

Beauty lighting

MAKE A GORGEOUS BEAUTY SHOT WITH A FEW SIMPLE LIGHTS AND MODIFIERS

BY STEPHEN A. DANTZIG

One of my favorite setups is my version of a beauty headshot. In my books, I describe the basic setup, a 30x40-inch soft box for the main light and narrower soft boxes for hair lights, but I want to show you how to do it with a studio “starter kit.” After shooting, you’ll use Adobe Photoshop to fine-tune the image to match your own vision.

Most starter strobe kits come with several strobe heads and a medium-size umbrella. This image of Brandy was created with three strobe heads, two of them fitted with 30-degree grids for the hair light. Grids are honeycomb devices that fit into a parabolic reflector and narrow the beam of light to a specified radius. The umbrella is a somewhat harsher light source than a soft box, so the effect of this lighting scheme will be even more dramatic.

A start-up strobe kit is all you need to create spectacular beauty headshots like this one of Brandy (*Figure 1*).

A beauty headshot is generally produced for commercial purposes, like selling cosmetics or hair products. The lighting is clean and without shadows; the contours of the model’s face are created by the makeup.

I place black flags along either side of my model. They shield my lens from the hair lights



Figure 2

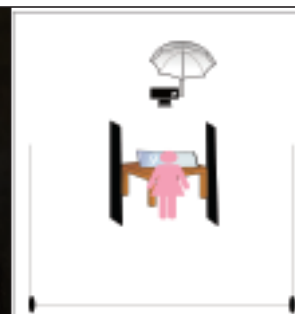


Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 1

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Figure 6

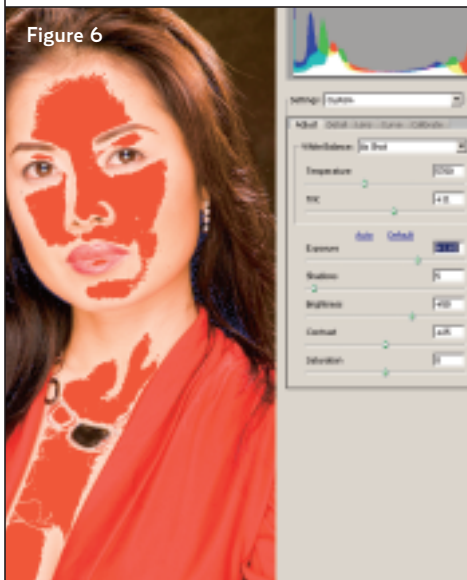


Figure 7

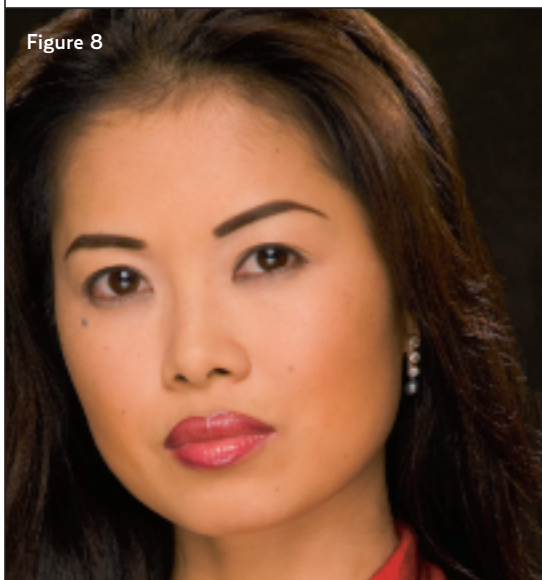


Figure 8



Figure 5

to avoid flaring, and they also serve as negative fill. The black absorbs some of the light from the main light and reflector and helps create a subtle shadow around the model's face. Be careful with the placement of the flags, especially when using a narrow grid spot for a hair light; you don't want to block the light hitting her hair.

We begin with only the main light in place. Brandy is seated in front of a drafting table that comes just below chest height. One strobe has an umbrella with a black backing to keep light from going through the umbrella. I positioned the umbrella directly in front of Brandy, above camera level and angled so the pole points right at her face. I set the exposure at $f/11$.

The umbrella does a nice job by itself, but there are too many shadows under Brandy's nose and chin (*Figure 2*).

We clamped a California SunBounce silver reflector onto the table and angled it up toward Brandy. This simple change in the lighting setup produces a dramatically different result. It's the careful placement of the reflector that produces the light that makes this one of my favorite techniques. You don't need to use a fancy store-bought reflector—any silver card will work. I like the combination of the harsher umbrella and the silver card for this look. The front lighting is now complete (*Figure 3*).

