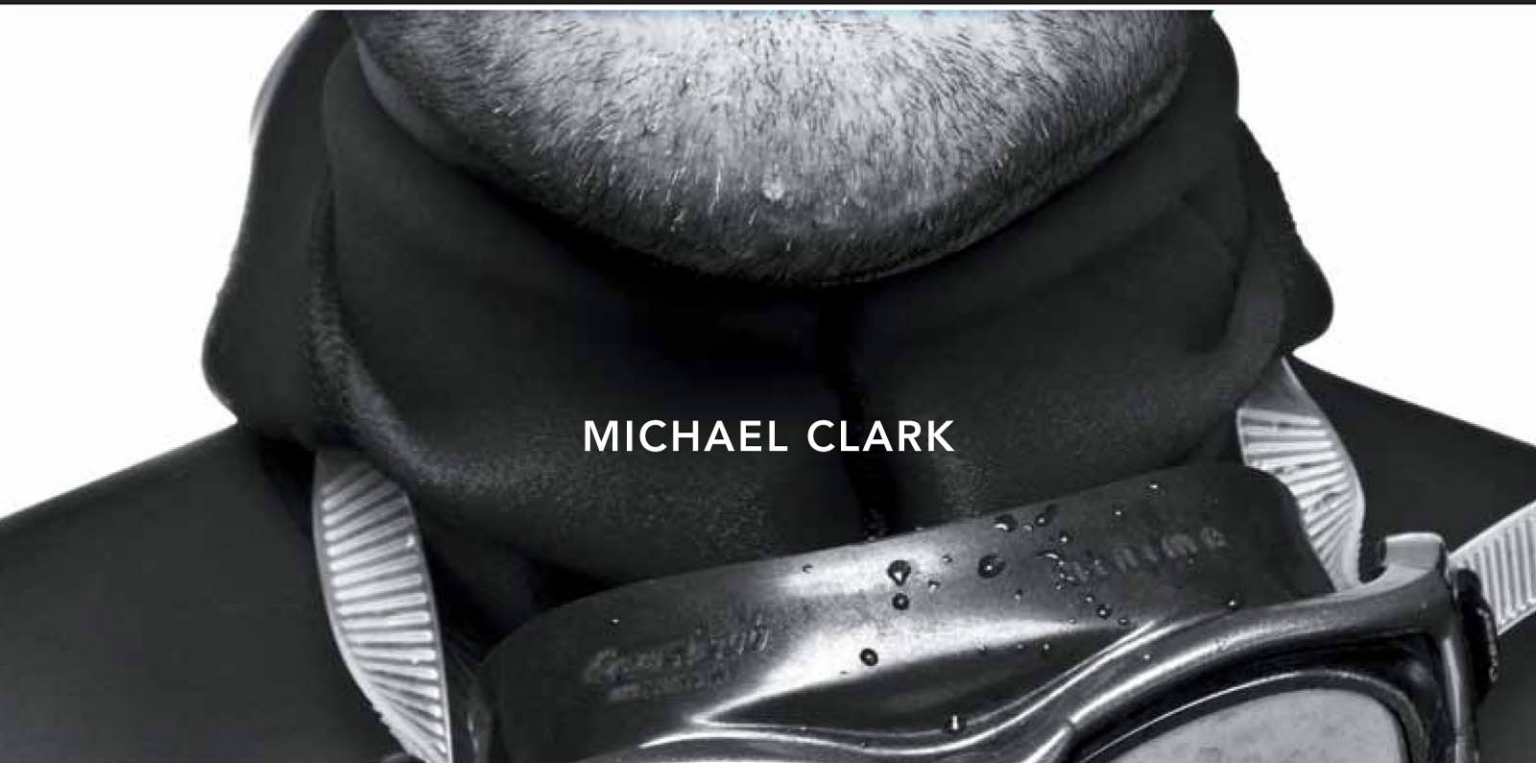# EXPOSED

INSIDE THE LIFE AND IMAGES OF A PRO PHOTOGRAPHER

MICHAEL CLARK

EXPOSED

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New Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

EXPOSED: INSIDE THE LIFE AND IMAGES OF A PRO PHOTOGRAPHER
Michael Clark

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contents

INTRODUCTION

"*I believe that the electronic image will be the next major advance. Such systems will have their own inherent and inescapable structural characteristics, and the artist and functional practitioner will again strive to comprehend and control them.*" — *ANSEL ADAMS, 1981*

Smoke from a small forest fire floats in the landscape of Kings Canyon National Park in Southern California, revealing the mountain layers as they stretch off into the distance.

EVER SINCE I WAS A CHILD I've had a feeling of utter enlightenment when I created something. It didn't matter if it was a drawing, a painting, or a sculpture. When I knew it was good, my whole being kicked into high gear. My concentration became laser focused, and the rest of the world faded away. Hours would fly by and I would barely notice. I was in a bubble that was all consuming. That creative spark was a lightning bolt for me.

I knew I had some artistic skills early on. As with many children with skills that come to them easily, I took my skills for granted. At an early age I was able to draw just about anything with very near photographic realism. With the help of my parents, I dabbled in just about every genre of art. Photography was just one of the genres I "tried out." The more I worked at art, the more exhausted I was by "perfect" drawings. As a result, I became very interested in abstractions and quick renderings. Part of that was a curiosity to see what would happen. Hence, an interest in photography wasn't that big of a leap.

