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(Below L) Vega's shot of 'Au Pied de Cochon,' an authentic French bistro in Atlanta, Ga. (Below) Jim Carrey at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles. Carrey is standing on a platform constructed by Vega's assistant (Bottom R) Vega gets a shot of a furry contestant in the first annual Dachshund parade in Greenwich Village.



Raul Vega

BY JO ANN LLOYD

SOMETIMES GAMBLING pays off. It did for Cal Poly alumnus **Raul Vega (ARCH)**, who came to Cal Poly in the mid-1960s, intent on becoming an architect.

But after four years of study, including a year in Florence, Italy, the would-be architect had a change of heart and took a chance. With money from his student loan, Vega bought all the equipment he needed to start his new career — as a photographer.

“At the time, I wasn’t sure about a career in photography or any career,” he said. “All I knew was that I really loved shooting pictures.”

So he set about making a portfolio and knocking on doors. “The portfolio was personal work. I matted and framed each picture, making each into a gem,” Vega said.

His attention to detail paid off. After a few months, a very well-known advertising photographer offered Vega work. A great deal of it.

Turns out, the photographer was working on several very big advertising campaigns. His clients included Pan Am; the state Milk Boards, known then for their “Everybody Needs Milk” ad campaigns; the Tourist Board of Tahiti; and cigarette and car manufacturers.

“I don’t know what prompted him to call me,” Vega said, referring to his new employer. “I was completely self-taught. This guy was doing very high-stakes stuff. It was a great experience, but I was flying by the seat of my pants. It was sink or swim.”

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(L) Vega's shot of model Mitzi Martin

Vega “swam” for three-and-a-half years. “We were busy, we did a lot. But he was a tough character, and it was time for me to move on.”

He set off for New York, maintaining residences on both coasts. In New York, Vega began meeting people – important people, including the iconic Andy Warhol. He started working

Now working from his studio in the Mid-Wilshire district of Los Angeles, Vega mainly shoots portraits, and most of his subjects are very recognizable: boxing legend Muhammad Ali, award-winning filmmaker George Lucas, actors Harrison Ford and Jackie Chan, singer-songwriters Dolly Parton and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. The list goes on and on.

In addition to portraiture, the award-winning photographer shoots beauty, fashion and architecture. “The architectural stuff is very deliberate,” Vega said. “With people, it’s an entirely different experience. The photo shoot takes on a life of its own. With famous people, you work hard and fast. Another part of your brain has to click.”

When Vega first photographed actor Jim Carrey, it was right at the time Carrey was becoming a mega star. “The shoot was organic, it moved,” Vega said. “We laughed so hard, we were practically spitting on each other. The man is a walking cartoon.”

Vega dispels the pervasive myth that working with famous people is difficult. “I don’t recall a bad photo-shoot experience,” he said. “When it comes time to shoot, everyone is focused on getting the best. We have to get along, as photographer and subject. It’s about getting the art.”

Vega thinks that today’s computers and electronics make it easier to break into the field. He advises would-be photographers

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for Warhol’s *Interview* magazine in 1979.

“I’d get \$75 a photo shoot,” he recalled. “That was rock bottom, but I was single and aggressive. I had a lot of fire. These people were the artists, and I wanted to work for the people who were inspiring.”

Vega’s first big breakthrough came in 1980, when his *Time* magazine cover shot of famed astronomer Carl Sagan earned him the National Publications Design Award.

to be a nuisance. “Raise an eyebrow or two,” he said. “Go after it. Kick down doors. Ask yourself: ‘What do you like, visually?’ Then find out who’s doing what and send e-mails and images.”

Vega’s award-winning photographs have appeared in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, *InStyle* and *Glamour*.

More information on Vega and samples of his award-winning work are available on the Web at <http://www.raulvega.com>. □