

The Hot Shoe Diaries

BIG LIGHT **FROM** SMALL FLASHES

Joe McNally

Excerpted from *The Hot Shoe Diaries: Big Light from Small Flashes* by Joe McNally.
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A Little Bit of Dis and a Little Bit of Dat

SOME FOLKS MIGHT VIEW lighting something or somebody as a page out of an NFL playbook, complete with Xs, Os, arrows, blockers, and tacklers—an intensely complicated diagram with many moving parts. And, of course, just like any play in football, no matter how carefully mapped, once set in motion the whole deal has a tendency to careen out of control, accompanied by much grunting, sweating, and the possibility of severe injury.





Others might view lighting as a mysterious hieroglyph, an unknowable set of symbols, daunting as a math problem, as attractive a proposition as a semester of organic chemistry.

Still others may simply view light as magic time, a quicksilver thing that works in our favor one day but not the next. It flickers with a mind of its own and can't be touched or wrangled any more than campfire shadows dancing on a wall. You chant and pray to the photon god and hope it works out.

Like they used to tell us in sex ed classes: hope is not a method.

I try to simplify things as best as I can. For me, lighting has never been a numbers game. You know when you program your background to be -1 EV for saturation, and you are flashing the foreground? Logic and math dictate that, given the fact that the -1 EV value will also apply to the flash output, to make the world equal you should apply $+1$ EV to the flash. Simple, right? Minus one for background, ergo, $+1$ for foreground.

It don't work like that.

View any sort of lighting plan as a recipe. You take a look in the photon cookbook and there is the diagram of the lighting grid with values and positions and ingredients and subject-to-camera distance and f-stops and three tablespoons of chopped whatever. Blah diddly blah. Okay. Fine. Good stuff. Remember, though, it's not a legal document. *It's just a starting point!*

Any tasty, wonderful photo dish is usually the product of some basic technical skills and common sense, and then a little bit of this and a little bit of that, dashes and pinches of Tabasco and

“We should be able to recognize certain types of light and light sources, predicting how they are gonna feel and look right then and there.”

pepper, some steady stirring, some gaffer tape here and there, a little bit of exposure control, some just-right feathering, and then, of course, the right temperature in the oven. Not to mention a healthy helping of the personality of the chef, who is wooing, begging, coaxing, cajoling, and otherwise eliciting the most expressive tastes from the ingredients that have all been set in motion in the big old pot.

There are some basic lighting ingredients to mix in before getting to the fine points of tweaks, fillips, spices, and presentation.

Color

Color, and control thereof, is a big deal. Color controls the mood of the picture, and thus it affects the mood and interest level of someone viewing it. Light has color, of course, and when doing small-flash lighting, it is important to remember that both the flash *and the scene* have color. These are battery-operated units you can fit into your camera bag. They are not light bazookas capable of blowing away all available light. (This can happen, say, in a headshot/studio scenario, and in those instances we need only worry about the color of the flash.)

But, often, when working out in the world, we will be filtering them into an existing scene that already has a mood and a coloration. We need to decide if we are going to alter that mood and shift things by introducing a new color palette, or if we need to slip our flash light in, subtly and unnoticed.

This plays right to our ability to control and understand color. Now that we live in the world of digital and raw capture, many downplay this notion. The malleability of digital is a wonderful thing, to be sure, but it is not an escape hatch. I have often heard “What’s the big deal? If you’re shooting raw, you can change it later.”

It is a big deal. Raw is not an excuse to not know. The ability to change it up later is a blessing, but we should be able to recognize certain types of light and light sources, predicting how they are gonna

feel and look right then and there. This is crucial, ‘cause presumably that will inform what color we introduce via the flash. Warm it up? Cool it down? Gel it so it blends well into a scene and everything looks copasetic? Grab theatrical gels and go Hollywood?

These are field decisions, ‘cause guess what? The magic of raw goes only so far. Flick a switch and the whole frame changes color, to be sure, but what if you have a scene that is super tungsten warm and you flash the foreground with a neutral white flash? Now you have two different colors and, if they don’t mesh well, the global adjustment of raw is only gonna fix one of ‘em. Mix in the wrong color with your flash and you condemn yourself to layers hell in Photoshop, losing yards of your life trying to “fix” something that you could have adjusted pretty seamlessly whilst you had the camera in your hands.

So learn a bit about color.

Quality

The quality of light is another principal ingredient. Most folks have a visceral, kind of *Yuck!* reaction to bad light, but it is difficult to articulate what might make that good light. Suffice to say it is something you just have to spend time in the kitchen to sort out. Light can be hard, soft, wrapping, harsh, slashing, sumptuous, glowing, ethereal, muddy, muted, brash, poppy, brassy, contrasty, clean, open—it's a little nuts. How many terms get thrown around about light? Lots. Just like there are many kinds of light. Take a look at the spice rack next to the stove. Which one you gonna pull?

Direction

The approach of light to your subject is a biggie, too. Front light, backlight, overhead light, low light? All will inform your subject with a different feel, and make that subject look different. Looking different—that's something we want for our pictures, yes? In the millions of photos that get taken every damn day out there, how do we make our pix stand out? Having control of light is very important here, and the direction of light is one of those elements of control.