I am addicted to the high that I get when I am creating an image I know is extraordinary.

Often, I'm asked how I've made it as a professional photographer. The short answer is that I've worked extremely hard with the help of many photo editors, mentors, and athletes. Alternatively, I don't feel like I've made it at all. I still have a long, long way to go before I can ever think I've "made it." But at the base level, I am an addict. I am addicted to the high that I get when I am creating an image I know is extraordinary. And being able to share that with the world, through my clients, is a supreme pleasure. That addiction to the creative high is the reason for my obsession with photography. It is the reason I am a photographer, and it explains why I work so hard.

This creative spark and the gratification I get from sharing it are the essence of this book and the reason I'm willing to share the entire process from start to finish. Reading about the entire process removes the mystery of how certain images were created. Hearing the complete story of an image makes the process logical and understandable. Seeing the whole process laid out makes these images accessible for all so that they can create similar processes of their own to further their photography.

The Preamble

Over the course of my career as a professional photographer, many of my mentors have been forthcoming with nitty-gritty details about their work. That has made an impact on me, and in turn I've tried to be as open as is prudent with anyone who asks about my work, my career, and how I have grown as a photographer. This book, my third, is a continuation of that principle. In this book I aim to pull back the curtain and shine a light on the realities of a working professional photographer in this day and age. Along the way, I'll dissect 16 images and include the story behind the image, how each image was created, the equipment used, and how each image was processed.

Even now, with the Internet full to the brim with information, it is difficult for an amateur photographer to know what the life of a professional photographer is like and even harder to know exactly what it takes to make it in this profession and consistently create work that keeps clients coming back again and again. I receive calls and emails from a multitude of photographers each year who want to make their passion their profession, and more often than not, they want the inside scoop on what it took for me to "make it" happen. I give them the same information other professional photographers have probably given them: It takes hard work, dedication, passion and motivation, and a bit of talent. The key phrase in that last statement is hard work. You have to want it. You have to want it more than almost anything else and be willing to sacrifice to make it happen.

This book isn't a step-by-step guide on what to do to start your career as a professional, but it is a look behind the scenes at the trials and tribulations of a working adventure photographer. I'm here to tell it like it is. I'll be sure to point out the glamorous moments and also detail the not-so-glamorous moments—that is, those that were particularly embarrassing or humorous and provide for good learning opportunities. The reality of being a professional photographer is quite different than the perception, and here I aim to separate myth from reality.

Having a vision for the type of photography you want to produce and a game plan to create it are only starting points for crafting your ideas. This book is a diary full of ideas, behind-the-scenes stories, tips and tricks, and examples of images I've shot that can help kick start the creative juices and provide inspiration to follow your photographic instincts and passions. In this book, you'll see specific images, learn what went into making them, hear the stories and thinking behind the images, find out who they were shot for and why, learn how they were executed, and understand the postprocessing involved. You'll read the adventurous stories about how each of the images were captured, including the highs and lows of what it took to get the job and come through

with the goods. You'll then move on to the actual techniques used to capture the images and view the provided in-depth, step-by-step video (see the enclosed DVD or link to files from the last page of your ebook) on how each image was processed. The hope is that by tagging along you'll be able to gain insight into your own photography, improve your skills, and find inspiration to create images instead of just taking them.

A Note on Digital Workflow

This book is not meant to describe a complete digital workflow. Although I will talk in depth about my digital-imaging workflow, I'll skip over some very important details, which you can find in my eBook *Adobe Photoshop Lightroom: A Professional Photographer's Workflow.* That ebook is available on my website at www.michaelclarkphoto.com. If you need detailed information about a digital photography workflow, I highly recommend purchasing that ebook on my website or finding a similar resource to help you polish your postprocessing skills.

With that said, this book will describe some fairly advanced postprocessing techniques using Adobe Photoshop Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop. I'll try to explain the techniques I use in as much detail as possible so that you can follow along. But if you can't decipher them in the book, be sure to watch the accompanying videos (or the video files that are linked to the last page of your ebook), which show step by step how each image was processed.

I'll assume that you have at the very least an intermediate level of experience with color spaces, histograms, Lightroom, and Photoshop, as well as a good feel for manipulating raw images.

Because I cannot explain every aspect of my digital workflow in perfect detail, I'll assume that you have at the very least an intermediate level of experience with color spaces, histograms, Lightroom, and Photoshop, as well as a good feel for manipulating raw images. Before diving too far into the postprocessing sections of this book, I highly suggest that you watch the *Lightroom and Photoshop Primer* and at least a few of the accompanying videos on the enclosed DVD. The Primer provides a good grounding on how I work up images in Lightroom's Develop module, and it explains how each of the sliders in the Develop module affect the image.

Having a complete digital workflow and understanding the tools used to process an image are critical to any photographer who wants to create top-notch work. Reading this book and watching the videos is a great introduction to a complete digital workflow. I cannot recommend highly enough that you spend time learning about digital workflow and image processing so that you can finish out the process and make sure your images live up to their full potential. Many times I've seen images that are captured perfectly and then the postprocessing is flubbed. You are the photo lab now, and as such, photography is a lot more complicated than it has ever been. Hence, take at least as much time and effort to process the image as you did creating it.

