

Sketching Light

AN **ILLUSTRATED TOUR** OF THE POSSIBILITIES **OF FLASH**

Joe McNally

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VOICES
THAT
MATTER™

New
Riders

Sketching Light: An Illustrated Tour of the Possibilities of Flash

Joe McNally

New Riders

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*In the storm-tossed seas of freelance photography,
Annie remains a safe harbor, a light on the shore.
Always and forever...*



Notes on the Book

This book has been a long time coming. So my first thanks go out to folks who have asked about it, and maybe even waited patiently for it. It took a while to write, in between assignments and life. I also waited a bit to get my head around some new technology that has been swirling about.

That's always a tough game to play, because there's always something new. But I did wait to include certain things—for instance, the new radio TTL systems for small flash—that are beginning to mature, and promise to make things easier for us. I wanted to see where some of the newer bells and whistles might lead.

Mostly, I remain thankful to be a photographer. In the midst of the torrent of technology we swim in daily, the unchanging mission for all shooters is to make pictures that arrest the eye of the viewer and describe our chosen subjects eloquently. We are part of an honored tradition, that of storytelling, which goes back to the dawn of time. Those prehistoric people, painting on their cave walls—were they doing anything different than we are now, with all our pixels and technical wizardry? I think not. They were leaving their footprints, and telling the story of their times, and their lives. With those ancient pigments on those rough walls, they were saying one simple thing: Remember us.

Which is exactly what we're doing. We're just doing it faster, more often, and with more sophisticated tools. And I'm thankful for those tools.

Nikon, my camera system for many years, creates wonderful picture-making technology. So does Canon. I'm thankful for both, because those two competitors spur each other on. Who benefits? Us. The photogs. Thanks are in order for Manfrotto, Elinchrom, Lastolite, LumiQuest, and PocketWizard. And Apple, Profoto, Nik, and Kata. And Lexar, Wacom, Think Tank, Westcott, and Epson. Basically, gratitude to all those technically minded folks who labor and compete with each other to produce photo machinery that makes the life of a shooter in the field easier, more expansive, and more productive. There are

amazing pictures being made today that could not have been made just a few years ago. The current, wonderful era of pictorial adventurism is directly linked to technology and innovation. Better tools fuel the imagination, and enable better pictures.

I write about a bunch of those tools in this book. I write about those tools because I use them, plain and simple. And, I use them because they work—for me.

It has been pointed out, and even complained about, that in the realm of small flash, I write solely about Nikon Speedlights. Okay, I do.

Here's why. I use them. I've got nearly 40 years of experience in the field using Nikon gear. I've been through the fire with the stuff, and watched it both soar and fail. I've had it save me, and curse me, the same way any camera system might do for and to anyone who chooses to use it. The point is, I'm qualified to write about the stuff. I've relied on it. I know how it works, and I can offer workarounds when it doesn't.

Thanks to Syl Arena, and his wonderful book, I can work a Canon Speedlite. I could go outside right now and make a picture with one. The reason I don't write about Canon stuff is that I'm not qualified. I've never relied on those lights in the heat of battle, when the chips were down, out there on assignment. I don't have the depth of experience that's needed to offer the reader a nuanced, detailed overview, fortified with the resonance that only comes from time spent using the gear, day in and day out. Just because you read the manual and can work the gear doesn't mean you can or should talk or teach about it. So I don't.

Additionally, while there's tons of basics and tech info and gear discussed in these pages, the conversation—story to story, picture to picture—emphasizes the use of light, not necessarily where it comes from. Big flash, small flash, light shapers, stands, settings, gels—it's all in here. But the much more important aspects of the book are how all that stuff gets used to speak, describe, and inform. How all that machinery boils down to a simple, elegant, appropriate light at that moment, for that subject.

Many people have helped this book along. I'm very grateful to all who have come to workshops and lectures, and then go into the field and passionately find their own pictures. Thanks to those in some classes who were kind enough to snap a production picture or two, behind the scenes. Some of those are in these pages, and they provide enormously helpful information. All the models have been truly wonderful. Kudos for your patience, discipline, expressions, and devotion.

Ted Waitt—and the all-star team at Peachpit. I drove them nuts, Ted especially. But he remained calm, and was always what a good editor should be—a reasoned voice, a collaborative director, an informed questioner, and a resolute shield from some of the ranting that might have occurred (I'm just guessing here) about "Where the hell is that book?!?!"

Speaking of all stars—the folks at my studio. Lynn DelMastro steers the ship. (That's a generous description of the McNally operation. It's occasionally been more of a leaky raft.) But through it all, Lynn has remained the heart, soul, and spirit of our enterprise. The enormously talented Drew Gurian, Mike Cali, Lynda Peckham, Mike Grippi, and Karen Lenz all offered wisdom, guidance, and organization, in addition to their tremendous visual expertise.

Harry Drummer, Jeff Snyder, Monica Cipnic, and the gang at Adorama have remained in our corner and are wonderful collaborators. My Italian and Jewish brothers, Mike Corrado and Lindsay Silverman at Nikon, always come through. Their colleague Trudy Kraljic cuts through the clutter and gets it done. Bill Pekala remains a force for all photogs, and Jeff Cable at Lexar thoroughly supports shooters. (Every digital snap in this book was done on a Lexar card.) RC Concepcion remains brilliant in every way, including his friendship.

Likewise, the creative crew at Lastolite has been terrific in listening and responding to reports from the field. I've actually helped them design some light shapers! (I feel like a pro golfer who's been on the tour for 30 years, and somebody finally asked him to design a course. Very cool.)

Manfrotto, both here in the U.S. and worldwide, pushes creative solutions both in the studio and on location. Dano Steinhardt makes a wonderful bridge for photographers grappling with the printed image. And Moose Peterson taught me how to embrace the natural world through a lens.

Bill Douthitt, my dear friend, off-kilter editor, and madcap compatriot through 25 years and 10 *National Geographic* stories, remains, well, Bill.

I've used cameras and lenses to tell stories for many years, but it was Scott Kelby who opened the door for me to the written word, something I had not thought of using much, during all that time with a camera to my eye. Scott, wonderful writer and shooter that he is, simply said, a few years ago, "You should write a book." He not only encouraged me to write, he lent his considerable skills as an editor. That vote of confidence was much needed, and appreciated. His voice resonates with me today, in this book.

Lastly, and importantly, I thank those who went before. Those photographers of yore who took, by comparison, crude tools into the field and crafted wonderful stories. Their pictures are my memory.

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Possibilities

The key word on the cover of this book is not “flash,” or even “light.” It’s the word “possibilities.” Because that is, at its core, what this book is about. It isn’t about pictures that already exist. It’s about what might be possible to create, in terms of pictures, if you experiment with light. The pictures and information on these pages are, hopefully, a prompt to that sense of experimentation.

There’s a ton of basic information in this book. There are pictures, sketches, production photos, notes, and metadata. In most instances, I’ve divulged virtually everything you could want to know about any particular shoot, short of the color of my boxers. They’re generally blue, by the way, though I do have a couple of pinstriped numbers, and on really big shoots I wear my lucky thong. Joe make joke.

The book also, amazingly enough, talks about what pictures can be created with one or two lights, or a small grouping of lights that act like one light. In a quick tally as the book heads to press, my count is that roughly 85 images under discussion were made with one light, and another 15 were made with two or three Speedlights or a couple of bigger flashes configured to behave as one light source.

I say “amazingly enough” not because it’s impossible make good pictures with minimalist lighting and gear, but because I have a bit of a, ahem, reputation. I guess I’m a bit on the technical side, and perhaps have a reputation for using lots of flashes, and engaging jobs with armies of assistants at my side. There might be folks out there who think that, indeed, a big job for us at my studio is vaguely reminiscent of one of those battle scenes in *Lord of the Rings*, complete with the sound effects. Frankly, nothing could be further from the truth.

It’s generally myself and one assistant out there on a job, with a modest amount of gear—a few stands and lights of different types. Sometimes, it’s just me, a camera bag, and a couple Speedlights. I wrote a book a while back called *The Moment It Clicks*, which most folks seemed to enjoy, though there were a few summations along the lines of, “You could do this, too, if you had 17 assistants and a couple hundred flashes!” One gentleman even wrote that the book was about “how to use \$10,000 worth of flashes!”

I blanched and started thinking to myself, geez, was I over the top? Did I really do that? Did I create the impression that me and an army of strobe-bearing orcs are out there, hacking reality into submission, subduing the very sun with so much flash power that every click causes an East Coast brownout?

Chastened, I went back to the book and started counting.

Of the 126 pictures in *Clicks*, 47 of them were made with available light, 46 were made with one light, and 12 with two lights. The remaining 21 used three or more lights.

Whew! Was I relieved! In that tome, it certainly wasn't the amount of light, but perhaps the way the light was expressed, that might have created the illusion that dozens of flashes were used. The question of volume of light and numbers of flashes popped up again with a book called *The Hot Shoe Diaries*, in which there were actually 113 pages devoted to one-light solutions. Sigh. I guess, as Clint Eastwood said in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, "Sometimes trouble just follows a man."

That's why the word "possibilities" is so important in describing this book. It's not about one light, or two, or however many. It's not about big flash or small flash. It's about using light—speaking with it, adapting it, subduing it, shaping it—in short, telling stories with it. As it always has been, light remains the language of all photographers, everywhere. And as we all know, a good story has nothing to do with how many words are in it.

It's also not about the numbers behind each exposure, even though there are tons of numbers given here in association with each picture. There's full metadata disclosure, and there are pictures showing the set, the distances, the gear, the light shapers, and the cameras. There are sketches that extend the reach of the stories by offering diagrams of lighting grids, and additional field tips. There is, in short, quite a bit of the "how" of picture-making in this book.

Which is a good thing. Photography is an awful lot about how to do it. The mechanics are always with us. And the immutable and, at first, daunting language of photography is writ by and large in numbers

"As it always
has been, light
remains the
language of all
photographers,
everywhere."

“That’s really
where the heart
and soul of this
book lives. In the
realm of the why.”

and symbols. F-stops. Shutter speeds. Three-to-one lighting ratios. Pixels in digits that exceed the national debt. Menu items, options, and sub-options. Arrows and scales. The very machine is festooned with buttons, dials, switches, and levers, all of which apparently have some influence on the final calculation, which used to be a picture, but is now a file, a capture.

