



Frontiers Shoot with Richard Simmons Made Me a Believer

A wondrous whirlwind day getting to know the incomparable Richard Simmons at his Beverly Hills Slimmons class studio.

By Ed Baker

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"Richard Simmons just called," said Aaron, his expression slightly accusatory and conveying a Koala-featured bewilderment, "and he sang a song to me!" It was Editor Aaron Drake's idea to showcase the *Dance Your Pants Off* legend as a *Frontiers* Health & Fitness issue cover. This made sense since Richard's *Slimmons classes* are wildly popular and he's just released a *new book*. Plus, Richard's ideology spans the whole package—motivation, inspiration, perspiration, diet, attitude and self-love. He would be perfect for an issue timed with New Year's resolutions. But being in his 20s, Aaron may have been unprepared for the magnitude of persona that was, as I came to understand, completely real. I've seen Richard on TV since childhood, motivating vibrantly colored high-energy exercise classes in striped dolphin short-shorts, tossing out one-liners from *Hollywood Squares* with enthusiastic grandeur—and I've heard him laugh, cry and walk off several appearances on *The Howard Stern Show*. A few minutes after Aaron left my desk, photographer *Ryan Forbes* phoned sounding a bit blindsided. "Um, I just got the strangest call. It was ... Richard Simmons. And he was crying." For the record, Richard didn't just cry for no reason; he was moved to tears by the beauty he found in Ryan's images by way of his own sleuthing.

"Perfect!" I said, and explained how he was not being punked. I had not contacted Ryan prior to his surprise call. I only submitted his name and website to Richard's PR with our concept, hoping that if Richard's people wanted to move forward, I could then pitch the concept to Ryan who in turn would be excited. *Frontiers* budgets are an oxymoron, so everyone participating in a photo shoot must have a personal interest in the project—or be really, really selfless.



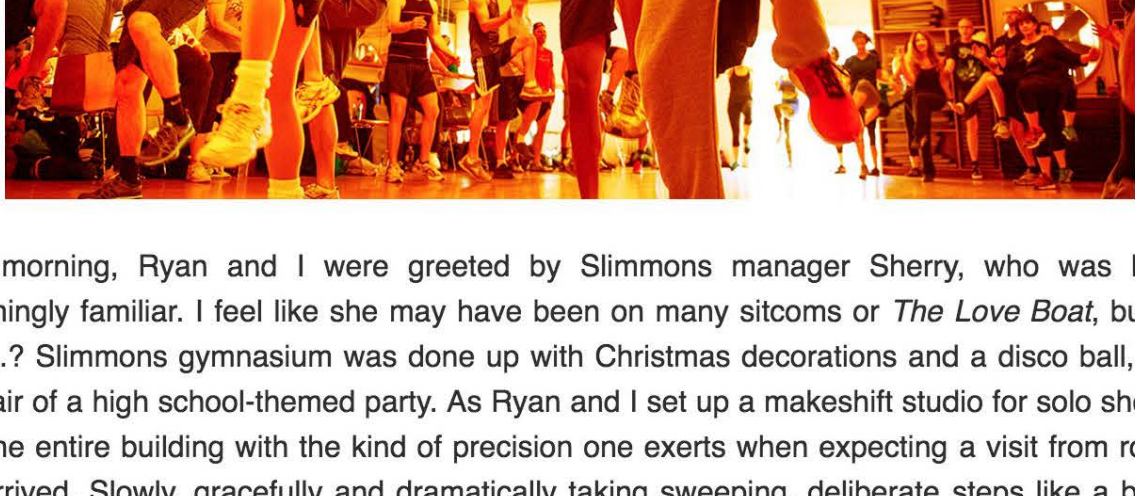
I felt it best to jump in and introduce myself at this juncture, so I wrote Richard a brief email saying I was looking forward to meeting him. He responded right away:

hello ed,
i am very excited about the saturday shoot.....i am.....honored.....if you need anything.....i am here.
love,
richard

"Love!" Richard has many fans and a long-spanning career. I learned that he takes the time to respond to each letter and email while conducting his businesses and living his life. He does not need publicity from *Frontiers* magazine, rarely gives interviews and has a healthy skepticism about the process. Yet he already bypassed a PR buffer in favor of direct interaction with us and used words like "honored" with sincerity.