I'm a people photographer, and believe me, I have made some folks look wonderful and done some others an outright disservice just by the way I brung the light. I always refer to Arnold Newman's portrait of the German industrialist Krupp. Hoo boy. Now there's an exercise in the direction of the light. Hatchet light for the hatchet man. Krup looks reptilian, an interpretation wrought by an effective combo of direction, quality, and color of light. It is light with an attitude.

“Don't shoot 20 frames. Shoot 200. Make mental notes. Look at your pictures. Make more of them.”

Remember These Things

No pixels have to die. The beauty of digital is that you can experiment to your heart's content, and you are belaboring no one but yourself. (And, of course, your wife, husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, kids, pets, neighbors, and anyone else who might be willing to put up with your experimentation.)

You are not running to the photo lab or CVS, racking up processing bills, matching up slides or negs to the laborious notes you took while you were making exposures. "Lessee...frames 21 through 27, the light was camera left at about 10 feet...."

You got it right there in the metadata. Also, make a picture of the light in reference to the subject. A production shot, if you will. That way, you'll have all your exposure info, as well as a visual set of notes to remind you of the physical placement of the light. How high? How far away? What was the f-stop, shutter speed, EV compensation?

Experiment! All of this stuff is just stuff, but it needs the knowin'. Those damn little buttons and dials are mechanical inputs to the camera, but they control functions that have enormous aesthetic implications for your pictures. The fancy-pants digital machines we have nowadays are wonderful and smart, but they are not as smart as we are, and have not a scintilla of stylistic sense or artistic inclination. The program mode and the auto exposure and the auto bracketing are like OPEC, or some other international consortium or cartel that gets together and conspires to make us lazy and dependent.

Break free! Make exposure after exposure. Don't shoot 20 frames. Shoot 200. Make mental notes. Look at your pictures. Make more of them. Find out which ones—which style, color, light, and approach—get your juices flowing. Then, when you get those good ones, you will know how to get back to that place and do it again.

This way, your good pictures will not be accidents.



“Light can be hard, soft, wrapping, harsh, slashing, sumptuous, glowing, ethereal, muddy, muted, brash, poppy, brassy, contrasty, clean, open—it’s a little nuts.”

Break Rules

There are tons of lighting guides and principles and how tos out there. Many of them have fine information. Dos and don'ts. Precepts. Rules, if you will.

Break 'em.

Remember what Barbosa, that scallywag pirate in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, said to the young Miss Turner when she demanded certain treatment in accordance with the pirate's code of conduct?

"Well, you see, missy, it's not a code, really...more like a set of guidelines."

Ahh, yes. Take a look. Put the light where they say to put it. And then put it where you want it. See what you like.

Remember, just like being in the kitchen, this is all to your taste. Some people will love pictures you would like to not put your name on. Other times, you'll feel like you have presented a virtual masterpiece, and the world shrugs. I always hark back to a colleague who shot a well-known entrepreneur for the cover of *Time*. At the time, this swashbuckling capitalist was all the rage and being viewed as a savior, and my friend was besieged with congratulatory phone calls about the cover, its photographic excellence, and how his camera and lens had perfectly captured the magic and the essence of this manufacturing messiah.

Then, of course, it all unravels. Within a year, it turns out that Mr. Honcho is actually a bad man, and he loses everything and is sent to jail. Another news cover runs, from that very same hero take.

(There were no new pictures to be had.) And my photog friend gets another round of phone calls, telling him again what an excellent job he had done, and how his lighting and approach had nailed the son of a bitch dead to rights, and the image fairly reeked of rapacious, evil intent.

Who's to know? What's right and what's wrong? What tastes good and what doesn't? After all, some people like Brussels sprouts. □

Make the Sunrise

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE GOTTEN UP for a bad sunrise?

And, because we love shooting pictures so much, how many more bad sunrises will we continue to get up for?

Shivering in the dark, wondering if we got all the gear, climbing up some hillside or big-footing our way through a forest or field we don't have a permit for, or climbing over a fence and wondering if the folks who own the property also perhaps own a large dog. We are out there making a bet on light and clouds and camera position, a bet so flimsy that it makes taking a flyer on the high-roller slot machines in Vegas look like sensible financial planning.

And then, of course, nothing happens but clouds. Unlike Vegas, when the light don't happen, we don't even play. Pack up and go home.

