rock band Linkin Park in a pizza parlor.

“My assistant and I showed up two days before and had these rad shots all lined up for them at an airport, where the plane was coming right over their head, Murphy said. “They wouldn’t come out because of the snow. They didn’t want their f***** shoes wet. There are no pictures that are cool because they wouldn’t get in the snow. They’re so lame.”

He filed their photos under “Lamekin Park” on his website for years. Yeah, his agent was elated.

The only time he felt star struck was shooting Peter Murphy, the lead singer of goth rock band Bauhaus.

“I think that's the only time that I was shaking, like visibly shaking, and sweating,” Murphy said. “I remember him reaching out and going, ‘It's cool, mate. It'll be alright. Just take your time.’ I brought all these props and he did everything I wanted to do, and I thought that was pretty cool. So he gets an A-plus.”

Murphy has an estimated gazillion stories to tell and names to drop, but he spouts off a no-holds-barred rehashing of his life as if he had nothing to do with it, like the whole thing was inflicted upon him — and maybe it was.

But if that were true, it begs the question: Why the heck is he in Fort Walton Beach?

‘Photograph’

The first time Murphy picked up a camera was for a photography class at Valencia College in Orlando.

It was the only school he could get into. Murphy didn’t make good grades. He graduated in Choctawhatchee High School's class of 1987, but says “graduated” in the loosest sense of the word.

His first assignment was to shoot something light against something dark to learn how to meter light. Murphy went overboard, he said.

His thorough archiving proves itself useful, because he still has the photo. In it, his then girlfriend and future first wife, Laura Waters, pokes her white painted face through a box of

charcoal.

“I think if a kid did that today, I'd probably still think it was cool,” Murphy said. “I thought, ‘That's kind of creative, you know?’ Everyone else shot like a black cat against a white house or something — not that that's bad.”

His was just better.

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Murphy always pushed boundaries on assignments — making a sculpture of his face out of plaster, incorporating Spanish moss he plucked from the side of the road or smudging Vaseline around the camera lens — anything to make a moment even a touch more photo-worthy.

His love for it came, though, when the professor, Robert Eginton, showed the class how to develop film in the darkroom. Eginton worked as a photographer for the Orlando Sentinel and United Press International. His photos appeared in People, Time, and Life magazine.

At the time, Eginton seemed old and decrepit, Murphy recollects, realizing he is the same age now as Eginton was then — he did the math. Murphy is 52.

“It smelled crazy in there, and we're in this red light,” Murphy said. “I saw the image come on the paper. I was like, ‘This is what I want to do forever. I can create anything in the world and put it on a piece of paper. And it's fast. I can do it myself. And then I can move on to something else, because I'm a spaz.’”

Murphy was hooked — still is.

“I don't stop,” Murphy said. “Right now, it's every day is shooting — every single day, work or not work. It's nonstop.”

After a couple of assignments and against the nature of his job, Eginton told Murphy to drop out and pursue photography in New York City or Boston.

“He thought I had something,” Murphy said.

Murphy went to the dive bar of photography schools, the New England School of Photography in Kensington Square — once the “punk-rock portion” of Boston. The two-year school wasn't fancy or posh like some art schools, but instead a door to Narnia amid a sea of dirty punk-rock bars.

“You walked in this door off the street and it was just this tall staircase and you could just smell the chemistry,” Murphy said. “It was awesome.”

With dyslexia, school never had been Murphy’s forte; there, he was valedictorian.

He still has the speech saved on his desktop, but he imagines his words were lost to the tune of a drunken Harry Benson (heck, Murphy was drunk, too). The Scottish photographer was so inebriated; he forgot he was the keynote speaker, turning what was an epic speech into a Q&A, asking the audience if it had any questions.

“My roommate goes, ‘Uh, how much did you get paid to shoot The Beatles?’ or something,” Murphy said. “And this is what stuck with me to this day that I live by — we’re in a church, too — he was wasted and got all angry and was like, ‘You don’t do it for the money.’ He got all crazy. And so, from that moment forward, I never forgot that.”

Murphy wasn't paid for photography at first.

