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## An Ordinary Day in America

Plain vanilla moments—photographed over three decades in 50 states—compile to form an extraordinary mosaic, a spot-on portrait of American democracy. Meet the artist: Ojai's Joe Sohm.

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## COVER STORY

### An Ordinary Day in America

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The Allegheny and Monongahela rivers converge in Pittsburgh, PA.

**W**hen Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, wanted a special gift for his mother, he gave her Visions of America—a new 300-page book by Ojai-based photographer Joe Sohm. Word back from Buckingham Palace is that Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth was “suitably impressed.” Closer to home, the U.S. State Department has ordered 60 copies, which are likely to become President Obama's gifts for visiting dignitaries.

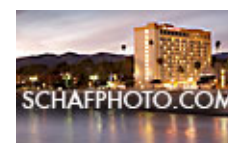
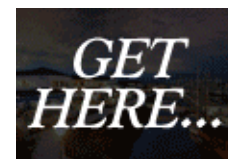


A break in a Colorado rainstorm illuminates the Million Dollar Highway.

Sohm's book continues its world travels with a stunning afterlife, including a symphony written for it, which many say has never been done before. His eye-popping collection of some 1,300 images has inspired the symphony composed by Ojai's Grammy-winning musician Roger Kellaway, as well as the lyrics to a new song: “We The People,” penned by Oscar-winning duo Alan and Marilyn Bergman. The whole musical extravaganza had its world debut earlier this year in five sellout concerts performed by the Philly Pops orchestra.

Sohm's handiwork so impressed superstar actor Clint Eastwood that he became the photographer's voice, narrating a DVD to help promote the book, which recounts the intriguing story behind Sohm's marathon photo odyssey. Later this year his coffee table tome will be featured at the Shanghai Expo, and PBS is turning the book of pictures into a documentary.

## LAST ISSUE



In the Santa Rosa Valley, Jarvis and Susan Streeter bring a world of eclecticism—where international art and antiques find a place in a contemporary English manor house—to their hands-on home renovation.

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## SHORT LIST



Washington D.C.

Meet Joe the Photographer, whose *Visions of America*, subtitled *Photographing Democracy*, has already picked up two prestigious awards: the Independent Publisher's Gold Medal and the Nautilus Book Award. The man creating this frisson is a lean, soft-spoken, low-key photographer. (I've worked with photographers for nearly half a century and can attest that such adjectives seldom apply to the breed.) When you have real talent, you don't have to blow your own horn.

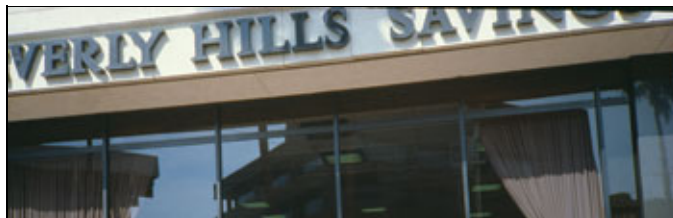
Sohm dreamed of taking pictures ever since he was a child. After graduating from the University of Missouri in 1971 he went on to teach history. From 18 to 27 he was also a musician, playing bass in a six-piece jazz-pop group. While he stills plays in a "garage band," photography has taken over his life—and "photographing Democracy" has become his major obsession.



A Tibetan immigrant gains citizenship.

But how do you capture an abstract in a very concrete medium? It's a question he is frequently asked. "I always had a vision of America and longed to capture it," he says. "So I set out to translate the spirit of 1776 into my vision of America."

The journey is one worth taking, because Sohm suffers from a severe case of wanderlust. He says his life's work began on the banks of the Mississippi and ended three decades later in Vermont, his fiftieth state. As celebrated travel writer Paul Theroux, who wrote the foreword to the book, notes, "These photos are a panorama of American dreams."





Sad realities are not glossed over, nor is the fact that most of the world still dreams of living in America.

Sohm and his artist wife, Leslie Plimpton, have lived for the past 15 years in Ojai's Saddle Mountain district. The other day he settled back on a leather sofa in their modern ranch house to talk about his passion and explain how his unique book—30 years in the making—finally came to fruition.