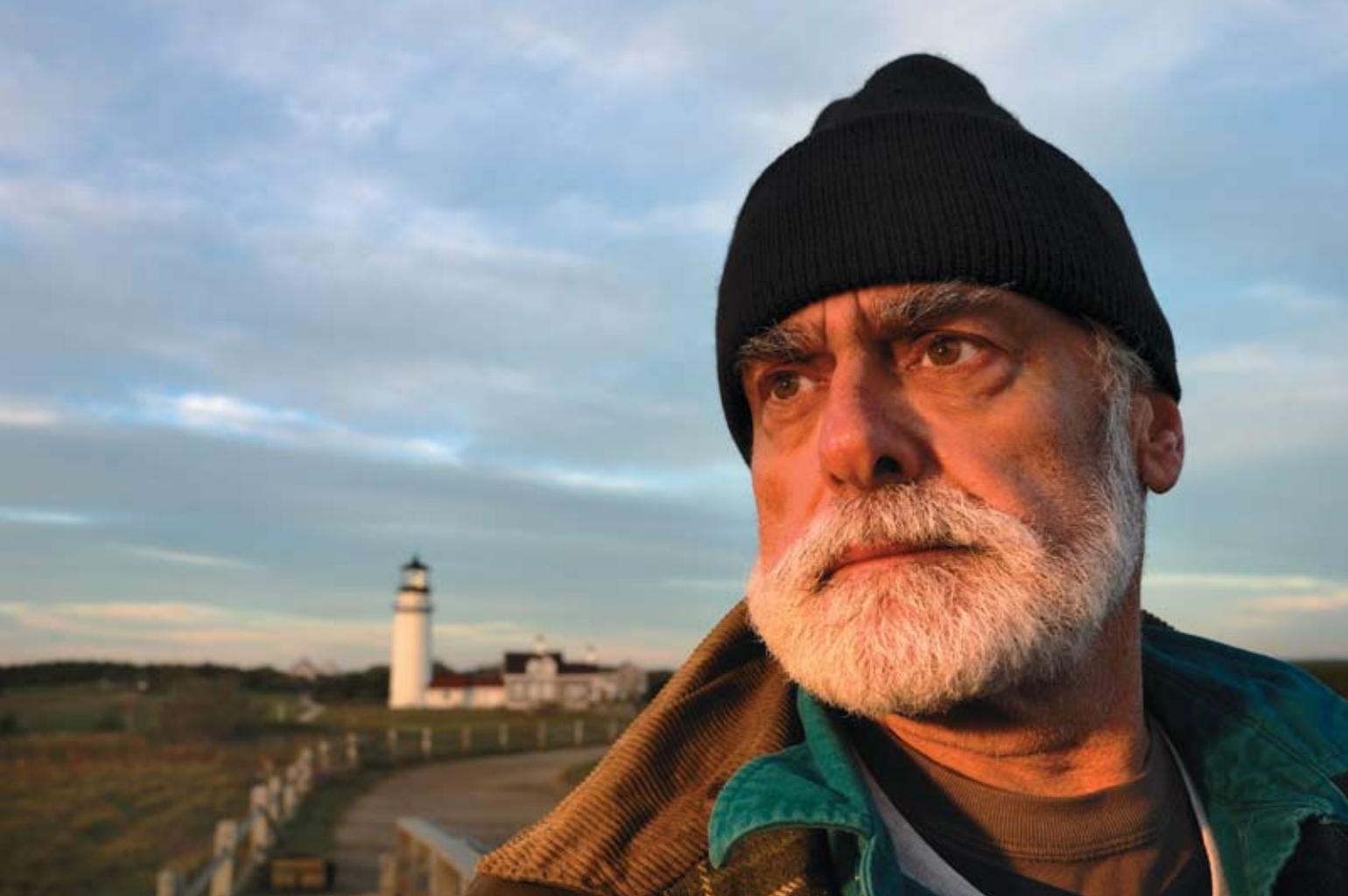
Unless, of course, you brought a flash.

Now I'm not suggesting an SB unit can do the job of the sun. Far from it. But in a pinch, when you got a salty-looking Cape Cod lighthouse keeper in front of your lens and you got a buncha clouds over your eastern shoulder shutting down the morning light show, you've got, you know, options.

Pop open a TriGrip reflector and use the gold side. Light bounced off this will go warm, the color of sunrise. Don't even have to gel the light. Hold it off to camera left, as close to the edge of the frame as possible. Pop an SB-800 (or 600, or 900; for me here, it was an 800) off the TriGrip. Angle your subject's face into the light, as if he's looking at the sea for a lost ship. Bingo—beautiful light, simply made.

Be careful with the position of the reflector. See the catchlight in his eye? Just about in the center. You don't want to hold the Speedlight too low or it will light up his jacket and cast an upward shadow on his face, which does not look natural. Keep the whole rig—light and reflector—just above his eyes. Also, moving that panel in as tightly as possible completely shadows his face from any other light. It gives you control.

The giveaway, of course, is that there is no golden glow on the lighthouse. That's okay. There could be clouds over that piece of the sunrise. Possible. Some kind of haze over the water. Again, possible. We have all seen all manner of things destroy



a good sunrise and cause us to pack up our camera bag and our hopes, and trudge to the nearest diner to recharge our optimism for the next sunrise with a double stack of chocolate chip buttermilk pancakes, a side of bacon, three glasses of orange juice, a hot cinnamon roll, and a vat of coffee.

Anything can happen out there. The clouds may part for a few seconds, letting wondrous light touch the face of our subject. But hey, while you're waiting for that particular miracle of light, you might grab a Lastolite TriGrip reflector, use the gold side, with a handheld remote SB-800, dialed into

Channel 1, Group A and triggered by a hot shoed master SB-800. The master unit tells the remote SB to fire at +1 EV. You need a bit more power than normal, 'cause on aperture priority mode the camera EV is adjusted to -1.7 for good saturation and color, and you lose some lighting power by reflecting it off the TriGrip. My white balance advice here is to go cloudy. Cloudy white balance has the feel of a warm sunrise, even when there isn't one.