“I could do what shoots that I wanted to do and with no expectation of getting paid,” Murphy said. “I could just have fun and do cool (stuff) with cool people.”

‘Can’t Knock the Hustle’

Murphy was a birthday shy of making a name for himself on the pioneering MTV reality show “Real World San Francisco.” Because he was a year too old, David "Puck" Rainey, stole his slot in the 1994 season — and was coincidentally the first ever to be evicted.

But Murphy already had fallen in love with the city with the Golden Gate Bridge.

He moved from Hawaii, bought a Vespa and lived above a gay porn studio on Fifth Street and Clara Street, just outside of downtown. He waited tables and procured drugs for anybody and everybody at the Phoenix Hotel — Oasis, Tricky, Foo Fighters — to name a few.

Linda Perry, the lead singer of 4 Non Blondes, was his neighbor.

“We were all just in that weird kind of time where everyone was kind of doing rad (stuff) and becoming somebody,” Murphy said. “And you were with them at that time when it happened. So I got to shoot all these people just because I was there.”

Sure, it was only because he was there.

“His composition never misses,” said Raphye, his wife. “I think that is why he has a consistent style. He never searches for the composition; it’s an instinct like breathing for him. He even vaguely aims the camera at you, the composition is going to be right.”

Murphy met Richard Klein and Riley Johndonnell, the founders of Surface Magazine, at a nightclub. At the time, the magazine was rudimentary, Murphy said, printed cheaply on broadsheet.

“This is where it all turned around for me,” Murphy said. “This was how it all got started for me professionally, because all these bands that I loved — Nina Hagen, Tears for Fears, Peter Murphy from Bauhaus, Tricky, Blondie — all these people that I idolized as a high school kid, they let me shoot.”

Murphy wishes smartphones existed when Hagen was singing Nirvana’s “Rape Me” in a toddler voice in the kitchen of his loft.

Pictures were limited then; memories weren’t.

“You had a camera with film but it costs a lot of money to get it done, so you were frugal with it,” Murphy said.

He remembers shooting Tricky during the day, then serving him at the Phoenix Hotel that night.

“He’s like, ‘What the f***, mate? You’re waiting tables at night?’” Murphy said. “It was just a trip.”

Murphy and a co-worker rented a Mustang convertible and drove from cold and foggy San Francisco to the palm trees of L.A. to shoot Tears for Fears at Chateau Marmont — Murphy had never been there. The valet treated them like royalty.

An unaffected Murphy set up a studio in the room, aiming to do something cool, as per usual.

“I didn’t want to do something basic, because I’m like, ‘Who gives a f***? You know what I mean?’” Murphy said. “If you’re just shooting a nice portrait of him on the balcony, like who really cares? So I’m like, ‘Let’s do long exposures in the hallway, abstract, almost where you didn’t recognize them.’”

In retrospect, it wasn’t his wisest decision. Murphy was shooting with film; he could’ve come back empty-handed.

He didn't.

'Perfect Situation'

The focal point of Murphy's living room is a respectable-sized record collection gifted to him from music promoter Ian Copeland and his brother, Stewart Copeland, the drummer of The Police, in exchange for helping Ian move. It's also the source of inspiration for 20 years' worth of photos of the band Weezer — the band Murphy has shot the longest.

He has photographed the group for 20 years. The first shoot for Alternative Press had the theme "2001: A Space Odyssey." He shot the album cover of "Van Weezer," the upcoming 15th album set to drop May 7.

"I would go through this (collection) and I would pull out albums and I'd go, 'Oh, this is cool. I love this composition. I love the colors and I like the styling,'" Murphy said. "I would make a copy of it and then I would bring in a whole stack of pages to Rivers."

Rivers Cuomo is the lead vocalist, guitarist, keyboardist and songwriter.

The theme of the White Album, its 10th album released in 2016, was "beach noir." Murphy gets chills reminiscing of the day it unfolded.

"It wasn't even planned and this is how it always goes," Murphy said. "I have all the elements and then there's this kind of idea and then things happen that are unplanned. And that's the thing I've always relied on every shoot I've ever done in my life. I have the general pieces and a general idea, but I'm willing to pivot from the idea."

