



CHIP DUNCAN
PHOTOGRAPHER - FILMMAKER
PROFILE - AUGUST, 2009

While en route to document humanitarian relief efforts in genocide-torn Darfur, Sudan in early 2008, Duncan found himself in the middle of Kenya's post election rioting. After side stepping baton-wielding police in riot gear and dodging tear gas grenades for an hour, Duncan made a call to New York on his cell phone. Within seconds, a fellow filmmaker in Manhattan watched live on CNN as the police did the unthinkable – they turned on journalists.

“In some ways, the world's become easier to navigate,” says Duncan. “To be filming a riot in Nairobi and talking on a cell phone to a colleague in New York would have been unthinkable when I began my career. But in a conflict zone, the dangers haven't changed. Journalists and filmmakers are an important voice in the global dialogue but sadly, they're also targets for those in power who fear the truth.

“In a situation like the election riots in Kenya, I wanted as many eyeballs on the scene as we could get. People in the press often take great risks to get the story. Global broadcast news and a free Internet can help save the life of the messenger. Just imagine what Iran or North Korea would be like with a free press.”

The Nairobi riots weren't Duncan's first experience with filming during crisis or conflict. Duncan cut his teeth as a television news photographer at an NBC affiliate in the early 80s, a job that helped him understand the range of experience and challenges facing journalists and photographers.

“We would literally go from interviewing the governor at the state capitol to being ankle deep in freezing water as firefighters worked on a four alarm blaze,” says Duncan. “I always kept a sport coat in the back of the car along with a pair of boots and whatever rain and cold weather gear I needed for the next assignment.

“Photographing spot news helped me navigate tense and uncertain situations. I learned to expect the unexpected. Whether it was a fire, accident or murder scene, everyone present was experiencing a certain amount of fear – the victims, the police, the paramedics - whomever was impacted by crisis. Understanding the power of fear and how it impacts people's choices makes a difference in how we navigate our own emotions while working under pressure.”

2009 marks the 25th year for The Duncan Group, a long form, non-fiction documentary company Duncan created in late 1984. Duncan started the company with a seven-part series of documentaries for teenagers called *Is Anyone Listening?* The series went on to become one of the best-selling classroom series of all time with distribution in nearly 20% of the nation's public schools. Producing the series also

helped create an opportunity for international distribution of original programming. Several Duncan Group productions have since found a home in more than one hundred countries and on networks that include HBO, Lifetime, Showtime, TLC, Discovery, Travel Channel and numerous broadcasts on PBS.

“It’s important to understand the market and audience and to create programming that has a home and a purpose,” says Duncan. “The size of the market doesn’t interest me as much as the quality of the programming and the knowledge that the finished work will find the right viewers.

“I believe documentary media has the capacity to inspire and, at times, provoke positive change. Change can begin with an audience of one.”

For much of the 1990s, Duncan focused on international work that included travel and adventure documentaries (Discovery Channel) on locations in India, Australia, Norway, Sweden, France and Alaska. Duncan followed up with an original 13-part series called *Mystic Lands* that focused on spiritual places of the world. *Mystic Lands* has been broadcast worldwide and features several unusually challenging locations.

“Our shows on Buddhism in Burma and Vodou practices in Haiti were a pleasure to shoot and produce, but the challenges of working in a dictatorship (Burma) and an anarchy (Haiti) were significant. The two countries present an interesting study in terms of photography and film production.

“We staffed each shoot very specifically to be able to navigate the challenges we could anticipate. Is it easier to work in a tightly controlled environment where the government watches every move and threatens expulsion if the wrong choice is made - or in a nation without infrastructure where law and order are handled by the local mambo or priest? Neither is easy, but the uncontrolled and unexpected nature of life in Haiti presented much greater challenges. The dangers we faced in Haiti were due to a lack of opportunity and resources as well as massive unemployment, and those dangers impact everyone. Long term poverty, economic stagnation and poor health care continue to create serious problems and a sense of desperation that most Americans have little experience navigating.”

During the past decade, Duncan’s filmmaking has been geared toward PBS and the national public television audience. The work includes several biographies, a film on the USA Patriot Act, a controversial documentary on women’s reproductive health and choices, a two-part series on the history of prayer in America and his most recent production, a one-hour biography on President Herbert Hoover (slated for broadcast nationwide on PBS on October 26th, 2009).

Duncan has also done considerable work as a filmmaker and photographer during the past few years on behalf of humanitarian organizations including extended shoots in war-torn Afghanistan (2005), post-earthquake Pakistan (2006) and in the midst of genocide in North Darfur, Sudan (2008). His media efforts have resulted in fundraising campaigns for Relief International (RI.org) and Save the Children (*SaveTheChildren.org*).

Duncan is currently working on two projects in Nairobi, Kenya. The first includes writing the screenplay and co-producing a feature film on acclaimed African photojournalist Mohammed Amin. The second project is a photography book on Africa’s largest slum - Kibera.

“Mo Amin was the real deal,” says Duncan. “He chronicled the news of Africa for almost three decades. He took remarkable images of mass starvation in northern Ethiopia in 1984. The power of those

images inspired the largest acts of charitable giving in world history – *Band Aid* and *Live Aid*. Mo proved that pictures not only have meaning, they have purpose.”

Alaska continues to be a source of inspiration for Duncan. He’s in production on his fourth Alaska film featuring wilderness, wildlife and climate change. Following the success of the highly acclaimed wildlife film *Alaska’s Bald Eagle – New Threats to Survival*, Duncan has been prolific in chronicling wild rivers while on rafting expeditions including the Tatshenshini, Alsek, Kongakut and Hula Hula rivers as well as the endangered Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

Duncan’s second non-fiction book, *Enough To Go Around – Searching for Hope in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Darfur* is slated for release in August, 2009 by New York-based Select Books. *Enough To Go Around* is Duncan’s first book featuring still photography.

“Shooting stills was a natural progression for me,” says Duncan. “I began shooting motion in 1980 and many of the techniques and aesthetics are the same. I picked up stills in 2003 and quickly moved from film into digital photography. The shooting style and equipment may change, but it’s still photojournalism.

“The joy I get from shooting stills comes from my proximity to and relationship with the subject. I tend to concentrate on portraits of people in the developing world. The process involves some kind of meaningful interaction with people living under difficult circumstances. My hope is to shed light on our similarities and to break down stereotypes, especially those based on fear. In places such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan, I’ve witnessed extraordinary grace among the people I’ve encountered. I hope the images and stories help to encourage justice and human rights in places where greed, tyranny, poverty, disease and lack of opportunity have been commonplace for far too long.”

When not at work, Duncan spends time downhill skiing in Colorado and biking in rural Wisconsin. He also guides an annual trek on Peru’s Inca Trail to Machu Picchu and has spent several years photographing people and sacred sites in the Andes.

For more information, please visit ChipDuncan.com.