

BLACK BOOK PHOTOGRAPHY





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BLACK BOOK PHOTOGRAPHY *2008*



“You have to be able to separate fantasy from reality. It’s why fashion is brilliant: you can dream.”

ALEK WEK

Photographed by Ron Eshel Interviewed by Pat Cleveland Edited by Kyra Shapurji

For the past eleven years, Alek Wek has wowed the fashion industry, so when esteemed fashion photographer Ron Eshel offered to shoot her exclusively for our latest issue, we naturally said ‘yes.’ Then, we invited one of Alek’s friends, peers, and fellow icons, Pat Cleveland, to sit down with her and give us a glimpse into the personality of a woman who, against so many odds, has excelled in this rarefied, white-dominated industry. Here’s what the two had to say over crème brûlée and coconut sorbet.

Pat Cleveland: So, let’s talk about your photo shoot with Ron Eshel.

Alek Wek: [Before this shoot] I’d never worked with him. The whole shoot was incredible. We did it in L.A. He’s English—

Pat: Which must have made you feel at home as a Londoner.

Alek: Yeah! There were quite a few English people [in the crew]; I didn’t know there were a lot of English people out in Hollywood. Everyone contributed. [From] the stylist to the makeup artist: amazing . . . It was really cool. To be honest, it didn’t feel like modeling, like “posing-modeling.”

Pat: That jacket on the cover is very reminiscent of The Beatles. Very regal. Speaking of music, what do you listen to?

Alek: I like different kinds of music. I go from classical to African. Music is everywhere. [It] has always been in my life and it’s very therapeutic. Even if you don’t want to dance, you tap your feet. When I’m in Paris, I love to go to the Virgin music store, that big one on les Champs-Élysées, when I’m doing a fitting at Dior, and when we have some downtime . . . You can try out some sounds that you never would have heard before.

Pat: Do you have an iPod? Are you one of those who run around with an iPod on?

Alek: I just got it for a present not too long ago, and it was sitting on my shelf forever—until I started running in the park. It’s amazing. I don’t need a DJ. Now, I can have a barbeque and put it in.

Pat: You barbeque? What do you cook? What are some of your favorite home cooked meals?

Alek: I like to cook a lot of stews, like okra. I love okra. You steam it with tomatoes and onions, then put some black pepper in it. You eat it with steamed rice. Simmer the onions and tomatoes, so you have some kind of broth, and then you let it simmer down.

Pat: Sounds delicious! I’m curious, which photographers do you like to work with?

Alek: You know what it is? I really value all of the photographers I’ve worked with because they’re so different. Steven Meisel is so different from Steven Klein, Steven Klein is so different than Gilles Bensimon, who I absolutely adore.

Pat: I love that famous photo you did with Herb Ritts.

Alek: [That shoot] was really easy. Herb was respectful, and a gentleman. I didn’t think the shot was going to be such a big deal. Originally, I was going to wear a black latex body suit, but Herb gave it a ‘no.’ He thought it would be better just to use my natural skin and oils. So that’s how the shot came about . . . Having an opportunity with all these incredible photographers, it’s so different. I mean you cannot compare. They all have a different way of working, and they all contributed toward the most amazing times that I had with them. I was just appreciating being who I was, and I thought, if I can be who I am and still do my job, I’m not going nowhere.

Pat: So after all these photo shoots, you must end up with hundreds of clothes, couture gowns, and designer shoes. What do you do with them all?

Alek: I give it away to Salvation Army, friends, and backyard sample sales.

Pat: Whoa, you must have some lucky friends! They must live in your fantasies.

Alek: You have to be able to separate fantasy from reality. It’s why fashion is brilliant: you can dream. That’s why we should celebrate different cultures because that’s what makes it worth it, you know? We all paint the world, we all do, and without that, it just becomes very selfish and very . . . boring—that’s the word. Very boring.

Pat: Okay, desert island time. What two things would you take?

Alek: Well, when I’m not working, I try to keep it really simple. I guess I would bring Vaseline for my skin, and I love those Lancôme lip tubes.

Pat: Well, you’ve done everything: back-up dancer for Tina Turner, published memoirist, film actor, model, activist, and I love your line of Wek 1933 handbags and accessories!

Alek: Thanks! They’re very durable. I love durability. But [designing] has been great. It’s keeping me on my toes, and I have to work with a team of people. You have responsibilities, and that’s important to a top model. There’s deadlines, there’s peoples’ lives; it really got me to be more responsible.

Pat: What’s your role like as an activist? What is it exactly that you put your hands on?

Alek: I feel that we should speak out for others that don’t have a voice. And for me, my first-hand experience was being a refugee, fleeing [Sudan for London], losing my father in that process . . . all that gave me an incentive to want to speak out to other people who are going through such hardship. Once my agents realized that, they embraced it, and I’ve joined forces with U.S.C.R.I. [the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants]. I always say, ‘Alek can do the little bit that she can do.’ Together, if we could all do something, we could really make such change. It’s another human being’s life, that’s what I really try to do with U.S.C.R.I. and Doctors Without Borders.