It all sounds very dry, difficult, and, truth be told, boring. To me, the numbers are the somewhat foul-tasting medicine of picture taking. Figuring out the numbers can be as hard as a math final, and just as enjoyable. So many times I have cursed the sheer mechanics of this! The camera in my hands can sometimes feel about as supple and responsive as an abacus. Even now, after all these years of jamming my eye into a lens, I ask myself: How do I make this machine work? If I go $-2/3$ on the camera and program $+2$ into the flash, is that good? Do all these numbers add up to a nice picture?

Sometimes. At other times, the capricious, mercurial nature of photography catches up to and overtakes math and logic. You are out there, apparently overwhelmed, in uncharted pictorial territory, where no book or manual can really offer guidance, and you think you can’t find right or wrong, yes or no, or even a proper f-stop setting, and the result of all this internal and external chaos is...a wonderful photograph.

Think about it this way. Imagine the high-speed camera in your bag is a Formula One race car. All the money, the sponsors, the glitz, the science, the tech, the RPMs, the high octane gas, the champagne in the winner’s circle...come down to a pair of hands on the wheel. The guts and savvy of a driver who knows when to lay up, and when to bring the hammer down.

It’s the same thing for us in the field. The problem of how to do it, as I said, is always with us, a perennial and occasionally annoying sidekick. The numbers have to be firmly in your head. That technical bedrock is the ground upon which your pictures will stand, and knowledge thereof gives you the confidence to risk it all going after a

good photo. But the how, resolutely, stands in service to the why. Why shoot it like that? Why use a big flash as opposed to a Speedlight? Why take the time to light a background? Is this story best told by run-and-gun shooting, or do we drag all the elements into a studio and control every pixel?

So, even though I give very precise data on each shot, I acknowledge throughout the accounts of each adventure (and misadventure—trust me, there are some of those in here) that my numbers will not be your numbers. Photography is so situational—each face, setting, and job will be different—that seeking the holy grail of the technique or math that always applies is fruitless. But, what does remain, what always lives in the heart and mind of every shooter, is the need to always answer that persistent, absolutely important question of why.

That's really where the heart and soul of this book lives. In the realm of the why. Why shoot a picture a certain way? Why put the camera to your eye in the first place? All the technical solutions drive forward from the singular, audacious act of looking through a lens and trying to sort out and explain the world in front of you within a single, two-dimensional rectangle. It could be curiosity, sympathy for the human condition, intrigue about a face or place, the urge to tell a story, or the call to shoot from a client. Whatever the impetus, the numbers just follow the need to shoot.

And certainly, every number you input at the camera has potentially enormous implications for the way that picture will speak. No doubt about it. I talk about that throughout the book. I discuss why I shot with a 300mm instead of a 14mm. Why depth of field in this picture is nonexistent at $f/1.4$, or huge in that picture that was shot at $f/16$. Why a 2400 watt-second big box flash is needed here, but over there you can get by with a battery-operated Speedlight that fits in your pocket. Could they be interchanged? What would be lost or gained by doing that? Why does one face demand smooth light but another absolutely require hard light with an edge? And, I'm direct, too, about the fact that you may well disagree with the answers I show here, in

my dispatches from the field. The answers to the how's and why's of a photo are as different and numerous as there are shooters.

The discussion is important, because talking about this stuff makes us all better shooters. It's just that when the talk starts and stops at the numbers, and the whole world revolves around the precious, soulless hardware in the bag, we miss the point. The point is the picture. The conversation starts there.

So we do need to know the numbers, and that's a beautiful thing because they are, indeed, knowable. There are good, clear, reproducible, precise approaches, distances, f-stops, and shutter speeds here in this book, and elsewhere. Sure-footed knowledge of technique feeds your pictures, and grows your confidence. And that confidence enables you to pursue ever more aggressively the answers to the far more interesting questions that are really the heart of the matter.

So read on, if you will. Study the numbers. Learn the techniques. Ask the questions. Create your own beautiful pictures. Risk failure. Court disaster. Entertain possibilities.

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Up Against the Wall

STRAIGHT FLASH BE UGLY, RIGHT? You can take someone who has a wisp of a chance of being attractive, and easily turn them into Quasimodo via the transformational wonders of bad light.

But sometimes it's the only game in town. Sometimes, you have to use it. And sometimes, maybe, it's not so bad. Given my well-announced criticisms of straight flash on the camera, I thought I'd take a look at it and see what happens when you're locked in to one light, perched on the camera, on axis with the lens.

It might be my overactive imagination, but when I'm looking at someone through the lens with a flash on the camera, I always have the sense that I am a U-boat commander at the periscope, peering at the hapless human on the seamless as more of a target than a potential portrait. "Range: Five meters and holding! Plot firing solution! Fire!" Then there's this almost viscerally felt whoosh at the camera, followed by the blinding impact of harshly flung photons at this unsuspecting, defenseless merchant ship of a subject. I continue to peer through

the optics as he or she, grievously wounded by my ineptitude, slowly slides below the waves.

I digress. Back to the business at hand, which is nuking the entire scene with a full-blown, straight-flash light treatment. When you pop the dome diffuser on most flashes on the market nowadays, they automatically zoom to their widest possible dispersion, tracked in millimeters. There are various possible numbers associated with different makes of flashes, but a wide play of light from the camera generally pulls in anywhere around 14 to 20 millimeters, more or less. Hence, if the zoom feature on your flash reads out at 14mm, it will theoretically cover the field of view of a 14mm lens. Again, in theory, the coverage is complete, and edge to edge, with no falloff of the light. Also, many flashes have an “auto zoom” mode where, when programmed properly, the flash tracks with the lens. In other words, when you zoom the lens, the flash zooms with you. It will go right through a bunch of millimeter lengths, keeping pace with your lens until said lens gets “too zoomed,” i.e., too long. Most flashes have an upper end of about 200mm for their zoom function.

I rarely go into full-blown clinical test mode, but I decided to try this out against a white wall. I put a very attractive subject, Ashley, out there, swiveled my peaked cap around backwards, and went into submarine captain mode.

First shot I tried was with a 24–70mm f/2.8 Nikkor lens, zoomed at fifty mil. Dome diffuser on. Wide dispersion of light, amply covering the “normal” field of view of the lens. Presto! Instant coverage. Edge to edge, full light, lots of detail,





zero subtlety. Very predictable, and in this instance, given Ashley's attitude out there, it almost gets a passing grade. Mildly comparable, really, to an awful lot of stuff out there on the newsstands, where hip is often confused with good. On the wall, plain as graffiti, is the absolute, anticipated characteristic of a light firing just over the lens. Its origin point is slightly higher than the lens, thus the shadow it throws from the subject is just slightly downwards. This light is definitely a straight line, right? No bending, curving, or softening. It hits her like a Mariano Rivera fastball, coming from just over her eye line to the camera, and her form is pinned to the wall, verbatim, albeit a touch lower than her actual form. Hence, her ears repeat on the wall, well, prominently. This sort of does her a disservice, as she has attractive ears. The size of those ear shadows would seem to go along with a trunk and a set of tusks.

So, I proved to myself that the camera manufacturers aren't lying, at least in this instance. The flash, with the dome on, does in fact cover the waterfront. But shooting like this is kind of like hitting the Record switch on a tape deck. The camera, robot-like, gives you what it sees, quite faithfully. It's almost like you, as the shooter, take yourself out of the equation, especially given the TTL metering conversation that the camera is having with the flash. It makes you kind of an interloper, hovering at the edge of the cocktail party, but not hip enough to be truly included.

Given this rather blunt tool of a light hot shoed to the camera, what can you do? How to influence the scene in any way at all? Keeping the flash right where it was, I pulled the dome diffuser off, which gave me back control of the flash zoom. That means I can zoom the lens and flash independently

of each other, and they don't track together. I kept the lens at fifty and cranked the flash zoom function on the SB-900 out to 200mm.

As you can see on the previous page, that produces a hot core of light around the model, with considerable falloff at the edges. Wow. After years of railing about the nastiness of straight flash, I almost liked the result. The hard, centrally located pop of light keeps you with the subject, that's for sure, and the rest of the frame at least achieves a gradation. It becomes more interpretive, more like a spotlight on a stage, and, perhaps as a result of this, I encouraged Ashley to get more theatrical in her gesture.

Dunno. You be the judge. Given the generation gap at my studio, the younger guys on the set were

all over this, thinking it was pretty nice, and something to file away and try sometime. I think they were actually shocked the geezer came up with something that might run in the pages of *Spin*, or *Eat It Raw*, one of those downtown-type magazines that specializes in showcasing pictures the young people like.

Then, I kept to the course of the light being bang-on axis, but pumped the SB-900 into a Ray Flash Adapter, a popular brand of ring light for small flash. Ah, the ring flash! It's aptly named, 'cause it's an alarm clock of a light. Usually only seen in an orthodontist's office, the ring-a-ding is a specialty light. It's a flash that literally circles the lens, ensuring that the light is hitting the subject at the same



angle that the lens is seeing the subject. The ring flash is sometimes referred to as a shadow-less light, but that is a bit of a misnomer. There is a powerful shadow created, but it falls directly behind the subject and thus, if the angle of approach is beam on, you don't see the shadow, or at least very much of it.

So how did this happen? How did this weird diagnostic tool of a light migrate into popular use? I could see how it would be popular at the ortho office. It illuminates everything in somebody's pie-hole—every glitch, crack, stain, or slant. This, coupled with the sneaky notion I have that most orthodontists slyly get real close with a slightly wide lens, and you can see why those guys are rolling in dough—a wide lens used that close will turn a mild overbite into outright horse teeth, and freaked parents immediately start pitching money at the magic mouth man, desperately hoping this “before” picture becomes an “after” picture.

I think the ring light and its au courant popularity stems from the fact that photographers are continual tinkerers, especially when it comes to using light. The ring has a definitive look when it's used “properly.” (Is there a proper way to use a light?) It is, or can be, very cool and expressive. When used carelessly, it's godawful. And, as opposed to an umbrella, which, if misplaced, will just look kind of blah, when you go off the reservation with a ring light, your subject suffers. Time for emergency Photoshop!

It sounds ridiculous to offer a sort of “rules of the road” for a ring light. (Anybody out there old enough to remember *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? When Butch is challenged for control of the gang by Harvey, and they're about to have a knife fight, and Butch tells him to hold off, wait a minute, 'cause they first gotta get the rules set. Harvey's exasperated response: “Rules! In a knife fight?”)



