

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{Chicago's Finest}

slmag.net

Jan/Feb 2017

BEING SANDRO

With a host of new projects, including an homage to the photographic masters with longtime collaborator John Malkovich, iconic Chicago photographer Sandro embarks on the most creative and ambitious stage of his career yet.

By Matt Lee

Photography by Sandro / Sandro portrait by Joe Morris

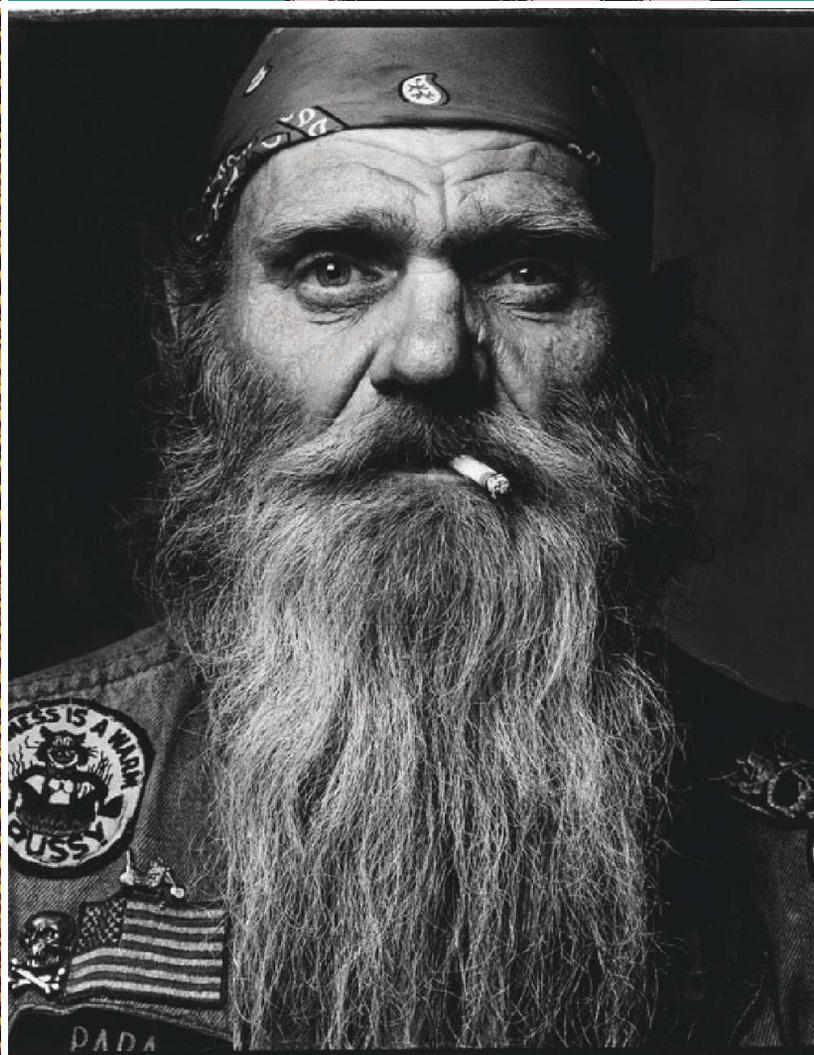
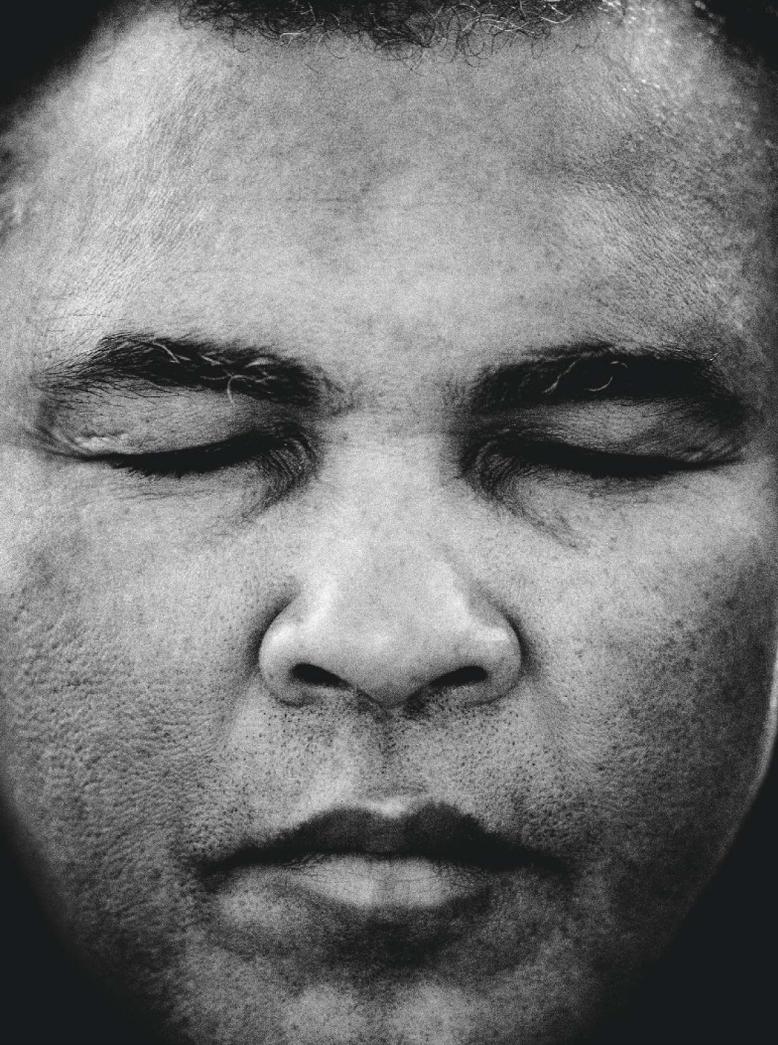
“I’m more inspired than ever,” says longtime Chicago photographer Sandro, reclining on the couch of his West Town studio. “I’m so full of energy and curiosity and wanting to do great work—I’m more in love with photography than I’ve ever been.”

