CORRIDA

American Photographers and the Bullfight

By Jim Cornfield

Cameras in the Afternoon

A curious nugget of photographic lore lurks in the mythology of *la corrida de toros*.

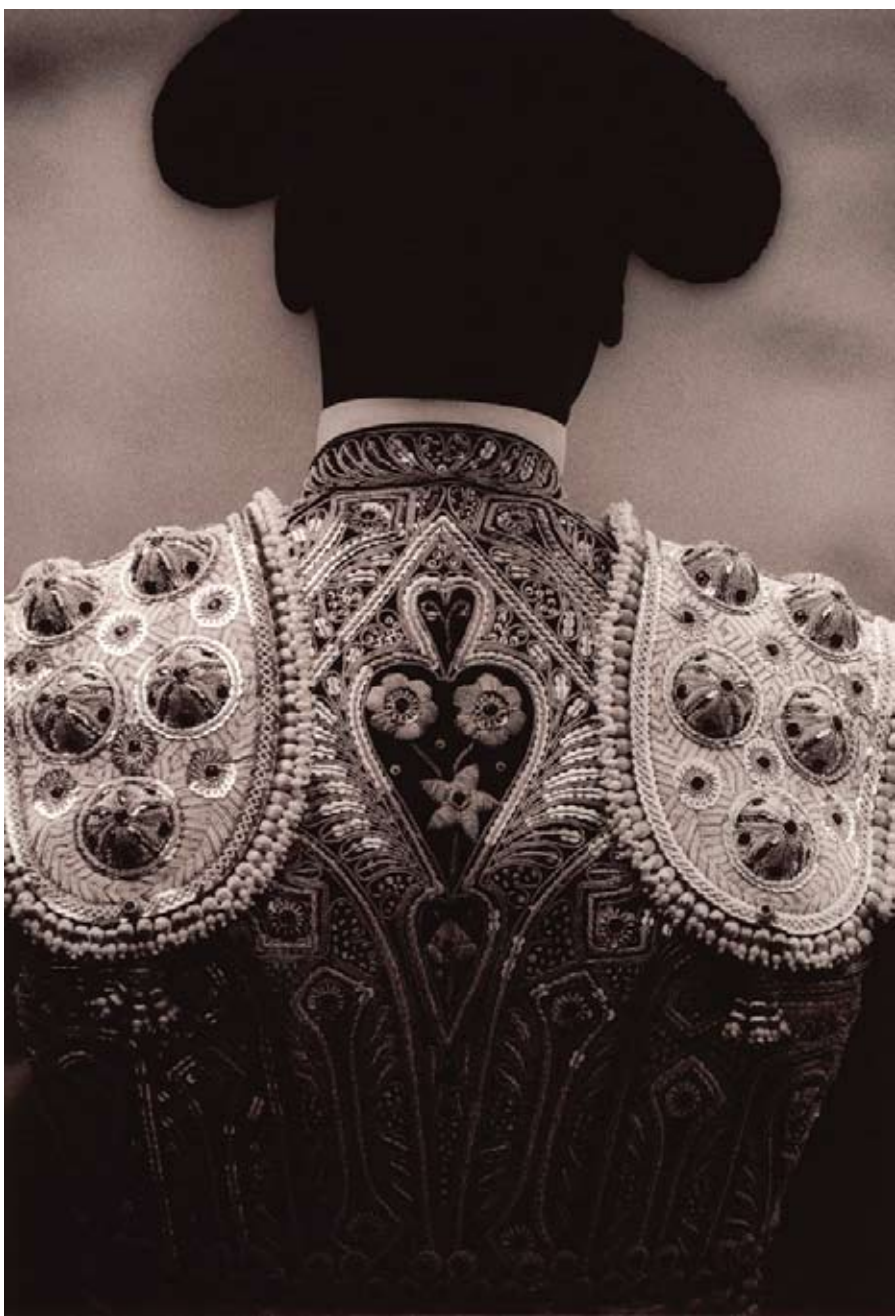
In the 1920s, there was a sudden surge of popularity in the gaudy spectacle that remains the Latin world's most durable icon. The boost was fueled by the rise of a new star *torero* from the gypsy barrio of Seville. He was a wiry daredevil named Juan Belmonte, and to this day, he's regarded as probably the most important matador ever. Once, at the height of his career, Belmonte was asked by a reporter if he thought the quality of bullfighters had improved over the years. As he rifled through some action shots of his contemporaries in the bullring, the matador supposedly replied that, no, the toreros had not gotten better; the photographers had.