Yeah, I guess. Here's one. Call it advice. Use it straight onto someone. If you tip it around like crazy, and perhaps use it low, looking up at someone's face, you better be paying them to pose, 'cause if it's a commission, you won't get called back. Generally speaking, people don't want their nose hairs lit.

With Ashley, I did use it straight on, and bingo, that mildly discomfiting shadow mostly goes away, hiding directly behind her, leaving only a faint, telltale line of darkness around her, which is characteristic of ring use. What can I say? The ring encourages risk-taking, pushing the lens in close,



and letting her get her posing ya-ya's out. Coupled with some funky makeup, it pops. Whether it pops pleasantly or jarringly is left to the judgment of the viewer. When you put that ring flash on as the main light, you know you just bought a ticket to the flash fun-house. Let it rip, and see where it takes you.

The Ray Flash works fine on TTL, by the way, when using it alone. Which means, of course, that you are subjected to the vagaries of potential exposure changes, as you would with any TTL flash approach. Manual mode works well, too. Choose your method. Be aware that if, for instance, you wish to use the Ray Flash ring as a tandem main light/commander (for example, let's say you have another TTL light as an off-axis fill or back-light), you may have trouble getting that Group A, B, or C light to pick up the TTL commands. The ring is obviously a very directed light, without a lot of spread, so using it in any commander capacity can be dicey. If your remotes are skewed to the side in even a slightly radical way, their light sensors can easily miss the pre-flash set of commands.

There are a couple popular ring flash models on the market right now. The Ray Flash and the Orbis. Check them out, and see which fits your needs. Note to self on the Ray model: when you put it on the flash head (at least, I have found this to be true with the SB-900), bring gaffer tape. The locking mechanism doesn't really work. Best to lock it, and gaff it.

Ring flash time is a time for experiments in exposure, tonality, and posing. This isn't Rembrandt lighting, and it certainly doesn't produce a three-to-one, classic portrait ratio. It's not a light most photogs will trot out every day, and it could be construed to be so exotic that a shooter might not bother owning it outright, and just renting one occasionally to experiment.

I've already shown the feel of the ring for a subject in a relatively sedate, clinical fashion. But given that there's a get-er-ya-ya's-out feel to this light source, here are some notions and examples.

SHOOT HIGH KEY

It's a personal preference, but I like the exposure expression of the ring to be more in the high key realm. Hot, straight, and bright seems to be a good way to go. Vanessa's always been one of my favorite models, and out against that white wall, in hot pink, with the outlandish head gear and the "Who, me?" kind of expression, the ring style of light is definitely working. She has the feel of a diminutive, innocent waif. By contrast, the light's got the trapping power of a police cruiser searchlight in an alleyway.



GET GOOFY!

Ring light time is party time. A perfectly outrageous light for the outrageous face. Bang! Hello! A good light to use for grunge bands, a portfolio of WWE headliners, or, perhaps, a roller derby star who goes by the approachable, pleasant moniker of Pistol Whip.

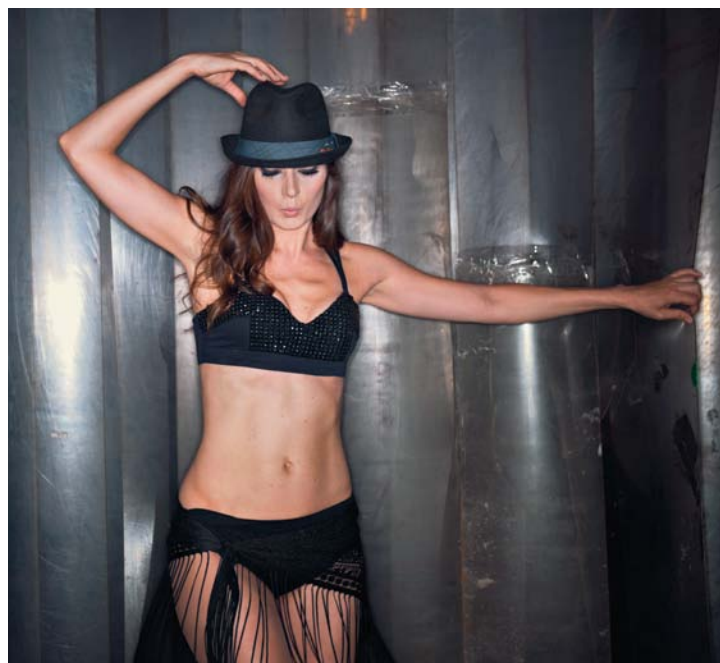
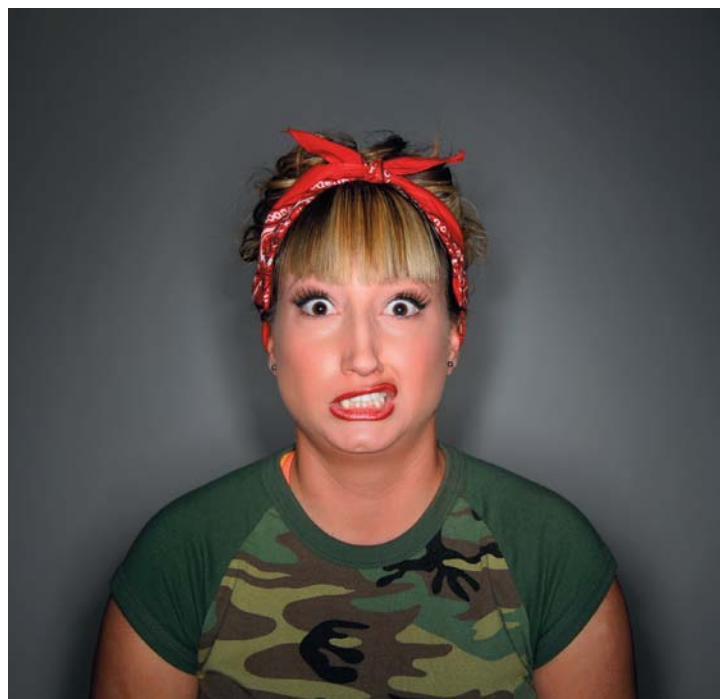
WORK IT!

Bleu is an amazingly beautiful lady—cool, and elegant to a fault. She's also so limber, and unabashed in front of the lens, that she can take on an other-worldly persona and become a female version of Mr. Fantastic. Here, the combination of outrageous makeup and in-your-face physicality morphs her into an X-Lady, fully deserving of one of those cool, evil, comic book nicknames. I'm not going to light this with an umbrella.

DAMN THE REFLECTIONS! FULL RING AHEAD!

School's out with the ring flash—so, all the care we usually take to hide our flashes and all evidence of their hits and reflections is out the window, too. Go for it! I find some of the best iterations of a ring can occur when it's used bang on to something highly reflective. The wash of the ring around the subject almost creates a halo, or aura, of reflected light which, again, is not a feel they teach in the basic textbooks of lighting, but it can be fun and effective. Put somebody up against something that will bounce the light right back at you and try it. And make sure they're wearing a hat.

Hard light from the camera. Who knew straight flash could be this much fun? □





THINGS I THINK I KNOW

I Thought the Lights Would Be On



DO YOUR RESEARCH. Check it out. Read everything you can. About any job. Especially one where you block off half of 5th Avenue in NYC with a 120-foot boom crane.

I was assigned by *National Geographic Traveler* magazine to shoot the great museums of New York in panorama camera format. Great job. It forced me to think differently. I had to take fairly bulky, 120 format cameras into some dimly lit environments and shoot very wide perspective photos. I had to use my eyes differently, i.e., very horizontally. Definitely a tripod job. Not to mention a job that needed planning and scouting, seeing as I was working for editors based in

Washington, D.C., some of whom apparently had no idea how long a city block was in New York.

There's this thing on 5th Avenue called Museum Mile, and it stretches from 82nd Street to 104th Street. It's home to at least eight of the great museums of the city, and in certain cases, of the world. To an out-of-town, deskbound editor, this sounds dreamy, right? Hey, maybe the photographer can get all these museums in one photo!

This was really suggested. I mean, I couldn't make this up, right? "Can you get all of these museums in one photo?" Real question, from home base.

"Uh, sure, I'll just rent one of those satellite cameras." Seems appropriate, 'cause this request was definitely from outer space.

I politely explained that, for instance, the two truly prominent institutions up there, the Met and the Guggenheim, are separated by at least six blocks and, oh my, are on opposite sides of 5th Avenue. This is what you call a real-world, real-time problem.

The editors came around to being reasonable after a bit, and sent me off to do the story. And then, shaking my head at the utter imbecility of those foolish folks in D.C., I went off and wrote my own page in the Stupid Book by not thoroughly researching a big, expensive picture.

The idea I had to replace their notion of a multi-museum lead photo was to get up high, over the tree line on 5th Ave., and shoot the distinctive, famously round shape of the Guggenheim in 617 format. The camera, pointing south down the avenue, would frame the museum on the left, and the panoramic nature of it would sweep out over Central Park, and in the distance would be

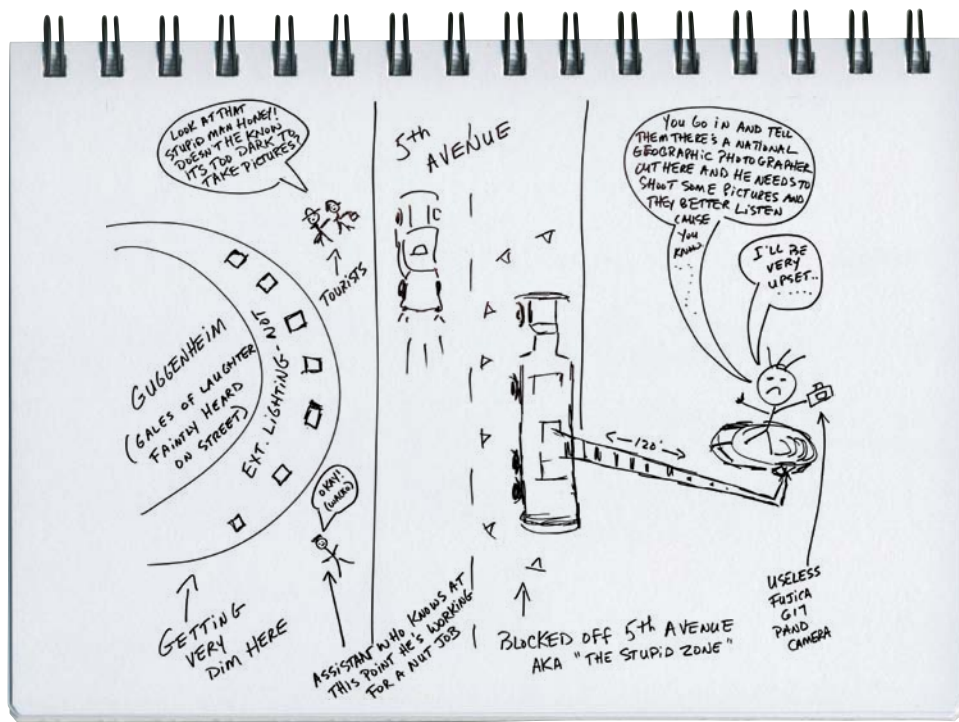
the skyline of Central Park South, the Empire State Building, and all things New York.

