

ART

WES BILLINGSLEA

Interview: Simone Jane

American schools, scholars and books didn't always have their facts straight when it came to their own history. Photographer Wes Billingslea came to that realization from an early age. "I was in 8th grade," Wes recalled, "learning about how Christopher Columbus 'discovered' America and the Indians, so I asked the teacher because I was confused. How could Columbus 'discover' this land and the Indians if they were already there?" It wasn't a blind challenge or a smart ass comment. It was an intelligent challenge. As Wes continued to grow, he understood that Native American blood ran through his family. "My father was Choctaw (in the Choctaw language, Chahta) Indian so I became interested in Indigenous people and ancient cultures," Wes explained, "though my father refused to acknowledge it, it made me determined to learn more." This was enough to spark the passion into flame that fueled his photography and art.

"I LOVE PHOTOGRAPHY, I LOVE ART."

The journey that resulted in the book, *The Aztecs: The Truth about Sacrifices & Other Customs* began on a company trip out of Cancun to a Mayan city called Chichen Itza. Wes was fascinated by the structures and the people. "I just wish I knew how to photograph it all," Wes remembers, "I wondered about the people and I had all these questions." Years later in the late 90s, Wes stumbled upon a touristy shop in New Mexico that had some shots by a photographer by the name of Edward S. Curtis from the late 1800s. He tried to capture the transition of the West and the Native Americans from their traditional lives to their reservation lives. He would live amongst the people for three to four months. That piqued Wes' interest. "I love photography, I love art," Wes claimed, "I want



to know more about these ancient cultures and societies, what a perfect blend. So that set me off to become a photographer." Wes was fortunate enough to meet Don Cameron who was a master darkroom printer. "He not only taught me how to photograph but he taught me to print with antique toning processes. Some of the prints in the book took three full days because it is a very complicated process. It's an old recipe from the 1800's to the early 1900's. You can print 10 of the same images and none of them will be the same. It really got me interested in the type of photography I do," Wes, explains. In 1999, the journey continued on to San Jose, California.

It was here that Wes befriended Huitziin, an Aztec descendent. He invited Wes to Mexico City to meet the Mexicas. That is what they call themselves; the world knows them as Aztecs. In order to gain the trust of the leaders

(Maestros) of the Mexicas, Wes had dinner with seven of them. "It was a process of questions," Wes explains. "They were very curious about why I wanted to learn about them and what my motivation was. There was one guy; his name was Ocelocoatl who was very quiet until the end of the dinner. He then started asking his own questions for about thirty minutes." When the dinner ended Wes had a good feeling about it, almost like he had passed a test. Less than an hour later he received a phone call at his hotel from Huitziin telling him to pack only a small bag. They were going on an overnight trip. Wes' destination along with about 100 other Mexicas was a small village called Ixcateopan de Cuauhtémoc located in the isolated, rugged mountains in the northern part of Guerrero,





Mexico. According to tradition, it is the birthplace and final resting place of Aztec Emperor, Cuauhtémoc who was tortured and executed by the Spanish conquistadors, and whose alleged remains were found under the parish church there in the mid-20th century. The church has been converted into a museum with displays of a number of pre-Hispanic artifacts. Offerings left in honor of the last emperor and the alleged remains of Cuauhtémoc himself. "I was allowed to photograph this ceremony called, 'Ixcateopan de Cuauhtémoc,'" Wes expressed. "It was pretty remarkable. It was intense to witness. I did most of my photos in black and white but I took some in color. I was set up on a pillar above the Danzantes (dancers) and shooting downward. The scene was very hypnotic with the drumming, the fires, the Zahumadora (women who are the keepers of the flame), the dancers, the smell of the incense and the smoke." To Wes, this was a life changing experience. It wasn't until long after Wes had developed the

photos and was down in Mexico sifting through hundreds of them when one of the Maestros started laughing while pointing to one color photo. "There were shapes and faces in the smoke above the dancers," Wes revealed. "It was so surreal. I promised I would never publish or share those photos. It was then I really knew I was accepted by them. They even gave me a Nahuatl name (their language) – Tlacuilocamilli. When I look through the lens, something happens to me," Wes explains. "I see with a very different eye. I think there is a real connection. It is almost at the soul level. When I look through the lens, I see the world through their eyes."

Wes sees how strong and beautiful many of these people are. He believes in the strength of their spirit and how their fight continues into the modern times. "I saw in myself a reflection of their struggle and perseverance in life, and by collaborating and building bonds amongst us, that allows us to overcome anything. I don't want to repeat the

mistakes of other photographers who show up, take photos, and then leave. They will proclaim how they are 'helping to preserve their culture' and I cannot tell you how strongly I disagree with this approach. There is nothing sustainable about it. I wanted this to be a shared experience and where the people tell their own truth, their own version of their history plus their challenges today. Their struggle against racism and economic disadvantages are real in modern times," he declares. Wes acknowledges, "I have pretty strong spiritual beliefs; notice how I do not say religious? I believe very much in an organic process. You may start down one path and you see it how it unfolds and sometimes it kind of twists and turns. It's a reminder to me to be true to yourself in whatever your passion is and whatever you want to do. I am not fixated on the end result. I am focused on the journey and the lessons learned. If I can help some of these people a little bit then I have done something right," he finishes.