I tend to work in Lightroom on a large 24-inch color-calibrated and profiled monitor. Because I'm adjusting images and their color visually, it is very important to have a calibrated and profiled monitor to accurately adjust the color in my images. X-Rite (www.xritephoto.com) makes a range of excellent tools to accurately calibrate and profile your monitor. Be sure to select a monitor calibration device that works for your needs and fits your budget. For more information on color management, including books and resources with recommendations and tutorials on this process, refer to Appendix B, "Color Management Resources."

Another note on color management: For those of you watching the included video tutorials, I worked up the images in the book using a very expensive and color-accurate Eizo monitor that shows the entire Adobe RGB color space. Hence, if you want to see the sometimes minute color adjustments as I saw them on my monitor, you'll need to calibrate and profile your monitor with a monitor calibration device like the X-Rite i1 Display Pro, ColorMunki, or the i1 Pro devices, or with the Datacolor Spyder4Pro device. And for the record, my monitor is generally profiled to a color temperature of 6500 degrees Kelvin, a gamma of 2.2, and a luminance value of 120 cd/m^2. For the best and most accurate viewing of the tutorials, make sure you have calibrated and profiled your monitor to these values and you watch the tutorials in a darkened room.

For those of you using raw processing software other than Adobe Lightroom, many of these same techniques can be applied. Apple's Aperture, for instance, has many of the same sliders and features as those found in Lightroom. It is just a matter of applying the same techniques I use with that interface. The techniques I use in Photoshop, and present in this book, are very specific to that software, so it would be very difficult to apply those techniques with any other software.

One of the main reasons for this book is a fact that I learned long ago. If you don't know what is possible, it is hard imagine the possibilities at the outset. To that end, after watching a top imaging retoucher work on some of my images, I was amazed at where he could take those images and how he figured out exactly what needed to be done to create a certain look. It is only after years and years of working on images that I know how to achieve certain styles and outcomes when I process images. And that is the entire reason for this book. Not only do I discuss the unglamorous, behind-the-scenes tidbits, but I also provide you with descriptions of how a select number of images were processed so that when you are processing images, you'll have a better idea of the possibilities and how to achieve certain effects. Of course, like everyone else, I have my own set of styles and techniques, and it is difficult to break out of those ruts. But as person who constantly strives to learn new techniques, it is my hope that you will get from this book a solid foundation for experimenting with your own images.

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CHAPTER 5

EXPANDING
THE PORTFOLIO

"*If you are out there shooting, things will happen
  for you. If you're not out there, you will only hear
  about it.*" — *JAY MAISEL*

Mike Tittel taking a break while mountain biking on the Wasatch Crest Trail
near Salt Lake City, Utah.

IMPROVING AS A PHOTOGRAPHER involves hard work, experimentation, and having a vision for where you want to take your photography. It takes a lot of energy to flex your creative muscles, and it isn't always fun or easy. As quoted in the opening of Chapter 1, Henri Cartier-Bresson declared, "Your first 10,000 images are your worst." I'm not sure this is completely true because some of my early images are still among my favorites. But the gist of his statement is that improving your work takes time and thoughtful assessment of where your work is and where you want it to be.

Like anything in life, excellence comes from repeated effort. The more you work at something the more you learn, and the more you improve. There are no shortcuts. Even if you were born with significant artistic talent, creating interesting and compelling photographs can still be a challenging endeavor, and I think that explains in large part the allure of photography.

I constantly strive to learn new techniques and take on new genres of photography to improve my skill set as a photographer. When I have time, whether on an assignment or not, I'll experiment with new techniques to create a certain look or type of image for my portfolio. It is in these "portfolio" shoots that I might try a new lighting setup and see how it works. Lighting, for portraiture or sports, can be tricky, and a lot of time and effort goes into crafting the light on the subject. I also experiment with specialized postprocessing techniques to create a whole new look, as with my high-contrast, black-and-white portraits. Whatever the case, once I have optimized the process, I then have the confidence to use that same technique on an actual assignment.

This chapter focuses on four images that were created in an effort to expand my portfolio. Three of them were shot on my own time, and one was shot on an assignment. All of them are in my printed portfolio and showcase a different genre, style, or technique. Here again, I'll explain the genesis of each image, how the images were shot, the gear involved, and how they were worked up in Lightroom and Photoshop so you can see the entire process from start to finish.

Portraits in the Men's Bathroom

As a pro, there is constant pressure to produce new images and improve your skills so that you have more to offer your clients. For that reason, I shoot as much as possible whether on assignment or not, and I work hard to create images with a new and different look than I've shot before. Several years ago I decided it was time to seriously improve my portrait photography skills and to create a new lighting style in the process. Of course, I am still working on improving my portraiture skills, and even though I've made quite a bit of progress, I still have a long way to go. I find portraiture to be one of the hardest genres of photography, and I'll likely be working to improve my skills in this area for the rest of my life.

I shoot as much as possible whether on assignment or not, and I work hard to create images with a new and different look than I've shot before.

A few years ago I had what I would say was a seminal moment while shooting portraits of some good friends of mine who were free diving near Santa Rosa, New Mexico. The image in **Figure 5.1** was created on that self-assignment, and since then I've been asked to create similar style portraits by several of my regular clients. In fact, over the last few years, this high-contrast, black-and-white style has become one of my go-to techniques. Perhaps I've even over used this style, but it never seems to grow old. That may be because it is as old as photography itself, and I am certainly not the first photographer to shoot high-contrast, black-and-white portraits on a white background.