Shot this in about 30 seconds as a demo for a Digital Landscape Workshop class. Shot maybe a dozen frames. Like it. Wish I had shot more. □





Make the Available Light Unavailable

WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT? Why would you go from the safe haven of light you can see, touch, and feel into the mysterious, uncertain, and quite possibly dangerous land of flash? That's like sailing across eel-infested waters and then climbing the cliffs of insanity! Inconceivable!

Think of it this way. That available light is available to you, for sure, but then again, it is available to everybody. You can make a picture that will look kind of the same as the guy next to you, and kind of the same as the guy next to him. Then all of you submit those pictures to the same magazine, or agent, or stock house, and the reaction is, "Hey, wait a minute, these all look...the same." It's like Angelina Jolie and Reese Witherspoon showing up on Oscar night wearing the same dress. Quel embarrassment!

In a world of sameness, where there's a Starbucks, a Gap, and a Pizza Hut on every other block of every other town you've ever been to, there is vibrance and joy in difference. In an era of pictures-by-the-pound, fast-food photography—royalty free, rights free—it just might pay to step back and try to make your pictures the equivalent of a mom-and-pop shop, the old curio store, or the place where the locals really eat.

One path to difference is to use light in creative and unexpected ways. Out here on the road, in the middle of No Place, Nevada, the sun had gone

down. There was still plenty of light, but it was cool, subdued, and expressionless. It was, you know, available but unexciting. I put Chris, our actor/cowboy, up against an old barn side that had lots of cool stuff stuck on it, and made a picture (below, left). A very average picture. (That's being kind.) It was a record of the scene, not an interpretation. It was shot at 1/80th at f/2.8.

But what lingered in my head was the sun going down over the distant hills on camera left. It had disappeared behind those hills just when it was about to get colorful and interesting. (Available light will do that to you.) So I put up an SB-900 with a full cut of CTO on it, and placed it on a stand at about the angle the sun had been. The CTO turned the clean, neutral white light of the SB-900 into the color of sunset. The SB-900 was especially advantageous here because of its capacity to zoom to 200mm. When you zoom the flash head to 200, you concentrate the light. It gets punchy and direct, kind of like, oh, the light of a late afternoon sunset.



“Safe, as in...blah. A smooth exposure. Publishable. But nothing with edge or difference or color. So, I got rid of it. All of it. I took over the controls and put the camera into manual mode.”

I aimed it at a pretty steep angle to the wall (triggering it with another SB-900 I hot shoed to the camera). Made another frame at 1/80th at f/2.8 (opposite page, right). You can see the scene warm just a touch. The camera is doing its job. It is blending the flash and the available light in a reasonable way. Remember, it's a machine. It does what it does. Like a food processor, it chops, slices, dices, and blends, all with the aim of uniformity and in worship of what it perceives to be the happy place—the land of the histogram, right in the middle of things. Safe, in a word.

Safe, as in...blah. A smooth exposure. Publishable. But nothing with edge or difference or color. So, I got rid of it. All of it. I took over the controls



and put the camera into manual mode. I dialed in 1/125th of a second at f/5.6, underexposing the scene by about three stops. Predictably, I got this (below). Ordinarily, you'd say, "Whoops!" and check your settings. But here, in this dark place, is where I wanted to be. Now I have control.

What happens when you open a camera shutter in a black room? Nothing, until you light it. I had turned this roadside scene into a black room via the use of shutter speed and f-stop. The camera sees almost nothing now. It is waiting for input. It is waiting for light.

Made another exposure, this one with the Speedlight firing and hitting the actor and the wall in a hard, intense way, creating lots of highlight and shadow areas. The SB-900, zoomed at 200mm and gelled warm, gave the scene life, dimension, and color.

You can do a lot with one flash and a stand by the side of the road. You can make the sun come back. □

Faces in the Forest

DUNNO, BUT RUNNING INTO these guys in the woods might constitute a bad day. Actually, that's kind of the feel I was trying to generate here, kind of a running-through-the-forest-*whoosh!* type of feeling, and then *boom!*—you end with an arresting, eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Of course, I wasn't running with the camera through the forest. I didn't move my feet. Nor did my subjects.

But the lens moved. Zooming or moving the lens while exposing is a time-honored technique. It's been around, frankly, as long as there have been zoom lenses. It requires a subdued quality of light (usually), something you can work with at slower shutter speeds. High noon on a sunny day is not the time to try this.

Subdued light, especially when you stop down the lens (make the opening smaller and the number bigger), will give you that workable, zoomy length of time for the shutter to be open. The slower the





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shutter, the greater the zoom or spin effect, but the greater the risks of camera shake and blurred subjects. (For the two frames with this story, the “spin” move is shot at 1/10th at f/16, and the shot of the single soldier, the “zoom” move, is shot at 1/5th at f/16.)

These kinds of camera moves during an entirely available light exposure have their pitfalls, to be sure. You can end up with images that have no essential core of sharpness, mostly ‘cause everything in the frame is being governed by the same quality and amount of light. In other words, it’s all the same value, and if you zoom poorly or move shakily, the entire deal is gonna look like one of those frames you make when your shutter button bumps into your hip as you cross the street with the camera over your shoulder. I have lots of these. I will eventually stage a retrospective show of these exposures, referring to them as photographs from my “uncertain period.” That would amount to my whole career.

