

# Meet one of America's most successful stock photographers

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How the images you see have changed since the days of Mad Men



Joseph Sohm



By STEVEN KUTZ EDITOR

Sohm made \$12,500 licensing this image of Miami Beach in 1998.

Imagine turning on your TV and seeing Donald Trump talking to the ladies of "The View," and as you go to change the channel you realize the huge image of the New York City skyline behind the hosts is a picture you took.

Or imagine sitting down on a plane and seeing that on the cover of the John Grisham book the passenger next to you is reading is another picture you took.

Now you have an idea of what it's like to be stock image photographer Joe Sohm.

We see images that were purchased from stock agencies every day. Probably more often than most people realize. The images in political ads that show people representing nearly every ethnic group imaginable. The picture in an online news article depicting a flood in the Midwest. The image atop a story about motherhood that features an improbably attractive baby and mother.

Sohm, who has been a photographer for over 30 years and has seen both the advent and the modernization of the industry, is one of the thousands of photographers who provide stock agencies with images. And he's one of the more successful ones. He licenses his photographs through several stock agencies, including Getty, Corbis, and Shutterstock. And he says he often finds his pictures in odd places.

"Last Halloween I was in the greeting card section of a store, and I saw a card with two pumpkins illustrating a guy's butt. That was one of mine," he told me.

Also see: [How my 1992 prom picture appeared on John Oliver](#)



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Joseph Sohm

One of Sohm's best sellers in the 90s: "A perfect American flag with a perfect blue sky behind it on a perfect flagpole."

Sohm, who is 67, has been a photographer since his late 20s. Back then, he was both an American history teacher and a musician, and he wanted to do something to illustrate his love for both. So during his band's shows, he started using a projector to show images he had taken.

He had an epiphany when an art director paid him \$750 for a picture he took a year earlier. "I went, 'wow, this is great!' I never bought into the idea of hourly wages," he said.

### **The early days of stock photography**

In the late '70s, there was a company in New York City called The Image Bank, run by Larry Fried. Sohм says they were pioneering stock photography as we know it.

"I'll never forget walking into Fried's office. He said, 'Do you want to see the future of this business?'" He then showed Sohм a thin catalog filled with stock photographs. Pre-thought-out images that anticipated art directors' needs. Fried would send them out for free.

"Before stock photography, it was like what you see on 'Mad Men.' The opportunities to do mischief and travel were unlimited," Sohм says. Big advertisers would spend a lot of money on photographers and their travel expenses whenever they needed an image of, say, Paris at night.



*Joe Sohм with a tripod and his favorite camera, the Fuji 6 x 17 Panoramic Camera. Image taken in Monument Valley on the Utah/Arizona border by his wife, Leslie Plimpton.*

Sohм adds that in the early days of The Image Bank, a major source of their pictures was one airline pilot who would take pictures "of all the cliché cities around the world" when he was flying there anyway.

These stock agencies "undermined assignment photographers who made thousands a day in the '60s. Suddenly you could buy these images for just a thousand bucks," he says.

### **Modernization**

Sohм has seen the photography world go through two major stages. The shift from assignment to stock, as described above. And then the modernization of the industry, when images became available online.

"The big leap came when Bill Gates bought the da Vinci drawings. He didn't know what to do with them, I'm told. So he started an agency. Continuum. I was among the first 20 to sign. That morphed into Corbis," Sohm says.

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*"My images are of real people doing real things. With real coffee stains on their shirts."*

Joe Sohm

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Corbis was among the first to move from 35mm slides to a scan model. "Soon Getty and Corbis started buying up all the mom and pop agents. In Seattle, Denver, all over the place," he says.

Sohm says that starting in the mid-90s stock photography companies were among the first to create a completely online shopping experience. "You could actually research your product, and pay for it online. And you could take delivery of it online. All without humans."

Of all the agencies he works with, he says Shutterstock is increasingly becoming the most photographer-friendly. For example, they send an alert to his phone when one of his images has been licensed.

### **What makes a good photograph?**

Sohm says "95% of my photos have one thing in common: direct sunlight on them." He says he follows the classic rules of photography: Early morning and late afternoon. "The magic hour is sunrise for four hours, and then four hours prior to sunset."

But that's for landscapes, cityscapes, and buildings. Taking pictures of people is a lot trickier, he says. "I look for lighting first. I don't want good people and bad lighting. I want light on them in an attractive way. No harsh shadows. Or no sunlight."



*Photo of four Presidents taken Nov. 18, 2004 in Little Rock, Ark., at the opening ceremonies for Clinton's Presidential Library. (Sohm added the flag during the editing process.)*

Sohm doesn't take the kinds of stock photography that features models, though. For example, the image of people in a business meeting who are really models or actors pretending to be in a business meeting. He says he could make a lot more money doing that type of photography, but he is more interested in executing his theme: Americana. (His website is [visionsofamerica.com](http://visionsofamerica.com), and he considers his life's work to be "photographing Democracy.")

"My images are of real people doing real things. With real coffee stains on their shirts," he says.

Speaking of Americana, he says one of his biggest selling images in the '90s was of "a perfect American flag. With a perfect blue sky behind it. On a perfect flagpole."

### **His camera**

He mainly uses a Canon 6D camera, and says it offers four times the resolution of a consumer model. He shoots in the highest resolution raw. And he edits his images himself in Photoshop.

### **Clinton / Gore**

A highlight of Sohm's career was being hired by the Democratic National Committee to take pictures during the Clinton / Gore campaign as they ran for the White House in 1992. "I disregarded the press bus and rented a car and drove ahead of the campaign," he says, to make sure he didn't miss any photo opportunities.

He says he still owns the images he took on the campaign. "I never take pictures for someone if they want to own them. Ownership is everything," he says, because then you're never selling anything — you are licensing. "You can sell an image 10,000 times. That's a powerful business model."



*"The View" with a Joseph Sohm image as a backdrop.*

### **Compensation**

He says during his 30-year career, he has made over eight figures in gross sales. Though this doesn't take into account his expenses, it's still over \$10 million.

He sold the image above of the Miami Beach skyline for \$12,500 in 1998. It appeared in a Bacardi ad in Vogue Magazine. He says he took the picture "looking back from the ocean. There was nothing but palm trees and neon lights. And the pink glow of sunset."

He says he used to frequently receive up to \$18,000 for his images, but "the Internet has changed that."

He currently sells the rights to about 50,000 images a year, and has licensed over 500,000 during his lifetime.

Shutterstock, one of the agencies he works with, says he is one of their biggest earners in the U.S. The site has 78,000 contributors, and had 33.4 million paid downloads in the first quarter of 2015. It pays contributors between 25 cents and \$120 each time an image is downloaded. The latter is for those in the highest earning tier. People like Joe Sohm.

Though he made more money in years past, he is doing okay today. He emailed me this after we spoke:

"During our conversation, I licensed 15 images."

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