THE STORY

In portrait photography the goal is to connect with your subject and capture a bit of the subject's spirit or character in a photograph. That is obviously pretty hard to do, if not impossible. But in this instance, it certainly seems like I caught a part of the subject's spirit. Nicolas "Nico" Danan had just dived to the bottom of the Blue Hole, an 80-foot-deep natural spring in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. He was free diving, meaning he used no scuba gear or supplemental oxygen, and he held his breath for over two minutes. I figured portraits of the divers in their wetsuits and goggles, still dripping with water, would be more interesting than the action because the setting wasn't all that adventurous. In particular, I was keen to try a new technique—shooting black-and-white portraits on location with a white background. My only problem was that the wind was howling.

For this image, I set up a makeshift portrait studio in the only place that would work on such a windy day—the entrance to a men's public bathroom, which was just 50 feet from the dive location. I taped a white paper backdrop to a wall in the entrance way and used one strobe to light Nicolas and another to light the background (**Figure 5.2**). It was a very simple setup with the main light placed directly behind and above me. Once Nico surfaced, I asked him to come over directly so that I could capture a portrait of him "in the moment." The quarters were very cramped, and every once in a while someone would interrupt us because he needed to get into the bathroom. When Nicolas first saw the setup, he laughed, which was a good thing because that broke the ice quite nicely. In this image Nico gave me a blank stare that really catches him in a calm, collected moment, as if just before a big dive.

During the shoot, it felt like I was really connecting with Nico and getting some nice shots, although nothing on the LCD seemed earth shattering. I wasn't shooting in black and white, but instead was shooting digitally and in color so I had to interpret what the images would look like once they were processed. When I returned to the office and started working up the images, I realized how solid this set of portraits really was and went to my scientific reasoning to try to figure out what had happened. After speaking with Nico and the other divers (I also shot with two other divers that day), I realized there were several factors.

Figure 5.1 Portrait of Nicolas Danan shot just after free diving at the Blue Hole in Santa Rosa, New Mexico.

Nikon D300, Nikon 24–70mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 400, 1/250th second at f/10

First, the odd location helped the divers let down their guard. And because I chose to photograph them after they came out of the water, they were a bit subdued. Second, it helped that it was a simple lighting setup with one main strobe. That allowed me to concentrate on the subject. Third, the shoot entailed just the subject and me in very close quarters. Because I was so close, the divers really let me into their personal space. There were no distractions (save for the occasional person wanting to get into the bathroom). Fourth, I knew these guys very well, which obviously helped. Talking with the divers after the shoot, they all told me I had really captured them that day.

In fact, I'd say this image is one of the best portraits I've ever shot. It is in both my print and online portfolios, and it always gets comments when I show it to art buyers and photo editors. My goal for this shoot was to create

a set of portraits that were raw and edgy—that weren't worked to death in Photoshop—and showed real people in real situations. This image in particular met that goal and then some.

THE GEAR

To create this image, I first had to create the studio on location. In this instance it was a semi-enclosed brick entranceway to the Men's bathroom. The entranceway was about 5 feet wide and 9 feet long—not that big. I taped a 4-foot wide, bright-white paper background to one wall with gaffer's tape. As described earlier, the lighting setup was a very simple two-light setup. Because we were on location and there was no power, I used an Elinchrom Ranger RX Speed AS battery-powered strobe kit with two flash heads. One head was put into a very large,

Figure 5.2 A diagram showing the lighting setup for this image.
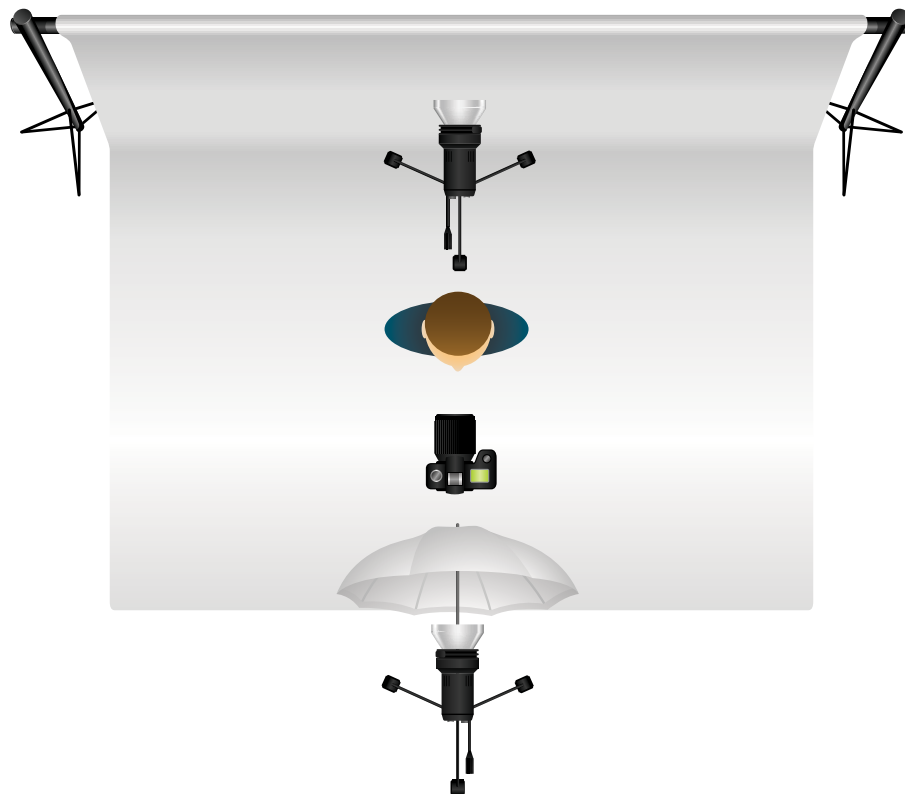
60-inch shoot through an umbrella and placed directly above my head level with the subject's face. The other strobe, fitted with a standard seven-inch reflector, was tucked in behind the subject pointing straight back at the background. The light on the background was set so that it was two stops brighter than the light on the subject: This way the background would be rendered pure white or close to it. To keep the light from bouncing off the background and wrapping around Nico, I pulled him away from the background as far as possible. It certainly wasn't an ideal lighting setup, but we made it work.