I got a little feverish about the prospects of this photo, to be honest. I had never rented a crane to block off a major city street before! This was exciting! Photography rules! I got the permits and the permissions, and rented the truck. Never even talked to the museum. Why bother? I'm on public property, shooting public stuff. There really aren't even any people in the picture, so no worries there.

Luckily, I had a beautiful day to work. Glorious sun, clear skies. Got there early to position the truck. Went up and got the height and angle I needed. Then I waited. I was looking to shoot this right about sunset time, when there would hopefully be little scallops of detail on the edges of the trees in the park, and the city lights would be coming on, along with the exterior lights of the Guggenheim.

Fortunately, during my wait for this momentous iteration of golden hour, I made a few frames, which proved to be handsome enough. Sunset light in the distance, great light on the museum. But it wasn't what I was after. I was going for dusk—deep, rich sunset, the city aglow, maybe tracers of traffic down the avenue!

So I'm up in the crane, watching the sun head west, and passing the time with some clicks of the camera. It was, as I say, a nice scene, and this was a vantage point I was never gonna have again. Instincts ruled, and I shot some stuff. But I dis-counted it at the same time, because I was up there waiting for *the* picture, the one I had in my head.



The city was growing dim, and beginning its nightly ritual of self-illumination—but not the Gug, which was gradually receding into darkness. I began to get nervous. Ever get those icy tentacles clawing at you inside? Whispers in your head that grow to shouts, and eventually screams? For me, it's sorta like that plant from the *Little Shop of Horrors* starts growing inside my stomach, fed by leaping anxiety, and it begins to devour all confidence and logic.

It was just me and my stupidity up there in the crane bucket in the accelerating gloom. Not to mention my insecurities, along with the absolute confidence that I had just made the mistake that would finally do me in, ruin my reputation, cause my career to crash and burn, and make me an un-hireable, bankrupt, homeless ward of the state who would spend the rest of his days rocking back and forth on a steam grate on 42nd Street, snarling incoherent obscenities at the swells whisking past to jobs that they continue to have because they weren't a has-been loser of a freelance photographer. There were some

other equally morose thoughts and feelings up there with me, as well. It was actually kind of crowded in that tiny bucket.

I grabbed the two-way radio and shouted to Gabe, my assistant on the ground, to run into the Guggenheim and ask when they were going to turn the lights on. He came back presently and tried to explain on the radio that they had some sort of display of historically important Russian lithographs or something up on the walls, and for the duration they weren't lighting the outside of the building. The curators feared the long overnight whammy of noxious mercury vapor light would fry the artwork. So, sadly, the building would remain dark.

I summoned what was left of my shredded self-importance, puffed my chest out, ego as fully erect as the crane, and screamed into the



mic to go back inside and tell them to turn the damn lights on, because there was “a *National Geographic* photographer out there on 5th Avenue shooting pictures!” Mercifully, Gabe didn’t press the transmit button with his response, but dutifully went back in to plead my case to the powers that be. In between gales of laughter at the presumptuous nature of my demand, Gabe heard the word “no” quite forcibly, several times.

He reported back. There was nothing left to do but hit the descend button. The crane truck rumbled and my platform sank, along with my hopes. All that was left to do was process what I had shot, and hope the magazine might be happy with what they saw, which they were. About the only wise

move I made during the entire debacle was not tell the editors about the notion of a dusk shot. I just told them it would be “a different, exciting angle.”

Lessons here:

Research. Find out what’s going on with the people, what’s happening inside the building, whatever. You never know what will impact your chances of success.

Shoot! Don’t put all your eggs in the sunset basket. Or any individual basket. Cover the job! Make those pixels sing! You can always throw them away later, when you get the prize pic. But, those “other” pictures—the ones you don’t think much of at the time—can later on be your lifeboat. As a shooter, I have been so guilty so many times thinking the shot I’m about to get is better than the one I just took. Your fevered hopes are wonderful. Pre-visualization of that amazing shot is great. But don’t let that breathless anticipation become a visual straightjacket. Shoot like crazy. Especially if you’ve just spent a few thousand bucks on a crane in the middle of New York.

Undersell! Don’t blather on to anyone about how great this idea is and what a shot it’s going to be. Then, you raise expectations, and if you don’t meet them, it’s a screw-up. And trust me, screw-ups stay with you, whether it was of your own making (your bad) or something you couldn’t control, like crappy weather (still your bad). You see, many editors out there are like hothouse plants. They never experience real-world storms. For them, life is good. It’s always warm, some sort of sun is always shining, and they get fed on time.

They never understand that sometimes the lights don’t come on. □



Radio TTL

AS PHOTOGS, we are definitely—along with much of the rest of the world—caught up in what's coming next. The future is wanted badly, and now. More megapixels! More speed! We seek software programs that seamlessly correct our sins, turn summertime trees the color they only have in October, and make skin smooth as pudding. And we're never content with stuff just coming off the shelf, cool as it might be. A piece of gear comes out that appears to be all the rage, and within 48 hours some photo-engineer has blogged about a mod he or she made where what had been designed to simply diffuse light now transmits files and downloads music.





It's natural, then, that the news that TTL control for both Canon and Nikon flashes—so far the province of line-of-sight infrared and optical pulses—could be extended by radio wave transmission would be seriously applauded, anticipated, and fairly drooled over. Quite frankly, I would count myself as a drooler.

What nirvana! The idea of putting one or more small but powerful flashes out in the field, hidden from sight and perhaps hundreds of feet away, yet controlled at the camera by the flick of a switch, boggles the noodle, plain and simple. That, in my opinion, doesn't just enlarge the envelope. It shreds that envelope faster than a sixteen-year-old who thinks they just got their driver's license in the mail.

It stopped short of the frenzy caused by, say, a new iPhone, but when these puppies were announced for the respective big-boy systems on the block—Canon's version was out considerably ahead of the Nikon model—needless to say, the joint was jumping. TTL radio! The voice of the future talking to us, right now!

And it's great. When it works. Let's just say there's been some static, and it's ongoing. I have tried mightily to achieve success with these units, even extending the deadline of this book a bit to see where the next firmware leads, but now, as I write, what I can report is great promise amid intermittent reception, with some fine-tuning to be done.

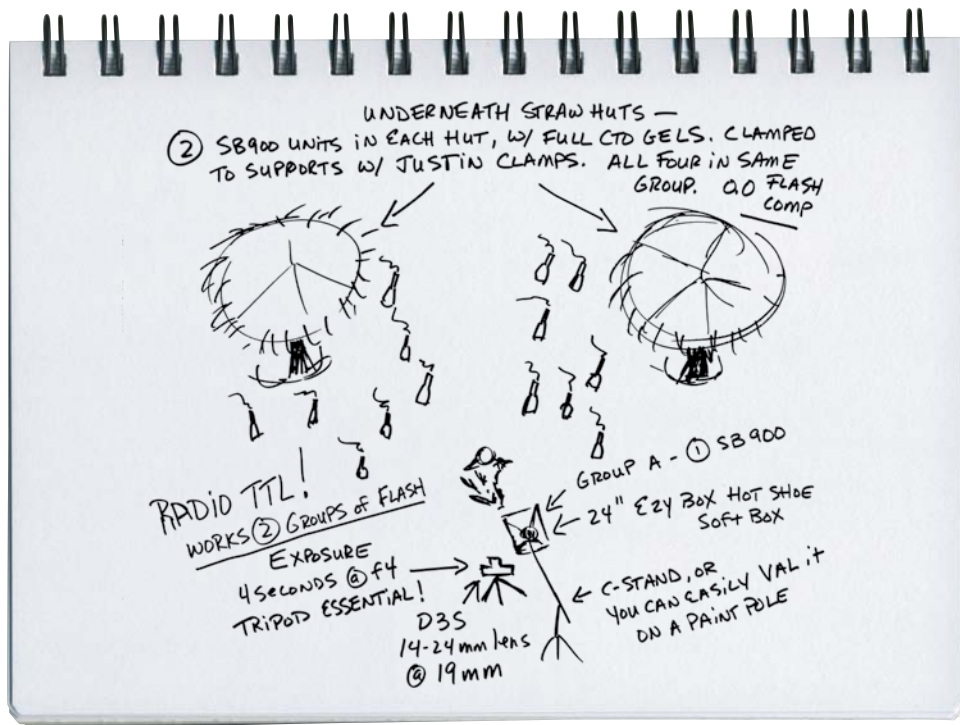
Which is to be expected. This isn't a garage door opener you've got mounted to your camera. It's a highly sophisticated liaison to your already mind-numbingly complex camera. The two systems do a very intricate dance step every time you press the shutter. They will stumble, as all technology occasionally does. I remember having problems with a unit in the early going, calling in for help, and being told to shut down the vibration reduction function on my lens, as that minutely affects the timing on the chain of events constituting an exposure. When you have things parsed out in milliseconds, even the slightest of hitches throws the whole deal off. Making these radio units work is not a surface fix. These guys are drilling deep into the bedrock of the camera's system.

The whole deal is delicate, in other words. Lots of potential, and I greedily want them to work reliably, right now, but in my limited experience, I'm still waiting for the other foot to fall with a much more reliable thud.

Here's the good news: We have made them work.

