

# Why I Shoot Digital

## *A little history*

To understand why I shoot digitally it would be helpful to explain a little of my “history” with photography.

As a teenager living on a military base with my parents, I had access to a full darkroom environment and lots of free time to play. In fact, when I go back and think about it I got into photography because I had an opportunity to develop prints and therefore I needed to create something I could print. I started with a “Brownie Box” since it was cheap and would create the “film” that I needed to play in the darkroom. I spent about a year working in the darkroom, learning from the military folks that were processing film for the various base activities. It was great, I could go out and shoot a roll of film and then take it over to the lab and immediately process it. I enjoyed the process of capturing images and then processing them to create images that represented what I wanted others to see in what I had seen.

This whole process worked like clockwork until the family was transferred to another base. Unfortunately that base did not have a darkroom available to military dependents, so my darkroom activity on someone else’s money ended. By that time I was enjoying the capture part of the photography process so I kept up with it – although I have to admit it was not the top item in my life anymore. There were other things taking my time and I really missed the quick gratification of seeing my images and creating my own prints. I did fall prey to the marketing propaganda and upgraded my Brownie for a 35mm with some basic features. While the camera was a lot nicer and I enjoyed seeing the prints I got back, I still missed having control of the whole process.

As an adult with a little bit of discretionary income I went back and tried the darkroom work for a while but it was hard to keep up with as I traversed the US for my job. I would set up a temporary darkroom in a bathroom for a couple of days but then had to tear it down so we could use the bathroom for its original purpose. Eventually, I just lost interest in trying to work the temporary bathroom darkroom into my photography.

At that point I switched completely to slides since I read that was what the “pro’s” shot. The slides were great but since I was not submitting, nor really working full time at photography, they tended to pile up in boxes around the house. On those rare occasions where I would get the “organizational bug” and try to put them in some type of order in a structured filing system I could spend hours and hours categorizing my images. And, as my wife will tell you, I must have tried every organization scheme out there. But no matter how I tried to organize and file them, the images sat in my photo graveyard with no easy way to work with them.

Eventually they ended up in archival safe hanging folders in metal cabinets. With each new roll of film shot, they would get sent off for processing, reviewed on the light table when then got back and then filed along with the others.

They were very safe, but they were also very forgotten. Everyone once in awhile I would think that I needed to go through this graveyard and find some that would be nice to print – but then I realized that I would also need to send it off to some finisher somewhere to create the print and hope that they saw the image the exact same way that I saw it. I could never convince myself that it was going to be worth the effort. Since I am not the type to sit around and view a slide show of my own images, the idea of loading up slide trays and viewing them on a regular basis did not get pass the initial idea stage. This workflow became the status quo for a number of years – take photos, review them and call my wife over to see the really good ones, and then put them in the cold dark recess of the file cabinets.

Over these years I moved on to better bodies and lens, to advanced functionality in the camera body and even more expensive lens. And, my images were getting better in terms of composition, exposure and all those other measurements that are typically applied to photography. But, the images still went through the same process of capture – review – file.

### *The lure of digital*

About four or five years ago, the capability of desktop scanners and printers got the point that I felt that I could actually consider working with a digital darkroom. This would provide the opportunity to turn the images I had captured into the prints that I envisioned. For any of you that jumped on this digital darkroom bandwagon more than a year ago, know that there were still a few wrinkles to be ironed out this concept. I was a frustrated as anyone with the whole approach but then finally decided that it probably wasn't that easy for those that were the first to work in a wet darkroom either. (The fact that I had spent over 30 years working with computers probably helped my tolerance level somewhat also.) And, not matter how cumbersome the process I was in charge of my images once again. Maybe I could not get the pure quality, or size, of a professional processor but I could fine-tune the image to be the way I wanted it viewed.

Over these past years I have upgraded my scanner twice and now use a top-of-the-line archival ink-jet printer. The advances in the capabilities of the software (Adobe PhotoShop ®) have grown where I am much more proficient with it, than I ever was with the chemicals. With these three elements: a) film conversion to digital information, b) the tool to effectively manipulate that digital information, and c) digital information to a displayable print I had an excellent digital darkroom. I could take those slides out of my graveyard and have total creative control in creating the images that I wanted. The exact cropping I wanted. The exact coloring that I wanted. Everything worked exactly the way that I wanted it

to – all in a real time workflow. I did not have to send something off and wait for it to come back and then have to send it off again because it was not quite right. I started really enjoying photography again and felt the same way that I did when I fell in love with it as a kid. I was capturing with film and, except for sending the film out for developing, processing my own images. I was back in control of the photographic process.

While film processing took some of the immediacy away, it was acceptable given that I could get pretty quick turnaround on slide development and I did not have to set up a processing lab in the house. Obviously a professional digital camera would have solved the film developing issue and while there have been very high quality digital camera bodies around for a few years; they were way out of my price range.

### *The full digital commitment*

Since digital cameras have a lot in common with computers they seem to fall under the same laws of performance and cost. According to a very familiar axiom to those in the computer industry – Moore's Law: power will double every two years [for the same or less cost]. This axiom appears to be true for this digital camera bodies also as there are a number of very high quality Digital SLR bodies in the marketplace at reasonable prices. All with the capability to create a file size that can easily be driven to a 13" x 19" print size.

These affordable D-SLR's gave me exactly what I had been looking for since my early days in photography. The entire photographic process is now in my hands. The D-SLR can be used with lens that I have acquired over the years; it provides every bit the functionality, and perhaps even more, of my high-level film bodies; and, it now provides me a digital file that is better than what I would get out of scanning one of my slides.

The move to a digital camera body has been one of the most exciting things that I have done in terms of my photography in a long time. It has provided new tool:

1. That works with my existing lens, flashes, etc.,
2. That helps me learn faster,
3. That improves my ability to ensure that I am getting good exposures at the time of the capture,
4. That helps me take advantage of an exposure latitude inherent in digital images, and
5. That fits right in with my desired workflow.

And luckily for me, and my bankers, the prophecy of Moore's Law has proven to work for cameras as well as transistors. After starting out with a Canon D30, I moved up to a Canon 1D, and now to a 1D Mark II. With each step the capabilities of the camera body have moved closer and closer to the level of film – and in fact I personally feel the Mark II exceeds what I have with my 1V film

camera. To me the Mark II provides me the image quality of my film bodies – at least at any print that I can make (13” x 19”). And, as a bonus, the features of the Mark II surpass those of my 1V. The focus lock and exposure algorithms far exceed anything I have worked with in the past. However I must admit that I do miss a full frame sensor for my wide-angle lens – but that can be easily solved with the Canon 1Ds. Guess I better leave now and go visit my friendly banker.