I shot with a Nikon D300 and a 17–35mm f/2.8 lens, which is not your typical setup for portraits, but in these tight quarters it worked well. This image was shot at 35mm on that lens, which is equivalent to a 52mm lens given the DX (APS-C) size sensor in that camera; hence, there was not much distortion. The flashes were triggered wirelessly using Pocket Wizard Transceivers.

THE POSTPRODUCTION

Although this image is pretty much a straight shot processed as a high-contrast, black-and-white image, there was a fair bit of work done on it to clean up the background and some blemishes on Nico's face. Straight out of the camera this image wouldn't win any awards—that is for sure. I could have certainly lit the background better on location, but there wasn't room to do so. Hence, I did what I could on location, knowing I could clean it up in Lightroom and Photoshop after the fact. My normal *modus operandi* is to get the shot as perfect in the camera as possible, which results in the best-quality image. Although the quality of this image isn't subpar by any means, it wasn't captured perfectly. So the difference in the image before and after processing is fairly drastic (**Figure 5.3**).

In Lightroom I converted the image to black and white right off the bat because that was my plan all along (**Figure 5.4**). I had to pull the Exposure slider out to +0.85 to blow out a significant portion of the white background. Even with this adjustment, not all of the background was pure white, and of course, part of a brick wall was showing on the right side of the image as well. The rest of the work on the background—to make it pure white and remove the brick wall—was done in Photoshop, as I'll discuss later. While adjusting the Exposure slider, I held down the Option key to make sure I didn't clip any details in Nico's face. I only wanted to clip the highlights on the background to force it to pure white. Note that I could have also used the Adjustment Brush and painted over the background with the Exposure set to +2.0 to force the background to pure white. I now use this technique when working up similar type images instead of doing all the heavy lifting in Photoshop.

Next, I set the Highlights, Shadows, Whites, and Blacks sliders to +4, +6, +2, and +4, respectively. If you look at the Histogram, you will see that both ends of the Histogram are clipped. This is intentional. Parts of the background are pure white and should be clipped on the highlights side of the Histogram. On the shadows side of the Histogram I could have set the Blacks slider to +11 and retained all of the shadow detail, but my intent was to create a high-contrast image. Hence, I set the Blacks slider to +4. I did not add any contrast in the Basic panel because I could do so with more control in the Tone Curve panel just below.

The real trick with this image, and the adjustment that really made it pop, was the Clarity slider. When I teach digital workflow workshops, I refer to the Clarity slider as "crack cocaine" because it is fairly addictive. Here you can see why: By pulling the Clarity slider all the way out to +79, I built up a lot of contrast in the midtones. Without

Figure 5.3 The image as it came out of the camera (left) and after it was processed (right).

this adjustment, the image lacked serious contrast and just didn't have that much impact. Pulling this slider all the way out also solved another problem. With the subject only four feet away from the lit background, there was some light bouncing off the background and wrapping around the right side of his face and neoprene wetsuit. Fortunately, because the Clarity tool builds up midtone contrast, and those areas where the light was wrapping around him were midtones, it corrected this lighting flaw. In other words, I got lucky here and learned a good lesson about shooting on a white background. The subject needs to be quite far away from the background if you want to blow it out completely and not have light wrapping around your subject. In my experience, the subject should be at least ten feet from the background. Ideally, the strobes lighting the background should be angled so that the light is raking across the background, not blasting it straight on. I knew this would be an issue when I shot the image, but the location in this instance gave me few options.

The rest of the settings in Lightroom were the usual suspects. At this point I tweaked the White Balance ever so slightly. But being in the Black and White mode, adjusting the White Balance changed the tones of certain colors because they appeared in black and white. Hence, it only had a minor effect on the image, and I adjusted it to taste. In addition, I adjusted the Lights, Darks, and Shadows sliders in the Tone Curve panel to -3, -2, and -4, respectively. This just helped to accentuate the high-contrast look.

The last tweaks I made in Lightroom were in the B&W panel (found in the HSL panel). Here I just fine-tuned the individual color channels, working with the red, orange, yellow, green, and blue channels (**Figure 5.5**). For black-and-white conversions, the

B&W sliders are wonderful tools. By using the Before and After view mode (found in the toolbar) in Lightroom's Develop module, you can see the before and after versions of your image. The before image will be the image in full color, and by looking at this image and choosing the appropriate color slider, you can affect the luminance of each color independently.

Moving into Photoshop, the first order of business was to work on the background. I used the Lasso, Eraser, and Clone tools, and basically erased or cloned large chunks of the background so it was rendered pure white (**Figure 5.6**). As you might imagine, this took a while. In this process I also removed the brick wall that was on the right side of the image. As I got closer to the subject while removing the brick wall, I had to zoom in closer and closer to 800% magnification to make sure I wasn't cloning out any of the subject.