The beach shot is tailor-made for these units. It's a low-light shot at dusk, as you can see, and illuminated by a great number of flambos, which is evidently what they call a Molotov cocktail in St. Lucia. The scene was set, the fires lit, and the sun was fading nicely to a deep, deep blue. Underneath

“When your subject is silhouetted like this in extreme light conditions, I often go to manual focus and use an iPhone flashlight type of app to light up the eyes and pull my focus.”



both straw huts, distinctly out of line of sight, were SB-900 units—two per hut, and Justin-clamped to the wood struts. I gelled them to the color of fire (full CTO).

To do this with line-of-sight TTL from my camera angle would have required taking the master flash off the hot shoe via an SC-29 cord, and most likely bouncing it downwards off a reflective board on the sand in hopes that the TTL signal would skip off that source and ping pong up under the straw roofs to ignite those flashes and give me control of them at camera. Working line-of-sight, as I am generally used to, this would have been my approach, and it most likely would have worked.

But with radio TTL, it's a no-brainer. At least after some fussing and sorting out. The only Nikon we have worked with the PocketWizard Flex/Mini system is the D3S. We started on the beach with a D3X,

but either the camera or the radio system wasn't having it. We switched up to the D3S, fussed again with all the on/off sequencing for the Flex/Minis at the flashes and at the camera, and voila! Radio TTL transmission occurred.

Overhead the model was a boomed 24" Ezybox Hotshoe softbox. It's placed just at the upper edge of my frame, straight onto her. On the sand down at her knees was a reflective TriGrip, but honestly I don't think it's doing much, and we may have even removed it during the shoot. There's no low catch-light in her eyes, which is a good indicator that the overhead light is doing the heavy lifting. She just has to keep her face up into a bit. If she looks down, the picture disappears, along with her eyes.

Two TTL groups, driven by radio! Very cool. The lights underneath the huts needed no tweaking, power-wise, and ended up running at



0.0 compensation. Same for the boomed main flash. Finals on this were D3S, ISO 400, 4" (that's four seconds), at f/4. She stays in darkness and holds relatively still for the long shutter. Notice the burning bottles are by and large behind her. If I swung those around to the foreground and they starting incrementally lighting her face up, I would have had a sharpness problem with a four-second shutter drag. But as long as she's in relative darkness, she's controlled by the fast duration of flash. (When your subject is silhouetted like this in extreme light conditions, I often go to manual focus and use an iPhone flashlight type of app to light up the eyes and pull my focus. Here, because she's wrapped in the firelight glow, surprisingly the camera did okay with auto focus.)

So, the future is upon us, and it looks bright, indeed. Naturally, me being me, when it comes to light, I try to push the future, or at least the limits. When Nikon says you can put several flashes into one group, I wonder, you know, how many? (So far, in my personal experience, the answer is 128, from our Flashbus stop in Atlanta, GA [see pic above].)

I just tried a bit of a complex setup with the radios recently, just prior to the closing deadline on this book, and...I ended up going with a line-of-sight solution. I'm unsure if proximity of the Flex transceivers to each other was the issue, or whether it was radio weirdness relative to a big concrete wall, or the fact that I tried to change up cameras in mid-stream, or what else the glitch might have been. We started off okay, taking one gingerly step after another, but then we fell through the ice. At the end of this story, there's a look at that shoot. Lots of lessons learned, and the biggest one might be: Have plans B, C, and D already in your head.

At this point I'm completely tantalized by radio TTL. I'm excited about the possibilities of hyper-sync. I'm thrilled that the new generation of Pocket-Wizards are backwards-compatible with all the PW stuff I already have. And, I'm anxious for the day more stuff gets sorted out.

The gang at PocketWizard are literally a bunch of geniuses. This mission they've embarked on definitely means they're not in Kansas anymore and are on an uncertain road, filled with pitfalls. Just for ordinary flashes, radio transmission on location can be an iffy proposition, because radio waves are radio waves. Lots of situational, unpredictable stuff can interfere with their performance. Now, the simple radio transmission is interlaced with exposure information from the camera, which opens a whole Pandora's box of Canon/Nikon proprietary information, which, as you can well imagine, they are grudging in the dissemination of. In short, much of the language that PWs are using had to be gleaned in a reverse-engineering fashion. Here's my

ongoing strategy for use of PW TTL, for the Nikon system:

- Keep it simple.
- Make sure you observe protocols. Turn your lens VR off. Make sure the SB-900 Speedlights are set to Standard mode for light dispersion, not Even or Center-weighted mode.
- Use the “top down” turn-on sequence religiously. Flash, Flex, Mini, camera. FFMC. (Is that a new rap group?)
- Keep it simple.

These guys will get caught up. They solve problems almost daily, and shout out firmware updates on a regular basis. Being a TTL shooter, I salivate over the coming dependability of these devices. This radio station could really be the voice of the future.

So, I looked over at this abandoned, messy corner of a factory building and thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool if there were a life-sized doll just kind of laying over there?” I don’t know why. Certain very colorful events from the early ‘70s might still be reverberating in my head.

The crusty beauty of the corner was enhanced by a pair of nearby windows. Flash through a window! That’s where the light comes from, anyway, so I set about creating daylight that I could direct and control. “Direct” and “control” are the operative words here. If you see the splash of sunlight on the floor, camera left, you’ll understand the sunlight is behind her, and the window on camera right—the main light, if you will—had very soft, indirect light that was just too soft to use.

I did want soft light through that portal, so I put up a big, big umbrella on a very large stand (this scene is on the second floor; go figure). I tell you, the availability of big, cheap umbrella sources is



pulling me back from softboxes to liking a simple umbrella style of light. The big size did two things: it made the light soft; and it essentially flagged or blocked other indiscriminate daylight from coming through there. That blocking ability added to my control of the scene.

One little flash into that giant swatch of umbrella wasn’t going to cut it, so I mounted a TriFlash out there to fire three SB-900s fitted with external battery packs through it. It was just outside the panes of glass, and Martina is looking right at it.

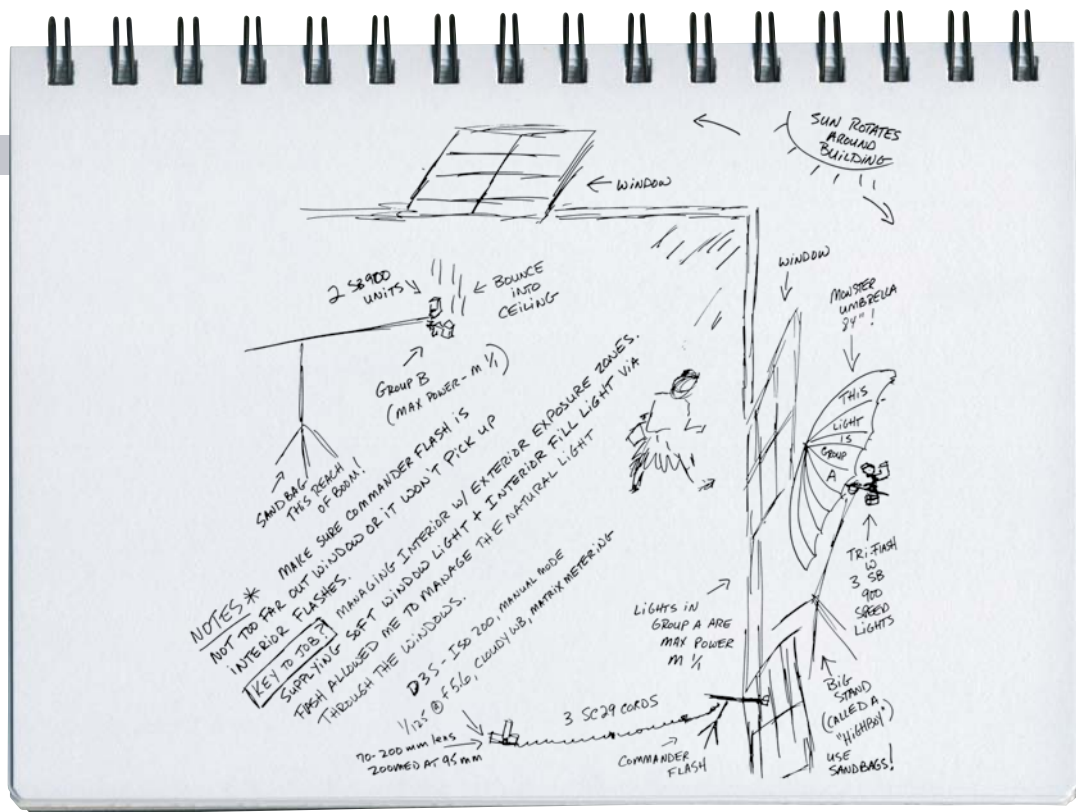




I couldn't stop there, though. Big as the umbrella was, it basically hit her and died. Almost no detail got into that, uh, lovely corner back there. I had to use a fast shutter speed to control the windows or they would have blown out, highlight-wise. But doing that (using $1/125^{\text{th}}$ of a second) ensured the immediate background for her would go completely dark. The shot you see of me directing the placement of the light (page 237) is shot at the exact same value as the shot of Martina the beautiful doll, $1/125^{\text{th}}$ at $f/5.6$.

Light had to come from inside, and the answer was more flash. I know, I know, with me it's always more flash, right? Not necessarily. If I could have skated on this with just the one source, I would have. (In fact, 80% of this book is about using one main source of light.) But, again, the need for control reared its ugly head. It really comes down to the camera, and its inherent, well-established inability—fancy as it is—to deal with radically different zones of exposure. Expose for detail in the corner? Blow the windows. Push the exposure down to get the windows under control? Sure. Lose the corner. Why did I choose this location? The shabby feel of that corner. What was part of the appeal of the corner? The nearby windows. Sheesh....

I put up two gelled flashes inside, on a tall stand and a boom arm, firing into the filthy ceiling. In this type of setting, any naturally occurring interior light might well have been tungsten-based, so my Speedlights both sport half cuts of CTO. (Didn't go to full—I just wanted a hint of warmth in the interior details, and I didn't want too much yellow light to spill onto her.) The combo of the gel and banging them upwards into a surface that had not seen a dust mop in a hundred years robbed them of





their power and efficiency, to be sure, but it makes sure that the feel and direction of that light source would appear natural. It wasn't an overt light, in other words. It wasn't a directed softbox that put a studio-like highlight on her hair and shoulder. It simply elevated the ambient level of the room. But instead of relying on the real existing light, which was coming from the wrong direction, I was able

to take my small bounce flashes and use them to literally push a bunch of light back into the corner. It was about as ceremonious as shoving all the clothes you have on the floor into the closet when unexpected company rings the doorbell.