But what if you use flash? The flash introduces another quality of light—one you are in control of. The flash, you will remember, fires at a very fast speed—let’s say 1/1000th of a second or so. (It varies, in relation to the amount of power you are pumping through the flash head.) As already noted, this “speed” of the light is referred to as flash duration.

The flash gives you stopping and sharpening power. Generally, what is lit by the flash—the area of the photograph that the flash dominates, exposure-wise—will be sharp. The rest of the ambient world will be blurred. How much? Depends on how fast you zoom or move that lens, and over

what millimeter range. How much you can push that lens one way or the other directly correlates to your shutter speed. At 1/15th of a second, say, the zoom movement will be short. At a full second, well, you can start zooming, go out for coffee, come back, and finish it. The results will be more pronounced, with longer streaks of motion correlating to the longer period of zooming.

For our special ops guy in the forest, I went to Lo.1 on the D3 to minimize ISO (Lo.1 gives you ISO 100 on that camera). Doing that enabled me to lengthen the shutter speed. The camera burped out an exposure of 1/5th of a second at f/16 on aperture priority mode. The background is dropped to about –2 EV. He was lit with two overhead SB-800s through a 3x3’ Lastolite panel. The panel is angled overhead pretty steeply, almost table-topped, so there is a bit of a brooding feel to the light, given my subject. (Table-topping a silk or a light source generally means it is angled almost flat overhead of your subject, just about parallel to the ground. Top light, in other words. I call it *Goodfellas* light. It’s like the light that’s suspended over the table at the back of the restaurant where the Don sits, meting out judgment and punishment. The overall scene is lit fairly softly, but the eyes are shaded. You know you better kiss this guy’s ring, pronto.)

Same feel here. Got simple overhead light, but I’m not using it at a normal, sort of “Hi, how are ya?” type of angle. It is producing a rim of shadow around the helmet, playing up the ominous aspect. The whites of the eyes, are, well, white, and they pop like a special effect at the movies against the camo face paint.

No need to go further with the light. Simple is

best here, 'cause you're about to introduce the quirk of the zoom move. Tripod just about required, though again, given the mentality of location shooting that says rules are meant to be broken, taking the camera off the tripod could produce something unpredictable and cool. Be steady on the zoom move! To do that, *start* the move before you hit the shutter button. That will mean the exposure will occur with the lens elements already in motion, which will translate to a smooth zoom. (And trust me, there ain't nothin' better than a smooth zoom, if you know what I mean.)

Try it. Then try it again. And again. In fact, try it about a hundred or so times. Not all will work out. Others will hit the sweet spot and give you a good range of choices. I have always believed that the best way to zoom is from telephoto to wide, which means you will pick up depth of field and the appearance of sharpness during the move. I've also heard it argued that you should go from wide to telephoto, which gives a different feel to the picture.

