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spokanenightscenes.com

Urban night photography

“Tame the light, and you have tamed the night”

Night shooters in communities throughout the world, have some very common issues to deal with. Firstly, the photographer has to be able to manage the light. Ironic, isn't it, to have to deal with bright lights, when almost everything around you is either totally dark, or in deep shadows. Yet, my principal concerns at night are managing the light, before dealing with the dark.

To help you with bright areas of a location you are photographing, you need to accomplish several things:

- Have a very stable platform (tripod) Brand names are not important, but the stability of the tripod is.
- Be able to bracket your shots sufficiently to reduce the glare from background lights, streetlights, and any other bright source of light. You will almost certainly lose considerable detail in this same shot, but we will shoot for that later.
- Manage your camera. As you bracket your shots (or auto bracket), insure that your platform and camera DOES NOT MOVE. You are shooting a series of images to manage the existing ambient light, and each bracketed shot must not force the camera or tripod to move, even slightly. To minimize the likelihood of the tripod or camera moving during an image series, use a tethered or wireless shutter release. Additionally, make sure you do not move either the tripod or camera as you change camera shutter speeds (if done manually).
- Know your camera. What does it do, and how does it do it? This is important, and trying to figure your camera out in a darkness situation is akin to trying to figure out how to turn on windshield wipers in a new rental car in the midst of a storm. I have found myself in both those situations, and both lessons taught me to prepare in advance, and KNOW THE CAMERA. Does the wheel turn to the right to increase the exposure? Or does it turn to the right to shorten the exposure? Yes, know your camera and practice BEFORE you get out in the dark.



Now, to help you with the dark areas of a location you are photographing, you need to accomplish several things:

- Allow your camera and tripod to remain in the exact same position they were in as you shot for the light.
- Begin to bracket your shots, exactly the opposite of the way you did when shooting for the brightest areas of the photograph. Now you want to allow the shutter to stay open in increasingly longer time periods. As you increase the time for the shutter to be open, you will notice that you begin to see more detail in the areas that were totally devoid of detail when you shot for light. Continue to shoot for the detail in the image, even as you begin to inspect/review your shots to see that they might be “too bright.”
- All of these shots to increase detail, have hopefully been taken, in exactly the same exact position that all of your earlier shots in managing light. No movement of the camera or tripod.

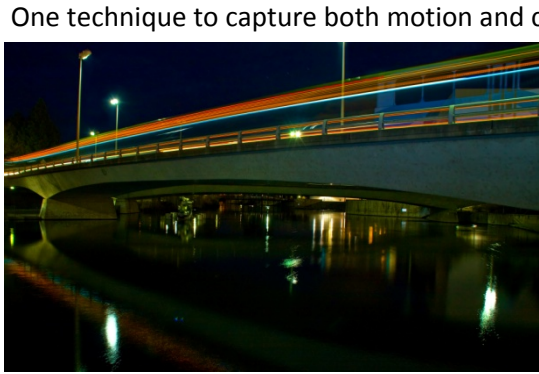
Now you have two series of images at a location, one series reducing the ambient light, and the other series which is opening up the darkness (the details) at your location. You are now going to combine images from both series.

As you review these images on your computer, it is time to combine/blend images from your two series. You can do that with a variety of software programs, including Photoshop Elements, Photomatix, Photoshop CS3, or Photoshop CS4 or several others. The point of the blending (combining) shots is to use both elements of the light managing initial shots, as well as the detail shots in the second series.

I suggest that each photographer shoot in their cameras RAW settings, to allow for much more image control.

#### Special effects photography at night

After dark, there is motion, and lots of color. You are going to want to capture that with your camera. This includes motor vehicles, floats in a parade, buses, and all moving objects which project light as they move.



One technique to capture both motion and color of moving objects is to use Rear Curtain Sync. This technique still requires a stable tripod, and it depends on integrating a timed exposure with projected light from either an internal camera flash, or better yet, a more powerful external flash unit.

The technique begins after you have set up your camera and flash unit to act TOGETHER. Open the cameras shutter as your moving object begins to enter the cameras field of view. The shutter remains open as the object proceeds across your cameras field of view. As the moving object gets close to the point in which it will leave the cameras field of view, you close the shutter. This activates the flash unit and “freezes the object in motion.” The best way to use Rear Curtain Sync is to shoot in a MANUAL camera setting, and use a BULB exposure setting. Further, it is better to use a handheld

or wireless shutter release so that you can instantly close the shutter before the object in motion is to leave the field of view. This technique will provide you a lot of color, and includes light trails and lights from floats in a parade or moving buses.

|                     |                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
|                     |                                  |
| <p>Blue lights</p>  | <p>Red and amber</p>             |
|                     |                                  |
| <p>White lights</p> | <p>Final blended composition</p> |

When you shoot at night, there are many opportunities for you to provide your own lights. Painting with light can be a lot of fun, and painting with color can be even more fun after dark. Shooting for light, shooting for dark, and blending the images are still required if you paint with light or color.

## Safety

Here are some tips for proper safety considerations.

- Know where you are going to shoot. The location and surroundings need to be considered when shooting as well as when considering personal safety at a given site.
- Spend an equal amount of time monitoring the area you are shooting from, as well as looking at the area you are targeting with the camera.
- Take multiple methods of lighting. Small flashlights and a headlamp are recommended.
- Wearing appropriate clothing and footwear which can deal with the weather and lighting conditions. Consider reflective or light colored clothing, as well as reflective strips on your tripod.
- Work with a second person, if it will make you feel more comfortable.
- Set up your camera in advance of your arrival at the location of the shoot. Setting up the camera with the appropriate lenses, ISO settings, and FSTOP's will hasten your chances of not missing a shot upon arrival, but also allow for you to get there – shoot – and then safely depart quickly.
- Leave no valuables in view from the outside of your personal vehicle. In fact, only bring exactly what you intend on using for the shoot. Leave everything else at home, in the office, or leave it in the hotel. Physically take what you intend to use for the shoot, with you.

## Hardware

- Carry an LED flashlight, or a headlamp (or both). Using a red filter can minimize night blindness and it will still illuminate the dials and screens of your camera. A flashlight may also assist in attempts to use auto focus in a very dark setting.
- Consider using a Big Max handheld flashlight with color filters, to assist in painting with color and light.
- Consider using Lumiquest gel filters, to both illuminate dark areas as well as paint those areas with color.

## Additional night photography resources

I have uploaded several resource documents to my website at [spokanenightscenes.com](http://www.spokanenightscenes.com).

Short night photography class handout:

<http://www.spokanenightscenes.com/NPFAQ.pdf>

Short night photography flash slideshow:

<http://www.spokanenightscenes.com/SNSnightshooters.htm>

Spokane Night Scenes, an exercise in night photography:

<http://www.spokanenightscenes.com/SNSNP.pdf>

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