Depending on whom you ask, *la fiesta brava* falls somewhere in people's sensibilities between a dignified, quasi-religious pageant and

a blood-spattered version of rodeo. Either way, the still photograph—that familiar balletic communion between matador and bull—is, for most of us, our only visual frame of reference for bullfighting.

Bypassing for a moment the sundry unpleasant aspects of watching the ritual public killing of an animal, (six animals, actually, in a typical event), on its flip side, la corrida is a complex performance art that unites, in short repeated phrases, the bullfighter's taut silhouette with the careening mass of a thousand-pound, well armed creature. When these formal movements are correctly executed, with grace and self-control, the effect is close to that of a dance—a tango or *paso doble*—with the added dimension of possible injury or even death at every step. However you feel about the morality of bullfighting, the danger of these imposing animals is undeniable. In the words of journalist Tony Hendra, the threat of a fighting bull in mid-charge is as palpable as "a madman with a butcher knife."

This element of risk adds powerful emotional voltage to every action that takes place in the bullring. Capturing the peak moments of that action is the stock in trade of most photographers who undertake to shoot this sport. In a way, Belmonte was clairvoyant. While photographers did improve over the years, so did their tools—from the advent of 35mm, to motorized film advance, and ultimately to the fast multi-frame capture speeds of the high-end pro digital SLR. Today it's eminently possible for any competent sports photographer with a little coaching on the correct sequence of events to "put the hammer down" when the bull lowers its head and to come away with a passable collection of climactic moments from an afternoon in the plaza de toros.



The Spectacle

The principal player here is a member of a rare cattle species, *Bos taurus africanus*, native to the Iberian Peninsula. His pedigree is something akin to that of a racehorse—traceable for hundreds of generations—and his bloodlines are meticulously preserved on ranches dedicated to producing a hot-tempered athletic beast without which the bullfight would not exist. Notwithstanding the often valid objections of animal-rights advocates, their frequent rants that fighting bulls are tortured or goaded in the corrals, splashed with turpentine, drugged, etc., to make them "mean," are false. These animals inherit their aggression, along with their distinctive physical conformation, through selective breeding. If this kind of husbandry stirs up associations with the recent dogfighting horrors uncovered in the United States, that's understandable. But the *toro bravo* spends nearly all his life—up to five years—pampered, free to roam wide open pastures, eating good grain and drinking clean water, until he's sent off for his one and only appearance in the bullring. Rejects gleaned early from the breeding process are generally sold off for beef.