Pat: You have a great voice. You *are* a great voice. These words are very important.

Alek: My mother always says, ‘Never stop learning. You never know it all. Leave yourself open to learning from others, and educate yourself.’ That’s all I kept hearing, and it’s so true.

Photographer Ron Eshel began his career in London in the early ‘80s. He currently resides in L.A., but shoots internationally, working in both film and digital media for such clients as Nokia, Sprint, Mastercard, and Johnson & Johnson. Ron’s proudest achievement, however, was the birth of his twins in 2004. Represented by Daniele Forsythe, www.danieleforsythe.com



Photo Shoot Wardrobe -
Military Jacket: Collette Dinnigan
Yellow Dress: Rory Becca
Necklace property of model
18K Dendrite Ring: Lola Brooks
18K Aerin Ring: Nicole Landau
Silver Dress: Sheri Bodell
Silver Electroplates Scorpion Necklace: Jenny Dayco
Grey Dress with Stripes: Olga Kapustina
Black Onyx Two Disc Necklace: Jenny Dayco

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Stylist - Gillean Mcleod, www.gilleanmcleod.com
Make up - Stephanie Daniel for Cloutier Agency
Hair - Andre Blaise for Texture Expert by L'Oreal Professionnel
Photographer's assistants - Erin Korff, Danny Ventrella
Stylist's assistants - Corban Poorboy, Elena LaCuesta
Production - Tina Cassey for QAS Productions Inc
Digital Capture - Ken Frisbee for Image Mechanics
Retouching - The Icon LA, www.iconla.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A

Aiello, Frank
pages 102-103

Alexander, Jeff
pages 122-123

Anderson, Andy
pages 24-25

Anyway Artists
pages 118-119

Arbogast, Jim
page 113

Arky, David
pages 52-53

B

Bacall Representatives, Rob
page 55-63, Inside Back Cover

Bagwell Food Photography, Iain
pages 36-37

Bailey, Brian
page 60

Barnhurst, Noel
pages 26-27

Barta, Patrick
pages 104-105

Beavers Photographer, Wick
pages 120-121

Belanger, Peter
pages 106-107

Black, Michael
pages 10-11

Bohm-Marrazzo
page 111

C

Cartright, Joseph
pages 78-79

Clor
pages 12-13

Cooley, Ryann
page 62

D

Daniels, Harold
pages 108-109

Drew, Hank
pages 48-49

E

Elder, Heather
pages 22-31

Erickson, Jim
pages 18-19

Eshel Photographer, Ron
pages 8-9

F

Figura, Paul
pages 114-115

Flynn Photography, Jim
pages 42-43

Freeman, Hunter
pages 28-29

G

Gilman, Tim
pages 124-125

Grimm, Rob
pages 14-15

H

Hughes, Jesse
pages 18-19

I

instilled images by
mister lynch
pages 80-81

Isom, Monte
pages 16-17

J

James, Bruce
page 61

Joseph Reps
pages 76-89

K

Kamin & Associates, Vincent
pages 74-75

Kaplanas, Alan
pages 92-93

Katz Photography, Jeff
pages 64-65

Klug Studios, Inc.
pages 68-69

L

Lanza, Scott
pages 40-41

Lesnick, Steve
page 112

Loader, Mark
pages 34-35

Lorenz + Avelar
page 63

M

Martinez, David
pages 30-31

McGhee, Tom
pages 82-83

ME reps
pages 12-13, 54

Meier, Todd
pages 126-127

Miller Photography, Chip
pages 50-51

Musilek, Stan
pages 20-21

N

Neitzel, John
pages 32-33

Neumaier, Greg
pages 118-119

Nielsen, Jesper
page 56

Niven, Bryan
pages 84-85

P

Page, Lee
pages 38-39

R

raffetto photography, theresa
pages 86-87

Rider, Paul
pages 94-95

Rubin, Al
pages 116-117

S

Sacks, David
page 54

Sakas, Peter
pages 90-91

Sander, Vicki
pages 110-117

Schoenfeld, Michael
page 59

Silver Photo Agency
pages 98-99

Silverman Productions, Jay
pages 44-45

Smith Photography, Kent
pages 70-71

Souders Studios
pages 74-75

Striffler, Eric
pages 72-73

T

Thies, Dorit
pages 66-67

Those 3 Reps
pages 12-13

tonic
pages 100-101

V

Vazquez, William
pages 88-89

Vecchione, Jim
pages 96-97

Vozdic, Paul
page 57

W

Weber, James
pages 46-47

Whitaker, Ross
page 58

Wolter and Associates, Bob
pages 12-13

TALENT LISTINGS