They were shooting in Venice Beach and Murphy spotted people sitting nearby un-posed, one wearing a cowboy hat. They didn't budge.

If Murphy had the idea, he would've hired them, he said.

Then, he spotted a man down the beach walking around with a metal detector.

"I said to my assistant, 'Go get that guy. See if you can give him 20 bucks to be in the thing,'" Murphy said. "So that's how that happened."

Murphy started working for Getty Images at age 30.

"They helped craft my style and change from shooting this music way that I was doing with the very conceptual and a lot of lighting to this freeform kind of lifestyle way that I've evolved

into now,” Murphy said.

And he could make money. Shooting musicians wasn’t lucrative — but Benson told him not to do it for the money anyhow.

“I was just poor,” Murphy said. “I got a couple kids and I was a dirt bag. I lived in the valley and I made no money. My wife was a dental hygienist. I drove a 1972 Volkswagen squareback orange with a roof cut off because I had an English mastiff and he would sit up in there and his ears would blow around and I’d drive that around L.A.”

He has three sons — Ozzy, 21, and twins Milo and Tripp, 19.

‘Beverly Hills’

“Where did we leave off, gay porn or math?” Murphy asks at his second interview.

“We can’t talk about gay porn,” he amends a couple of seconds later.

We opt for drugs.

Murphy had hosted a 12-step meeting at his home the night prior.

“OK, cool,” he said.

Murphy is known for his candor on the subject.

“He’s super open about it because he knows it helps people,” Raphye said. “Even if it’s one person that says, ‘Oh my God, that guy can do it, going from the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle, where everybody perceives that to be badass and you can’t be the cool, creative badass unless you’re partying.’ Here he is, 10 years later and he’s still a badass and he still has fun every day.’ I really look up to Sean.”

He surmises addiction became an issue about age 20. It started with a drug, but Murphy binge drank like a college student, a week without it then raged for five days straight.

“That lifestyle in Hollywood, especially in the early ’90s, running around with big celebrities and bands and different folks, we drank and did lots of cocaine,” Murphy said.

He went to his first recovery meeting in 1998, after Ahmet Zappa — the third of four children to musician Frank Zappa — said he hated Murphy when he drank.

But he relapsed on repeat — once driving straight from rehab to a drug dealer’s house in the valley.

“Then it evolved into meth,” Murphy said. “That was the one that f***ed me up.”

He had kids, too, and — by the grace of God — a job. Like a star athlete or international pop star, people were paid to make sure Murphy got off the plane for photo shoots.

“It was stupid,” Murphy said. “They would hold up the camera for me on jobs because I couldn’t hold the camera. I was one of those, just out of control, something you’d see on VH1: Where are they now? It spiraled downward. I lost clients. I didn’t lose my career fully at any point because I was good at faking it or pulling it off.”

Raphye shook her head to indicate Murphy wasn’t good at faking it.

Murphy will be 10 years sober on May 9. What still haunts him today is how he disrespected his clients.

“Almost daily, I’ll catch myself in a haze thinking about how I disrespected this job or I was late,” Murphy said. “I just bum out on myself. I have a lot of shame.”

Murphy wouldn’t be who he is without it.

“I’m happy that I’ve lived that life, because I wouldn’t be doing what I am now; now I’m helping other people possibly,” Murphy said. “I wouldn’t have met Raphye. That butterfly effect, where one thing has a ripple effect on the rest of your life. It is what it is. How many people are addicts that you probably know?”

The final chapter of Murphy’s sobriety was someone’s nightmare. He had just left a drug recovery meeting and was a mere five days down the rabbit hole of recovery and probably a few days shy of another relapse when his life collided with an Irish man.

“At the end of the meeting, ‘Have you done the steps yet?’” Murphy said. “And I was like, ‘No, what’s that?’ He goes, ‘Come outside. We’re going to read the doctor’s opinion.’”

All fired up, “Irish Mike” — as he came to know him — took Murphy outside and invited him to start a sober living house. Murphy assumed he was a decade sober, but later found out he only had 30 days under his belt.