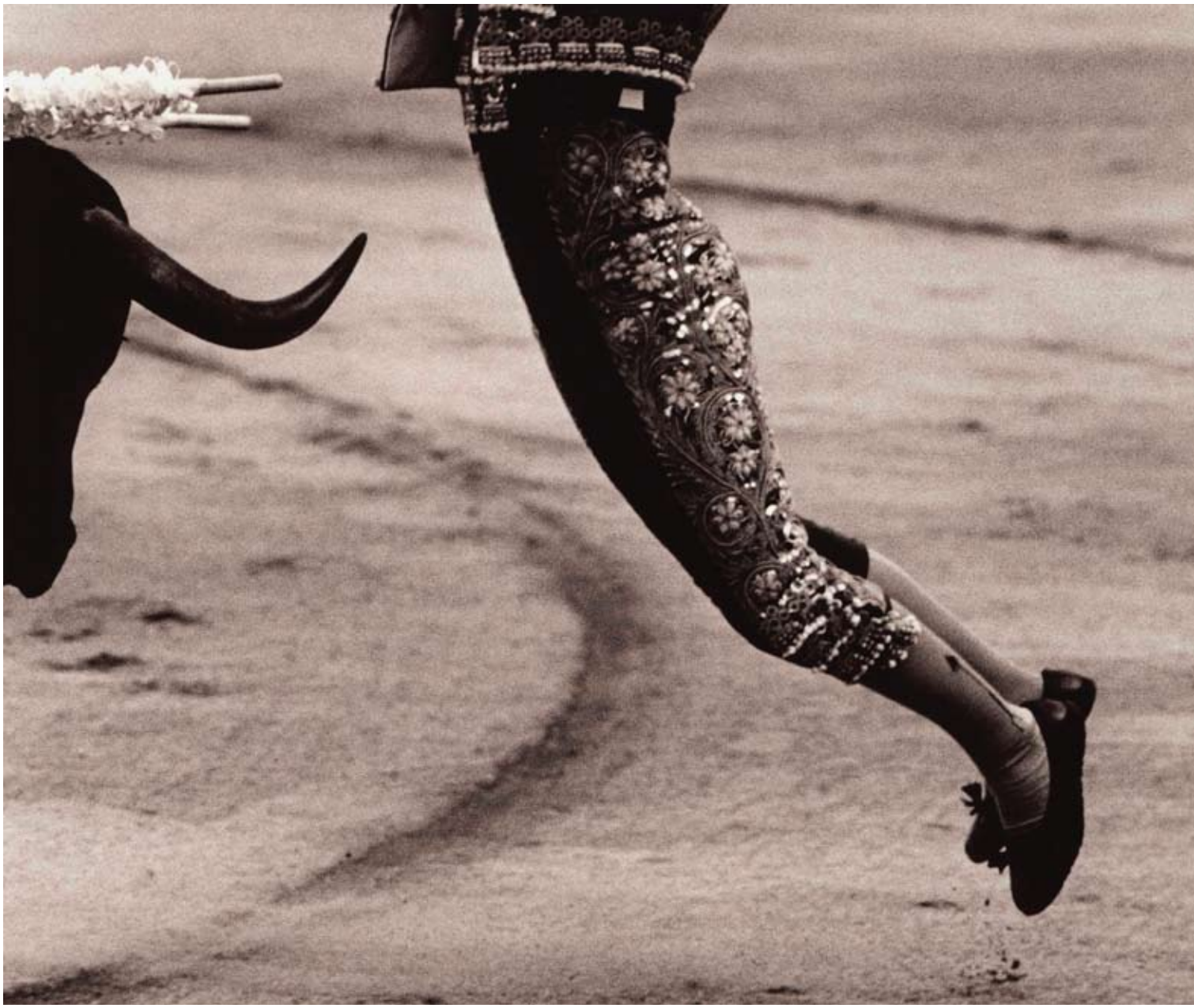
The actual origins of the bullfight are a little murky, but it's safe to say that somewhere in this spectacle's lineage,

Above: *Gregorio Sanchez cites a bull with his work cape*
Below: *Madrid bullfight critic Millán Borque in ringside seat*

Peter Buckley: The Maestro

During the late 1950s and early 60s, one particular coffee-table book seemed to materialize in nearly everyone's living room—sometimes where you'd least expect it. It was big and lavish and impressive, and thus qualified as a "gift book" for such unlikely recipients as graduating seniors, newlyweds and maiden aunts. In one case I know of, it was even a Bar Mitzvah present. The book was *Bullfight*, with photographs and text by Peter Buckley. Even for its time, before the era of animal-rights sensitivity, the subject matter seemed a little daring—a bit dark, even. But its publisher was the august firm of Simon and Schuster, so the book sold in all the right bookstores, anointing it with the necessary dose of propriety. The photographs were nearly all full-page, 9x12 inches, lovingly printed by copperplate lithography, and surprisingly, all in black and white. The effect, even today, 50 years later, is nothing short of spectacular.

