

PITCHING FOR PROMS

# PROM NIGHT PREP

*The burgeoning school prom season takes place in early summer and benefits a wide range of suppliers. Brian Muir explains why now is the time for photographers to start getting involved in this business*

WORDS **TERRY HOPE** PICTURES **BRIAN MUIR**



The phenomenon that is the school prom grabs many headlines come prom season. Without a doubt it's here to stay and the market will continue to grow. Somewhere around 90% of schools around the country now hold a prom, usually for teenagers who have just completed their GCSE studies, although there is now a trend for celebrations to mark the end of junior school at age 11 as well.

Whatever your views on this particular American import, an incredible amount of money is thrown at it, and it's an occasion that demands to be photographed. Small wonder then that so many professionals have been looking at the opportunity, and an event-style approach where prints are available on the night has the potential to generate good income, since if you're charging £10-15 for each print you're likely to sell possibly hundreds of prints in a single evening.

One of those who has been getting increasingly involved in the scene is Prestwick-based photographer Brian Muir, who runs Air Image Photography, and for a few hectic weeks at the start of June he's run off his feet, tackling events every weeknight, with potentially two to three proms in a single evening. Although the next prom season is still several months away, you need to be making your bookings, because this is when prom organisers are out there selecting their venues and completing all their arrangements. Leave it too late and you could miss out, and Brian is increasingly finding that he's being booked a full year in advance by schools who have been impressed by the job he's done for them.

"I first got the taste for event photography in 2009, when I encountered Mike Weeks from the Event Photographer Society speaking at Focus on Imaging," he says. "Impressed by the way he could shoot and output prints within seconds I invested in my first dye-sub printer and found that the returns were good, but only if the job was done well."

Brian's first prom booking came four seasons ago, through his son's piano tutor who was head of the sixth year at the school where she taught. "She asked me if I shot proms and I told her that of course I did, although really I should have said 'not yet'," Brian recalls. "However, they booked me on the strength of the portraits I showed them from a couple of formal black-tie events. That same year, my daughter had a friend who was a school captain at her secondary school. Again on a recommendation and samples of the black tie ball images, and a fair bit of confident pitching, they booked me. So that first year I photographed two proms, and both schools booked me for the following year virtually as soon as they could. Now I write to all my local schools in late

**“That first year I shot two proms, and both booked me for the following year”**



August or September, giving priority booking to those that I've already worked with. After that I open up the diary to all comers."

#### Shooting the prom

Every photographer has their own way of working, but Brian prefers to work outside whenever possible, using natural light supplemented by a touch of flash if necessary. "If I've not worked at a location before I'll always scout it out in advance," he explains, "looking for suitable locations inside and out. If I have to be indoors, I will either find a nice part of the venue, such as a staircase or fireplace, or I will have an area to set up a backdrop so that I can shoot full length and small groups."

On the night of the prom Brian and his small team will aim to arrive around an hour and a half before the sit-down dinner to give themselves time to set up. The print and viewing station will be put in place and Brian then gets his lighting set up.

"Liaison with the organisers at the school is vital," he says, "and we ask them

to share on social media that prom goes should arrive for portraits about an hour before dinner. At this point it usually gets incredibly busy: I have this small window to photograph as many individuals, couples and groups as possible, and good organisation is essential. My team, which knows how I work, gets folks lined up ready to step in front of the camera and asks them to watch how I'm posing the previous subject.

"There is a set routine of poses for individuals, namely full length, looking towards camera; three-quarter length looking towards camera; then repeat with the client looking away from camera, towards the key light. I have poses for couples, depending on whether they are dating, prom dates, just good friends or even family - we've had twins and cousins before. Groups take the most time, as everyone has an opinion on how they should all pose; you have to work extra quickly with them or it can take too long to get the shot. Looking at my work rate on a prom, I estimate it averages out that I capture a sellable portrait every 7-10 →

**IMAGES** Brian Muir prefers to take his prom portraits outdoors, supplementing the natural light with flash if necessary and making the most of the spectacular Scottish sunsets.



seconds and that includes changing clients over and getting them positioned and posed.”

Living on the west coast of Scotland the daylight can stretch on into the evening and Brian can usually get a good hour of great light after dinner.

