

# I Do!

## (But I'm Doing It My Way.)

By Mike Allegra

**T**wenty years ago, wedding photographer Bill Wilson '83 sat behind his secondhand Macintosh unable to stifle a laugh. On the screen in front of him was a photograph he had recently manipulated – that of a fisherman on a pier wearing both yellow waders and a cat-that-just-caught-the-canary smile. The reason for that smile could be seen to the fisherman's immediate right, for dangling upside down from a hook as if she were a record-setting marlin, was his new, beaming bride, resplendent in a wedding gown and veil.

This photo – actually a combination of three

photos – was very different from any of the images Wilson was working on just year or two earlier. A photography convention at New York's Jacob Javitz Convention Center was the catalyst. While he strolled up and down the aisles, scrutinizing the new cameras, lenses, and filters, he stumbled upon the digital photography booth. It was, he remembers, the only computer in the entire show.

"It was way in the back, just a little sign over this Macintosh IIx computer," Wilson says. "No one was even looking in that direction. So I watched this guy, probably using Photoshop 1.0 or something, goof around with the lasso tool, putting a photo of a banana into the mouth of a picture of a baby."

▶ Amanda Sheronas Spencer '90







Photograph by Michael Branscom

▲ Bill Wilson '83

At the time, digital photography and digital photo manipulation was seen as little more than a novelty. But that silly little demonstration hit Wilson like a thunderbolt.

“Right then I had a revelation that being able to manipulate pictures with a computer was going to change all the rules for the profession and photography. It was going to change everything.”

Wilson embraced digital photography so early in its history that for a time he became almost an industry unto himself. His fishing photo was so unique that, when he used the image for his business card in 1993, he was soon inundated with calls. His services were solicited from photographers who, arriving late to the digital revolution, needed a consultant. More significant, Wilson was getting hired by young couples who were eager to use his photo manipulation skills to make their weddings extra memorable.

Wilson’s timing couldn’t have been better. To many in the optimistic 1990s, it was

no longer sufficient for a wedding day to be memorable to only the happy couple, it had to be memorable to *everyone*. To many future brides and grooms a wedding could – and should – be a celebration of the creative spirit.

This is a far cry from the way things used to be, notes sociologist John Macionis ’66. “Weddings were very traditional social markers in the past. If you were a Catholic kid in an Italian neighborhood you got married in that local church in your neighborhood. The people who attended were your neighbors, your family. It was very class linked. It rooted you in social space. Similarly, if you were someone who lived in a wealthier area, you were going to get married in that Episcopalian Church and have a big reception. Yes, these two weddings represented two different social classes, but they also had a lot in common. For one thing, I doubt that either one of those couples brought a lot of creativity or individual imagination to those weddings. The ceremonies unfolded pretty much the way the

social rulebook of the time said ‘people like you’ ought to behave.”

These days, with photos cropping up everywhere on the internet of wedding parties running away from zombies or rampaging dinosaurs, it is safe to assert that the cookie-cutter ceremonies of old are gone forever. Traditional rules no longer apply. After all, who says a wedding gown must be white? Who says a reception has to take place in a rented hall? And who says that a blushing bride can’t be photographed as The Catch of the Day?

Technology is partly responsible for this sea change, and photographers like Wilson aren’t the only ones who have been required to adapt.

Amanda Sheronas Spencer ’90 was always interested in fashion. At one point she even contemplated becoming a fashion designer for plus-size models. Once she began to study design, however, her priorities quickly shifted. “You know how some people decide

to become a doctor and then they take certain classes and think, ‘Maybe I don’t want to be a doctor?’ To me that was fashion design.”

So instead of creating dresses, she found her passion in promoting them. She started out at Schell and Stein, a Los Angeles public relations firm that represented local fashion and jewelry designers, but her desire to head back to the East Coast, where Spencer grew up, soon led to a job as the PR director at Alfred Angelo, a Philadelphia-based wedding dress manufacturer.

“When I first started at Alfred Angelo in 2007, brides-to-be were still very much looking at wedding magazines, not just for their dresses, but also for ideas for the entire wedding. Martha Stewart was the most notable name in the wedding industry to tap into. Now with the advent of Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, and an army of wedding industry bloggers, however, a bride has immediate access to thousands of ideas. They have a wealth of

information at their fingertips. They can cherry-pick and create their entire wedding on the internet and share it with their friends. Brides have more knowledge than ever before.”