Buckley was a multifaceted, multilingual Princeton graduate, a veteran of the wartime Army U.S. Counter-Intelligence Corps, a filmmaker, a writer of children's books, and a knockaround buddy of Ernest and Hadley Hemingway's son, John. Beyond all that, he was a very gifted photographer. With his bullfight project, he reconfigured his skills and coined a novel, stylized technique for examining the spectacle of bullfighting. The stark black-and-white treatments, the shallow depth of field and daring close-ups with barely manageable telephoto optics, render la corrida as an intensely serious business, ultimately played out by two isolated figures, alone out on the sand, with a deadly agenda. Buckley used Tri-X film, rarely pushed beyond ISO 650, so the apertures were mostly wide open on ungainly 300mm telephoto lenses. The cinematic intensity of the results has been a model for action shooters in all fields—in particular, one bullfight photographer, Michael Crouser, a direct heir to Buckley's legacy. His work is showcased throughout this article. By way of posthumous thanks to Peter, who died in 1997, and most especially to his very generous widow, Susan, Crouser personally printed these Buckley images specifically for inclusion in this month's *Rangefinder*. The original prints have long since faded or been discarded or lost. The negatives were retrieved from a safe-deposit box and we're pleased to give them new life on these pages.



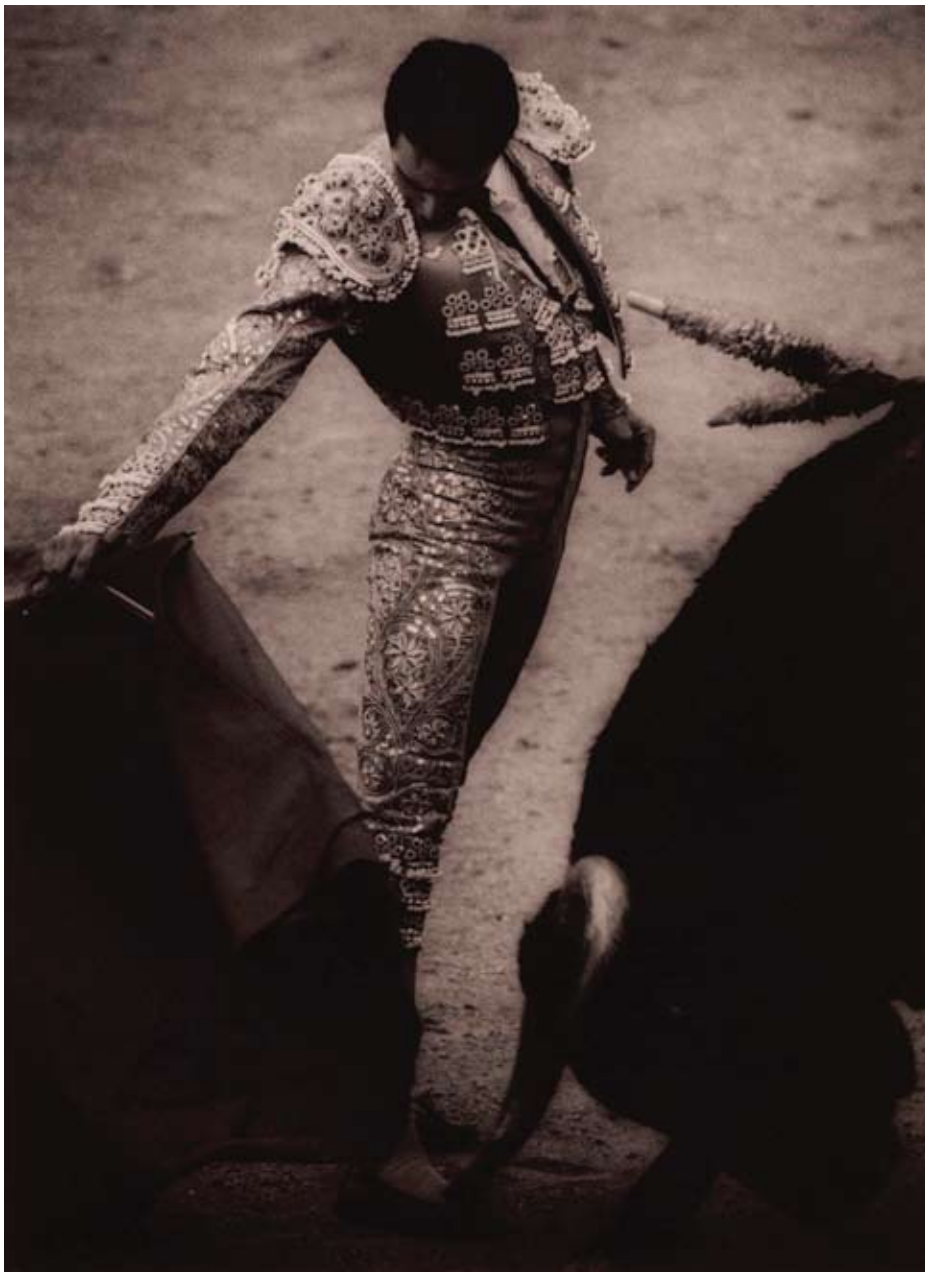
there's a connection to the *venationes* of the Roman amphitheater. These were exhibitions that involved the killing of captured wild animals, some dangerous, some just unlucky. They were often "pre-game entertainment," before the day's featured gladiators entered the arena to square off against each other.