“To be honest the light is much nicer at that time of day,” he says. “There’s a period of about 20 minutes, if nature is kind to us, where we could get a spectacular sunset. The only thing is that many people who have seen these sunset shots seem to think that a green screen has been used: I can assure you that it is completely real! I initially had to balance the flash against the ambient light, but with this kind of work you really need to know what you’re doing with Manual shooting, adjusting shutter speed, ISO and aperture settings on the fly to squeeze the very last drop of colour and light out of the

**“If sunset lasts long enough, I can capture 60 sellable portraits”**

sky. If the sunset lasts long enough I can capture 60 sellable portraits in 20 minutes.”

**Selling the pictures**

As with most event photographers these days, Brian aims to be selling his 8x6in and 8x10in prom prints on the night, and he has a standard charge for pay-on-the-night customers. He also offers a discount to those who choose to prepay for their portraits a month ahead of the prom, and the biggest percentage of audience goes for this option since it saves them carrying extra cash on the night and they are guaranteed to get their prints.

“We also operate a dedicated mobile card terminal which, to be honest, sees more use at a graduation ball than it does at a sixth year prom,” says Brian. “I know a number of my peers are adopting the new PIN pad terminals, such as iZettle and Worldpay Zinc, and are Bluetoothing them to their phones or iPads.

“As well as printing on-site, we normally have images uploaded and ready for online sale immediately after the prom, which can make it a late night. If we can get Wi-Fi access in the venue, we’ll try to upload as the night goes



**ABOVE** With every prom portrait, Brian Muir is trying to create “the most fashionable, stylish and artistic image”, because it’s “their moment”.

on. Speed is of the essence with any event, and that includes speed of shooting, speed of viewing and printing and speed of online availability. I also post a sample of the prom images on Facebook then link that to Twitter. It’s a fantastic marketing tool: last year I posted sample images from some proms and within a week, because of the viral nature of social media, they had reached over 18,000 people.”

One thing stands out very clearly for Brian, and that’s the need to create the very best images that he can, even if he’s working at breakneck speed. “With every portrait I take I’m trying to create the most fashionable, stylish and artistic image I can,” he says. “I never go with the attitude that it’s the individual’s prom picture so they’ll buy it anyway, no matter what it looks like. This is their moment, something they have been looking forward to for the whole senior year. I want the client to be delighted with it, to be proud to show it. Long into the future, maybe in a few generations, the girl in the sunset will forever be that stunning 18 year old, looking amazing.

“I’m very particular about my lighting set-up, using off-camera flash with careful use of modifiers to create shape, depth and form as well as using wide apertures to give shallow depth-of-field. If you are just snapping away and producing average looking results, you may get the attitude from the prom goers that they could have got the same image using their phone, so why should they buy a professional print? When the image comes up on my viewing screen, I want it to have ‘Wow Value’. As professional photographers, we need to step up our game, and to be visibly better than the camera phone competition.” **PP**

**MORE INFORMATION**

[www.airimage.co.uk](http://www.airimage.co.uk)



**GEAR FOR PROM PHOTOGRAPHY**

Kit for prom coverage needs to be selected carefully, with portability in mind. Brian uses a Nikon D3 fitted with a 24-70mm f/2.8 lens, and for his lighting he works with Lencarta Safari Li-on battery powered studio flashes (the original Safari Li-on, not the current Safari 2), with a large softbox as his key light and a strip softbox with a honeycomb grid as an edge or separation light. Images are sent via a Nikon WT-4 wireless transmitter to a MacBook Pro running Adobe Lightroom, and prom goers view their pictures on 24in monitors or sometimes a 32in TV. Once shots have been chosen they are produced on DNP DS40 or DS80 dye-sub printers and then placed in a mount for presentation to the client.

“This season I started using the Yongnuo YN622 radio triggers when shooting outdoors,” says Brian. “Incredibly good value, they allow me to sync studio flashes faster than the 1/250sec maximum offered by the Bowens Pulsars I previously used. Having a faster shutter speed gives me the flexibility to use much wider apertures, creating shallow depth-of-field even in the brightest of sunlight. While I’ve pushed the sync capabilities to 1/8000sec for testing purposes, on proms this season I was comfortably using the HSS capabilities to shoot at 1/800sec at f/4 to give really nice depth-of-field separation.”