

Through the Dog Photographer's Lens

See what drives pet photographer Amanda Jones to capture the perfect shot.

Denise Flaim

From his age-clouded eyes, to his scrawny legs, to his “devil” tail with the tuft of hair jutting out at the tip, Rusty isn’t exactly a classic beauty.

But on this sunny spring morning, the 15-year-old Miniature Pinscher from New Jersey is being photographed with an intensity usually reserved for a Vanity Fair shoot. And kneeling on the creaky maple floor of this rented Manhattan photo studio, drumming her fingers to get her geriatric subject to look into her close-up lens is Amanda Jones, who for all intents and purposes is the Annie Leibovitz of dog photography.

Forget Coach collars and Prada totes. To have your dog’s portrait shot by Jones means you — not to mention your pooch — have arrived. Her photographs have an unmistakable intimacy to them, and often reflect a fascination for the parts that make up the whole — the arch of a neck, the splay of a leg, the loll of a tongue. Jones’ subjects have made fine fodder for no fewer than four photo books featuring, respectively, Dachshunds, French Bulldogs, Greyhounds, and their diminutive cousins the Iggies, and, of course, mutts.

“I could not do what I do without treats,” says Jones, 40, nodding to her industrial-sized bag of Pup-Peroni. After much trial and error, it has become her doggie distraction of choice. “I can break it into little pieces, and it doesn’t get greasy and smear all over my camera,” she explains, as she crouches down again.

Canine capture

“Rusty,” says Jones, tapping her camera and waving a fingernail-size bit of Pup-Peroni. The dog, who has the decided air of a cranky old man on a park bench, stops and stares. Click, click, click. Huddled on the floor, as if in a modern dance piece, the petite photographer slowly moves her hand in the air, bends her arm over her head, drums her fingers on the floor, and makes a high-pitched whistle — anything to get his attention.

“We call him the Jack LaLanne of Min Pins,” beams his owner, Tessa Lavender-Beck, 35, flipping open her cell phone to show off a fuzzy Halloween photo of the diminutive red dog in a muscle suit and foam dumbbells.

No one can argue that Rusty has led a full life. Lavender-Beck got him from a pet store when she was in college. She remembers him as “this insane, weirdo, skinny red dog who’d been marked down three times.” Rusty survived dorm life with Lavender-Beck’s then boyfriend, now husband, Jon Beck, 34, earning a 5-inch scar in a campus scuffle with a Rottweiler.

“Rusty took the first bite,” Beck says, as the Min Pin takes a break to shuffle around the studio.

At her computer, Jones uploads her first batch of photos. On screen, Rusty’s eyes are huge and knowing. Near the water bowl, he sniffs and nonchalantly relieves himself on the well-worn floor.

“We’ve never known each other without Rusty,” says Lavender-Beck, reaching for the paper towels Jones keeps handy for accidents. They’ve also never had any other dog; intensely territorial, Rusty never allowed another four-footer in the household.

Struggling with deafness, severe arthritis, and Cushing’s disease, Rusty probably won’t be around much longer. And the blank wall under the cathedral ceiling in the couple’s duplex calls out for a 2-foot-square portrait of him in all his toothless splendor. Such digital immortality doesn’t come cheap: A 90-minute session with Jones, which includes proof sheets and five prints, costs \$1,100.

Even at those prices, less is often more. “I kind of let them unfold,” Jones says of her subjects. “I try not to pose them.”

Her biggest challenge is convincing the dogs to walk on the seamless white paper that she uses as a backdrop. “Dogs just aren’t themselves on it,” she says. To relax them a bit, she might turn to a rubber chicken toy when a loud squeak is warranted, a latex chicken leg for a more demure squeak, or that kitty captivator, the feather wand.

Rusty is having none of it. The appeal of the Pup-Peroni is wearing thin, and the paper is slippery. He bares his teeth, and his tongue unfurls like a carpet runner. Jones clicks away, but not before Rusty nails her.