In its current iteration, the ceremony of the corrida—the ritual, the costumes, etc.—has changed little since the 18th century. A bull enters the ring; his *bravura* is tested by men on foot wielding heavy magenta capes, and then by mounted picadors, who use stout, pointed lances to tire the animal's powerful dorsal neck muscles. This ostensibly curtails the bull's tendency to charge wildly at anything in the ring that moves, and it prepares the scene for the performance of the matador. He's the headliner, key member of the troupe called the *cuadrilla*. His stature with audiences is largely determined by how artfully and closely he lures the bull past his body, working only with a small crimson cape, the *muleta*, and the sword he'll use to kill the bull at the climax of his routine. This last act is categorically the most controversial phase of the fiesta brava, the so-called "moment of truth." It is so difficult to do properly that even the most accomplished big-league matadors often require several sword thrusts before the bull is sufficiently injured to drop to the ground. The coup de grâce, the actual death blow, is then administered by a *puntillero*, an aide armed with a sharp dagger.

If all this paints the bullfight as an improbable anachronism, that's because it is just that. But a remarkably resilient one.

In a world already fraught with far more brutal savageries, the corrida de toros has few friends even in its native lands. One Mexican college student I interviewed called it "too sad." He admitted "it's artistic," but he felt the tragedy was oppressive. "You can get that every day on the news," he said. "Who needs to sit in the stands on Sunday and see more death?"

Latin American audiences have diminished significantly in recent years, probably



for less philosophical reasons—among those the global mania for *fútbol*. As recently as last year, a Gallup poll revealed that 72% of Spaniards had little or no interest in their so-called "national fiesta." Animal-rights activism, especially in urban areas, puts continued pressure on the commerce of bullfighting, militating against the use of taurine imagery in advertising and the televising of the fights. (At this writing, TVE, Spanish National Television, announced that it was suspending live coverage of corridas.) Nonetheless, la fiesta brava seems resolute on survival, thanks to a small, zealous cadre of aficionados, bullring impresarios, breeders and a network of *escuelas taurinas*—schools in Spain and Mexico where the techniques of the torero's arcane craft are taught to aspiring professionals. Although the fiesta's core demographics are skewed toward older spectators—Baby Boom era and earlier—there's always a steady trickle of younger aficionados, drawn to this sport partly by the tabloid star power of an occasional glamorous newcomer (male and female) among the ranks of matadors.

