

The best thing about digital photography is that it always presents opportunities to learn—even when you're sure you have it down pat.

Finding the right exposure



TAKING DIGITAL CAPTURE OUTDOORS

BY STEPHEN A. DANTZIG

You assume that when the light is behind you and the camera, you're good to go. The light of the sun setting behind you is supposed to be "magic."

That's not always the case. Sometimes the area behind the subject is far brighter than the light above and in front of her, even with the sun in the "magic" position. This is not uncommon on the shores of Hawaii. Small clouds can form quickly over the mountain ranges and block the setting sun. The subject can be standing in the shade of a cloud, while the area behind her is flooded with sunshine.

In this case, metering for your subject will greatly overexpose the background, and it can create flare. One way to remedy the situation is to use a strobe as the main light. For this image of Brooke Tanaka (left) I set it about two stops hotter than the foreground ambient light, which now becomes the fill light. To control the background ambient, I adjusted the shutter speed. This made the strobe more of a main light, nullifying the flat, cloudy light on Brooke. I checked the preview screen of my digital camera until I saw what I wanted. I rechecked the meter setting and went into shoot mode.

Nailing the exposure with the narrow latitude of digital capture takes practice, especially in photographing white fabrics.

I was going for a fashion look in this image of Brooke Tanaka, so I used a spotlight with a 7-inch parabolic reflector. A soft box would have lessened the contrast.

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Shooting RAW helps—the range for shooting in JPEG format is smaller than shooting with transparency film. Using your preview screen is *not* an effective way to judge the overall exposure, but viewing a histogram can show you how the image is holding the whites. I used six lights for this image of Teresa Bringas (right), and an additional light on the backdrop. I metered each light and combination of lights to stay within a one-stop range. The preview screen showed that the

whites were largely blown out, so we moved back the lights until they looked right on the display. I am a huge believer in metering every part of a set, but with digital capture, it’s sometimes necessary to then check the scene with the on-screen histogram. ■

Stephen A. Dantzig Photography is a commercial studio in Honolulu. Dantzig’s latest book is “Lighting Techniques for Fashion and Glamour” (Amherst Media, \$29.95). See more of his work at www.dantzigphotography.com.



I used the highlight alert mode of my camera’s information display to make sure none of the whites are blown out.