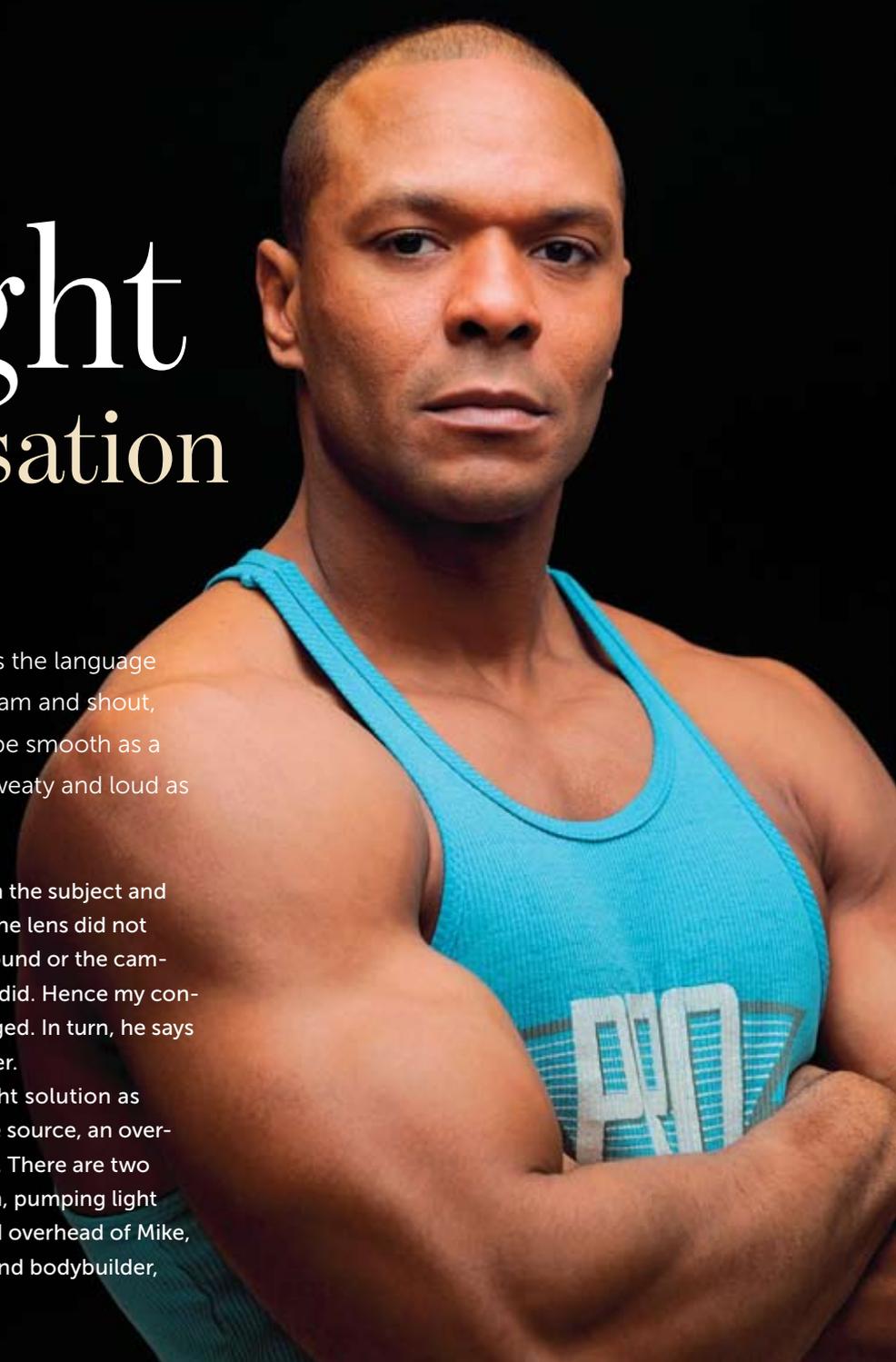
Here's the deal. Try it both ways. Or, spin the camera. Give it, you know, a good hard, uh, twist. Then the world spins instead of zooms, but again, your foreground subjects stay sharp—because they are flashed. Your applied light is dominating the up-front part of the picture. Remember I mentioned I dialed in -2 EV in aperture priority mode? That is helping my sharpness enormously. I effectively took the ambient level of light down from its already shaded middle value and saturated the heck out of it. Made the forest look a bit dark and spooky. That means my guys front and center here have almost no ambient light hitting their faces. Whatever



“The best way to zoom is from telephoto to wide, which means you will pick up depth of field and the appearance of sharpness during the move.”

natural light that is out there is behind them, forming a minimal backlight. On their faces—nada, zilch, just about f /nothing. I pull da guys back into good exposure with my Speedlights, which I can program in increments of a third of a stop to get detail back in their faces just the way I want it. Pretty cool, actually. Out there in the woods, working this way, I've got the same control I would have in a fancy New York rental studio—just minus the cappuccino bar. □

Some Light Conversation



I OFTEN REFER TO LIGHT as the language of photography. You can scream and shout, or you can whisper. You can be smooth as a salesman, or you can be as sweaty and loud as a carnival barker.

All these pictures were shot with the subject and the camera in the same place. The lens did not change. Neither did the background or the camera's point of view. But the light did. Hence my conversation with the subject changed. In turn, he says something different to the viewer.

I would describe the first light solution as smooth light. It comes from one source, an overhead 3x3' Lastolite Skylite panel. There are two SB-800 units, dome diffusers on, pumping light through that panel. It is boomed overhead of Mike, a Florida based trainer, model, and bodybuilder,



who stands underneath it, radiating quiet confidence at the lens. If I were built like him, I'd feel pretty damn confident, too. The light is simple and clean, even and smooth. It fits him, comfortable as skin.

Ah, but then we get cocky. The eyes are compressed, the chin is up, and there is a touch of "Don'tcha wanna be me?" to his expression. Quiet confidence just crossed the line into arrogance. The light picks up on this mood, and it radiates, too. It is no longer quiet. The overhead source stays exactly the same, but what overtakes it is two backlights, placed on either side of Mike, in a position I often call "three quarter back," as I talk about in other stories in the book. In other words, they are not completely behind him, looking directly back at

the camera. That would be straight-up backlight. If the camera is at 12 o'clock, then the lights are at 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock.

They rim him out, and create a frosted line of light all around his physique. If he's the beefcake, baby, this light treatment is the frosting. Caption this one, "D'ya think I'm sexy?"

Next, we go all the way to crazy theater with a bodybuilder performance pose. Muscles are flexed, and the expression's as big as his biceps. He is still being lit by the side lights, but the overhead smooth light is gone. It is replaced by a low, hard source—specifically, one SB-800, hitting him hard. He leans into the light and mugs for the crowd, which is, of course, the camera. The low light catches him like a theatrical footlight, and now he's on stage.

In the last shot, the rim lights are shut down and, instead of playing to the crowd and the low lights, he is caught in a single, overhead spotlight. This is one SB-800 on a boom, no diffuser, zoomed all the way to 105mm. This is, for all the world, like a balcony spot in an old theater. Shadows define his flexed muscles, giving him that peak-and-valley, light-and-shadow ripple effect. He screams for good measure.

A number of issues are at work here.