Gringos

It frequently surprises people to learn that there's an active contingent of bullfight aficionados in the United States. In a country where animal protection is practically its own industry, a passion for the fiesta brava comes in dismally low on the political-correctness scale. Still, a small subculture thrives, much of it the distant offspring of Ernest Hemingway—the Tyrannosaurus rex of American bullfight junkies—and other authors like Barnaby Conrad, Tom Lea and James Michener, as well as a handful of sappy, if fascinating, vintage films. There's *Blood and Sand* with Tyrone Power, *The Brave Bulls*, *Magnificent Matador* and Robert Stack's first movie-star turn, *Bullfighter and the Lady*, by action director Budd Boetticher, himself an amateur torero. (A biopic featuring actor Adrien Brody as 1940s ring sensation Manolete is due in theaters this year.) There are vigorous aficionado clubs in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston and elsewhere, plus an organized group of book collectors, Taurine Bibliophiles of America, and predictably, any number of bull-inspired English-language websites. An online forum, Mundo Taurino ("bull world"), buzzes daily with postings in English about taurine topics and minutiae. There are even three escuelas taurinas—one operated in Northern California by America's only active certified matador, Dennis Borba—the member of an extremely rare breed. "Matador" is an honorific title. Only a handful of North Americans have ever officially been thus anointed, and nearly all have had their careers in the ring stifled by lack of enthusiasm for non-Latino interlopers. They remind us that the bullfight remains a closed microcosm, intimately fused to the fire-and-ice culture of the Hispanic World.

In the community of serious American editorial photographers, many talented shooters have tried, with varying degrees of success, to show that fire and ice—the Goyesque melding of darkness and light—embodied in the corrida as sun and shade, violence and artistry. The names over the years comprise a prestigious roster: Ernst Haas, Loomis Dean, David Douglas Duncan, John Loengard. But nobody ever seemed to approach the subject with the acuity and power of part-time filmmaker and writer of children's books Peter Hays Buckley.

Buckley's now classic black-and-white coverage of this temperamental subject, and the book that resulted (see sidebar, page 26) became a watershed event in our perceptions of the bullfight. It also provided the impetus for a young New York-based photographer to create a stunning canon of images for a book of his own, due out

this year: Michael Crouser's *Los Toros* (www.lostorosbook.com).

PHOTO COPYRIGHT © PETER BUCKLEY

Cesar Girón prays before the corrida

Sin Tiempo

In the book, Crouser taps an arsenal of technical and aesthetic resources that raise this collection above the level of conventional bullring imagery. Crucial is his choice—like Buckley—to use black and white for coverage of a spectacle that's traditionally celebrated for its garish colors.

"The hues, and the saturation of color photographs," says Crouser, "always seem to reveal the era when they were shot. But with a few exceptions, the ceremony and the surroundings of the bullfight look much the same today as they always have throughout history." Black and white, he insists, coupled with the technique of diffusion during printmaking, insures that these images exist, like the bullfight, "*sin tiempo*—outside of time." (They also exist *sin* Photoshop. Unlike his commercial and editorial work, Crouser's personal projects are frequently done "wet"—with Tri-X, the darkroom and late nights wheedling images to life under a safelight.) Long lenses—300 and 600mm telephotos—and brutally tight cropping are tools that Crouser also favors to isolate the drama of an image from the surrounding clamor. His elevated camera angles do the same. A well known matador, Luis Francisco Espla, pointed out that this viewing angle was the same perspective which Goya used in his celebrated etchings of 18th- and 19th-century bullfighting. It helps to isolate the action against the plain background of the arena.

