Varying bulb configurations, halogens, fluorescents and a new electronic flash option add variety to an old standard.

BY RON EGGERS

Continuous light

WESTCOTT SPIDERLITES

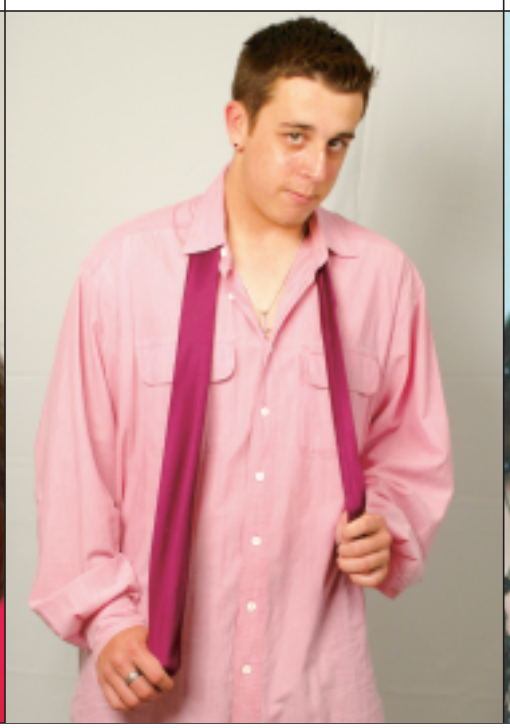
Long before electronic flash, power packs, soft boxes and umbrellas, portrait photographers depended on continuous light. Classic black-and-white movie stills photographers such as George Hurrell and Lazlo Willinger created dramatic compositions with the continuous light sources at hand—flood lights, movie lights, spot lights and others. Those light sources were unwieldy and non-portable.

The development of sophisticated electronic flash systems and the use of Polaroid prints to check composition and lighting ratios changed the way pro photographers lit their compositions. Color photography presented problems with continuous lighting. Color temperatures from the various light sources were inconsistent. Continuous light sources fell out of favor.

But there's a resurgence, of sorts, as some of the problems are being resolved. Manufacturers can control color temperature much more closely now. Some of the more advanced light controlling devices that have made

Two soft boxes with five halogen 150-watt lamps each, resulted in soft, wraparound light coverage.

A single head with three 150-watt halogens was sufficient for a makeshift studio setup.



There was a slight cool color cast with the daylight-balanced fluorescent lamps.

electronic strobes so popular, like soft boxes and defusers, are available with continuous light systems. And continuous light systems are becoming more portable.

Though still best for specialized applications, continuous light's versatility is expanding. It's ideal, for example, for when a photographer is shooting both stills and video, when electronic flash would be a problem. There's nothing more distracting in a video than having an electronic flash blow out the scene every few seconds. Continuous light is also a good option when strobes aren't permitted. Often, museums that do not allow electronic flash will permit continuous light sources.

F.J. Westcott Co., which built a reputation on its umbrellas, soft boxes and other light controlling devices, provides a complete line of Spiderlite continuous light sources with different head configurations, bulb types, color temperatures and power options. For this review, Westcott delivered multiple heads, 16x22- and 24x32-inch soft boxes with stands, a variety of bulb types and portable power.

One of the advantages of the Spiderlite system is its light source versatility. It's a simple matter of switching out bulbs to go from halogen to fluorescent. There's even an option to use self-contained electronic flash bulbs. The Spiderlite TD5 can take five bulbs, the Spiderlite TD3 three bulbs, and the Spiderlite has a single large socket.

Shooting in a darkened makeshift studio with a Nikon D70, I arranged the lights in two-head setups and tried different light ratios. For the individual bulb testing, I used a single head, running both exposure and color temperature tests. For consistency, I shot at ISO 400 with all exposure readings taken at 6 feet.

First I tested the Spiderlite TD5 with 150-watt halogen lamps, which generate light with tungsten color temperature. I had used the TD5 before, but only with fluorescent bulbs. Setting lighting ratios was easy. The TD5 has three on/off switches to control the sets of sockets. The first switch controls the two exterior vertical lights, the next controls the two exterior horizontal lights, and the last one controls the center light. It's possible to adjust the amount of light thrown out by switching on and off different combinations of bulbs.

The same basic composition, shot with five 150-watt halogen lamps. The first uses a single soft box, the second with two light sources.

The halogen bulbs produced a 2,730K color temperature. At full power, I could shoot for 1/60 second at f/2.8. (With continuous light sources, both the shutter speed and f-stop have to be considered.) With just three bulbs, it metered out to 1/30 second at f/2.8, also the reading for the TD3 with halogen. Overall, I was pleased with the results. The images have a warm tone, with no yellow tungsten cast.

The single-socket head can take either a 500-watt halogen lamp or a 1,000-watt halogen lamp. The 1,000W lamp had a color temperature of 2,830K and metered out at f/2.8 for 1/60 second. As expected, the 500-watt lamp is one stop slower at 1/30 second.

Switching to the daylight-balanced 23-watt fluorescent lights, exposure settings were f/2.8 for 1/30 second using all five bulbs, 1/15 second with just three. (That was also the exposure reading for the TD3 with the same bulbs.) The lights are daylight balanced, but the images still had a slight cool cast. Using the smaller soft box with the TD3 and three of the newer 27-watt daylight fluorescents, the exposure reading was f/2.8 for 1/15 second, and a little warmer.

Besides the halogen and fluorescent bulbs, there's an electronic flash option when more light is required. Westcott has added self-contained strobe heads to its line: the 4201 Master Studio Strobe and the 4200 Studio Strobe. These little units generate enough power for an f/16 exposure and recycle in about six seconds. That's impressive for such compact lights.

Portable power is also a recent addition. It consists of a compact 14-volt NiCd

battery, charger and DC/AC inverter. The power cord plugs into one of the inverter's two 120-volt plugs, and the inverter plugs into the battery. The battery cannot power the heads with halogen bulbs. Even three 150-watt halogens would exceed the 400-watt capacity of the inverter. However, it is possible to use the fluorescent bulbs as a continuous light source, since they draw so much less wattage. The battery provides sufficient power for about 90 minutes of fluorescent light.

The TD3 with the sockets holding one strobe as the primary light, and one halogen bulb as a modeling lamp makes a good combination. I was amazed at the number of pops I could get out of one charge using the portable power with the electronic flash. The battery is rated at 700 full-power firings. I tripped the flash more than 400 times and used it with various other bulb combinations, and still had power left. Multiple-light combinations like that make it possible to use sophisticated studio setups in the field.

There are instructions for putting the various pieces of equipment together, but Westcott would do well to provide better documentation. When photographers switch from one electronic flash system to another, the systems may have different capabilities, but the basics are generally the same. Switching to a continuous light source presents a complete new set of challenges that would be a lot easier to overcome with a booklet on how the various components come together and how to best use the different bulbs.

Providing the option of either continuous light or electronic strobe, Westcott's system of heads, bulbs and soft boxes gives photographers the versatility for a variety of specialty assignments. ■

A single soft box with the 1,000-watt halogen lamp produced more dramatic results.