Corrente Schankler ’98, who founded Petal Design Studio, a floral design business, has also noticed the trend. “Things have changed in a big way over the last couple of years,” she says. “Instead of a binder with five pictures in it, brides now show me a Pinterest board that contains maybe 200 photos. What has changed is that people have become so much more invested in all the details. Wedding plans operate on a more micro level. They want this day to reflect their personality and so many things about their relationship.”

Today’s brides know what they want and, now more than ever, they are willing to pay for it. Even in this down economy, the average cost of an American wedding is \$28,400, the highest it’s ever been. And in places such as Santa Barbara, Chicago, and Manhattan,

those average costs can go sky high (\$42,300, \$53,000, and \$76,000, respectively).

Designers like Schankler (whose business is based in New York) are the principal beneficiaries of these bigger budgets. But those costs are often the result of a bride’s desire for personalization rather than her demands for overt symbols of wealth.

“The challenge and opportunity of doing a wedding is that the bride and groom are very invested in the design of their event,” Schankler explains. “For example, one bride was getting married in the mountains and asked for some natural foliage to be incorporated into her centerpieces. I love this type of request. I happily hiked along the mountain trails near the venue, foraging for florals and foliage that I added into her bouquets and centerpieces.

“I had another couple who was getting married at the Bowery Hotel last year. It’s a wonderful venue. They wanted a ‘vintage’



▲ Yes, you, too can be Cinderella, courtesy of Alfred Angelo and ©Disney Fairy Tale Weddings.



look which included lots of candles. But they wanted the candles to look well-used, covered with dripped wax. Most candles are designed now to burn without dripping. So, my team pre-burned all of the pillar candles and used an electric fan to achieve the desired drip effect. This is very difficult to quantify in terms of cost. It is still just a candle, and a used one at that. So, while I wouldn't say that weddings are getting more lavish, they are definitely getting more intricate and thus more labor intensive for the vendors involved."

Gown makers, however, who provide a product rather than a service, aren't seeing the benefits of the new spending surge.

"In the dress industry, the numbers have been down," Spencer says. "Last year was a very tough year for everybody. There are websites that sell designer samples. There are factories in China that will target brides directly, cutting out the U.S. retailers. And there are girls who will resell or donate their dress after wearing it; some brides won't even keep the dress anymore. For some it's no longer a sentimental purchase

"Yes, there are a lot of brides willing to go all out for their weddings, but there are a lot more brides who are asking themselves, 'Is my dress the most important thing? I'm only going to wear it for one day of my life.'"

Despite this newfound competition, however, Alfred Angelo does have a few aces up its sleeve. One consistent winner is their officially licensed Disney Princess gowns, a line that seems to tap into something almost primal in every little girl's wedding dream.

"In some ways you're not selling a gown, you're selling a dream – to make a wedding fantasy into a reality," says Spencer. "Most of the wedding is based around the dress. That's who you are that day. You're Cinderella. Or you're Ariel. That's why it is such a humungous emotional purchase that these girls are making. So much emotion is tied to this decision."

Other licensing opportunities didn't work out so well for Alfred Angelo, however. Kristen Stewart's wedding dress from the *Twilight* saga went over like a lead balloon. "It didn't do well at all. Part of the problem was that you had to be supermodel thin to wear it well."

Another possible miscalculation was that *Twilight* is a young person's movie – reflected in no small way by the packs of giggling teenage girls who came into the stores to try the dress on. These girls had no intention of get-



Photograph by Michael Branscom



ting married – not yet, at least – they just wanted to dress like Kristen Stewart. Older brides wanted nothing to do with the dress and, these days, older brides are the wedding industry's bread and butter.

According to Pew Research poll numbers, in 1960 the average ages for first-time brides and grooms were 20.3 and 22.8 years old, respectively. Now the average ages are 26.5 and 28.7. To some sociologists this upward trend, in part, is rooted in the way contemporary American businesses do business. A recent report by The National Marriage Project posits that "the economic foundations that girded marriage in the mid-20th century have collapsed." That is to say that the days of a man spending his entire career at a single company until his retirement are long gone. Decades ago, when such work environments were commonplace (mostly in the manufacturing sector), men and women could take more comfort in marrying young. Sure, the young couple might not have a lot of money on their actual wedding day, but if the husband had a stable job, it was taken for granted that more money would come later.

With those expectations no longer realistic, marriages are now perceived as a "capstone" rather than "cornerstone" event – something that takes place only after one is financially secure, not before.