The scene worked. For the model, I had a strong key light that looked like window light, and just enough detail in the corner to make that wonderful shabbiness part of the picture. I got the windows under my control via the combination of f-stop and shutter speed that the flashes enabled me to access. The conundrum here, of course, was that I've got lights outside and inside the building, which I thought would stress the radio TTL system nicely.

And, it worked with the D3S for the first 12 frames. Then I tried it with a D3X. No go. And, in fact, for whatever reason, that camera switch (which is me just never leaving well enough alone) proved fatal. We never got the PWs working again, and went eventually to line-of-sight triggering,

which worked well—even given the disparate locations of the flashes. We placed the commander flash in the window, but just a bit in the window. There was enough of it radiating outside and inside to pick up both groups of flashes. Finals on flash power were real simple—full up, manual 1/1 on all units.

Ups and downs are to be expected during the first flirtations with a system. It happens, and it's okay. We ended up staying with the D3X and line-of-sight for the rest of the day. It was working.

Here's the thing about glitches on location. They can be catastrophic and ruin the shoot. Or they can be a bump in the road. What matters is how you smooth that bump—no matter the size—and how quickly and decisively. When time is flying, and the sun is creeping around towards the other side of

the building, and the model's starting to sag a bit (we were blessed with Martina, she's a trouper—many subjects are not), you have to readily deviate from the original path, pull out the machete, and start bushwhacking a new one. That's what we did here. Next stop would have been to go traditional PW radio trigger to all units, and go into manual adjust mode. But with an umbrella the size of a city block on a stand heavy and high enough to be used as a cell phone tower, you don't really want to be running it up and down, up and down. The line-of-sight triggering gave us TTL control, right there on the second floor.

And here's the beautiful thing about a big light source, dependable transmission, and TTL technology: You can work it. Martina changed outfits and went into decidedly non-doll mode. I moved to a 200mm f/2 and shot a headshot at f/2, dropping the power on Group A (umbrella) to manual 1/4, and completely nixing the interior lights, all with a couple button pushes on the commander. For the full-length swirl of the skirt, I stayed at 1/4 power out the window, and she got some bounce fill from the sun off the floor. I shot a 70–200mm lens at f/3.5, ISO 100, still at 1/250th. I put the interior lights back in play, and those two, coming off the ceiling and thus being drastically weakened, stayed resolutely at full power for the whole deal.

There have always been lots of ways to do a shot like this, and pretty simple ones. The dawning of radio TTL promises to make it even simpler. □





The Shape of Light

TOO OFTEN I'VE PUT UP A LIGHT and just used all of it, because that's what I do. I'm a knuckle-dragging photographer, so most of the time I start by putting up a light. Then it spills and splashes all over the place, hitting areas of the scene I don't want lit, or drawing attention to that lovely tie with the stains from yesterday's plate of chili, or the t-shirt that's so loaded with logos that my subject might as well be a Nascar. Duh...this ain't so good. What do I do now? The manual says put up an umbrella and everything will look nice.





Ashamedly, there have been times I've given up, and let the light do what it wants, not what I want. It's an umbrella, and it's supposed to be nice light, so there it is. I put up the umbrella. Can I have a prize now? I've been guilty of this more than I'd like to admit. Call it lazy. Call it resigned. Call it just not being able to think my way to an energetic solution on that particular day in the field. Call it thinking I can fix it later. Call it outright stupidity.

On other days, I've been (thankfully) more forceful, and literally done battle with the light or, more appropriately, done surgery on it. I've taped it, blocked it, flagged it, hung my winter coat on it, had somebody stand in front of it to kill some spill or spread, you name it. I've thrown anything I can get my hands on out there in the location world to try to bend a particular type of light to my will, and make it light in a directed, sculpted fashion—not just a splatter-fest of photons.

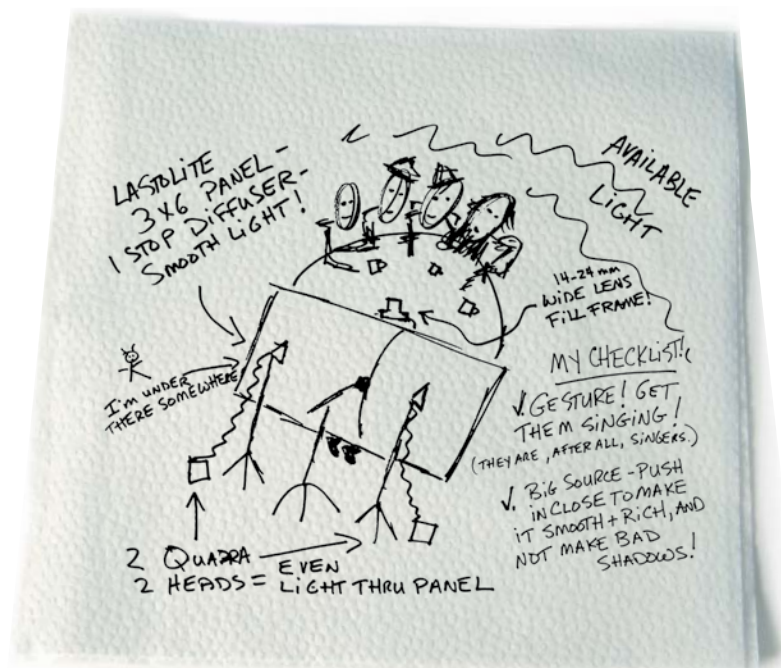
One of the ways you can avoid going to war with the light you just put up is to know why you're using that light. Direction and punch calls for perhaps small softboxes, or even a tight grid for real drama. Young children bouncing around in front of the camera might require a broad, smooth source with lots of coverage, so that Johnny jumping over here is lit with the same niceties as Suzy doing a back flip over there. That scene might need a real big, hazy,

soft white umbrella, or some broad bounces off of walls and ceilings. An intense, moody portrait of an angst-ridden young playwright whose dialogue is racked with pain might speak to a soft but dramatic source that's radically placed off to the side. Thus placed, one side of his face has richly beautiful light, but it falls off rapidly into shadow and darkness, just like his plays.

Another way to ease your location pain is to look at the shape of your subject, then look at the shape of your light shaper. They are called light shapers for a reason. At the very least, the light that comes screaming out of these things starts off mimicking its originating source. Much like a smoke ring, it dissipates and wanders quickly, but the source does enforce a character and quality to the light you make. Light from a small source starts off small, for instance, and has an urgency to it. Big light sources produce wrapping, blanket-like light that's soft and languid. What does your subject need?

Here, I am showing you two types of subject matter—one very horizontal, and one very vertical. One is very character-driven, and, well, bushy. The other is beautifully ethereal, set in a wonderland of a foggy forest. I could have used the same light for both if I had to—a standard-issue umbrella, perhaps—but I would then have had a bit of a tussle on my hands. For the horizontal fellas at the table,

“By dovetailing the shapes of the light with the shapes of my subjects, I avoided having to take out the chainsaw and rearrange a perfectly good umbrella.”



I most likely would have had some falloff at the edges, and not been hugely pleased with the overall softness and character of the light. Out in the woods, an umbrella would have surely lit up the plants around the dancer, and thus needed cutting and shaping. But by dovetailing the shapes of the light with the shapes of my subjects, I avoided having to take out the chainsaw and rearrange a perfectly good umbrella.

For the singing gentleman, I chose a 3x6' Lastolite Skylite one-stop diffuser panel. These guys are members of an all-male, a cappella singing group, over 40 strong, called Conspiracy of Beards. They sing nothing but Leonard Cohen songs, and are based in San Francisco. They're very talented and a hoot to work with. And, not surprisingly, they're characters. Porkpie hats, all scruff and beards, darkish, vintage clothing—if you light this wrong, you're in for a long day, and an even longer night monkeying with the Fill Light slider. Bring the light

from the side and they shadow one another, and their tweedy attire disappears from view, which is bad news for the storytelling aspects of the photo, 'cause their garb is part of their look and persona. Also, shadowy side light will wreak havoc on their faces, which are wonderful but not the type you'll see anytime soon in an Abercrombie catalog.

Soft, frontal light, shaped for them, is the way to go. I put up the panel super close to them, basically right on top of my head at the camera angle. Then I put two sources into it—in this case, two Quadra heads, each with their own pack. There are diffusers on each head, so I'm trying for softness and spread right from the get-go. I'm smack in the middle of the guys and the light source, with the two heads on either side of me. A very chummy, tight-knit gaggle, to be sure.

But the result is a big, beautifully smooth light that covers this ad hoc Mt. Rushmore in the coffee shop quite nicely, and pokes photons into all

“Strip lights are wonderful lights for the human body, long and narrow, especially if you want to do a rim of light, or a line of light along the edge of someone’s frame or form.”

the crevices and folds of their faces and garments. It’s a rich, highly detailed light that softly lets their character come through. It’s not a light that makes our eyes work hard for the reward. There is no squinting, “wish that was a little brighter” feel to the light here. A bucket of light, if you will, covering them completely. If it were a bucket of water, it would have been a big one, and they would be totally drenched. Same idea.

Now—two Quadras, eh, McNally? Sounds like a pricey, over-the-top solution. But it’s not overkill, or just using every light in the bag ‘cause I carried it along. Here’s the method to the expensive madness. The Quadra is an asymmetrical unit, as most higher-end, controllable packs are nowadays. That means the A port delivers the full power of the rating programmed into the pack, and the other port—the B port—gives you roughly 30% of that rating. To do this with the two heads and only one pack, I would have uneven light. One head automatically gets much more power than the other. Not good.

I could fix that if I had to, by placing, say, a half-stop of neutral density gel on the more powerful head, the one coming out of the A port. That would even up the game enough to get by, albeit with perhaps some feathering of the heads. By “feathering the heads,” I mean turning them at angles to the subjects by degrees, to cut the full force of the light. It’s not to be confused with actually moving the light source. The stand or support for the light remains static, but the heads turn, sometimes radically, to put your subjects in the spill or edge of the light, not in the main path of it.