Usually PR people coordinate with editors and we don't see the personality/celebrity until we're on set. But Richard already committed, serenaded Aaron, tearfully lauded Ryan, closed several emails to me with "love" and picked a date for the shoot—four days out. Ryan and I were invited to attend a Saturday morning SWEAT class. I had boarded a roller coaster and it was speeding towards Slimmons Beverly Hills studio.

Richard politely declined my offer to provide grooming and wardrobe (you're welcome, *Frontiers'* budget) writing that he "will be in a black and white zebra outfit, all made up, with every hair in place."



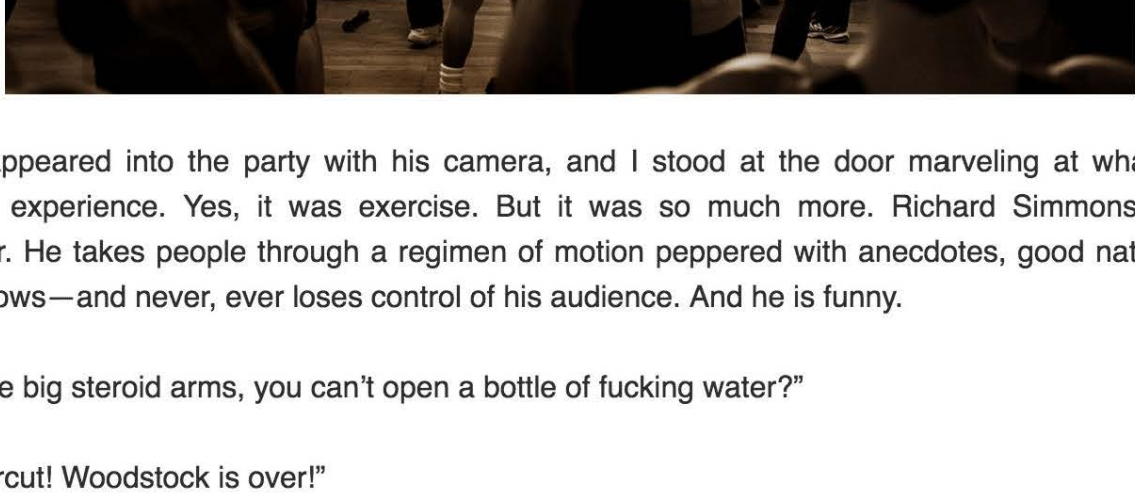
Saturday morning, Ryan and I were greeted by Slimmons manager Sherry, who was lovely and overwhelmingly familiar. I feel like she may have been on many sitcoms or *The Love Boat*, but who can say in L.A.? Slimmons gymnasium was done up with Christmas decorations and a disco ball, giving it a nostalgic air of a high school-themed party. As Ryan and I set up a makeshift studio for solo shots, Sherry prepped the entire building with the kind of precision one exerts when expecting a visit from royalty. And then he arrived. Slowly, gracefully and dramatically taking sweeping, deliberate steps like a bride at the top of the aisle, Richard entered, singing an improvised narrative of what was taking place real-time, turning our day into a live musical. He was indeed wearing a black and white zebra outfit, leggings, made up with not a hair out of place.

Richard produced a gift-wrapped box overflowing with perfect bows and presented it to Ryan. Fornasetti decorative plates. Richard noticed these plates in one of Ryan's photos, mentioned he was a collector and the rest was thoughtful history, indicative of one of his remarkable traits—the ability to make everyone feel special. I learned this throughout the day as I watched him navigate the diverse crowd of SWEAT students, calling out individuals on personal updates with love and zingers like a Vegas headliner taking the mic through an audience.

After bestowing T-shirts and Dammit Dolls upon us, Richard took his place against the seamless roll of gray paper. Ryan explained his plan to composite Richard into a *Lollapalooza*-type outdoor fitness venue in post-production. Richard said, "I trust you," and struck a succession of great poses.

As students began arriving, I busted out the pile of model release forms—a necessary pain in the ass for the second segment of the shoot—for everyone to sign. Ryan was going to sift through the class journalist-style, capturing the action, which meant anyone photographed had to consent. Trying to get people to sign is like cold-calling—unpleasant and no easy feat in the land of reality TV. Everyone is a skeptic. But Richard's world is a safe zone, and almost everyone was gracious. One guy refused, instructing me to "not photograph" him, which was fine since I didn't have the camera.

Richard introduced us to a few of his regulars. "This is David from *Frontiers*." Although I'm Ed and Jewish, he was close—I'm short, loud and loves to eat. I may have thrown him off when we exchanged Italian banter earlier on, because he knew everyone else by name whom he had met—and those he didn't know, he introduced himself to. The class began without warning. No bell, whistle or buzzer, just a group moving in unison to a well-choreographed mix of high-voltage hits.