The sentiment would be inspiring coming from any veteran artist, but, considering the accomplishments Sandro has enjoyed in his long career, it’s an even more compelling statement. Long one of Chicago’s most celebrated fine art and commercial shooters, Sandro [last name Miller, but he’s on a first-name basis professionally] has an array of work that is—to put it modestly—dizzying. In addition to a seemingly unending list of projects like award-winning films and pro bono campaigns, he has held dozens of exhibitions across the globe and published a wide variety of books on an array of subjects so diverse and eclectic that their only observable commonality is that they were born out of Sandro’s curiosity and passion. An incomplete list of his book subjects alone offers an inadequate but telling glimpse into the glamorous landscape of life as experienced by Sandro: bullfighters, bikers, Cuba, Chicago dancers, Morocco, the tribes of Papua New Guinea, Steppenwolf Theatre, Michael Jordan and former prison inmates.

“All these projects that I do are my curiosities,” he says, surrounded in his studio and living space, which he shares with his wife Claude-Aline Miller, by a mind-boggling array of books, artwork and other ephemera. “I’m curious about bullfighting so I go out and shoot a book on bullfighting. I was curious about Cuba so I made 15 trips to Cuba. It’s all fulfilling curiosities.”



Chicago photographer Sandro Miller posed on a custom motorcycle from JMOTO Speedshop in Crown Point, Ind.

