

A Corleone scrapbook

BY MARK MEDLEY

Over the course of a career spanning five decades, Steve Schapiro photographed some of the most iconic figures of the 20th century: Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King Jr., Andy Warhol, Ray Charles, Robert Kennedy, Samuel Beckett. He was a regular contributor to *Life* magazine during its heyday in the 1960s, worked for publications including *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair* and *Sports Illustrated*, and photographed Mia Farrow for the cover of *People* magazine's first issue. But his most lasting image is one he seldom gets credit for: Marlon Brando, cradling a cat, in the role of the Godfather, Don Vito Corleone.

The photograph graces the opening page of *The Godfather Family Album*, which was recently published by Taschen two years after a limited edition run of 1,000 copies sold out. A 424-page retrospective of one of film's most enduring trilogies, the book is anchored by hundreds of photographs culled from Schapiro's personal archive.

"It's nice for me that finally my name is being attached to a lot of the iconic images," says Schapiro, 75, on the phone from his home in Chicago.

Schapiro arrived on set intending to shoot a cover story for *Life* and ended up working as a "special photographer" on all three films. "At the time, no

one had any idea what kind of film this was going to be," he recalls. In the foreword to the book, he writes that "it was rumored that Paramount executives were sending out their secretaries during lunchtime to buy copies of Mario Puzo's novel, hoping the increased sales might influence *The New York Times*' bestseller list and heighten public interest."

Before his arrival, he'd heard rumours that Marlon Brando was in poor health. When Schapiro showed up on set for the first time he was shocked to see how much Brando had aged. He looked like an old man. The rumours were true.

"Suddenly he turned into the crowd and I saw this enormous electricity shoot out of his eyes," Schapiro says. "The electricity of a young man. And basically [their] whole strategy was going to be to try to keep the look that Brando had in the movie as secret as possible. So that when the movie came out it would be a big surprise."

Now the book reveals all: Photographs include Brando sitting in his makeup chair, being transformed into the Don Corleone; James Caan, covered in squibs, preparing for the death of Sonny Corleone; director Francis Ford Coppola giving his actors direction, or lying in a casket between takes. But while the behind-the-scenes shots are interesting, it's the photographs of the actors in character that

are most engaging. As the title suggests, Schapiro appears to have caught the Corleone family at their most candid.

"These are big, operatic tales telling intimate stories," says Paul Duncan, the book's editor. "It's a human story. It's a family story, which is why we called the book *The Godfather Family Album*."

Duncan and Schapiro both insist that, despite some beliefs in the art world, movie photography deserves respect.

"It is only now, many years later, that we can look back at the photos of Steve Schapiro, Bob Willoughby and others to see the beauty and artistry of their work," Duncan says. "You can now buy their work at the very best photo galleries, which is only right. With books like this, we can show these wonderful photos to a wider audience, highlighting the artistry of the photographer."

Taschen will soon highlight even more of Schapiro's work: A book of photos from his time on the set of *Taxi Driver* will be released in October.

"I think photographing movies is very similar to photographing a documentary story, in the sense that you're looking for key moments, you're looking for emotion," Schapiro says. "A good picture has design, emotion and information ... and you can find that working on a movie in the same way that you find that on the Selma march. You're still looking for something that works as an iconic image, or as an image that will convey the emotions and the spirit of the people or the event that you're photographing."

■ *The Godfather Family Album* is published by Taschen (\$69.99).

National Post

mmedley@nationalpost.com