**Tell us more about your background.**

I like to say that I was born on the bellybutton of America: Webster Groves, Jefferson County, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Heartland USA. Route 66 was my playground where I took bicycle rides, trying to get lost. In fact I worked out how to make a living while getting lost.



In Connecticut, a pipe-smoking senior and his cat share an ordinary moment.

**Did you come from a family of photographers?**

My grandfather Henry Joe Sohm sold medicine to cure baldness. It's ironic; I've been bald since I was 28. My father, also Henry Joe, owned an appliance store and always had the first gadgets: reel-to-reel tapes, color TV, portable cassettes. I'm Henry Joe the third, and I always viewed the world through multiple screens. I remember watching the John Kennedy funeral at my dad's store on about 22 TV sets simultaneously.

**Did you start with a kiddy camera?**

My father lost the sight in one eye, which meant he also lost depth perception. So in my teens he gave me a Kodachrome 3-D camera called a Stereo Realist Camera, which was the rage in the fifties. And I began shooting 35 mm slides that could be viewed in 3-D.







A small-town barbershop in Lyons, CO.

### **What did you shoot?**

I was drawn to the foothills of the Ozarks—natural, rural, scenic areas—and felt more comfortable shooting inanimate objects. The hardest shots were urban cityscapes and people. I don't have photos of Nixon resigning with his arms flung up high. I shot a portrait of America on an ordinary day. You take thousands of ordinary days, put them together and have a portrait of something more extraordinary. That's how American democracy expresses itself.

### **Why did you quit music for photos?**

My music taste outgrew my ability to play. I knew I could be good but never great as a musician. Ansel Adams was groomed to be a concert pianist and he had to choose between the two.



Modern Americana, a mother and her sons.

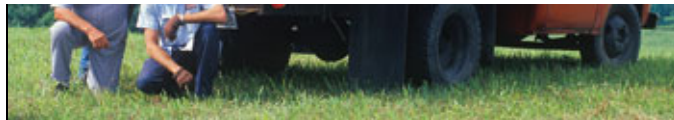
### **What made you pull all your photos together for this book?**

I always wanted to do the book, because my images were used by everybody from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush. I thought, 'When are you going to use your own images?' My intention was always to make a statement of what I had passion for. It was the importance of the birth of America.

### **Was it easy making the final photo selection?**

I tossed out hundreds of thousands of pictures and whittled it down to 25,000. Then I picked the 1,300 for the book, which I like to say resulted in a sweeping mosaic portrait of democracy and the country's diverse culture.





A farm family in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

### **What was the biggest influence in your life?**

The bike rides I took, the 3-D camera, watching the Kennedy funeral on all those TV sets—and doing large displays of imagery on multiple screens.

### **You were once the official photographer for the Democratic Party. Did it give you an inside track when it came to photographing the Obama candidacy?**

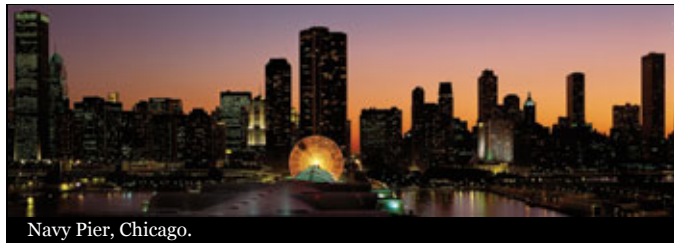
By the time his campaign began, all the people I knew during the Clinton era were gone. So I had to start from scratch.



The Grand Tetons, Wyoming.

### **What advice would you give young photographers?**

Marry your photo talents and interest with a passion for a subject matter...so that your photographs are linked to who you are as a person. That's what I did. When I shoot, I shoot from the inside out. It's an inner passion, a higher purpose. And in my case that passion is the United States. Every image I chose to shoot reflects that. America became my lover.



Navy Pier, Chicago.



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## **VISIONS OF AMERICA**

Join Joe Sohm on June 18 at the Topa Tower Club in Oxnard. A presentation entitled "Time to Feel Good About America Again: Visions of America" follows a three-course dinner. The evening begins with a reception at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$125 and include a signed copy of Visions of America. For more details or to purchase tickets, call 805.983.7777 ext. 239.

For more information about Joe Sohm and to view more of his photography, log on to [visionsofamerica.com](http://visionsofamerica.com).

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