“He doesn’t have many teeth, so it’s more like a hickey,” Jones says, looking at the coin-sized souvenir Rusty has left on her wrist.

Point and shoot

A Connecticut native, Jones grew up in a cat-only family; her beloved longhaired Dachshund Lily, now 10, is her first dog. After a stint as a wedding photographer, Jones found herself in San Francisco, photographing dot-com execs and other cubicle dwellers. On a whim, she invited a friend and his yellow Lab Ruby to pop by her studio.

“It wasn’t my intention to do dogs only, but it was so much fun,” Jones remembers. “The photos came out really well, and people flipped.”

She tacked up a flier in a local pet store and did 10 portraits that first year. She estimates she’s shot about 1,500 in the last decade.

Today Jones lives in Massachusetts with her husband, a stay-at-home dad, and her 6-year-old daughter who is just starting to learn the difference between a Pug and a Basset Hound. Jones’ studio is on the grounds of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Outside the window is an art installation of six trees hanging upside down, suspended in air, with their gravity-defying, sun-seeking branches growing upward.

Jones’ schedule is similarly topsy-turvy. She works about half the weekends of the year, booking often sold-out sessions in cities as far flung as New York, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Chattanooga. London is the farthest she has gone for a shoot. She says her human clients vary depending on geography, and that Wisconsinites are “very calm and quiet” compared to New Yorkers who never seem to stop talking. But “dogs are dogs wherever we are,” she says.

Jones shoots cats and human babies, too, along with the occasional llama or horse, but dogs are her mainstay. Her most crowded frame included a dozen Golden Retriever pups. She’s also shot a family of five with their four dogs.

Her favorite photo of herself is a laminated Polaroid that her husband carries in his wallet. In it, Jones is deadpan, as her Dachshund impishly licks her nose.

Beyond the lens

Jones appreciates characters — perhaps precisely because they have character — and so, despite his orneriness, Rusty has endeared himself to her. “He’s got good circles,” she says of the dramatic whorls of fur on the back of his thighs.

“I like his gangly legs, his chicken legs,” Lavender-Beck adds, as Jones takes a close-up of his paw.

Rusty takes another much-needed break, lying on the blue fleece blanket his owners brought along. His session is almost done, and the next dog — an irrepressible 112-year-old Yorkshire Terrier named Rosie whose ears are fringed like expensive throw pillows — is about to arrive. Lavender-Beck strokes Rusty, issuing a comforting “Sssssh,” while still more photos pop up on the computer screen.

While all her subjects are special, the photographer admits to some favorites.

“I love Chihuahuas,” Jones says. “I just love their spirit — how feisty they are. They never quit.” She’s enamored of Great Danes for their sculptural quality. “They do the coolest stuff with their arms and legs and ears.”

One of her favorite shots is of three Rhodesian Ridgebacks whose poses — one sitting, one standing, one stretching — form a captivating intersection of bodies. It came at the end of a long photo session — Ridgebacks are not known for their infinite patience, “and I was fried, so tired,” she remembers. “And then came this just incredible stretch.”

Similarly she senses there’s a bit more to Rusty. She has him pose with his proud owners, individually and then together. Lest anyone think him a wimp, Rusty nails Beck on the cheek. Finally, Jones has Beck lie on his back and lift Rusty into the air, balanced on the palm of his hand.

“Nine pounds of terror,” Beck intones.

“An offering to the gods,” Jones chuckles.



The hour and a half is up, and Lavender-Beck dresses Rusty in his camouflage sweater decorated with Scottish Terrier profiles.

The biggest mistake some clients make is that they wait too long to take their dog's portrait, Jones says. "Sometimes the dogs are so old, they can't hold their heads up," she says softly.

Rusty isn't like that. He's tough and stubborn and positively imperious. Jones has no way of knowing that two days later, Rusty will take an unexpected turn for the worse and the Becks will have to have him euthanized.

But today, thanks to Jones, whose photo of Rusty in midair fills the computer screen, he is immortal.

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