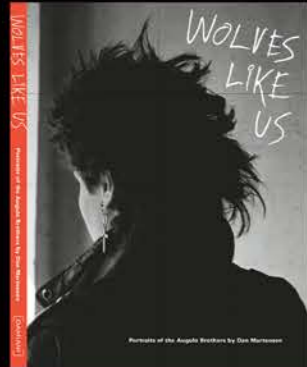


# In the Company of Wolves

An editorial and commercial photographer documented the six Angulo brothers and their wild creativity before they became known as "The Wolfpack."

BY LIBBY PETERSON



## WHY YOU SHOULD KNOW HIM

After five years of photographing his subjects, Dan Martensen released *Wolves Like Us: Portraits of the Angulo Brothers* (Damiani), whose collective story was explored in Crystal Moselle's prize-winning film *The Wolfpack*. Martensen had just returned from a book signing in Paris at the time of this interview.

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➔ Dan Martensen's phone rang. It was his friend Crystal Moselle, a filmmaker. She had been walking down First Avenue in Manhattan and bumped into a group of boys, six brothers dressed like the gangsters from *Reservoir Dogs* in matching black suits and sunglasses. Is Martensen by chance in the city right now to shoot them, she asked? Sure, he replied, he had actually just come from his home in upstate New York to do a shoot in his studio—bring them by.

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PICTURED: Three of the brothers—Eddie (formerly Jagadisa), Narayana and Glenn (formerly Krsna) Angulo—ham it up for Dan Martensen's camera.



As Moselle walked into Martensen's studio, six teenage boys, all with silky dark hair long enough to graze their waists, were silently trailing her. "They were amazing-looking, and at first that was it for me," Martensen says of the boys, who were each given Sanskrit names: Bhagavan, Govinda, Narayana, Mukunda, Krsna and Jagadisa. "They didn't talk to me, like at all. But there was an energy there."

It was September 2010 and Martensen didn't know anything yet about the Angulo brothers, later nicknamed "The Wolfpack" (from Moselle's documentary of the same name), whose collective backstory—growing up homeschooled, shielded by their father from the outside world in their three-bedroom apartment on the Lower East

Side, entertaining themselves by recreating films with remarkably accurate homemade costumes and props behind locked doors—would cause a media sensation at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, inspire in-depth reportage by *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* (among others), and engross millions of people worldwide.

After their shoot that day, Martensen asked Moselle if he could photograph them again sometime. Just a couple weeks prior, the boys had ventured out on their own for the first time after 14 years of confinement. Following a few more meet-ups with her, they invited the photographer to their home.

Martensen walked in. Drawings covered the walls, from end to end and ceiling to floor, and the boys started assembling costumes

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THIS PAGE: The concept behind this *ELLE* magazine shoot with model Josephine Skriver was a "real life love story and road trip" around Puglia, Italy, Martensen says, an example of his natural, laid-back approach at work.



and props for the camera. "There was just so much," Martensen says, "I mean, for a photographer or filmmaker, this was a once-in-a-lifetime thing to stumble upon."

He raised his camera and clicked furiously, unaware that he had just begun creating his new book, *Wolves Like Us*, a devoted look at the Angulos and their wildly creative imagination, released this past fall. Martensen got hooked, he says, just like anyone who's seen *The Wolfpack*. "They're super sweet and beautiful and kind and they're awesome," he says in a burst. "They're just awesome guys."

#### RECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES

Martensen took an observational approach when he photographed the Angulos, as he does with his editorial and commercial clients, but that wasn't always his way of shooting. At the Rhode Island School of Design, he looked at photography as something that should be carefully constructed. Perhaps stemming from watching his dad shoot still life photos for his advertising projects, Martensen looked up to people like Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson, contemporaries in their field for large-scale photoconceptualism.

"Everything in the photograph was considered and placed and staged and

constructed," he remembers. "I was more interested in being a photographic Caravaggio or something, trying to paint with light. As time went on, I found that it definitely wasn't my best mode of communicating my vision or anything I was trying to say or do artistically."

Martensen needed to figure out his game plan; photography was all he wanted, and he didn't have backups. A friend referred him to Creative Exchange Agency to do some assisting, and he spent the next four years bouncing around from fashion photographers Alex Cayley and Tom Munro, to Stéphane Sednaoui (a friend to this day) and Annie Leibovitz. Leaving his constructionist interests in the dust, Martensen was adapting to a faster way of working.

#### WANG AND WASSON

He got burned out assisting, though, and decided he wanted to make a go at shooting for himself. He made an online portfolio, and on a whim he got an email from The News Inc., a showroom run by fashion figure Stella Ishii: a designer—brand new to the scene, having just shown his first collection out of school—wanted to work with him on a lookbook. His name was Alexander Wang.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Model Ollie Edwards in Tulum for the *Telegraph Men's Style*; a shoot in Sayulita with Edita Vilkeviciute; Julia Hafstrom for *Vogue Deutschland*.



“My photography didn’t have to be contrived or look heavily produced. It just had to be honest.”



Martensen got paid more in a day shooting Wang’s lookbook than he did assisting, and “as Alex became Alex,” the photographer says, he flourished right alongside him, earning more recognition and gigs.