When I had the background closer to pure white, I added a Levels adjustment layer and pulled in the white point slider to 246 to force those last few areas to pure white. I also changed the Output Levels to 3 and 255 so that the blacks would be backed

Figure 5.5 By using the Before and After mode in the Lightroom Develop module and the B&W color sliders, I could very accurately adjust each color channel's luminosity.

off from pure black ever so slightly. Notice that I left the white Output Level at 255 because I wanted it to be pure white. If I changed this to 252 as usual, when the image was printed, the white background would not be pure white but a very light almost imperceptible gray color, which might be visible. To keep parts of Nico's face from being blown out, I added a layer mask to the Levels adjustment layer and used the Brush tool to paint over those areas that were blowing out because of the Levels adjustment. I then added a Brightness/Contrast adjustment layer to brighten up Nico's face just a bit.

Once I had the background and the overall image worked up, the last task was to use the Spot Healing Brush, the Patch tool, and the Clone Stamp tool to touch up a few parts of his face. Each of these tools works best for certain types of cloning and healing. The Patch tool is my favorite, but it also takes more time to use. If the area around the spot I am working on is pretty uniform, I'll use the Spot Healing Brush (with Content-Aware fill). If not, and I am trying to blend that area with an already busy area, the Patch tool seems to be the best bet. The Clone Stamp tool works well for those areas that are uniform, like cloning parts of the background in this image.

This image took about two hours to work up. I'm not one to spend days and days working up images; I just don't have the patience, and if an image needed that much work, I would hire a professional retoucher to work on it. With two hours of time invested in this image, I was very happy with the end result, especially seeing how much it changed in the process.

Figure 5.6 Here are the stages of work done to this image in Photoshop. The top shot shows how the image looked when I brought it into Photoshop. In the middle image, I used the Lasso, Eraser, and Clone tools, and erased or cloned large chunks of the background to render it pure white. I also removed the brick wall showing through the background on the far right side of the image. The bottom shot shows the final worked up image. I added two adjustment layers to the image: a Brightness/Contrast adjustment layer and a Levels adjustment layer, as well as a layer mask to keep the highlights on Nico's face from being blown out. I also retouched his face. Note that I elected to create duplicate layers for each retouching step so that if I had to go back in and redo one of those steps, I didn't have to start from scratch.

The Wave

For several days in a row, while shooting surfing on the north shore of Oahu, I got up before dawn to shoot "empty" wave images at Waimea Bay (**Figure 5.7**). As someone who isn't a surfer and who hasn't shot surfing for that long, I found this exercise less than exhilarating. After all, I thought, they are just waves. But my buddy Brian Bielmann, the afore-mentioned "godfather" of surfing photography, was heading out each morning to shoot open waves, and I tagged along each time, not only because the light was great, but also because Brian had shown me some incredible images of waves exploding in the bay. After a few mornings, I started to get it. Even without a surfer on the wave, there were majestic split-second moments where the wave would curl over and explode 30 or 40 feet into the air. It took keen concentration and a quick trigger finger to cap-ture them, and little did I know that I would create an award-winning image of a wave.

THE STORY

The morning this shot was made, I found myself standing next to practically every big name surf-ing photographer on the planet. Everyone who was anyone in the surfing world had flown in a few days earlier in anticipation of the Eddie Aikau surf-ing competition, and as the swell continued to rise, the waves in Waimea Bay became larger and larger. Every morning like clockwork, before and after the

Figure 5.7 A wave exploding in Waimea Bay on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii, the morning of the 2009/2010 Quiksilver In Memory of Eddie Aikau big wave surfing competition.

Nikon D700, Nikon 500mm f/4.0 lens, ISO 400, 1/2000th second at f/5.6

Eddie, photographers swarmed to the bay to shoot images of empty waves. This image was shot the morning before the Eddie Aikau big wave surfing competition started. There were upwards of 70,000 people either on route or already camped out at the bay waiting to hear whether the contest was a go or not. Because traffic was in such a snarl, we arrived at 4:30 a.m. to claim our spot on the guardrail, which is the best vantage point for shooting empty waves.

Even without a surfer on the wave, there were majestic split-second moments where the wave would curl over and explode 30 or 40 feet into the air.

The weather on this morning dawned crisp and clear. At 6:40 a.m. a shaft of light hit the waves breaking in the bay, and that was the exact moment this image was shot. As you can see in the image, the foreground is just starting to become illuminated, whereas the main part of the wave is fully illuminated, giving the wave a more dramatic feel. The difficulty of shooting breaking waves like this, and surfing in general, is that you never know exactly what is going to happen. As a result, you have to shoot a lot of images. On this morning I shot over 500 images of empty waves before the contest began. On the entire trip I shot well over 2,500 images of empty waves and a total of over 8,000 images. The reason: If you aren't already shooting when the wave forms and explodes, you'll miss the shot. Hence, to get the shot, you end up shooting almost every wave that rolls into the bay because you just never know what you're going to get. At eight frames per second, that adds up to a lot of images very quickly. Every once in a while you get a few shots of a wave like this one or even better.