Ryan disappeared into the party with his camera, and I stood at the door marveling at what was the Slimmons experience. Yes, it was exercise. But it was so much more. Richard Simmons is a true entertainer. He takes people through a regimen of motion peppered with anecdotes, good natured jibes, high and lows—and never, ever loses control of his audience. And he is funny.

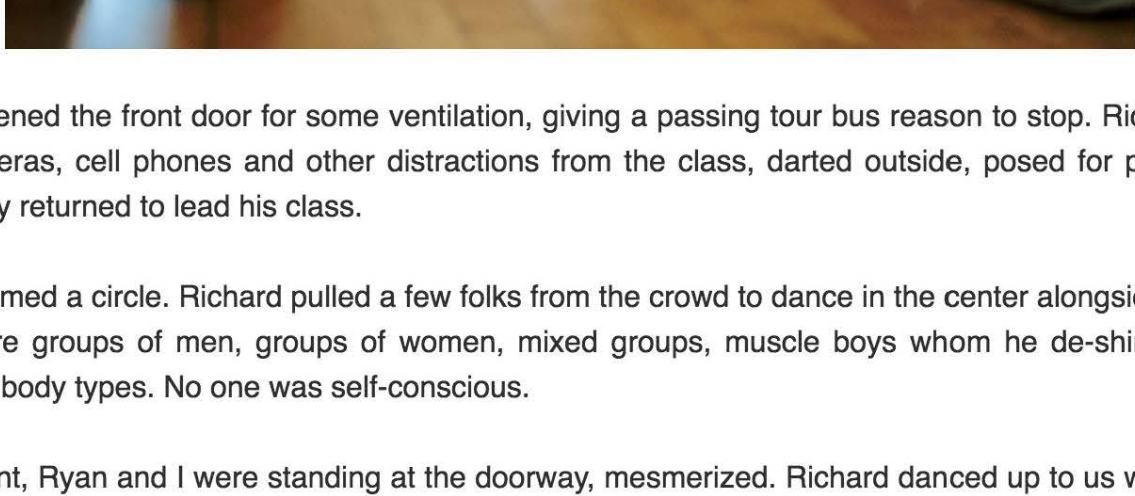
"With those big steroid arms, you can't open a bottle of fucking water?"

"Get a haircut! Woodstock is over!"

"Oh look, he's wearing a rainbow [wedding] band. Where'd you meet, a fucking candy store?"

"Does it hurt? I don't fucking care!"

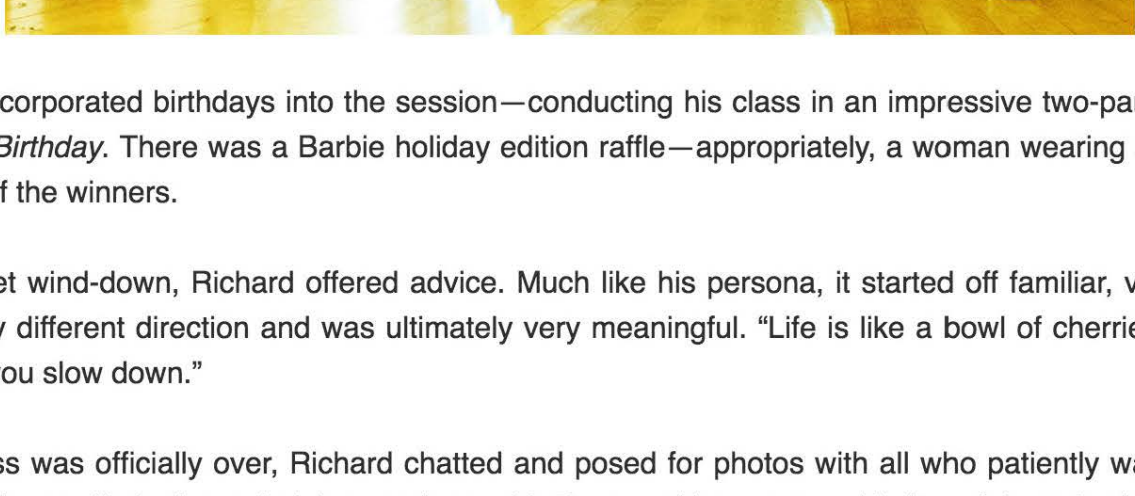
Sure there is a lot of cursing, but it's all done with love, like that one relative we all have with a truck-driver mouth and a heart of gold. I see the recipients of each call-out smile back, acknowledged—and sweating.



