

Shooting au naturel

By Jeff Kent

It's the primary tenet of photography: You don't photograph an object; you photograph the light falling on it. From the start of photography with the crudest ancestors of modern cameras, light has been the most important variable in the creation of photographic images.

The quality of good natural light is unequalled by anything reproducible in the studio, but it's often hard to find, hard to use and hard to manipulate. Even when the weather and the venue cooperate, the strength of the light itself can present a challenge to the photographer. It's not easy to make a living as a location photographer if you restrict your working hours to the brief periods of "magic light" just after sunrise and just before sunset.

Tony Corbell, Cr.Photog., a world-recognized lighting expert, says you can make your own magic, even in bright sunlight. Corbell has published numerous books on lighting, including projects that have become the basis of college classes. His collaboration with Dean Collins and his relationships with Hasselblad and Fujifilm have kept him on the cutting edge of lighting technique and technology throughout the years.

According to Corbell, photographers need to think about all the available tools they have to improve a given location situation, whether it's a great background but terrible light, or great light but a horrible background. The key is understanding the subtleties of light control.

Photography, by nature, is a reciprocal science. When you lighten the subject, you automatically darken the background, and vice versa. For example, say it's a bright, sunny day and you have to photograph

Left: This image by Michael Taylor, M.Photog.Cr., API, F-ASP, is a high school senior portrait made on location during the middle of the day. The directional lighting is coming from sunlight walls across the courtyard from the subject. Shot with a Mamiya 645 AFD body and 55-110mm lens, with a Kodak Pro DCS back set at 100 ISO. Exposure was for 1/10 second at f/11.

Right: "This couple had just gotten married on the beach, and we were going up to the celebration dinner," says Marybeth Adkins of San Rafael, Calif. "This is really a moment between the moments. I'm backing up the ramp a few feet ahead and snapping away." The skies were overcast, and Adkins shot on auto focus with a Canon EOS 3 camera and 28-135mm zoom lens. Exposure made for 1/125 second at f/5.6 on Fujicolor Portrait NPH 400 Professional film.

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Acclaimed lighting experts explain how to manage natural light—any time of day



a white-clad bride in harsh noonday sun. To avoid blowing out the entire subject, most photographers would diffuse the light falling on the bride with some sort of translucent material, thus softening the light that's hitting the white dress.

"What a lot of people miss," says Corbell, "is that you then need to open up the exposure to compensate for the loss of light on the subject. When that happens, your background gets brighter. When you take light away from your primary subject, you add it to your background. The inverse is true as well. Adding light to the subject darkens the background."

The technique of compensating for this reciprocal quality is called *key shifting*. Its proper implementation allows photographers to pick and choose their backgrounds, knowing that there are variables they can adjust to get great images, no matter the time of day.

There's more to it than simply adjusting up or down a stop, says Corbell. "We don't often step into a situation where the natural light is gorgeous and stationary, and we can just walk up and use it. We usually have to move around and work with the light

Doing it digitally

When shooting digitally, Corbell uses the same basic techniques as when he's shooting film, but he's a lot more careful to get the exposure dead on. With digital photography in natural light, if you overexpose, you're in trouble, he says.

"You can fix a lot of things in Photoshop, but if you overexpose, then your camera's image sensor reads it as 'no information,'" he explains. "When there is no information in an area, you can't put it there. You can't bring it back. Unfortunately, most wedding and portrait photographers were taught to expose for the shadows and print for the highlights. That will not work with digital. You need to test, test, test and learn to read the histograms."

Corbell also pays more attention to his range of contrast when shooting digitally. "I try to keep my ratios smaller and work with less contrasty pictures," he says. "I want to be sure I can get a full-range print every time."

by adding something to it, taking something away, transmitting it, or reflecting it."

Addition, subtraction, transmission and reflection—these are the four critical methods Corbell uses in key shifting. "If you use these methods to control the ambient and the natural light, you can work a lot longer in the day, as opposed to waiting for that perfect time of day," says Corbell.

Addition: When you turn on a flash, the reciprocal nature of photography changes,

says Corbell. "A flash takes care of lighting the subject, and the background is handled by shutter speed and aperture."