Like Buckley, Crouser approaches the corrida as the proverbial stranger in a strange land. Crouser is not the die-hard enthusiast who can reel off the names of matadors and identify moves with the cape or banderillas; who shoots, every Sunday afternoon, chasing that elusive moment when a matador earns an "Olé" for technical perfection. Crouser, instead, is the quintessential photojournalist—the uninitiated observer. He is, for the single moment that emerges from each print, his own audience, simultaneously thrilled,

Journeymen (and Women)

Among the ranks of North American aficionados, there is a small contingent of hardworking shooters who spend the bullfight season at ringside in Spain or Latin America. While the financial rewards are usually modest, the photographers are accepted and often honored by the matadors, impresarios and bull breeders. The currency for their knowledge of, and passion for, la fiesta brava, along with their photographic skills, is an invitation as respected members into a closed, very exclusive fraternity. Among the best of these:

Lyn Sherwood

The dean of American bullfight photographers, now retired, this veteran Southern California newsman published a weekly English language magazine, *Clarin.* It featured reviews, interviews and some of the best bullfighting photography ever to come out of Mexico. The key to his extraordinary timing was many afternoons spent in small bullrings, facing animals as an *aficionado practico*—an amateur torero.

PHOTO COPYRIGHT © LYN SHERWOOD

Legendary Spanish matador Manuel Benitez, El Cordobes, performing in Tijuana, Mexico.

Muriel Feiner

A soft-spoken girl from Brooklyn, New York, Muriel Feiner visited Spain after college, fully expecting to be horrified by bullfighting. A few years after becoming a devoted aficionada, she met and married Pedro Giraldo, a professional bullfighter who recently retired from the ring to manage aspiring matadors. Muriel is the widely respected author of several taurine-related books in Spanish and English, and she is considered the expatriate community's most knowledgeable source of information and lore about the corrida de toros. She is always in demand as a technical advisor among broadcasters, moviemakers and journalists. Her superb photographs, along with her articles and reviews, appear regularly in magazines. Muriel's secret to her acute understanding of the work of a bullfighter is simply to marry one. The couple have two grown children, neither of whom were encouraged to pursue a career in the bullring.

PHOTO COPYRIGHT © MURIEL FEINER

Right: *Superstar matador Jose Tomás awaits his return into the Barcelona ring after ending his brief retirement. Tickets for his comeback sold for as much as $5000. Photo by Muriel Feiner.*

shocked and amazed, groping his way through impressions of a completely atavistic phenomenon—la corrida.

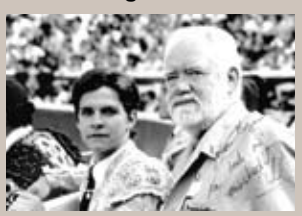
"The shadows," he mused in a recent interview recalling his earliest exposure to bullfighting, "the shapes, reflections, *trajes* (costumes), expressions. All this was new, completely new—a culture that is rough and timeless, where people can get hurt or get carried out of the ring on the shoulders of the crowd.

"And then a bull," he went on, "a thing much larger than a human being, dies only feet away from me. That made it serious, and made it heavy. But it did not make me turn away."

Jim Cornfield is a veteran commercial photographer and travel writer based in Malibu Canyon, California.

Formerly the feature editor of Petersen's PhotoGraphic *magazine, Cornfield has published three books and hundreds of magazine articles in a career that spans 30 years. He is a regular contributor to* Rangefinder *and currently prefers football to bullfights. Cornfield is shown above.*

Jason Morgan



The star player and easily the most knowledgeable American photographer working at ringside in Mexico is Jason Morgan, a resident of San Miguel de Allende and a familiar face both on the bull ranches and in the major bullrings of Mexico and Spain. Highly respected for his extraordinary sense of *temple* ("tem-play," or timing) in shots of working toreros, Jason is a favorite among Spanish and Mexican breeders of fighting bulls. He is a full-time consultant to the Spanish bullranchers' association. Jason has published two books, and his photography appears in publications and websites worldwide.

PHOTO COPYRIGHT © JASON MORGAN

Matador David Fandila, "El Fandi," in work clothes, tests a young seed bull in the small ring of a Spanish breeding ranch.