Sherry opened the front door for some ventilation, giving a passing tour bus reason to stop. Richard, who photographs, cell phones and other distractions from the class, darted outside, posed for photos and seamlessly returned to lead his class.

People formed a circle. Richard pulled a few folks from the crowd to dance in the center alongside himself. There were groups of men, groups of women, mixed groups, muscle boys whom he de-shirted and a medley of body types. No one was self-conscious.

At this point, Ryan and I were standing at the doorway, mesmerized. Richard danced up to us with Tango-lead-confidence and took Ryan by the hand. Looking panicked, Ryan handed off his camera and disappeared into the circle. I turned the corner to put Ryan's camera in a safe place—but really to hide—when I saw that Richard had re-danced out to the lobby, wagging his finger at me, as in, "No, you're not getting off this easy," and then led me into the circle. We were stripped of our shirts and trying to follow Jazzercise dance moves. I apologize to those who had to see my post latke-party bloat, back-hair and inability to move my arms and legs simultaneously in opposite directions. But in that judging moment, I looked out to the circle of strangers and saw faces of people enjoying themselves, not judging my total lack of coordination, and I got it. This is what the Simmons philosophy is all about.

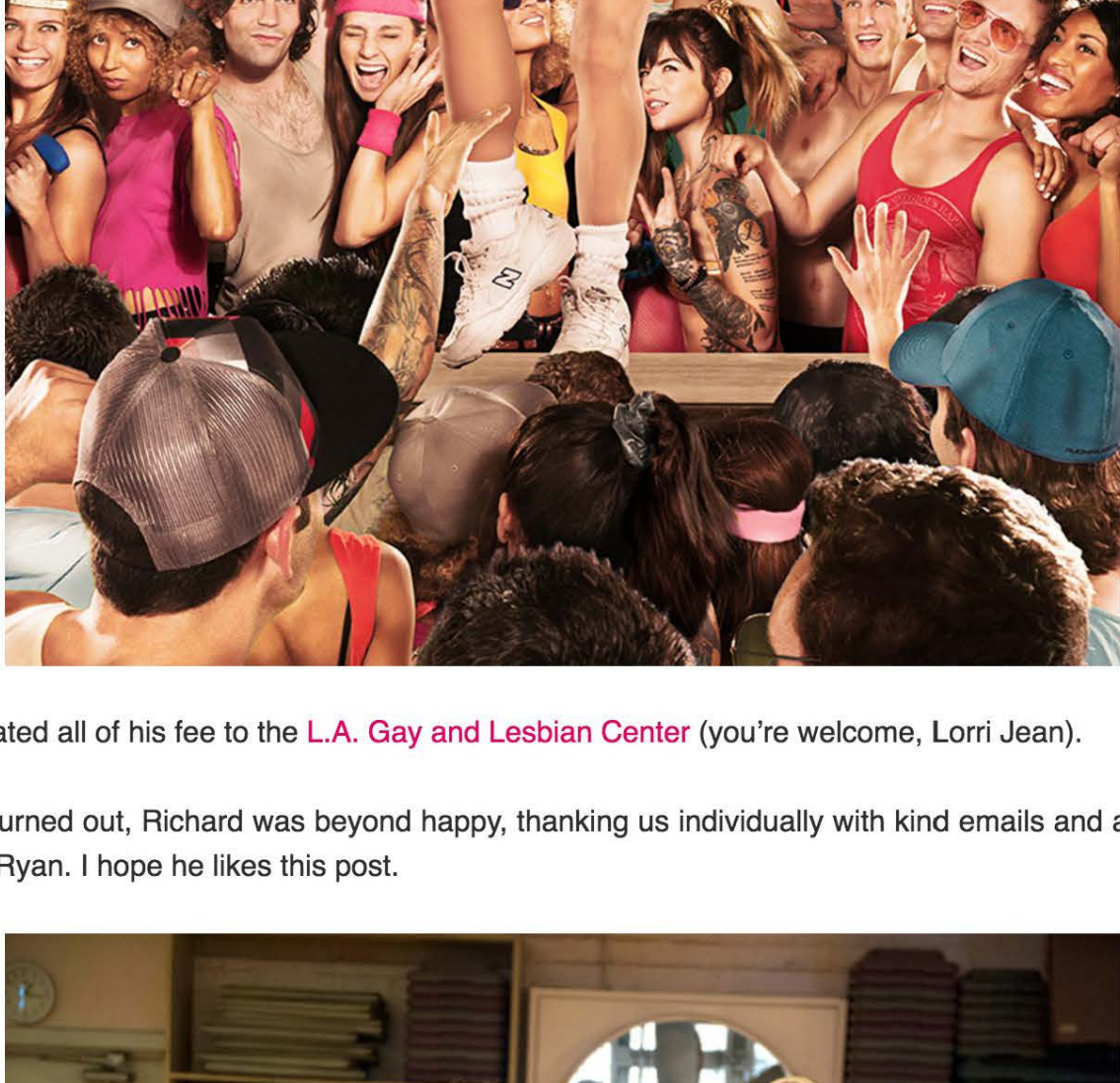


Richard incorporated birthdays into the session—conducting his class in an impressive two-part harmony of *Happy Birthday*. There was a Barbie holiday edition raffle—appropriately, a woman wearing a Barbie-T was one of the winners.