The addition of flash is helpful when the background is overly bright and the subject is too dark. While the flash unit illuminates the subject, the photographer makes the requisite increase of shutter speed to compensate for it, which automatically darkens everything outside the area illuminated by the flash. The faster shutter



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8 keys to natural light portraits

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Photographed in the children's grandmother's backyard, this portrait has its main directional light coming from the setting sun to the right of the camera. "The lighting from that direction brought out the beautiful colors and texture in the environment and gave us great lighting on the boy on the left," says Michael Taylor. "I did not want to sacrifice the lighting on the face of the boy on the right. To correct the situation, I turned the boy's body on the left so that his shirt acted as a reflector and bounced lighting back into the face of his younger brother." Photographed with a Mamiya RZ camera and a 150mm lens on Kodak Professional Portra 400VC film.

1. The biggest problem with most photographers when they look for a place to photograph their clients in a natural lighting situation is that their paradigm is totally wrong. Most photographers look for a place to create a portrait because of how the scene looks. That does not seem, on the surface, to be a problem. That foundational thinking, however, can cause many problems when you look to create a portrait. I look for places that have beautiful lighting on the faces first, then I look for backgrounds. The most important lighting is the lighting on the subjects. Look for lighting that flatters people and then see if you can make that environment suit the rest of your needs for a great portrait.

2. Use the edge of light for two very different and important purposes. The first reason is that most photographers tend to place their subjects in the areas of very deep shade. I know that we have always been told not to photograph in the sun. There is some truth to that, however, the areas that border sun and shade are very exciting places to photograph. To start with, the areas near the edge of shade and sun are generally the best places for lighting on the face. While it is true that in the deep shadows you have no "sun issues," lighting in deep shade tends to be so bland that it is what I call a "there light." In other words "there lighting" is just okay, barely directional, with no personality and

generally does not reach into the eyes. Second, areas towards the edge of where sun and shade meet will many times give you a beautiful hair light and edge light onto the subject. This light can bring an increased feeling of depth and dimension, add excitement to the portrait, and slim a person down (or add weight if used at the wrong time on the wrong person).

3. Look for areas of reflected light to open up a whole new world of lighting outdoors. I look for areas opposite of where the sun is bouncing off walls to create beautiful directional light source. Good reflected light is my favorite light situation outdoors. There are two different ways to look for these situations. The first is to simply to go to areas (near the middle of the day) where the sun is bouncing off buildings. The sunlit buildings are acting as huge soft boxes and result in a fabulous light falling on the subjects. The other way is to look for the places where reflected light falls. Reflected light has a certain characteristic that is rich, full-bodied and caresses the surfaces where it falls. It is the complete opposite of a "there light." When you use the second technique to look for areas of reflected light, you will find areas to photograph that you have never thought possible. Remember that light bounces off everything. Use that fact to help you. I have used reflected light off

dirt, cars, t-shirts, tree bark, homes, and once an elephant seal's body to light up his trainer at the Tacoma Zoo.

4. Find areas that will direct beautiful light on your subjects' faces, (In essence, key and fill light), but also on their hair, the edges of the frame and the background. All the light tools that you use in the studio should ideally be in your natural light portraits. Don't be satisfied with just good lighting on the face. Look for everything in terms of lighting. Look for a place that will give a graceful edge light and a lovely background light to put that finishing touch on your portrait.

5. Keep a clean color temperature of light on the face. Critical lighting technique has always concerned me, ever since my first job in the photo industry, working at a color lab. It never failed that the most inconsistent photographers had the hardest images to print and were the pickiest customers at the front counter. I learned then the importance of good exposure and having only one color temperature of lighting that falls on the face. Warm light, cool light neutral light in the background, whatever suits your fancy is great. That is a matter of taste. I have consistently been very careful about the lighting and exposure on the face when I have shot with negative or transparency film. These concepts are especially crucial in the days where digital is used as a means of capturing information

6. Look for lighting opportunities. Most



This portrait was taken in the middle of the afternoon with the directional light coming from sunlight bounced off a wall to the camera right and the gravel parking lot beneath the subject's feet. "The subject was placed to back side of the red wall so that the open sky behind her gave her a hair light and edge light," explains Michael Taylor. Captured with a Kodak DCS Pro SLR/n set at 160 ISO, 70- 200mm f/2.8 Nikkor lens.

people look for *lighting situations*. By that I mean most photographers look for environments where they are comfortable photographing. Most photographers looking for locations will only go to situations that are commonly associated with available light, such as areas next to windows, places underneath tree branches, next to building overhangs and at that sweet light time of day. I do not discount these places, because I look for those areas, too. I, however, look for areas of lighting opportunities. Places that will expand your areas to do location portraits. You can photograph in the middle of a parking lot if there is reflected light bounding off the pavement. You can make a great portrait at 1:00 in the afternoon if there is wonderful light reflected from the two-story building across the street.