This capstone theory could also explain why the number of marriages overall is plum-



meting. In 1960, 72 percent of all adults over the age of 18 were married; in 2010 the number was 51 percent. These numbers are going down among all demographics, but the most precipitous drop is on the lower end of the economic spectrum – those who have the most difficulty obtaining the aforementioned financial security.

"In the sociological literature a number of researchers are making the case that mar-

riage is becoming more class linked. There is a pretty good amount of research to support this," notes Macionis. "Many say that there is a greater gap in the rates of marriage between affluent and less affluent people than ever before.

"This might be a possible reason for the rise of wedding costs," he adds. "If upper-middle-class kids are getting married older, that means their parents are older, too, which, in general,



means that everybody's earning more money and can afford a more expensive wedding."

Though the economic argument is compelling, the decline in marriage is very much a matter of speculation.

"A left-leaning argument points to the importance of economic security," Macionis says. "If they don't have that security, men don't feel like they are capable of taking care of a family and women don't want to connect themselves to men they can't count on. The conservative response is that the decline of marriage is symptomatic of an overall decline in respect for the family, the church – all that symbolic structure, which provides order and meaning."

Sociologist David Popenoe, the founder of the National Marriage Project (and the spouse of Katherine Popenoe, the former Assistant to Head Master Josiah Bunting H'37 '88 P'88 '97) once forwarded another theory. By observing the citizens of Sweden, Popenoe noticed an association between the number of government services and the strength of the institution of marriage. Swedes, who live in an all-inclusive welfare state, he found, are less likely to marry, have fewer children, and are far more likely to divorce.

"I don't think I ever stated flat out that it was cause and effect," says Popenoe, who is now retired. "It was just an association."

Due in part to the controversial impact of his research, Popenoe founded the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, where he taught as a professor. (The organization is now headed up by others and headquartered at the University of Virginia.)

"I felt it was important to have some group focused on marriage and families that was connected to academia in order to get better research done and to have a more solid say in regard to the media," he explains. Though the organization covered a lot of ground reporting on marriage trends of all sorts, the group always placed an emphasis on marriage's effect on children.

"If children are not involved it really doesn't, from a public point of view, matter a whole lot about what's happening to marriage," he says. "When children are involved – and they usually are – it is extremely important. So a lot of our work was pulling together research making that point."

So do the trends spell marriage's doom? Not yet. For one thing, there is compelling circumstantial evidence to suggest that more



▲ Amanda Sheronas Spencer '90

education can slow marriage's decline.

"Today you see that college educated people have a higher rate of marriages, more long-lasting marriages, and fewer out of wedlock births than people who are less well-educated and less economically secure," says Popenoe.

Also, while the number of marriages is decreasing, the desire to marry isn't. Among adults who have never been married, 61 percent still want to take the plunge as opposed to 12 percent who don't.

Marriage counselor Douglas Jardine '62 is not surprised.

"Humans need to create a primary emotional bond," he says. "We're built that way. We are not the rugged individualists we always thought we were. We have to have a person with whom we have an attachment relationship. When we have that security, that connection, that level of trust with another person, we live longer, our autoimmune systems work better, and we're better able to do bold things and take on new challenges."

"I think that in recent times," Jardine adds, "more and more people are seeing a good marriage – or another kind of fully committed, good relationship – as essential to personal happiness."

Also, some of the new wedding trends do result in happier marriages. Couples who wait until they're older to get married, for example,

divorce far less often. And this age increase is especially advantageous to women, who can now pursue their educations and careers in ways they could never have dreamed of 50 years before when they were expected to be anchored to a household.

In fact, one might argue that the way people approach the institution of marriage has become as personal and individualized as the way they approach wedding receptions. Perhaps a floral arranger like Schankler will create a centerpiece that includes artichokes (and she has). Perhaps a photographer like Wilson will shoot an entire Halloween-themed wedding wearing a gorilla suit (and he has).

And perhaps a bride like Spencer, who had spent the past five years of her career helping young women realize their fairytale dreams by matching them with the perfect gown, will set up her own wedding in an entirely different way. And she did.

"I once thought I wanted one of those big over-the-top weddings," she says. "But I got married when I was older and it changed my perspective a lot. So I had a small ceremony, followed by an intimate dinner for 50 people at a restaurant in our area."

"My wedding was not what I thought it was going to be," she says with a smile. "But it was exactly what I wanted."