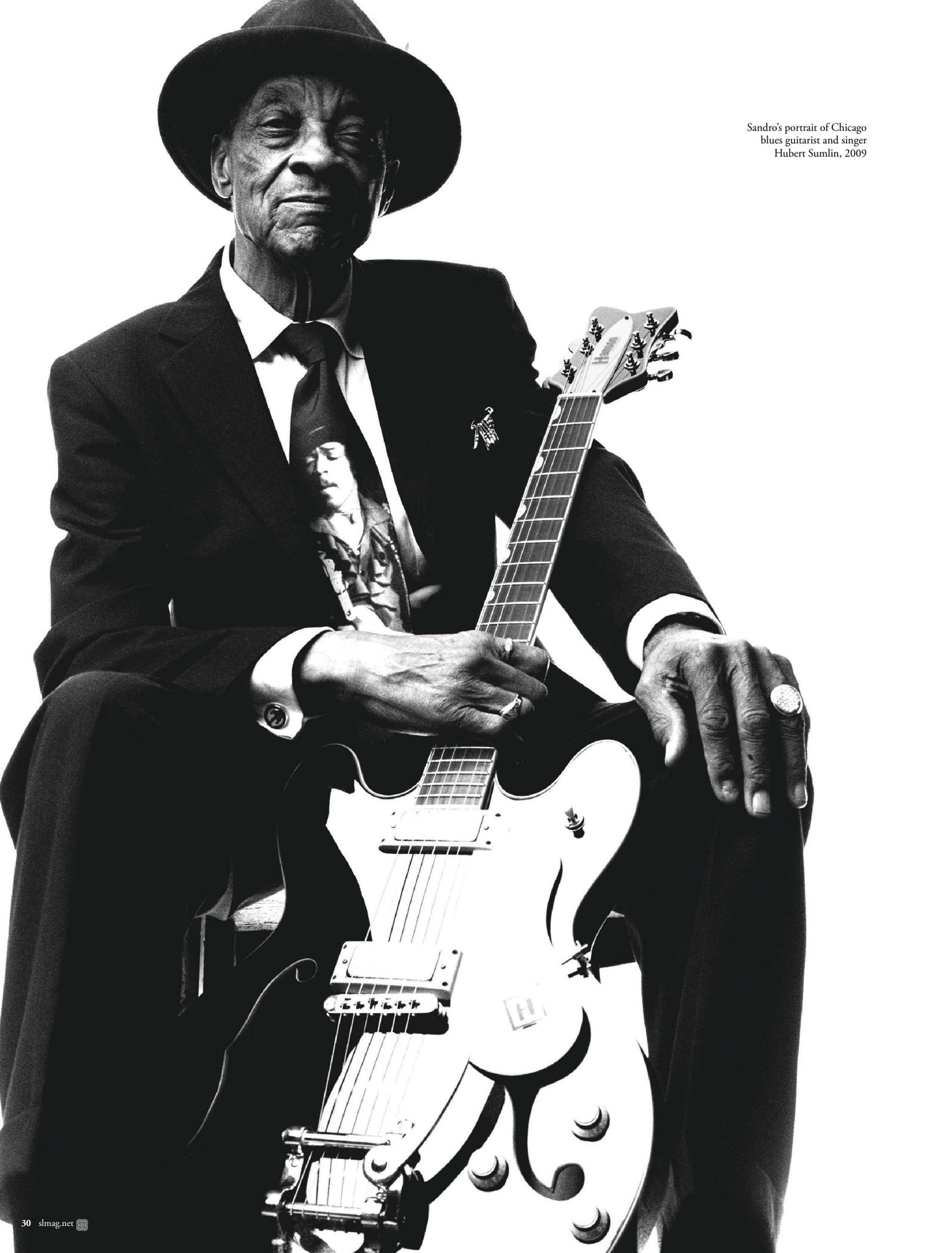


Sandro's mind seems to be growing curiouser and curiouser. While his projects are fluid—and in some cases, such as his passion for dance, never-ending—several of his recent initiatives are among his most creative and ambitious yet. In *My Hair My Soul My Freedom*, which will likely become its own exhibit and book, Sandro is taking an in-depth look at the hair of African American women. The idea, he says, was born out of not only his admiration for African American hairstyles today, but also the subject's historical significance. "When I walk the streets of Chicago and I see black women with these amazing, beautiful hairdos, I'm just blown away," he says. "I began to do some reading about black hair. Sadly, when the Europeans went over to Africa to gather slaves, they found that Africans had the most amazing hairdos—whether it was dreads or these beautiful sculptures they would wear on their heads. Their hair empowered them. The first thing the Europeans would do is cut their hair, to weaken them. Today, it's so beautiful for me to see these men and women growing their hair and having these amazing, almost pieces of art on their heads. Right now I'm about 70 portraits into the project." To keep the focus solely on hair, Sandro is photographing the subjects sans any visible clothing and equalizing skin tones across the portraits. "The hair is what you really see," he says. "This project is a celebration of Africans, African Americans and the empowerment they have with their hair."

