

# Still life according to Spindel

Photographer captures  
baseball legends and more on film

By Richard Deitsch

Photographer David Spindel likes to joke that it took him 40 years to become an overnight sensation.

Though his name may not roll off the tongue with the Andy Warhols and Peter Maxes of the world, chances are you have seen Spindel's art. His still lifes of sports memorabilia and portraits of celebrities have resonated with art and sports fans of all ages. Perhaps his most famous portrait is one of baseball Hall of Famer Joe DiMaggio, which adorns the cover of the recently published *DiMaggio: Setting the Record Straight* (MBI Publishing, 2003). So close did Spindel get to the legendary Yankee that DiMaggio once referred to him as "my personal photographer" while introducing Spindel to another fair baseball player by the name of Ted Williams.

The Brooklyn-born (and Costco member) Spindel got his first taste of photography as a teenager when his mother gave him a Brownie Hawkeye camera. That fostered a love of photography that took him to the Rochester Institute of Technology, and upon graduation in 1964 he began his career as a working photographer in New York City. He ultimately branched out to working in commercial advertising and owned his own studio in New York City for nearly 30 years.

In addition to shooting the advertising campaigns for well-heeled companies such as Bulova, Spindel began taking portraits of celebrities in the 1970s, from George Burns to Liberace to John Lennon. In 1979 his twin passions of baseball and photography came together when an agency approached him to do a cover for *Yankee Magazine*. The assignment called for reproductions of Babe Ruth's and Lou Gehrig's uniforms, among others, to be shot in the Yankee locker room.

But Spindel found the place too trunk for his vision, so he borrowed some old uniforms from the team and constructed an antiquated-

looking locker room in his studio. The result was *Clubhouse*, a mélange of baseball memorabilia and Yankee jerseys. The image was made into a popular poster, and a lucrative new hobby for Spindel was born.

"I don't think there is another photographer in the world who does what I do," says Spindel, 65. "Most photographers are really photojournalists. They document things. A baseball game. The war. What I do is create photographs from nothing. Sometimes I'll spend six months just creating a photograph."

To that end, Spindel has a large room in his house in upstate New York where he stores the nearly 10,000 baseball-related items he has collected. In 1989 he spent several weeks putting together a piece that featured memorabilia from DiMaggio's career. When the baseball great finally agreed to Spindel's invitation to visit his studio, DiMaggio surprised Spindel by bringing along two prized possessions: a sterling silver humidifier that had been signed by his teammates to commemorate his famed 56-game hitting streak, and a baseball signed by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

DiMaggio asked Spindel if he wanted to use them in his photograph. Surprised, Spindel improvised and set them among the other memorabilia. Then DiMaggio really stunned the photographer. "So where do I sit?" the slugger asked. Spindel nearly fainted. "I said to myself, 'OK, Spindel, I gotta make room for DiMaggio in the photograph.'" He

ended up taking a couple of posters out of the shot and set up an 8-by-10 camera to double-expose DiMaggio into the picture.

Two days later he brought the finished print to DiMaggio, who was doing an autograph show in Atlantic City. So overjoyed was DiMaggio when he saw the finished portrait—the same one that appears on the cover of *DiMaggio: Setting the Record Straight*—that he invited Spindel to stay for the weekend and hang out with pal Ted Williams and others.

Outside of his commercial projects, Spindel has donated his art to more than 100 charities and is the staff photographer for ARC (Association for Retarded Citizens) in Rockland County. He and his wife, Barbara, have been married for 39 years and have two children.

Spindel recently began working with a public relations specialist to market his artwork all over the world. The plan is for him to work with more contemporary athletes and sell stationery and postcards of his work.

"My dad always said, before he died, 'Son, one day you are going to decorate the world and make it a more beautiful place to live in.' I constantly struggle to make that happen every day," says Spindel. "Right after he passed away, I wrote something down for him on a baseball. It read, 'Hi, Pop, I'm working on it.'" □

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