“He was nuts,” Murphy said. “He’s like, ‘I’m starting a sober living house in Chatsworth and there’s a horse that lives in the backyard, a pitbull and there’s one crackhead that I got. He’s

gonna live there. Me and him are going to start this revolution in the valley, San Fernando Valley. And Murphy, if you just come for 30 days, we can do the steps and then you can help other people because they're dropping like flies.”

“I was like, ‘What is going on, man?’” Murphy said.

He went.

The place was a “s***hole,” Murphy said, with 10 bedrooms, a garage with Murphy’s cot, a crackhead called Carl and a horse that interrupted AA meetings. Mike was a construction worker who would bring junkies in off the street.

“He’d pick them up from prison,” Murphy said. “He had white supremacists and prisoners and dudes that look like you’d see on TV locked up. Dickies and shaved heads and swastikas. These were the people you would walk across the street to get away from if you saw them coming toward you. I was like the clown. I had a career, a house and kids.”

Murphy chose to live in the garage on a cot, parking his Harley-Davidson in front of it to keep people from touching him at night.

“One guy would die in the other room from a heroine overdose,” Murphy said. “It was f***** crazy.”

But it worked.

The house transitioned from four men to hundreds with standing room only. They deemed it Plan C.

“It was the place to be,” Murphy said. “The buzz in L.A. was crazy. Everyone in the valley came to Plan C. If you were a hard case and you couldn’t get sober, you came to Plan C. That was the spot.”

Murphy was the first to finish the 12 steps, so they hung his picture on the wall. It’s probably still there.

Murphy glosses over how hard it was. How he recovered still eludes him.

“For whatever reason, I finally made it; I finally got it; I finally listened. I did what I was supposed to do,” Murphy said. “The obsession for alcohol and drugs was lifted from me; it’s such a non-issue for me. I don’t have cravings for any of that. And I don’t know how that’s

possible for me. I was a daily — there wouldn't be one day where I didn't drink or do drugs. Not one, ever.”

‘L.A. Girlz’

PJ Harvey is the love of Murphy's life ... err, not the real love of his life, he amends.

He photographed Harvey in her hometown, two hours outside of London, England, for Alternative Press magazine. He freaked.

Murphy paid for his own trip.

They spent 12 hours together — sans writers, band managers or assistants.

“We did the raddest photos ever,” Murphy said. “And we hung out and she was asking me, she had just done ‘Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea.’ It was the best album ever. I got an advance copy. She was like, ‘What do you think of my thing? Like she really genuinely wanted to know if I liked it.”

Murphy loved shooting her because she would do anything he asked.

“She doesn't have any body issues and she doesn't care if she looks ugly and I think that's so attractive,” Murphy said. “Right? Like when people don't need to be perfect for a photo and they don't care. That to me is the most attractive thing.”

It's how he met Raphye.

He was photographing her former band Casxio in a “weird shoot,” in which the members were blindfolded and had cigarettes as if they were about to face execution by firing squad. She was wearing a fur coat.

“I said, ‘Hey, take your jacket off,’” Murphy said.

Raphye remembers it differently.

“All the guys had their shirts off and you're like, ‘The white tank top isn't working for me. Take your shirt off.’ I'm like, ‘No, you kook,’” Raphye said. “He goes, ‘PJ Harvey did it and I fell in love with her.’ I'm like, ‘Well, if PJ Harvey can do it.”

That became the album cover.

They have been together for 14 years, but married a few (ish) years ago.

His addiction almost cost him the real love of his life.

When they met, Murphy took Raphye on a job with him, which is how she learned to produce. She was a production assistant.

“I was giving out drinks and getting releases signed and somebody gave me \$300 for the day and I’m like, ‘What magical fairy land did I just step into? This is insane,’” Raphye said. “I was delivering pizzas.”

Murphy never hesitated to take her to work or introduce her to his friends, she said.

“I said, ‘Don’t you want to keep parts of your life separate?’” Raphye said. “Because that’s how the other boyfriends I’d had were. ‘These are my friends. This is my job. And you’re my girlfriend. And this is my video game.’ Sean, not at all. He was like, ‘Oh my God, if I could glue you to my hip, I would. I want you to come everywhere with me.’ It was really cool. He changed me in a lot of ways. I felt secure and safe.”