That morning I shot at least two dozen equally amazing images of open waves, but this image in particular seems to capture more attention than the rest. In fact, this image has won an honorable mention in the 2011 PDN's (Photo District News) Great Outdoors Photography Competition, one of the biggest competitions anywhere for professional and amateur outdoor photographers. I was quite surprised because I thought some of the other images I submitted were stronger images. But that only goes to show how magical images of waves can be. Not surprisingly, several photographers who specialize in shooting empty waves make quite a good living selling their images as fine art prints. The ocean is a magical place, and capturing a moment when the ocean is going wild is just as appealing as a majestic mountain in a wild storm, if not more so.

THE GEAR

Equipment-wise, this image didn't involve too much fancy footwork. I basically mounted a big lens on a fast camera and let it rip. This image was shot with a 500mm f/4 Nikkor lens on a Nikon D700, and both were mounted on a sturdy Gitzo tripod. Attached to the D700 was the MB-D10 battery grip, which allowed me to shoot at 8 frames per second (fps). Because the light was changing so quickly that day and especially right when this shot was taken at dawn, I had the camera in Aperture Priority auto-exposure mode so that it could automatically adjust the exposure. I set the exposure compensation to negative two-thirds of a stop because as the waves exploded into whitewater, the scene became significantly brighter and I didn't want to blow out any key highlights in the final image. It was only by checking the Histogram on waves I shot earlier that morning that I figured out just how much exposure compensation to subtract from the automatic exposure.

Figure 5.9 The image as it was processed in Photoshop using a Levels adjustment layer (with a layer mask), a Brightness/ Contrast adjustment layer (with a layer mask), and a Vibrance adjustment layer.

The key to getting good images of waves is to anticipate when and where they will form, which isn't easy. The only way to really get these images is to follow the wave into the bay, start blasting away at the highest framing rate your camera allows (in this case 8 fps), and hope the action happens with the shutter button depressed. One of the other concerns is the camera buffer, because you only get so many shots in a burst before the camera has to stop and write the images to the memory card. Hence, you have to choose the right moment to start firing, or you'll miss the height of the action. Even if you don't miss it, you might miss the next wave while the camera is emptying the buffer. In this case, as with a lot of sports photography, having a top-end camera with a huge buffer and a wicked fast lens with amazing auto focus is a major advantage.

Oddly enough, the biggest impediment to getting good images in a scenario like this is staying focused.

Oddly enough, the biggest impediment to getting good images in a scenario like this is staying focused. With so many other photographers standing right next to you, it is hard to concentrate and not get caught up in conversation. Whether it is waiting for your camera's buffer to clear or cleaning the ocean spray off the front of your lens, there are plenty of opportunities to miss the shot. Regardless, as in this case, the early bird gets the worm. If you aren't out there shooting, you'll never get the shot.

THE POSTPRODUCTION

This image only needed very slight modifications to the raw image. In Lightroom I adjusted the overall brightness of the image using the Exposure slider (**Figure** 5.8), which was set to +0.70. The Highlights, Shadows, Whites, and Blacks sliders were set to +3, -2, +2, and -52, respectively. I left the White Balance as shot in the camera, and pushed the Clarity slider to +25 and the Vibrance slider to +40. The only other changes I made in Lightroom were to adjust the Lights and Darks sliders in the Tone Curve panel to +10 and -7, respectively, and to add two Graduated Filters, one on the left edge of the image and the other on the bottom of the image. These were added to keep the bright highlights of the whitewater from blowing out and to add a bit more drama to the shadowy bottom part of the image. Both Graduated Filters were adjusted using the Exposure slider. The lower Gradient was set to -0.42, and the left gradient was set to –0.52.

In Photoshop I added my standard adjustment layers: a Levels adjustment, a Brightness/Contrast adjustment, and a Vibrance adjustment (**Figure** 5.9). I also added a layer mask to the Levels adjustment and also to the Brightness/Contrast adjustment to keep the highlights from blowing out in some of the exploding whitewater. The Levels sliders where set to 9 (black), 1.00 (middle), and 239 (white), and the Output Levels were set at 3 and 252. In the Brightness/Contrast adjustment layer I pulled the Brightness out to +2. In the Vibrance adjustment layer I set the Vibrance slider to +34 and the Saturation to +9.

All of the adjustments were basically fine-tuning the Histogram and adding contrast and saturation to the image. The Lightroom Graduated Filters were added to help control the highlights and also to direct viewers' attention to the part of the image that I wanted them to look at, which in this case is the curl of the wave. This is perhaps the greatest attribute of the Lightroom Graduated Filters. I use these Graduated Filters to help point viewers' eyes to where I want them to go in the image, which is an incredibly powerful tool.

Sleepwalking in a Sandstorm

White Sands National Monument in southern New Mexico has become one of those places I visit at least once a year. I love it there. If you have never been, you owe it to yourself to make it there some-day, especially if you are a photographer who likes to shoot landscapes. It is unlike any other place on earth save, perhaps, for Antarctica. The rolling white sand dunes are mesmerizing, and the light can be absolutely magical. The sand is not really sand at all; it's gypsum, which gives it the white color. And of course, the temperatures are quite a bit warmer than Antarctica. In fact, I'd suggest avoiding the monu-ment during the summer, because it is quite warm. As you can see in **Figure 5.10**, the light and the clouds in particular were impressive on this day at White Sands. Little did we know that we were in for a wild night after this photo shoot.

THE STORY

The trick at White Sands is to camp; otherwise, you'll miss the best light. The only camping in White Sands is backcountry camping, and those campsites are about a mile or more away from the parking area, which means you have to come prepared for a hike. Also, because they are away from the crowds, the camping areas are the best place to find untracked dunes. Just about anywhere else in the park people

Figure 5.10 Sadhana Woodman practicing yoga in White Sands National Monument near Alamogordo, New Mexico.

