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CHICAGO – In a Covid-free world no doubt this list would be a TOP 20 or 25 ... in non-pandemic times, I photographed approximately 150 celebrities per year. In 2020, there were only two, before the global pandemic basically put my career – like that of so many others – into a medically induced coma.

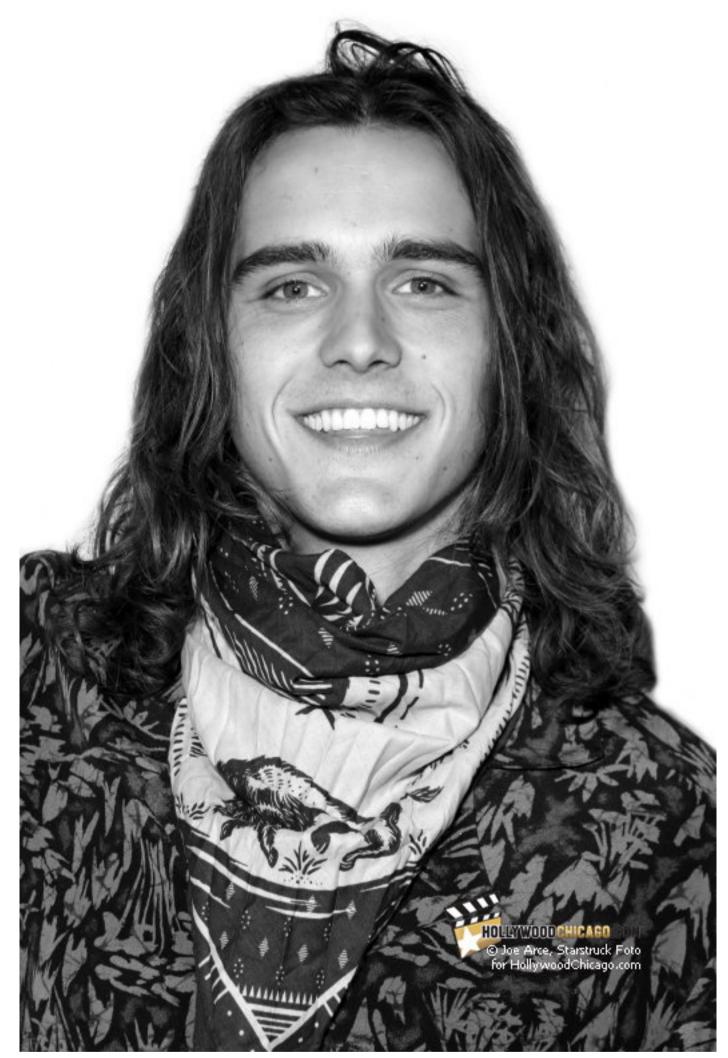
The year 2021 brought a slow and sloggy return as most Hollywood folk preferred to promote their wares from the safety and comfort of their own homes, rather than playing a real life "Squid Game" of dodge the variants on Red Carpets or in making personal appearances. Red light!...Green light!...Red light! And who could blame them? Good for them but bad for me. But as of yet I still haven't been eliminated and hope springs eternal that I may survive upcoming rounds. That being said, I present to you my Top 10 Celebrity Portraits of 2021 and the stories behind the shots. As per every year, the ranking of these portraits are based on a combination of the star power wattage of the subjects, the artistic results and the difficulty of landing the quarry... especially vying against those budding smart phone celebrity stalkers who may wish to play along at home.

Let us begin ...



💢 10. Actor Charlie Gillespie





Actor and Teen Idol Charlie Gillespie

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Charlie Gillespie is a bona fide teen idol. The breakout star of Netflix's hit "Julie and The Phantoms" has proven to be the "ghost with the most," setting hearts on fire from coast to coast. Sure the suits at Netflix just announced that they were sending the beloved (three Daytime Emmys!) teen musical comedy off into the great beyond, but the 23-year-old crooner of the award winning song "Unsaid Emily" – unlike his supernatural character – won't be vanishing anytime soon.

Charlie Gillespie, like wonder kid Zac Efron before him (both propelled by filmmaker Kenny Ortega) will no doubt quickly transition from "Tiger Beat" online to leading man. He is already in growing demand, having appeared in 2020's "Runt" and in the just-completed "The Class" (slated for 2022).

