

# A Conversation with Joe Browning

by Mark Hamilton  
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Joe Browning joined the Ohio Valley Camera Club during early 2009. His success has propelled him in less than a year from the new-member Tyro status to one of Advanced in all three print categories which is a rare, perhaps unique, occurrence during the 50 year history of the club.

My first introduction to Joe was a meeting where he was slowly walking with a portfolio bag while mumbling that he hated competition, saying they really make him anxious. When he finally pulled out his prints, I was astounded to see one of the most beautifully printed scenes of the old mill. Since that time, Joe has become a good friend and I find him to be a person who is always willing to share his photography experience and knowledge, as well as being someone who is truly interested in you and what makes your photographic vision tick. As I've said in other places, I routinely hear Joe's voice in my head saying "Now, I want to know why you're taking that shot....what do you see?"

Joe is the 2010 Membership Chair for the club. Read on to learn more about Joe and his interests.

**Mark: Tell us a little about who you are?**

**Joe:** I am not sure who I am; it seems to change hour by hour. I was a teacher in the Cabell County System for 33 years until cancer ended that. I am a survivor of 2 serious cancers, lung that cost me my right lung, and brain, which cost me what little brains I had to start with. But most importantly, I am a grandfather of 3 precious gems, 1 boy and 2 girls, and they occupy most of my time and energy



**Mark: How long have you been a photographer & can you recall what got you interested?**

**Joe:** I have been interested in photography all my life. I always had a camera and was taking snapshots, but really became interested and serious when I started teaching and became the unofficial school photographer for Beverly Hills. This is where I got a darkroom setup and taught myself and the kids at school to take, develop and print for the school or the yearbook.

But the biggest step in my photography came when digital cameras were first introduced and Dennis gave me some Casio and Epson digital cameras for my classes and we started taking pictures and using the internet to do web pages, distant learning with other schools, and it just snowballed from there.

Another key factor was my love of the ocean and underwater photography. When I was scuba diving, I wanted to capture the beauty, so I bought a Canon AE-1 and an Ikelite underwater housing for it and my flash unit and off I went. This led to learning more about a camera, lenses, and technique.

**Mark: What's the biggest mistake you made when first starting out as a photographer?**

**Joe:** The list would be long. However, it comes down to probably 2 things that go together. I was so excited to take a "Picture" I would shoot too fast and this resulted in poor composition and not watching what was in the frame. Prior to image editing software and digital photography this was a real problem. When we were shooting film and could not have instant results and the cost, it really made you think before you pushed the shutter. Now, with digital it is bang, bang, bang sometimes and we are right back to not paying attention.



**Mark: What is your favorite photographic location or subject? How would you describe your style?**

**Joe:** Now, this is a hard question. Location, I have been to some really great places and have 2 places I cannot get enough of. State would be Utah. It has more variety of anyplace I have been.



The range of photographic opportunities is so great it is beyond capturing. The National Parks, Monument Valley, Great Salt Lake, and Mountains are spectacular.

But I keep going back to the Tetons and Yellowstone for the beauty and wildlife. Which are the 2 favorite things I like to shoot.

As for my style, I am a sloppy dresser, can't keep track of anything, and very lazy. Oh, you meant my photographic style. That would be that of a someone that tries to capture the reality of the landscape. I want to show the scope and mood of a scene and make the person who sees it, have the same WOW I had when I saw it.

**Mark:** Can you take us through your steps from the point where you are standing in front of a potential photographic scene through the capture of the image, the storage, processing, and printing. We would like to crawl into your head to see your thought process as you go along.

**Joe:** Before I take a picture, which will be in RAW and Adobe RGB, I am trying to decide what made me look at this spot or scene and want to take a picture of it. I take a general shot and then begin to refine it. I look at it from different angles, different settings, and different lenses. I am looking for the light or contrast that sets this place apart or special. Once I have it on the card, I transfer it to my computer and store it in a Trip Folder and then copy it to another off computer hard drive.



After I have it backed-up, I then sort the shots in Photoshop Bridge to see which one I like the best or ones I want to work on. My processing in Photoshop is fairly simple, I usually do basic exposure, clarity, vibrance and color temp [in Camera RAW] before opening to Photoshop.

Once in Photoshop, I sharpen using unsharp mask and then create a 50% gray layer to dodge and burn to bring out or hide certain parts. When I am satisfied and go to print the image, I print using a Epson printer and have Photoshop manage color, match profile, and stand back and see if I did it right.

Before I go anywhere, other than local, I have searched the web for all the information on the area I can. I want to waste as little time as possible trying to figure out where to go and what to look for. I want to be taking pictures, not driving a car. It also gives me a good mental picture to compare my shots to what brought me here.

**Mark:** What type of gear do you use that you haven't already mentioned? Favorite lenses? If you were limited to just one lens, what would it be?

**Joe:** My camera equipment consists of 2 Canon camera bodies, 5D full frame camera that I use for most shooting, especially landscapes and scenics, and a 50D that I use for wildlife shooting since it has a 1.6 multiplier and almost 7 shots per second. I use 3 lenses, Canon 17-40, 24-105 and 100-400. I have a 2x extender and a set of extension tubes for macro.

My favorite lens would be 100-400 which I use for almost everything, but I probably take more shots with the 24-105.



**Mark:** I know that you've taken a lot of formal workshops all across the country. Which workshops and professionals have made the most impact on your style? Which ones would you say would be the most beneficial to other OVCC members?

**Joe:** The one that was the most inclusive was [Mark Johnson](#), for his ability as a photographer and Photoshop guru. [Joe McNally](#) [links to McNally's blog] for his personality and knowledge with flash photography, however he usually works with Moose Peterson, and I don't like Moose at all.