As often is the case in photography, fine-tuning and control can become the difference between a photo with problems to fix and/or a very tough day in the field. As it is, you’re often fighting the odds going into the shoot. You don’t want to be fighting your gear, as well. So, one universal rule in the world of power-pack lighting is that one pack per head gives you the most control. As soon as you have multiple heads running out of one source, you face compromises that have to be danced around.

Let’s get into the woods, where one might think you’d find my grizzled, mountain-man subjects rather than an exquisitely delicate dancer. But a ballerina it is. I wanted her to



project a vulnerable, fawn-in-the-forest feeling, very similar to certain major roles in the world of ballet, where theatrical danger often lurks for the prima ballerina. Off to camera right is a strip light, so called because it is, as I've mentioned already, a long narrow strip of light.

Strip lights are wonderful lights for the human body, long and narrow, especially if you want to do a rim of light, or a line of light along the edge of someone's frame or form. In this instance, it is the main light. Or more properly, the main (only) flash. The forest is the main light. And the existing light is beautifully appropriate for the scene. But look at the difference between my subject and Drew, my first assistant, in the production pic (following page). She's got the spark of directional light. Drew becomes part of the forest. Actually, with his scruffy look and dark clothing, he becomes, well, kind of creepy.

With some light on her, she becomes the star, the point of attention. Notice the strip is up high and pitched towards her a bit, in an effort to keep it off the ground. The last thing you want to see is a flash highlight on the pachysandra. Dead giveaway that you're using a



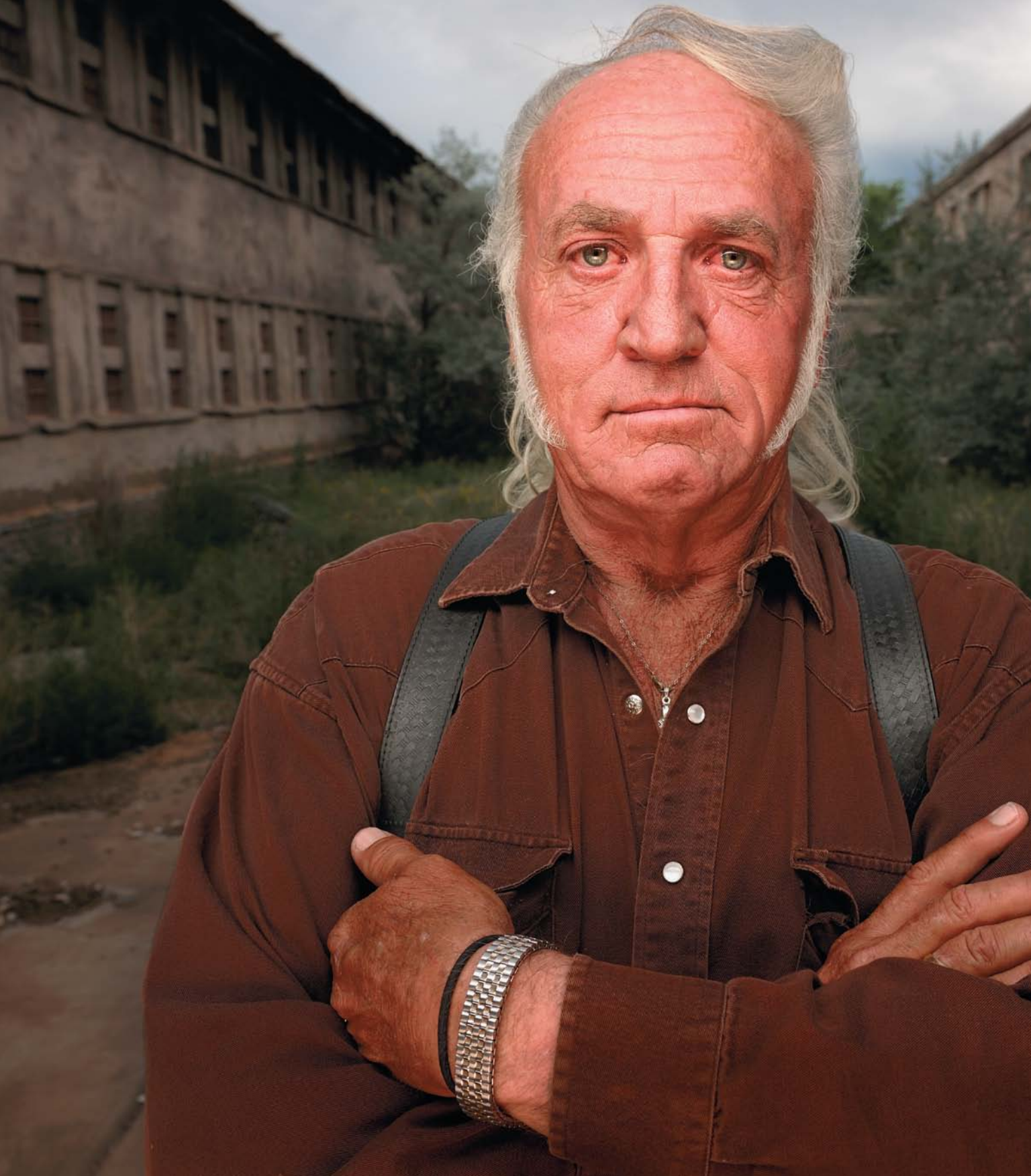



flash, and it will lead the viewer's eye away from the subject.

One thing I would have liked, but did not have here, was a recessed strip light. If you notice, the front diffusion panel of the strip light comes flush—right to the edge of the black material on the sides of the softbox. An edge baffle surrounding that piece of diffusion would have made things easier for me. By “edge baffle,” I mean somewhere around two inches of material projecting out around the edge of the softbox, which helps to contain, corral, and direct the light. My worry here with this style of box—without the edge baffle—is that, though the light produced will indeed head towards the subject, some of it will drop immediately to the floor as quickly as loose change through a hole in your pocket, creating the dreaded floor highlight. Most major league softboxes now come with this feature—the edge baffle, or hood. It dramatically controls spill and the tendency of light to blow everywhere as soon as it escapes the confines of the softbox.

Another very, very helpful tool in terms of controlling the light is often referred to as an egg crate. Briefly, it does, in fact, look like an egg crate. It attaches with Velcro and is a series of fabric cubes that columnate the flow of the light. The egg crate drops right over the diffuser surface and, combined with a hood, is a great way to make sure your softbox light goes right where you want it.

Makes sense, right? Your subjects have shape and form. So does light. Match 'em up well, and you won't fight the light. ▣





A Tale of One Face, Lit Two Ways

RICK'S GOT A FACE FOR THE AGES. It's a visage as blasted as the New Mexican desert he's lived in for many years, mixed with a touch of Johnny Cash and illuminated by a pair of weary eyes that have seen too much. At his core, he's a decent, affable guy who enjoys a laugh. I can only speculate, though, that if you crossed him...that would be bad. They would never find the pieces of you out in that vast desert.

And it's a beautiful face, too, though I suspect Rick doesn't hear himself accused of being beautiful too often. It's a well-worn topographic map of a life that's intersected with pain, laced and lined by confrontation with the dark side of the human spirit. Rick, you see, was a prison guard at the New Mexico State Penitentiary during the worst prison riot in the history of incarceration in the United States. He's been in the belly of the beast. When he smiles or laughs, as he often does, it's like daybreak through storm clouds.

How do you light this face? Well, the obvious answer, of course, is any way you want. There is no right or wrong here. There are a bazillion folks out and about with cameras, and each of them would have their own approach to making a portrait of Rick. I'm showing you two approaches here. Both are two-light scenarios—one done all with small flash, and one shot with “medium” flash. (I still hesitate to call the petite little Quadra a “big” flash. Park it next to a 2400 Ws Speedotron, and you'll see what I mean. When you toggle a 24 Speedo at full power, there's a definitive *POP!* that rattles the windows. It's like the full-throated bark of a German Shepherd guard dog. The Quadra, popped at full power, sounds like the yip of a shih tzu.)

Nevertheless, these two shots are done simply, with just two sources, of different types and with vastly different modifiers. Even given the difference in light mods, both have very definitive similarities in approach. Each is a confrontational, frontal portrait. Each employs the time-honored lighting mechanism of a main plus a fill, with the main being high and over the subject, and the fill being eye level or lower. In each case, the shutter speed is used as a louver for the background ambience. I control how brightly or dimly the back end of the picture plays by making my shutter slower or faster. Neither of these images is right nor wrong. Neither is better nor worse. Neither is necessarily more significant than anything that's been shot or will be shot of this legendary gentleman of the great southwest. They both even share a flaw that the composition police would issue me a summons about—bull's-eye framing. No rule of thirds. He's smack in the middle of both pictures.

“In each case, the shutter speed is used as a louver for the background ambience. I control how brightly or dimly the back end of the picture plays by making my shutter slower or faster.”

What they represent, simply, is a choice of approach at the moment of the intersection of the light, the subject, and the shooter. All the elements of a photo are variables, subject to continuous change, on a job-to-job basis. Every day in the field, you react with your gut, your heart, and the equipment you happen to have on hand. What also sometimes mixes into the equation of a photograph are the demands of the assignment (if there is one), your mood, the subject's mood, the reach of your visual ambition that day, and perhaps the availability of some piece of gear you wish to try. (What also mixes in is how much time you have, what the weather is like, whether you ate Mexican food the previous night, if you just had to talk to your kid's math teacher about him or her failing the last three tests, and the fact that you're out on the road, trying to do this shot, and you're down to your last working credit card.) Accepting this type of location randomness (what works today doesn't tomorrow) of course flies in the face of the desperate wishes we all have for a photographic silver bullet—that thing you always do, a reliable comfort zone we can construct out there when we're shooting. It's also stressful for those who might feel that some universal tip—like, “Always use a tripod!”—will somehow be a perpetual open sesame to the good picture vault. Now, there's nothing wrong with following sound advice. It will make your pictures better. But the path to a good photo is never straight, comfortable, or assured, even if you carry that well-advised tripod faithfully, all along the way.