7. When you are in that time of day when there is beautiful, sweet light, make sure that you look 360 degrees around you for portrait locales. This concept occurred to me when I was doing some portraits on the beach in Malibu at that perfect time of day. When I happened to look behind me there was an even more beautiful scene in which I could place the kids to do a great interactive portrait, mindful that I still wanted to keep the proper direction of light on their faces. By keeping this concept in the back of my mind I have almost always been able to add to the variety in portrait sitting.

8. The second biggest mistake for photographers is that they make portraits when they are not using the proper direction of light. This is a trap that I have to struggle every day not to fall into. It is very natural to walk into a park scene and see beautiful lighting wrap around a tree trunk and you feel ready to plant your tripod and create a portrait there. The problem is that, the lighting that is wrapping around a tree will also wrap around your subjects' face...from behind. This means that the lighting is coming from behind and, therefore, from the wrong direction.

To summarize...

- Choose a location for the lighting on the face first and then choose the background.
- Keep clean lighting on the face and make critical proper exposure.
- Use reflected light and edge of light to work near the middle of the day.
- There must be proper direction of light on the face, not just the scene.

Lighting guru Michael Taylor, Photog.Cr., F-ASP, owns and operates Taylor Fine Portraiture, based in Pasadena, Calif.

speed allows less light from the background to be absorbed by the film or sensor, thus effectively darkening that area and creating a well-balanced exposure overall.

To use additive lighting effectively, avoid making the image look too flashy, and be sure to use the right exposure.

Subtraction: "What if I move to a setting with a darker background, then

have an assistant hold a black panel above the subject's head to reduce the light falling on her, thereby lightening the background?" Corbell asks. "Well, people will say that now my subject is in shadow—but not if I expose for it." By adjusting the aperture or shutter speed to capture more light from the darkened subject, you automatically lighten the

Leslie Bartlett of Rockport, Mass., captured this image at 6:12 on a July morning on Cape Ann, Mass. Shooting with a Canon PowerShot G2 camera, he exposed for 1/250 second at f/4. ISO was set to 100 and focal length was 16.8mm.

©Les Bartlett



While photographing an ocean-side wedding in Monterey, Calif., Stefanie Herzer captured this image of a girl using a flower basket for a hat. It was a bright, sunny day, but the girl was standing in open shade, making the exposure a little easier. "I love that she was aware of the comedy in this situation and how she was squinting her nose to express that," says Herzer. Captured with a Canon 1Ds camera and 24-70mm f/2.8L lens. Exposure was for 1/500 second at f/3.5.

background as well. This technique helps to consistently light the entire scene—background and subject—and then you simply adjust your exposure to lighten the entire composition.

"There is beautiful light quality that can be had simply by putting a black panel over someone's head on a bright, sunny day," says Corbell. "Don't have a black panel? Fine, put the subject under an archway, a tree, anything that will block the direct light coming down on them."

Transmission: Transmission is simply altering the quality of the sunlight falling on the subject by filtering it with translucent material. When everything about your composition is looking great except for a laser beam of direct sunlight falling on the subject, whip out a translucent panel and diffuse the beam. "If you take an assistant with you and have him hold up a round 42-inch, pop-up, translucent panel, you can shoot merit-quality prints all day long, especially if you use long lenses," says Corbell.

Reflection: Lighten darker areas of your composition by redirecting the natural light with reflective material. This works especially well for backlit subjects when you don't want to use a fill flash. Where to place the reflector in such a situation? "Look at the ground," says Corbell. "There will always be a shadow. If you stand in the shadow and lift up the reflector, there will always be light, and it will be coming from the proper direction."

For casting light on the subject's face, Corbell prefers to use white opaque fabric. He uses gold or silver metallic reflectors as accent lighting on the subject's hair, or to create a highlight along an arm. To Corbell's eye, metallic reflectors are too specular for faces, and they tend to add an unwanted color cast. □



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Hot tip: Go long

You can spend an awful lot of time finding the perfect location—or, by using longer lenses and altering your techniques slightly, you could find that perfect location just 10 feet from your own back door.

"There are amazing backgrounds all around us if you shoot them out of focus," says Tony Corbell. "I think too many people let the background dictate too much about the photograph. The background should support the subject, not compete with it."

Corbell once did a fashion shoot in front of an ugly green trash dumpster. He softened the light with a translucent panel and used a 300mm f/2.8 lens to soften the background to a blur. In the resulting images, the dumpster looked like a pastel green studio backdrop.