Nikon D2x, Nikon 17–35mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 100, 1/125th second at f/8

are hiking and playing on the dunes, which means there are tracks all over the dunes, and that doesn't help if you want images of pristine sand dunes.

For this stock shoot I hired an expert yoga instructor named Sadhana Woodman, who could perform a variety of yoga moves on the shifting gypsum at White Sands—a difficult task. Because it was August and incredibly hot, we planned to shoot at last light for a few hours, camp, shoot in the early morning light, and then get out of there quickly. The first evening went spectacularly well. This image was shot on that first evening. The clouds were massive and glowing in the evening light, creating an unbelievable backdrop. Shortly before dark, I asked Sadhana to pose on this dune while I shot a series of vertical and horizontal images. The idea was to silhouette her against the magnificent sky. I started relatively close to her, and when I moved farther away, I realized the images were only getting better and better. This image was shot from about 50 feet away. Her body position, with her arms pointing upward like an arrowhead at the wild clouds above her, is what makes this image work. This is also one of those rare images where having the subject dead center is the perfect composition. It just made sense visually.

After the evening shoot, we enjoyed a casual dinner with a bit of wine under a blanket of bright stars and wispy clouds. Just as we headed off to bed the wind picked up. What had been a nice evening turned brutal within minutes. The winds revved up and never stopped, and I was in a mesh tent! OK, so I should have known better than to take a mesh tent to a sandy desert environment, but the talent was sleeping in my full-on mountaineering tent along with her husband who came along for the adventure. Not that it mattered as Sadhana informed me the next morning, because she and her husband also got no sleep.

It was a comical night. We wrapped clothing over our faces to protect our eyes and took walks in the gypsum "white out." Sleeping was out of the question. The three-season tent I was sleeping in was bent over in the wind so far that I had to constantly keep pressure on the side of the tent to keep the poles from snapping. White Sands felt more like Antarctica that night than I had ever seen it. At one point we couldn't see more than 30 feet from the tents. Hiking back to the cars, which were over a mile away, would have been a fool's errand. By morning, I had at least a few inches of white sand in my tent.

Fortunately, the wind died down at sunrise and we dug ourselves out to start shooting. Sadhana, frazzled from a rough night without sleep, announced that she felt "like crap" but still got up to appease the camera with a few yoga poses. What seemed like a miserable night turned in to a wonderful morning of spotty but clear light and more incredible images.

It just goes to show that no matter what happens on a shoot, it is imperative to get up and be there when the light happens, because you never know what will happen. The sleepless night was a wild adventure, and although it was not much fun, it was very exciting to see the desert in all its rage. However, I'm not sure my cohorts enjoyed it all that much.

It just goes to show that no matter what happens on a shoot, it is imperative to get up and be there when the light happens, because you never know what will happen.

My stock agency, Aurora Photos, accepted 76 of the 114 images I submitted from this shoot, which is the highest percentage of images any of my stock agencies have ever accepted. Hence, it was well worth the effort! This image has received a lot of praise and has been used by many different clients. It is also included in my print and Web portfolios.

THE GEAR

Because we had to carry in a full complement of camping gear, I pared down the camera gear to a minimal but versatile kit including two camera bodies and three zoom lenses: a 17–35mm, a 28–70mm, and a 70–200mm. My gear was also stored in a Pelican box, which as it turned out, was very prudent. This particular image was shot with a Nikon D2x and a 17–35mm Nikkor lens set at 17mm. I exposed for the brightest part of the cloud above Sadhana in manual mode and used a relatively small aperture of f/8 to keep her and the cloud sharp. During the sandstorm, I didn't worry about my gear at all because it was in the Pelican box. They may be heavy, but Pelican cases are great when it comes to protecting gear.

One of the key takeaways learned with this image is to move around your subject and check all the angles if you have the time. If I had just stayed in one position, this image would not exist. This is one of the most important concepts I think about whenever I arrive at a location. I leave the camera in the bag for a few minutes and just walk around. It gives me time to think about the type of image I want to create and how I will go about creating that image. If there is an angle or position that is hard to get to, more often than not that is the best position to shoot from because it gives you something different and interesting. In this case, the best angle wasn't a hard position to get to; it was just farther away.

Figure 5.11 The raw image as it was processed in Lightroom.

THE POSTPRODUCTION

This is yet another image that only needed slight modifications in the postprocessing and a bit of retouching to make it sing. One of the first details you might notice in the Lightroom screen shot is that a few backpacks are on the horizon line to the right of Sadhana (**Figure 5.11**). Quite a few footprints are in the sand as well. I took the liberty of removing the backpacks and the footprints in Photoshop to clean up the look of the image. While shooting, the light was fading fast, and there wasn't time to move the bags. Plus, doing so would have added a few more sets of footprints. For that reason, I elected to just shoot the image with everything included knowing I could take these elements out in the postprocessing.

In Lightroom I adjusted the brightness of the image slightly by setting the Exposure slider to +0.08. The Highlights, Shadows, Whites, and Blacks sliders were set to -2, +2, 0, and -1, respectively. I set the Contrast slider to +2. And I pulled the Clarity, Vibrance, and Saturation sliders out to +20, +22, and +3, respectively. The final adjustment I

INDEX