**Mark:** In the club you've become known for your Photoshop wizardry. Can you share some words on what goes through your mind in making these artistic changes? I have stood beside you when you were planning the changes even before you shot the photograph, that part I find intriguing.

**Joe:** Most of the time I have no idea what I am going to do with an image until I see it on the screen and say, this would be a good image to make an evening shot, or I need to add a sky or bring out more color etc. I usually look for clean lines and really good options to work with in creating the image.

If I take a shot with the idea of using it in a composite image, I try to compose the shot so that I can extract it or add to it with as little effort as I can.

Now, this is a quick idea of what I was going to do to add some interest to the dead dark area in the upper left of the shot. I knew what I want to do; now I have to get all the images ready to add. This is my idea image that when I have time, I will go back and really try to add the buildings. I could make this a night scene and add lights to the windows of the town and make the sky dark or late sunset and add light to the pier to add interest and contrast.



**Here is a basic shot. I had an idea to add the town to the shot.**



**Image with town added to background**



**Mark:** What tools do you use to scout the location prior to visiting? I'm also interested in how you use these ideas. Are you looking to improve upon the shots that have already been done or are you just trying to find a location and to then shoot something unique?

**Joe:** When I plan on taking a trip, I go to a subscription of Photograph America Newsletter. If it has a guide to the area that is a big help because it is really detailed and tells you what you will find and the best times to be there. I then go to the internet and just enter where I am going and see what I can find. I will also go to google images and enter a name and find what I can.



**Iconic shot where Forrest Gump was running and classic shot of Monument Valley**



**My shot of Delicate Arch from below the arch with an 800mm lens instead of climbing the mountain and shot at sunrise instead of sunset**

After I have gathered all the info I can or need, I then will go over it and make a plan and list of what I plan to do and plan routes, times, etc. I also think of what lens will be best to take the shots I am wanting. So I have notes and worksheets to use to help get the shots. After I get the iconic shot maybe, I then go after or do different shots,

**Mark:** The Photograph America newsletter looks really good. I see where you can buy a subscription or else buy regions and even individual articles on an area. How exactly do you use it?

**Joe:** I take the newsletter and read or look it over, especially any map, and then start looking up images on the internet using a name given in the article. This will give me a picture, which I add to the plan sheet along with name I highlighted on the article. Clement and I had bought all the issues at one time and I selected the ones I thought I could use and keep them on my computer in a Trip Info folder.

**Mark:** I think it'd be interesting to the members who are just starting out with editing to know how you have built your post-editing skills. Have you learned more by being self-taught and building upon that or did you find certain courses of study to give you a huge jump on the skills?

**Joe:** Well, I started out self taught, but that was really slow. For those of you starting out with Photoshop, you really have to have help. I took Pat's Photoshop classes and then helped teach

the classes for about 4 years. I have a library of Photoshop books that show tricks and tips, I just have to remember where I put them. But the best way is use it and I mean use it. It is so easy to forget something in photoshop you have done a lot of times if you don't use it for awhile. All the mistakes you make, helps you learn. I also watch the videos from links [found later in this article] and try them.

**Mark:** If you had to give a basic formula to Joe's perfect composition, could you give us some examples?

**Joe:** My basic formula for perfect composition, point and shoot a lot and hope for the best. If I see something that grabbed my eye, it will be light, impact, dramatic color, or lines. I seem to look for these things, so when I compose I try to center the eye on that and frame accordingly trying to avoid any distractions on the edge. This is a shot that I liked, but you notice the stray elements in the bottom center, distracting and exposure is too dark in foreground.



Here I have taken the distraction out; I could not move the camera without being in the water and could not pull the distraction. Also I exposed this shot just a touch brighter to get more foreground detail. Hopefully, I have dramatic light, I have gotten the anchor point to lead you into the picture and not out and I have a good foreground, middle and background to give the image impact and depth. It is not a center shot, which isn't always bad and it draws you into the shot and captures the moment for you.



**Mark: Any current inspirations (persons, magazines, websites)?**

**Joe:** Right now I am inspired by the people in the club; it is hard to beat what they are putting out on a consistent basis. The scope and diversity of styles is so broad and keep pushing me to be better or get left in the dust. I read very little about photography, it is usually Outdoor Photographer Magazine, or Photoshop. Sites I follow:

- [Mark S. Johnson Photography](#),
- [Planet Photoshop](#),
- [The North American Nature Photography Association](#),
- [Gavin Hoey Photo Videos](#)

**Mark: Where would you go, what would you do, what equipment (if any) would you want to have in order to accomplish this photo trip of a lifetime?**

**Joe:** My “Dream Trip”, if I was able to go anyplace to shoot and cost was not a factor, would be Alaska. I would love to see the glaciers, wildlife and mostly the northern lights and photograph the wonder of this giant. This might take me the rest of my life, but when shooting Grizzly Bears up close, that might not be too long anyway.

Equipment that I would need for this adventure would be long glass. A Canon 600mm F/4 lens and maybe a long 2.8 lens, like the 300 or 400 mm to go with my lenses I have now. I forgot to mention the seaplane and friends to go along to enjoy the trip. I hate to do anything alone, so I will have to win the lottery and invite my few friends to come along and go on a photo safari.

**Mark: You can see more of Joe at these sites:**

- [Joe Browning's Blog](#)
- [Joe's Photo Gallery](#)

*(Joe Browning is the 2010 Membership Chair for the [Ohio Valley Camera Club](#) where he contributes articles to [the club blog](#) as well as being a generally all-around-good-guy in helping members via email and in person)*

*(Mark Hamilton resides in Russell, Kentucky where his family is happy that he does not try to make a living with his writing or camera skills. You can find his photography blog at [4x6photo](#). He also occasionally writes for the [Ohio Valley Camera Club](#).)*