While the topic of African American hair may be a relatively new one for Sandro, two of his other recent initiatives are iterations of a theme that has helped define his career for the last 20 years: An ongoing, utterly unpredictable series of collaborations with the actor John Malkovich, whom Sandro met while taking portraits at the Steppenwolf Theatre nearly 20 years ago. "We just naturally hit it off," says Sandro. "When John saw the photograph I had done of him he really loved it, and that was it. Every time he'd come to Chicago we would connect." Over the years, the pair has collaborated on everything from more traditional portraits of the actor to, recently, a series of photos and a short movie in which they recreated 15 of director David Lynch's most iconic characters, from Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks* to Henry Spencer in *Eraserhead*, to raise money for Lynch's Transcendental Meditation Foundation.

On an even larger scale is another collaboration between the duo, *Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters*. In this series, Sandro pays tribute to some of the most iconic photographic portraits ever taken by recreating them with Malkovich channeling the subject. A true mind-bender, the series is a perplexingly engaging *trompe l'oeil* that relies as much on the actor's uncanny ability to shape-shift as Sandro and his team's obsessive dedication to recreating every detail. Recreations range from Diane Arbus' "A Young Man in Curlers at Home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C. 1966" to Irving Penn's "Pablo Picasso, Cannes" to Victor Skrebneski's "Orson Welles." While Sandro considers Penn, in particular, and Chicago icon Skrebneski among the artists who have most influenced him, all photographers in the series had a deep impact on his work.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Muhammad Ali, 2004. Andy Warhol / Green Marilyn (1962), 2014, from the series "Malkovich, Malkovich, Malkovich: Homage to Photographic Masters." Paul "Papa Smurf" Buneta, Jr., Triumph Bonnie Chopper, Collinsville, IL, 1995, from the series "American Bikers." Melody, 2016, from Sandro's ongoing project "My Hair My Soul My Freedom."



Sandro's portrait of Chicago
blues guitarist and singer
Hubert Sumlin, 2009



Dance For Life, Sandro's tribute to the artists whose efforts support the important charitable work of Chicago's Dance for Life

Sandro's latest book, *The Malkovich Sessions*

“The homage to the masters came out of my having cancer,” says Sandro, who recovered from a terrifying bout of Stage 4 throat and neck cancer several years ago. “I laid in bed and I was very ill for about six months. I started thinking, ‘If I get well, I’d love to say thank you to all the people who inspired me.’ These images that we recreated are just embedded in my brain. They are the images that truly changed the way I look at portraiture.”

Like much of Sandro’s work, what resonated with him has also resonated with the public—exhibits of the project are currently booked at museums around the world for more than two years out, and Sandro expects the tour could extend as long as five years. Locally, some of the portraits can be seen at Sandro’s longtime gallery, Catherine Edelman Gallery, and the portraits were included in part of the broader retrospective book *The Malkovich Sessions*, published earlier this year. Tellingly, Malkovich, like Sandro, is a lover of fine art in all its forms and was familiar with each of the photos before recreating them.

While much has changed over the years since Sandro first picked up a camera, his passion for the art form is timeless. “When I started out there was probably less than one tenth of the photographers there are now,” he says. “The digital world has made it much more available to everybody. I do believe stars are still being born in this industry, but I think they have the same makeup as I did—they’re so dedicated, hungry, passionate and full of desire to make it. They’re devoting their lives to it. That’s what it is, a lifetime devotion.

“Today, with social media people are sending out for likes. That’s really not how I work. I’d rather go to the museum, institution, or gallery that I’m exhibiting at and see 400 to 600 people show up for the opening. That’s my joy.” ⁶⁷