Size of source. We are always talking about how the size of the light affects the feel and quality of the light. Witness here the effect of a three-foot swatch of diffusion material moved in close to our subject. It wraps, softly and easily. As I said, smooth.

As opposed to one small, spectral source, which is anything but smooth. That changeup produced the harsh slashing shadows in the last two frames. Size changes, angle changes, photograph changes.

A word about these light panels: I use 'em...a lot. The feel of the light is very softbox-like, but when working with the Speedlights, which have a light sensor window that seeks input from the master signal at the camera, you can't bury them inside a softbox, 'cause the remotes won't see the master flash. The light panels are open surfaces, so messages from the camera translate easily.

On the last shot, I knew I had the light nailed 'cause I had a test model who had the same body-builder physique. □



Groups!

EVERY PHOTOGRAPHER'S favorite thing! The more people in the group, the odds that something is going to go wrong, or somebody will not look good, or someone will complain, or your lights will misfire, or the person with the striped tie and the checked suit and the white socks and the welder glasses will be in the front row are so high it's ridiculous. Scenes like this are so daunting, so difficult, so spirit-breaking as to make even the most resolute shooters dream of engaging in another profession that would presumably be more stable and remunerative, like running a roadside vegetable stand.

That's a little extreme, but you get the idea. To do effective group portraiture, you have to have a multiple personality: shooter, lighting director, cartoon character, stylist, shrink, diplomat, captain of the Love Boat, and, occasionally, a flat-out, shit-heel, goin'-straight-to-hell liar. "That's really nice! Everybody looks good! Especially you, ma'am. That's a lovely outfit! Circus in town?"

Yikes. But ya gotta do it. I try to make a game of it now. I positively drip confidence, while keeping up a line of chatter a used car salesman would envy. I have no idea if what I'm saying is sensible, effective, or downright offensive, but I try to keep the ball bouncing and my subjects laughing until it's over. Mercifully, these bloody things are generally over quickly.

Okay, quick survival guide. Do not shoot one of these with a straight flash. (Whenever I say stuff like that, I realize that if you are out there and you have one flash and nothing to bounce off, ya gotta do what ya gotta do.) But strive, mightily, to get the light off the camera—and,





“Work your lights as high as you can get them, and aim them towards the back of your group. Basically, fly the bulk of the flash power over everybody.”



if possible, use multiple lights. If you shoot it with straight flash, the folks in the front row will be two stops hotter than the folks in the back, and the unflattering light will make most everybody look about as happy as a group of folks at an Irish wake.

I have gone to extremes (hey, it's me). For *Life* magazine, I shot a group of virtually every well-known jazz musician on earth on a soundstage out at Silvercup Studios in Manhattan, using about 70,000 watt-seconds of light. I had to bathe the entire set in light, and have about *f/16* from front to back, 'cause I had to shoot it on a panorama camera. That meant a lot of light and a lot of diffusion. Got it done, though, and it looked good. And, truthfully, I was under so much pressure that the only thing I really remember is that jazz musicians don't listen to anybody.

But nobody's gonna do that again, especially me. Another extreme I have gone to is to do a firehouse group portrait of about 60 guys, outside the house, in the rain, with three SB-800 units. Talk about the winging-it, minimalist approach. I put two remote flashes on camera left and camera right, like a copy stand, and just banged away. Here's one strategy I can offer here: Work your lights as high as you can get them, and aim them towards the back of your group. Basically, fly the bulk of the flash power over everybody. Trust me, the front row will still get lit up by the low spill that comes out of the Speedlights. (Remember how I've said that when you set off one of these puppies, light goes everywhere?)

The light will radiate. The lower portion of it will light the front of the group, while hopefully a bunch of the light—because you placed the flashes high up—will travel to the back of the line. Also, with a flash to the left and right of the camera, try lighting

the group like you would light a background by crossing the lights over each other: feather the right light toward the left, and vice versa. You may get some conflicting shadows, but you have a better chance at even dispersal and coverage. (Those potentially conflicting shadows can be softened and opened up by the flash that's coming straight from camera. This is one of those instances where you don't have the luxury of using your on-camera SB flash only as a commander. You need to program it to be a flash and a commander. You also may need to play with the EV of that on-camera flash. Probably best to dial it down just a bit, and let the remote Speedlights do the heavy lifting.)

Forget about sidelighting! Unless you have a huge, huge light source, bringing light from the sides of a group setup is just asking for trouble. Shadows will tumble left and right like so many dominoes. There will be big dark holes in the photo where some of the people used to be.

Frontal light—a big bounce or wall of it—works well. That is why, if I have a smallish or reasonably sized group, I often use a Lastolite 3x6' panel directly overhead my camera position, oriented horizontally. That is a wonderful "cover" light, if you will. And, if you use a C-stand with an extension arm to project it over the camera and towards your group, you then have a lot of leeway to pitch that source at an angle that won't cause screamin' highlights in people's glasses.

In a group, kids are actually much easier to deal with than adults. All you have to do is get 'em together and be prepared to act like a goofball. I have actually shot groups of little tykes with a stuffed animal bungee-corded to my head.