When I photographed the cast of "The Class" during mid-production in July, Charlie suddenly disappeared as I was about to shoot group photos, ghosting me and his fellow cast members when it came time to gather. Nobody could seem to locate him, until we spotted a circle of about a dozen girls literally huddled around him in the lobby of the theater. He was all smiles, and then joyously proceeded to "ruin" several group shots doling out rabbit ears to his unaware cast mates. Never trust a phantom! NOTE: The online petition demanding Netflix bring back "Julie and The Phantoms" has garnered close to 150,000 signatures in six days.



√9. Actor Lyric Ross



Actor Lyric Ross Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

At only 18, Lyric Ross is definitely a star on the rise. Her portrayal of Deja Pearson on NBC's "This Is Us," as a young black woman from the foster care system, quickly became a fan favorite. What started off as a three episode role in season Two – when she was 13 – blossomed into the role of series cast regular for season Three.

Lyric Ross began acting in commercials at age five, and seems to possess a supernatural power in conveying emotion. This gift enables her to go toe-to-toe and scene-per-scene with her on-screen adopted father, two time Emmy winning powerhouse Sterling K. Brown ... the result of their chemistry is some of the best acting on prime time television.

Lyric has been racking up critical acclaim and award nominations as well. In addition to winning a SAG award as part of the Outstanding Performance By An Ensemble In a Drama for "This is Us," she was nominated as Teen Choice Breakout star of 2018 and NAACP image awards in 2019, 2020 and 2021.



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I photographed Lyric as one of the stars of the upcoming Nick Celozzi film "The Class," filmed in Chicago last summer and now in post production. With the premiere of the final season of "This Is Us" beginning January 4th in 2022, expect more accolades for Lyric Ross. I predict her star to go supernova and light up many a marquee in the years to come.



## 8. Dancer/Choreographer/Actor Harry Shum Jr.



Dancer/Choreographer/Actor Harry Shum Jr.

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

There's no dancing around the fact that Harry Shum Jr. is a man in motion and he's definitely moving on up. From stating off as a featured dancer in commercials to backing up Jennifer Lopez, Jessica Simpson and Mariah Carey, Shum became a highly sought after choreographer and dance instructor. He would go on to help choreograph the 82nd Academy Awards, "So You Think You Can Dance" and "Ellen's Even Bigger Really Big Show," among others.

After appearing in the "Step Up" dance movies he landed the role of dancer Mike Chang on Fox's hit show "Glee" and participated in their live tour ... he would win a SAG award for his performances on the show. Shum then had a role and helped choreograph the Hulu web series "The League of Extraordinary Dancers" and their touring live shows. He also appeared in the sequel "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny."

In his portrayal of Magnus Bane, a centuries old warlock and bisexual man of color in the Freeform Fantasy series "Shadowhunters," Shum would be elevated to official Sex Symbol Status. He would win a GLADD award, a Bisexual Representation Award and the E! Peoples Choice Award For Male Star of 2018. It is reported that the upcountry Crazy Rich Asians 2" will feature his character largely cut from the first film.

I photographed Harry Shum Jr. when he was in town to promote his first leading man role in the psychological thriller , "Broadcast Signal Transmission," which was screened at the Chicago International Film Festival in October. He just may become this generations' Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly, as he likewise shuffles from dancer to accidental leading man. "When I act I'm dancing with my emotions and when I dance I'm acting through movement," he revealed to HollywoodChicago.com. I couldn't help but notice his blazing white shoes and how they seemed to shimmer and glow as I directed him to his mark upon a hotel couch. "Yeah maybe it's the shoes?" "Hey Harry! Is it the shoes?" "It's gotta be the shoes... "







Actor Katie Cassidy
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Photo for HollywoodChicago.com

I'm pretty sure I'm not the only photographer that has had to seriously fight back the overwhelming urge to breakout into a roaring A Cappella version of "I Think I Love You" when reviewing their images of Katie Cassidy.

While she may have not inherited a penny of her famous father David Cassidy's wealth, she certainly did inherit his stunning smile, looks and mesmerizing on-screen charisma. Though she comes from the three generation entertainment family, Katie Cassidy was never raised by her 1970s superstar teen idol father. Her success came solely by her own drive and artistic ambition ... she even paid for her own acting lessons. Raised by her mother and her ER physician stepdad – away from Hollywood – she never stopped working since she started modeling at age 14. Initially, she was dubbed a "Scream Queen" as she worked her way up through several horror movies, including remakes of "When A Stranger Calls (2006) and the "Nightmare On Elm Street" reboot (2010).