But it wasn’t until later, hanging out with friend and model Erin Wasson in L.A. one day, when his signature style would really click into place. Martensen hadn’t shot her before, but she suggested it that day, and it seemed like such a natural idea that they wound up spending the day as usual—hanging out, skateboarding, going to the beach. This time, though, Martensen had his camera in hand.

“Those pictures from that day became the archetype of what I do today: this intimate hang,” he says. It comes in handy in his editorial work for magazines like *Interview*, *i-D* and *Vogue*, and for his commercial clients—H&M, Ralph Lauren and Theory, among others. “Cutting loose seems to be something I’m apparently pretty good at doing. It’s always been my way to get people to engage with me, and when that translated into photography, it was seamless. It didn’t have to be contrived or look heavily produced. It just had to be honest.”

#### MAKING WOLVES LIKE US

That revelation formed his approach with the Angulos, too. Martensen took any free weekend he had to meet up, shoot and talk about films—as it turns out, the brothers have a rather refined palate for nostalgic cinema. “For me it was this therapeutic thing because I got to relive a lot of those movies,” he says. “I don’t talk about Batman with my friends anymore, you know what I mean? But I got to do it with them. I don’t know, it took me back, and it kind of sculpted the way the project would come to fruition.”

Martensen wouldn’t consider *Wolves Like Us*—a name inspired by TV On the Radio’s song “Wolf Like Me”—a traditional narrative, nor all that tangential to Moselle’s film; to him, it’s more like a “diary of great moments.” It’s funny how it worked out: Martensen stopped staging and constructing his own photography only to dedicate one of his biggest projects to subjects who do just that. He shot them in their day-to-day, dressing up, acting out scenes and fantasies. You could say it was a form of escapism for them, that in spite of being locked for years in their home, the brothers had a whole world that they’d created for themselves. It was profound seeing them become these characters and leaving, going into the woods, to the beach, running around the city at night, Martensen says.

THIS PAGE: Actress Mackenzie Davis for *The Last Magazine*. OPPOSITE: Mukunda in his Batsuit and Narayana as *The Godfather’s* Don Corleone.



“I just wanted the photography to feel true to their spirit and true to what it meant to be one of these brothers.”

They made an impact on the photographer in more ways than one: he shot the whole project on film, an uncommon practice in the rest of his work, but revisiting the older process actually motivated him to return to film for his editorial jobs. “I’m not sitting around with a group of people staring at a computer anymore, I’m not second-guessing or worrying about what other people think in that moment,” he says. “I’m just shooting, and that seems to be when I get my best pictures.”

Up until a year and a half ago, Martensen had no idea what he was going to do with his five years of photos. And then Moselle finished up *The Wolfpack* and sent it to Sundance in 2015; it won the U.S. Documentary Grand Jury Prize. “Crystal literally said something to the effect of, ‘Okay if you’re going to do that book, now’s a good time.’”

He hurriedly got things rolling, aiming to release the book on Halloween, an ambitious deadline for him but a favorite day for the Angulos. He blocked off a couple of weeks and went home to sift through his photos, printing, arranging and pinning them around. He enlisted Dean Langley (the former art director of *i-D* magazine) to help edit and design the book, and journalist Joseph Akel to edit and write a forward. “It was really painful to get rid of some of the images,” he says, but they managed to edit it down in a couple of weeks. Damiani was on board with publishing right away.

But not everything wrapped up as succinctly. A couple of the brothers became overwhelmed by the publicity, and one of them was uncomfortable with having his image in the movie or book at all.

“It’s not that he wasn’t told, but I think with the momentum of this movie coming out and winning all these awards and all of a sudden they’re sort of famous, it all happened really quickly,” Martensen says.

Considering where the Angulos were years ago, the brothers, now 18 to 24 years old, have adjusted incredibly well—two are pursuing filmmaking, one’s a musician, another’s an environmental activist. A few have even cut their hair and changed their names (Krsna goes by Glenn now, and Jagadisa is Eddie). But when their lives took a sharp turn—from knowing practically nobody but their family, to everyone wanting to know them—the less-enthused brothers wanted to pump the breaks, and Martensen’s relationship with them was a casualty that frayed in the process. “We still talk, we email and I see them when I’m around—though they’re actually busier than I,” he says, “but there’s that feeling from a couple of the boys that they didn’t realize what this was going to be.”

The fact is, no one knew; it’s almost impossible to predict these things. Still, Martensen maintains the same “cool uncle” relationship with the rest of the pack and continues to take steps to rebuild trust.

Now that the book is out there, he’s focusing on some paid gigs—Martensen’s got plenty coming through—but when it comes to his next project, he’s cracking open *Wolves Like Us* for inspiration. There’s just one problem: “I’m never going to find another group of brothers like this,” he says, “it’s just not going to happen.”

With one huge project down, Martensen is facing what is perhaps a more daunting task on the horizon: hashing out what he can take from this adventure with the Angulos to carry out in his creative endeavors down the road. **Rf**

CAMERAS: Canon 1D X, Pentax 67II, Canon 35mm, Leica M6, Connate G2 LENSES: Canon 70-200mm, Zeiss 21mm, 35mm, 50mm, 85mm, 110mm