With the ballerinas here, I just acted like an idiot—which comes second nature to me—and made sure I didn't use a straight flash. At 1/60th at f/10 with straight flash, as you can see below, you turn these cute kids into a group you don't want showing up on your doorstep on Halloween. With a situation like this, it has never been truer that you have to make your small flash behave like a big one.

Quick strategies to shoot a gaggle of cuties like this with minimal gear:

- Make it fun.
- Find a white wall and spin the head of your SB-800 or SB-900 all the way around, so that it fires backwards, washes off the wall, and comes forward to cover the kids.
- If there is no possibility of a wall behind where you are shooting, crank the flash head up as if you were bouncing it, and start working with your shutter speed to blend in some of the existing light. The existing light can soften the harder pop of your on-camera Speedlight. If



the ambient light starts doing strange things color-wise, you could try a preset white balance. Find a white surface (the Lastolite TriGrips work well here, if you got one stuffed in your bag) and do an exposure that mixes flash and ambient. The camera's sense of color will most likely render good skin tones.

- Make it fun.
- If you have a remote flash or flashes, run them through soft light-shaping tools, such as an umbrella or, as I mentioned, a 3x6' Lastolite panel. It's the perfect shape for a group like this, which was shot at 1/15th at f/7.1 with no EV compensation. The flash dominates the foreground of the photo, rendering the kids in a pleasing and sharp way, and the drag of the shutter to 1/15th brings in some context and background. Be careful with low shutter speeds, though. Shoot a bunch. If you go any lower than 1/15th, you run the risk of giggly kids who are moving and not sharp, even though they are flashed.
- Try a quick, light flick of light off the floor. A very weak fill bounced off the floor at about -2 EV is often effective in giving those cute faces an extra little spark. And when I say "floor," I don't mean the crimson carpet. You have to throw something white, gold, or silver down there. Enter the Lastolite panels again. A white reflector with either a gold or silver backing comes with all the kits. Throw that on the floor and you're in business.
- Did I mention to make it fun?



How to Give Birth to a Speedlight

FIRST, YOU HAVE TO HAVE FRIENDS who understand the murky recesses of your imagination. Then, you have to have a workplace where twisted humor is the rule, not the exception. With those elements firmly in place, the only thing that stands between you and a photo like this is where to put the Speedlights.

One, er, placement is obvious. Now this is where you really need friends. There is no one I could ask to do this for me other than Mawgie, long-time Santa Fe Workshop model, friend, and graceful, exuberant presence in front of the camera. She's modeled for all sorts of classes at the workshops, but never did she foresee, as she put it, becoming a "gynecological model." I pointed out to her that it would be a real ice breaker as a business card.

Mawgie made arrangements at her ObGyn clinic and we trooped in there and started moving and pushing (okay!) and propping to make it as doctorly as possible. One of the first controls I reached for to achieve this was white balance. Shooting this room in straight-up daylight tones would render it pretty mundane, as it was a simple, no-frills doctor's office. When you are trying to create a mood, though, color is one of the most effective tools in your bag. The background is a frosted glass window, looking onto the parking lot. There is quiet, fading daylight filtering through there. Because I shut the overheads off, it was really the only light source in the room.

As I have said a number of times, when you take daylight, especially muted daylight, and translate it through your camera set at a tungsten white balance, the world goes blue. How blue depends on your exposure (underexposure will give you a rich, saturated blue) and the degree of tungsten you have the white balance dialed into. Within all the general options of white balances offered in almost any digital camera—daylight, open shade, cloudy, tungsten, etc.—there are incremental controls that allow you to fine-tune that particular realm of color you are programming. Here, I took my tungsten balance a touch lower on the Kelvin scale (on the D3, I went to B3). Thatsa one beautiful blue!

In my mind, by turning the scene blue it has a more science-like, operating-theater drama. The sterile gowns and masks go with this flow.

The mood is set. Now the, uh, child in question is an SB-900 and it is on the floor stand that comes with the unit. The dome diffuser is on, giving me the greatest spread of the light. (Jeez, there's a lot of ways you could write about this.) There are no gels on the flash.

That SB-900, being ungelled, will also radiate blue. Except if you keep it bright. In the upper reaches of its exposure curve, the quality of light will be white. A cool white, but white nonetheless. That is why our intrepid delivery team of Nerissa, Jen, and Leah all have relatively normal skin tones. They are in the brightest wash of that light, the miracle-of-birth light, and thus are glowing. I am controlling that source from the camera with an SU-800 Wireless Speedlight Commander unit. There are no problems with the lights receiving the i-TTL signal as the white walls of the small room bounce the pre-flash everywhere.

Now for the rest of the room. It is bathed in blue, so what will look good and perk visual interest is a couple of highlights, gelled with CTO and, therefore, warm. Warm and cool tones always produce a vibrational color effect. They play well together. There are three other Speedlights in this photo, all very controlled, all very warm. On the lower right, there is an SB-800 with a Honl grid spot, introducing mild highlight value to the equipment on the stand. On camera left there are two Speedlights: one an SB-900 with a snoot, putting a small highlight on the shelf in the background; and another SB-800 with a snoot, putting a very faint highlight on Mawgie's left leg. Very controlled, very low power. An accent light shouldn't scream. We left that to Mawgie. Kidding! □