I first noticed her not as a victim, but during her brilliant stint as the seductive and ball busting demon Ruby on the 3rd Season of "Supernatural" ... she was hellaciously good at being bad. Cassidy played in other popular ensemble dramas such as "Gossip Girl" and the 2009 reboot of "Melrose Place." New York Magazine simply stated the obvious, her performance was the best thing about the show. I completely agree.



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Her breakout role came from playing another woman of power, the superhero Laurel Lance/Black Canary on "Arrow." She quickly became a fan favorite and her character expanded to the "The Flash" and "Legends Of Tomorrow," other shows in the "Arrow-verse." Even her character's death in Season 4 couldn't damper her transformation into the darker Black Siren – from a parallel universe – to resurrect back again.

Make no mistake that Katie Cassidy isn't content to simply rest on her "Laurels." As an actress she continues to evolve and kick ass. In 2021, she took on the leading lady role in the rom com drama, "I Love Us," and has a role in the upcoming 2022 thriller "Agent Game" (opposite Mel Gibson, Jason Isaacs and Dermot Mulroney). Katie Cassidy is obviously continuing her family's long standing tradition of crafting characters that fans will instantly "Cherish" ... so "Come On Get Happy!" Photographed backstage at Wizard World Chicago, October of 2021.



#### 6. Anthony Michael Hall & Debbie Gibson



Anthony Michael Hall and Debbie Gibson

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Anthony Michael Hall and Debbie Gibson have always been a couple of "Class" acts ... they filmed the upcoming film "The Class" in the summer of 2021. The two 1980s teen stars continue to shine brightly and serve as two perfect textbook examples on how to thrive in a business that pushes so many former teen idols out the door.

Debbie Gibson first hit the top ten with her single "Out of the Blue" in the summer of 1987. By June of '88 she had the number one single on the charts "Foolish Beat" at only age 17 ... the youngest female artist ever to write, produce and sing a number one hit. Her music videos were everywhere.

I remember because my girlfriend's eight-year-old daughter was completely obsessed with her. I remember her blasting those tapes endlessly and declaring that Led Zeppelin was so lame and yesterday, and that Debbie Gibson was at least 100 times cooler. I was a touring rock and roll photojournalist at the time and I countered – in no uncertain terms – that there was nothing cool about being a teenybopper and that in five years nobody would even remember her!

I lived to eat those words and after doing my first photo shoot with Ms. Gibson in 2013. I actually called my ex-girlfriend and asked her to issue my long overdue formal apology to her then 35-year-old daughter. She was right ... Debbie Gibson did indeed rock and was cool as F..K! Gibson spent August and September of 2021 in Las Vegas headlining with Joey McIntyre, formerly of New Kids on the Block. She released her 10th studio album,"The Body Remembers" – her first full length album of original songs in 20 years – to rave reviews. Her video for

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"Christmas Star" was selected as one of the top 30 videos of 2021.





Anthony Michael Hall and Debbie Gibson on the Red Carpet Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

From upstaging Chevy Chase at age 13 in "National Lampoons Vacation" to becoming the silver screens nerd of choice as John Hughes comedic wonder kid ("Sixteen Candles," "The Breakfast Club" "Weird Science"), Anthony Michael Hall almost single-handedly made it chic to be geek and hip to be square. But Hall was just as smart as the young characters he played onscreen when he turned down further nerd roles offered by Hughes to wisely avoid being typecast. The role of Ferris Bueller was originally written for him and he also passed on the role of Duckie in "Pretty in Pink". This strategic move allowed AMH to play the long game and display his fearless willingness to branch out and shine in more diverse roles

He was the youngest cast member to ever join Saturday Night Live at age 17, although only for a single season. He would go on to portray the villain in "Edward Scissorhands," the gay lover of Will Smith's character in "Six Degrees of Separation," Bill Gates in "Pirates of Silicon Valley and the leading man for five years in the critically acclaimed Stephen King series "The Dead Zone." Hall also branched out into producing and directing, further securing his place in the industry.