In the quiet wind-down, Richard offered advice. Much like his persona, it started off familiar, veered in a completely different direction and was ultimately very meaningful. "Life is like a bowl of cherries ... (long pause) if you slow down."

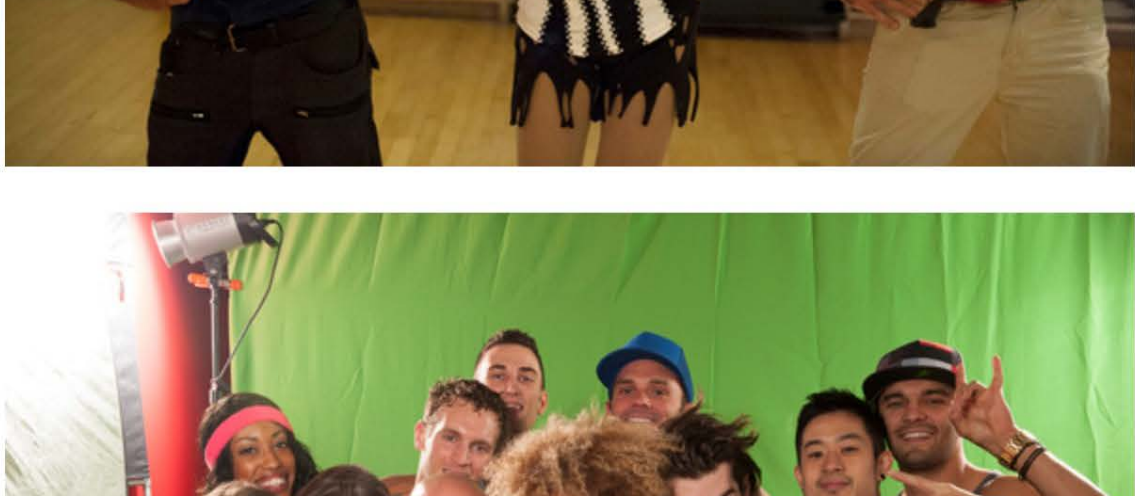
When class was officially over, Richard chatted and posed for photos with all who patiently waited to do so. Once the studio had emptied, he sat down with Ryan and I to express his heartfelt gratitude and cried once again. It was time for us to disembark the roller coaster. We walked out into the brisk daylight of L.A. winter with a deeper understanding of why people love this man so much. I handed him the most current *Frontiers* issue featuring Liza Minnelli on the cover and said, "See, you're in good company." Without missing a beat, he said with hugs and kisses, "Liza never looked that good, honey," and a bid us farewell.

One week later, Ryan and I wrangled local model friends to shoot in front of a green screen at the *Frontiers* office—some Slimmons regulars, friends of *Frontiers* including *Nick Lam*, *Chris Bueno*, *DJ Euphoric* and some new friends. These good sports were used to build a crowd that you can see cheering Richard on in the final composited cover, which turned out amazing.



Ryan donated all of his fee to the *L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center* (you're welcome, Lorri Jean).

And as it turned out, Richard was beyond happy, thanking us individually with kind emails and a few more plates for Ryan. I hope he likes this post.



Special thanks to Alexys Oliver, Chantelle Matthews, Christiana Bueno, David Walsh, DJ Euphoric, Justin Cummings, Michael Quiett, Nicholas Lam, Scott Hahn, Stell Bahrami and Yale Scott.