

THE GOODS

In a series beginning this month, we lead you through the process of setting up a top-notch and affordable home studio.

BY BRYAN LINDEN

Home *work*

BUILD THE ULTIMATE HOME STUDIO WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

There were several factors I considered before beginning to build my home studio, including functionality, price and aesthetics. Every product that went into making my studio a reality was chosen only after extensive research. My plan should be easy to replicate or adapt for most any studio, in-home or stand-alone.

Recently, I decided to switch the primary focus of my business from shooting musicians mostly on location to weddings and portraits. My budget of \$10,000 was to include a motorized background system, lighting and a projection system. The project actually came in under budget at \$6,698, with enough left over for another a camera or several accessories.

I've been happy with my setup, and I've booked 100 percent of the prospective clients who have come to the new studio. The space is a comfortable setting, with romantic music playing in the background during consultations. After wedding clients answer my interview questions, I press a button on a wireless remote to lower a selection from the 12 backgrounds in my automated system and capture a few photos of the prospective bride and groom. This is followed by a slideshow of my work projected on a 10-foot screen.

While the slideshow plays, I go to my digital darkroom and quickly retouch and print one

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Above: Bryan Linden shooting mother and child in studio. There's plenty of room to back up several more feet, and the furniture is on sliding casters for easy mobility. Left: Captured during the session with Cara and her beautiful baby girl, Alexis.

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of the captures to present to the couple after the slideshow. So far, everyone's been enthused after seeing the high quality Linden Photography can give them. Next we talk about options and prices, answer any remaining questions, and book the event—easy. The presentation, images and use of technology impress my clients, and it all conveniently takes place in one area. We didn't have to give up anything aesthetic about our home to accomplish it, either.

The projector is an important part of my studio, and I chose one that's easy to transport to my workshops and my high-end portrait clients' homes. Projecting my images large-scale helps me sell large portraits. The projector also serves as our living room television, and though it's not quite plasma quality, my family quickly fell in love with watching everything in High Definition on the 10-foot screen, which doubles as a white background. The projector is hooked up to our stereo system, cable TV, and a Mac Mini Intel version that can run Windows XP if we need it.

I chose the Epson 835p projector (\$3,500) for several of its charac-

a few automated roller systems, I selected a self-supporting four-roller system from Backdrop Outlet (model HCS4ROLL, \$699). It was the best and, surprisingly, least expensive unit I looked at. Each of the four automated rollers can hold up to three canvas or seamless backdrops (12 total) and can be individually accessed via wireless remote. I don't recommend using muslins in the system, as they tend to bunch when rolled. You can still use muslins easily by loosely attaching them with hand clamps to a background on a roller.

I also wanted to be able to easily mount other backgrounds. The makers suggest using gaffer's tape to attach backgrounds to the rollers and to the opposing background, although removing the tape could tear paper backgrounds. For me, it's more convenient and safer to use Ultra-Mate fasteners from Velcro, which come in 1-inch by 10-foot rolled strips. The self-adhesive Velcro is thin and the hook-and-loop combo holds fast. I put the hook side on the rollers and the loop side on the top front side of the first background. I put a hook-side strip on the bottom of the background to mesh with a loop-strip on the bottom of the next background. I place two 4-foot wooden dowels with some loop-side Velcro attached along the rear backside of the last backdrop in each roller to weight the drops and keep them straight. I can easily remove or reposition them as needed. The adhesion of the Velcro strips could be reinforced with staples (www.velcro.com/consumer/products_um.htm).

The system comes with a height-adjustable stand, but I didn't want such a large thing in my living room. In other settings, you could mount the stand on locking wheels to make it easy to move when necessary. I mounted the system permanently on my ceiling and hide it with a theater-style swag. To complete the theater look, I added crimson drapes that serve as a backdrop when closed. I recommend finding a



The backdrop setup makes a theatrical screening area for a stunning presentation. With the press of a button, the space transforms back into a shooting area.

teristics: native XGA resolution (1,024x768 pixels), a must for projecting applications such as Adobe Photoshop; 3,000 ANSI lumens to afford a bright picture even in large rooms and with moderate ambient light; 3-LCD technology for rich, accurate colors with no color wheel artifacts as with many DLP projectors; wired or wireless (802.11g) networking operation; built-in PCMCIA slot so we can project slideshows and presentations without a computer; HDTV capabilities of 480i, 480p, 720p, 1080i; and several input ports for compatibility with almost any connection we need, including Composite Video, S-Video, Mini DIN, Mini D-sub, and Video RGB (www.epson.com).