With almost 100 onscreen credits, Anthony Michael Hall has worked almost nonstop since he first appeared as the Honeycomb Kid in commercials at age seven. For 2021, he was in "Halloween Kills" and "Something About Her," as well as a reccurring role as Mr. Perott on ABC's "The Goldbergs." He already has three releases scheduled for 2022, including the shot-in-Chicagoland "The Class." The film is directed by Nick Celozzi and was shot mostly at suburban Elmhurst University ... it's a "The Breakfast Club" for a new generation. Hall plays the antagonistic high school vice principal and Debbie Gibson the school drama teacher who gives her students a very unique make up exam.

I photographed the cast on July 26th during "An Evening With Anthony Michael Hall" Charity Benefit at the Tivoli Theater in Downers Grove. AMH and Debbie Gibson gave our readers a portrait that back in the day could only be described as completely rad and bitchin!







Kenneth Branagh Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Kenneth Branagh is such a badass actor's actor that the British Monarchy was forced to confer knighthood onto a proud Irishman from Belfast ... that's how good he is. You just know that if the most celebrated and well known Shakespearean of the modern age was writing and directing an autobiographical nostalgic lover letter to his hometown of Belfast – set in the time of the 1960s Catholic/Protestant conflicts – it just has to stick in the craw of the Queen who knighted him. Now that is a Sex Pistol level punk rock smack down!

Dubbed the new Laurence Olivier for almost the entire length of his career, Branagh received an Oscar nomination for portraying the man himself in "My Weekend with Marilyn." He has been nominated for five Academy Awards prior to this year, as well as winning two Emmys and three BAFTAs. His new film "Belfast" seems destined to rack up several more Oscar nominations in 2022, including perhaps Best Picture and Best Director. On the Red Carpet I briefly got to direct the director who directed "Thor" at the 57th Chicago International Film Festival premiere of "Belfast" in October ... that's not exactly "Much Ado About Nothing." Coming up, Branagh's long awaited "Death on the Nile" is scheduled for release February 22nd.



1. Priscilla Presley



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Priscilla Presley

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

I remember Marcia, one of my favorite cousins, making me watch "Elvis Presley: Aloha From Hawaii" when I was nine years old. Well I was way too young to ever get to photograph Elvis, but in 2021 I finally did get my long-time wish to direct his former wife, the fabulous Priscilla Presley, through an Exclusive Photo Shoot in her hotel suite for her management.

FROM MY POST PRODUCTION NOTES: "Priscilla is pictured lounging on a couch like a modern day Cleopatra. Notice the casual arm up, but the perfect body line. She is channeling Elvis's relaxed and cool swagger, yet simultaneously she is smolderingly stunning and defiant. Like Cleopatra she is a Queen, an ageless sex symbol and the guardian of an empire."

As the modern businesswoman in charge of the Elvis image, she has successfully proven that she can in fact have it all. Presley and her partners recently opened "The Guest House At Graceland," a 450 room luxury resort hotel just steps away from the Graceland mansion. She personally oversaw the detailed decoration of the reported 100 million dollar hospitality project ... the biggest in Memphis in 90 years.

Graceland may forever be thought of as the house that Elvis put on the map, but it was his former wife that saved it for all the world to enjoy. Naturally the Hollywood actress knew her perfect camera angles and how to make any photographer instantly feel like a king.

On Thanksgiving morning I received a text from her publicist. "Priscilla was amazed at the photos! Thank You for making her so happy!"

Getting to give direction to the Queen of Graceland was definitely my favorite shoot of the year and the one I'm most grateful for. Even thinking about it now part of me is still "All Shook Up."

Priscilla Presley recently held court and greeted fans during the Elvis's birthday bash festivities at Graceland on January, 8th 2022.





Priscilla Presley, Close Up Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com







Betty White, 1922-2021

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Here is a list of celebrity subjects who I previously photographed, that we sadly lost in 2021, in no particular order ... Anne Rice, Eddie Mekka. Dean Stockwell. Larry King, Dustin Diamond. Willie Garson, Jane Powell, Ed Asner, Dusty Hill (ZZ Top), Tawny Kitaen, Olympia Dukakis, Johnny Crawford, Felix Silla, Larry Flynt, Mira Furlan, Tempest Storm, James Hampton ... and Betty White. RIP.

ANOTHER LIST FOR 2021! Click on 10 BEST FILMS OF 2021 [30] by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

To directly access the portraits of photographer Joe Arce, of Starstruck Foto and HollywoodChicago.com, click here. [14]

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