The image begins to come together with the addition of the first hair light, which separates Brandy from the backdrop and begins to add emphasis to her thick black hair (*Figure 4*). I usually use narrower soft boxes for hair lights, but this time I chose a spotlight with a 30-degree grid. The spotlight yields greater contrast than the Stripdomes, so I set it to the same exposure as the main light. I'll bump up the exposure of the hair light with larger light sources.

To complete the lighting, I set up a second spotlight with a 30-degree grid. I did minor retouching with the Photoshop Heal and Clone tools (*Figure 5*).

I like the image as it is, but it didn't fit my plan. Some simple Photoshop enhancements will add shine to Brandy's hair and make her face pop the way that I want. I captured the image in raw format, so I had more options to play with. After creating a TIFF file from the properly exposed image, I reopened the raw file in Adobe Camera Raw and used the exposure slider to overexpose the image by 1.65 stops; clipped highlights shown in red (*Figure 6*).

I opened the image in Photoshop, selected the Move tool, held down the shift key, and dragged the overexposed version on top of the properly exposed file. Holding the shift key while you drag an image from one file to another will center the new layer. Brandy's





hair shows beautiful highlights, but her skin tones are blown out (**Figure 7**).

The image looks pretty bad, but we'll fix that. I duplicated the background layer and dragged it on top of the overexposed layer. I clicked on the Add Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers palette to add a white layer mask (your background should be white).

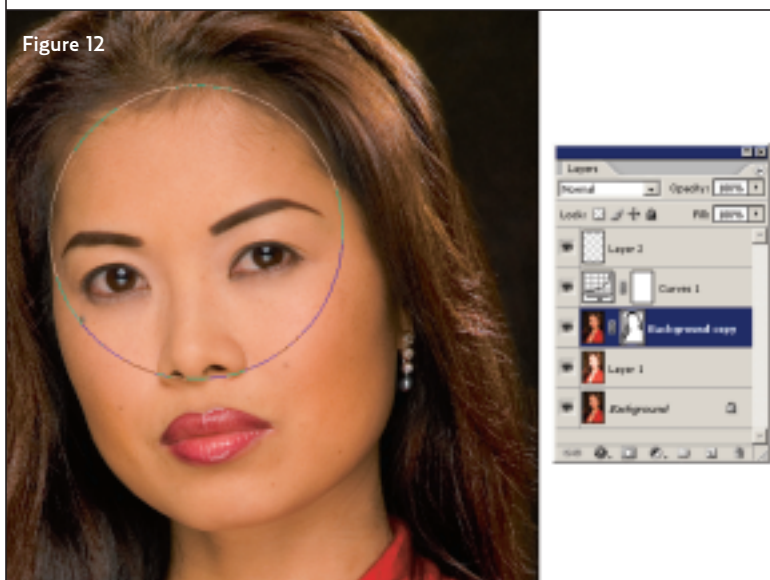
A white layer mask reveals all the data on the layer (**Figure 8**). Click on the layer mask rectangle to activate it (brackets will appear around the corners) and choose the Paint Brush tool with black as the foreground color. Painting with black reveals portions of the underlying, overexposed layer (**Figure 9**). Use the opacity slider in the tool options bar to control how much of the underlying layer you paint in.

The Layers palette shows a curves adjustment layer used for color correction for the shoot, but it's not pertinent for this tutorial.

I initially painted in the overexposed area of the hair at 100% opacity, but it blew out the highlights too much. The solution was easy: I switched the paint color to white, lowered the brush opacity to 50% and painted out the highlights (**Figure 10**). If you hit the backslash key, you can see the mask in the image, and you can easily see where to paint or modify the mask. Use the left and right bracket keys to respectively decrease and increase the size of the brush.

The image is almost finished—but not quite! (**Figure 11**) I still wanted more pop to Brandy's face. We've got an over-exposed version of the image at our disposal, so let's play with it a little. I set the brush to 10% opacity and increased the size to fit just inside the contours of her face.

With just two brush strokes on the mask over Brandy's face, the image is complete (**Figure 12**). How much you change the image is an aesthetic matter. Add as much of the overexposed layer as you like—that's the beauty of layer masks. ■



Stephen Dantzig is a photographer and educator in Honolulu. He is the author of "Lighting Techniques for Fashion and Glamour Photography," "Mastering Lighting Techniques for Outdoor and Location Digital Portrait Photography" and the recently released "Softbox Lighting Techniques for Professional Photographers" (all from Amherst Media). See more of his work at www.dantzigphotography.com.