For my background system, I was looking for extreme versatility that wasn't going to be an eyesore in my living room. After looking at



The meeting area provides comfortable seating with a romantic ambiance. I effortlessly control my slide presentations through a wireless keyboard.



I house the Epson 835p projector in a custom-built box with easy access to both the front and the back, which is mounted to the ceiling.

competent electrician if you mount your background system in a ceiling as I did and make sure all safety codes are followed.

My backgrounds include a 10x20-foot white canvas that doubles as my projection screen, a chroma green canvas to use when I want to drop in a virtual background, several Old Master and computer created backgrounds, and seamless black paper. I've got a ton of choices available in moments. When I'm using multiple backgrounds on a roller and I need a background other than the last one used, I remove the bottom backdrops to get them out of the way by detaching the Velcro. This also helps keep the backdrops clean and undamaged (www.backdropoutlet.com).

I found a fantastic, unique lighting system that I love, the German-made Hensel Integra Pro Plus Super Size three-light kit (P/N7338815, \$2,499). These monolights have many cool features and are built like tanks. The color constancy has been great, and they even come with changeable glass flash domes in various color temperatures for film shooters. Each 500-watt-second (WS) monolight is housed in sturdy aluminum. The Integras have a 6-stop range adjustable in 1/10 increments. The Hensel radio transmitter system that comes with the kit gives you wireless control over each individual unit, right from your camera. Every control on the lights is easy to use. The mounting system for umbrellas and soft boxes features a one-handed quick release.

This Integra kit comes with a rolling soft-sided bag, three 500-WS lights with 300-watt halogen modeling lights, one radio flash trigger and transmitter, two umbrella flood reflectors, one 7-inch reflector, two economy umbrellas, one honeycomb grid (#2), one five-in-one

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reflector, one 24x36-inch Ultra Softbox III, one soft box adapter for Ultra III, three aluminum light stands, and a Hensel lighting guide. There are plenty of lighting systems on the market, but the combination of quality, performance and price makes the Hensel system hard to beat (www.henselusa.com).

I chose to use my 16x27-foot living room with its 9-foot ceilings as my studio. I connected the projector to the stereo system that was already there, arranged plush sofas that serve my purpose much better than the stiffness of a meeting room or office. With the backdrop system mounted at one end of the space, there's still enough room for the lighting, posing group family shots, or isolating a single subject with a zoom.

In any space, 12 feet is the minimum width a wall needs to be to house a background system. Also allow enough room to back up and use your lenses, and make sure the height of the ceiling will work for you. Before installing a backdrop system, try doing a mock-up of the largest shoot you would attempt to capture in your studio. Set up the lights and pose your subjects by the wall you plan to use, allowing for the space your background system may take. If you have room enough to capture the subjects as you'd like to, you can feel confident about installing the system. If you can't find the room in your house, consider using a garage or another dwelling.

My living room has many windows on all sides, all draped with silk curtains that double as backgrounds or be drawn to allow for available-light shots. Ambiance is also very important. My recessed room lighting is sectioned for selective control. I can dim sections independently for ambiance or to provide optimal contrast for projection. Candles, soft music, wine and coffee, and light desserts or snacks are there to make clients feel like special guests. It shows my attention to detail and makes them feel like special guests.

The grand total of basic equipment discussed in this article is \$6,698, well below the \$10,000 budget. In upcoming articles, I'll discuss ways to use the equipment, along with some helpful add-ons that I'm using in my studio. I hope that this series will give you some helpful information, and most of all help you have fun and be profitable in your photography business. ■

See a QuickTime VR before and after tours of Linden's Ultimate Home Studio in the Bonus Content at www.ppmag.com.

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