But she could feel something was wrong.

“He never slept and he would make giant messes and clean them right up,” Raphye said. “I just couldn’t figure him out right away. There was some turmoil. I always knew whatever the core thing in him was, it was the best that there is. There’s nothing better than what was under all that. That was the addiction stuff.”

It took her a year to figure it out and when she did, she stepped back.

“It took a couple relapses, but I didn’t give up,” Raphye said. “I’m still his biggest fan. He can tell the same story 30 times and I’ll sit here and listen to it and be just as excited as the first time. I think it’s really neat that I’ve found a partner who I can continue to look up to and trust.”

Sean is special, she said.

“I have never had another friend or relationship — even in my family — like Sean,” Raphye said. “He’s so generous and he has no fear. People are afraid to give up themselves or give you something they have. He’ll give you everything and know he’s going to be fine. I don’t really know how to explain it, but he’s always just been really neat.”

'Island in the Sun'

The answer to the aforementioned question of why (the heck) Murphy is in Fort Walton Beach is simple.

It's home.

"Living all around the world, no place — even L.A. after 26 years — it's like, 'This place just doesn't feel like home,'" Murphy said. "In the back of my head, it was just always this was here. I don't know how to describe it. All of my friends live here. There was a connection."

Murphy even owned a home in Santa Rosa Beach and still couldn't live there. He actually lives in the former Northwest Florida Ballet studio. They redid the space, but left much of the original flooring; they didn't even wash it, he said.

"That's why I bought it," Murphy said. "When I was a kid, I grew up here and my friends used to dance here, so it was sentimental to me."

Murphy's father, Terry, was a fighter pilot who flew F4s at Eglin Air Force Base and his mother, Carol, was a nurse at the hospital. Murphy ran for Fort Walton Beach City Council because people wouldn't sell him their dilapidated buildings.

"I was like, 'Well, they won't sell me their building, but yet it looks like Chernobyl,'" Murphy said. "So it's just sitting there vacant for no reason forever. And so I voiced that and the mayor's daughter, who I went to school with, was like, 'You should run for city council.'"

With backing from the fire department and enough campaign signs to warrant name recognition, he ran and lost. He's cool with it. Honestly, he's too busy.

Murphy is the director of photography for the paddle board company BOTE (another long story) and still photographs as if his livelihood depends on it; it doesn't. And when he's not doing that, he's looking over the shoulder of his mentee and future esteemed photographer — remember the name — John Harrington.

"(Harrington) was persistent and annoyingly so, which is how you have to be," Raphye said. "Because if you give up when someone stops answering the phone, it may be because they're testing you. It may just be because they're too busy to talk to you right now. But for whatever reason, if you quit, you're not going to get the result you want. Sometimes Sean will answer the phone the first time and maybe it's too easy for them and they don't come back. I don't know why they don't come back."

Murphy can probably hardly wait for Harrington to get lost. Frankly, he's a hard kid for Murphy to hang out with, he said. He means it in the loving-est way.

"He has this whole life that he knows is out there and he has connections," Murphy said. "That's cool for me. Like why do what we do for so long and just repeat yourself until you die? Like, I'm doing another band. I'm doing another advertising job. Who gives a f***? I've already done thousands of jobs. It's cooler to see someone else get it and send them out to do their thing."

Murphy not only has been a mentor, but also a friend and confidant, Harrington said.

"He's seen me go from basically a kid at 18 years old to a 22-year-old and watched me mature, fail, succeed and everything in between in something that we both have a passion for," Harrington said.

Murphy hopes to kick Harrington out in a year, in the same way his first photography professor did to him.

"I owe it to these kids, like, 'Get out. Don't get comfortable in this town when you're 20 because you're gonna get stuck,'" Murphy said. "You're going to get married. You're going to get a job where you're making a lot of money. You're gonna start shooting real estate and you're going to miss an opportunity. Go see s***. You can always come back."