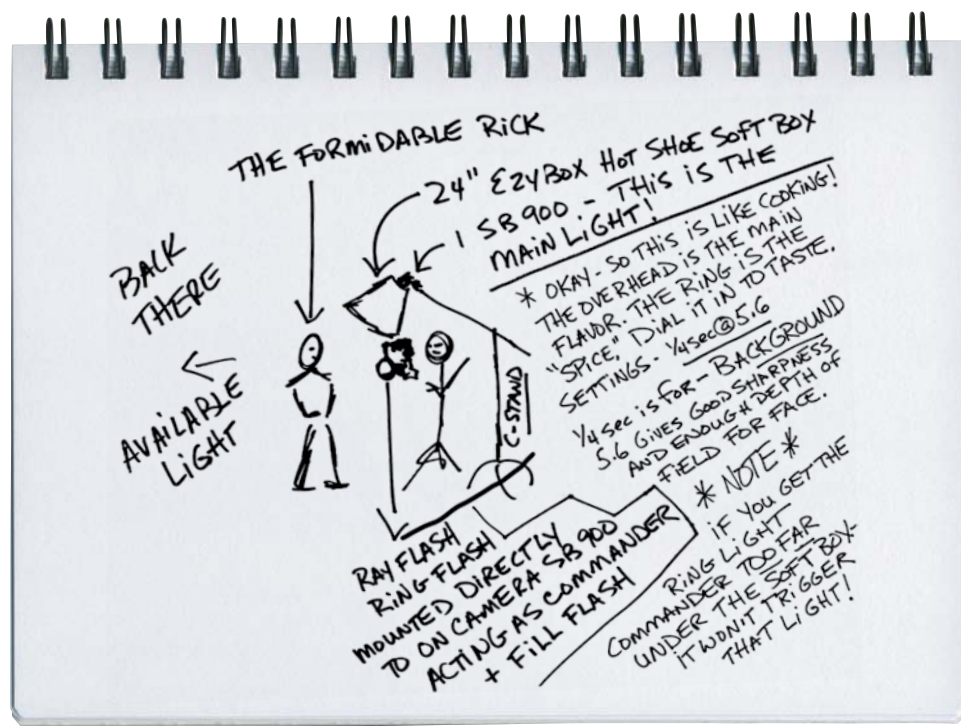
Sorry to be the rain on the parade. In a world that abounds with photo literature that fully discloses the numbers, the gear, the shape and size of everything used on the “set,” there's still no certainty of result. The only thing left, at the close of the shutter, is whether the picture just made communicates or not, and that's as elusive and



ineffable as ever it was. A picture that speaks, that has staying power, that trips emotions and imaginations, and does not simply take a place in the endless line of numbered, pleasantly presented, attractive failures that populate everyone's droning hard drives—including mine—is the grail we seek. And there is no treasure map. Yippee!

So take these two approaches as signposts in the wilderness of your choosing. They may point you to the top of the mountain, where the view is clear and the air is fresh. Or they could easily lead to the Cliffs of Insanity.

The shot above is small flash: Two SB-900 units, one overhead of Rick, above his eye line and very, very close to him, into a 24" Ezybox Hotshoe softbox. It's pitched forward towards him on an extension arm off a C-stand that is directly behind me. It's basically sitting on



my head. Underneath it, I am beam onto him with a Ray Flash Ring Flash Adapter circling a 50mm f/1.4. The lens is pushed uncomfortably close to Rick, and the ring serves to pop out every line, ridge, and gully in a face desiccated by the harsh winds of time and life. It's not a comfortable light, either. It is unforgiving and raw. For this, I didn't ask Rick to smile or be the ever-gregarious storyteller he generally is. I just asked him to regard the lens and drag on an ever-present cigarette as he saw fit.

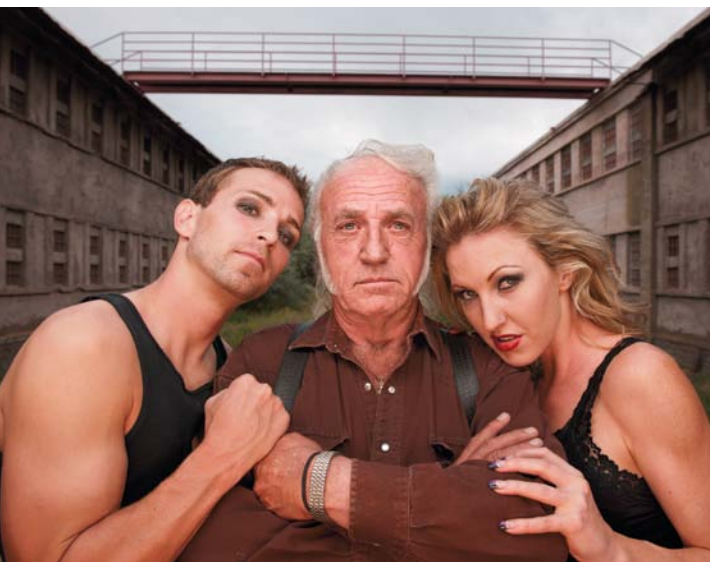
It's an uncompromising portrait, and, truth be told, a frame I'm fond of. The light is rough and unvarnished. Rick embraces it and stares back at the lens in an equivalently unvarnished way. The softbox does its job here, covering the waterfront with even light, providing me with a baseline. The ring is the spice in the gumbo, for sure. You could make the argument, quite logically, that the feel of the ring light is what dominates the picture, so it, de facto, should be listed as the main. That's okay by me. I simply prefer to think of my overhead as the covering light, the starting point, and thus refer to it as the main light, even though it really becomes, at first glance, pretty invisible in the photo equation.

My exposure is $\frac{1}{4}$ second at f/5.6. ISO 100, Auto white balance, with my focus cursor on that 50 mil dropped directly on Rick's eye. No messing around here with an auto area auto focus. The eyes have to be critically sharp, and at this closeness, there's not any room for error, even at the reasonable f-stop of 5.6. My exposure is, of course, the combo of the overhead box and the ring flash. What contributes what, or how much? This is where, once again, we are in the photo kitchen, preparing a spicy pixel soup. How much ring (spice)? How little? My suggestion is to get to the f-stop you need with your cover light. (And 5.6 is certainly a reasonable f-stop. It isn't necessarily *the* f-stop.) It should be well exposed, maybe just a touch under. Most likely, it will appear a bit flat, and dead in the eyes. Then, start dialing in the ring. Normal, plus one, plus two, etc. Stop where you like. Stop where it speaks to you, and thus explains Rick, even a little.

If you are shooting TTL and relying on the ring as a flash and a commander for the Group A light in the Ezybox, be careful how far you tuck yourself under the softbox. The ring is such a direct light that from that position, the commander signal it pops out there most likely will not find the light sensor panel on that softbox Speedlight. The bulk of the softbox itself can block effective transmission of the pre-flash, and thus communication between the two units can become dicey. There are a few ways to cure this. Pull your camera angle back so you are not directly underneath the box, which could then require you to grab a longer lens, such as an 85mm. This would put the ring/commander light in a position to more easily "see" the remote Speedlight.

“The real variable—hence, the ‘difficult’ thing—is the feel of the play between the two light sources. No one can tell you where or what that is. It's up to you, your taste, and how you want your picture to speak.”





Or, put up a reflective board off to the side, near Rick but out of frame. That will most likely pick up spill from the ring and bounce it back up and into the softbox flash. Playing a little ping pong with your commander signal can get it to reach lights in places you wouldn't think you could ever trigger. Failing automated systems, a good option to have in your bag is a PocketWizard. You can fire the top light with the radio, and run the hot shoe ring flash in SU-4 mode, which is a manual slave trigger mode. Or, you could use the ring light as the trigger and take an independent slave eye and connect it to the overhead light via a cord running from the eye to the PC port on the Speedlight. You can let it dangle, if you want to live dangerously, but in this configuration, I would usually just take the slave eye and gaffer tape it right to the leading edge of the softbox, to maximize reception possibilities. Lots of ways to get the mechanics of transmission done, none of them particularly difficult, and some are automated, some manual.

The real variable—hence, the “difficult” thing—is the feel of the play between the two light sources. No one can tell you where or what that is. It's up to you, your taste, and how you want your picture to speak. But, any inflection you infuse that speech with comes from playing the ratio game—how strong one light is in relationship to the other. Test! Play!

Now for the medium flash shot—the one shown at the beginning of this piece. The vagaries of working fast on location led me to use two strip lights in a classic clamshell beauty combo for this portrait of Rick. He wasn't the original subject, truth be told. I was showing a class a couples' portrait light, using two young, beautiful people, all made up for drama. It's a nice enough shot. You can see the progression, from available light staging of the scene and framing the shot, to one light overhead, to that addition of a low beauty fill (and Rick), warmed with a bit of CTO gel.

Why two strips instead of two regular softboxes? Uh, the strips were set up and ready to go, and we were running out of time. I'd love to come up with a more nuanced, high-falutin' reason, but there you are. They did work out well, though, when I put Rick in the middle of the two young people, telling them they were a singing duo and Rick was their manager. The horizontal nature of the two sources was perfect for the trio.

But, you know, Rick is a black hole of such density, power, and interest, right in the middle of the photo, that I quickly excused the “models.” They were wonderful, but Rick's bulk and flinty,



Garrett Garms

expressive exterior just became the boss of the visuals. Framed by the penitentiary cell blocks, he graphically occupied the middle of the picture, quite naturally.

He steps under the main light, the big strip. The small strip, the fill, has a half CTO on it for some warmth, which I probably did not need for him. If I could replay this, I would have gone for a neutral feel for both lights. Face it, Rick don't need adornments like filters and fancy moves in post. He is what he is, and I'm thankful for that, as he is one of the most amazing faces I've ever been lucky enough to have in front of my camera.

Thankfully, the warmth doesn't over-influence things because that low light is low power. See the production pic at right with the overhead main turned off? That small strip held just under camera is popping in a value that is about two stops of power under the main. The finals on this are 1/125th at f/8, ISO 100, D3X, 24mm lens. Cloudy white balance, mostly to keep a warm tonality for the buildings in the background. It's dusty out there, and a storm was coming up, so I wanted to complement the rich, earthy tones of the scene. I shot a total of seven frames. If I had my druthers, I'd have taken his watch off. Sigh. Do you ever shoot a picture that you wouldn't have done something different to?

Two setups, each with two lights. One small-flash style, the other with bigger lights and light shapers. Same graphics, really. One uses the inside of the cell blocks, and the other, the outside. Which do you like? Maybe neither. Myself, I like them both, but honestly, if I were to shoot Rick again, and I hope I do, I'll do it another way, and turn another page.

There are no real rights and wrongs here. No answers. Just the ongoing pull of finding the next good picture. □

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