

Beckham Digital Tutorials

Monochrome Magic

Black and White was the first way I was able to produce my own photographic prints. Of course it was in a darkroom, via an enlarger, photographic paper and chemicals. It was expensive (at the time), time consuming, but also very appealing and rewarding too.

In a world full of vibrant colour, why on earth would we want to remove that colour to look at our images in Black and White? You would think that Black and White images would be considered quite dated and old fashioned these days, but that doesn't appear to be the case.

Black and White images are making something of a comeback as digital photographers rediscover the beauty of monochrome images.

A monochrome conversion often simplifies an image. Removing unwanted colour and information in the image can often increase the appeal of the image. If we make the right choices, our black and white conversions are not some quaint throw back to film days, they are a valid part of modern digital photography. We already know how popular some of the third party simplify filters are. Filters like Buzz and now Topaz. They remove information from our images too and the effect, while not monochrome is similar in many respects.

Some pictures just have a little too much information in them and a monochrome conversion simplifies the image and we find the result has greater appeal.



The problem we face is that there is no one technique that we can apply and get stunning results every time. Every image contains different colours and they alone will record in different shades of grey. We also need to be aware that a monochrome conversion isn't a shortcut, or a way we can sidestep Photoshop techniques. We need those techniques just the same, because a great colour image, where the tones and exposure are well balanced, will almost always produce a stunning black and white image.

So, on this Disk we take a series of images and work them through in the best way we know how. Apart from the usual information about monochrome conversions we have added loads of other tips and tricks along the way. When we embark on a monochrome conversion, there always seems to be some other technique that we need to complete the work. Well here we include that too and some technical information about how the image was originally shot.

The Winter Tree - Running Time 28:24



Good Photography is all about vision and everyone of us has our own visual I.Q. A level at which we see picture potential.

We need to train that IQ and gradually raise the level. The reason we say this is that the tree image shown to the right lacked a lot of appeal when we saw it from the roadside and most photographers would drive right by.



However, we knew that we could make a great monochrome image of this subject, so rather than driving by, simply because the sky wasn't right, we stopped for a few pictures.

Its all about vision, seeing the potential, and here we demonstrate how easy it is to create an image like this. The hardest part is spotting the image in the first place and stopping to photograph it.

There are no fancy or complex selections and all the work we did with this image was simple and easy stuff that anyone can master.

In the digital age it costs us nothing, but a little time to capture a few images, so if in doubt, stop anyway and take a few shots. You will be amazed how many times you will be glad you did.



The Seal - Running time 17:50

There are a number of reasons why we may consider a monochrome conversion to an image. One of those is when the original colour in the image is not adding much, if anything to it.

In that case we have little to lose by trying to make a stunning black and white from the colour original. The trouble with all these manipulations is they all need a slightly different approach. Making a Black and White image is not just removing the colour.

Here we needed to improve the composition as well as bring out those sparkling black and white tones.



The Hot Air Balloon - Running Time 20:58

A hot air balloon is an unusual choice for a black and white image, because it is generally the dramatic colour of the balloons that attracts us in the first place. If we remember that the monochrome conversion tends to simplify the image, we can see how removing the colour can still work in a positive way.



In this example we can use the tools of Photoshop to adjust the two main colours of the balloon fabric. Left to their own devices, the red and blue original colours tend to look much the same tone when we simply remove the colour.

What we need to do is separate the two main tones of red and blue to give us the diagonal split between the top and bottom half of the image.

As usual, we have added a little refinements of our own with regard to the shadow of the man, standing outside of the balloon envelope.

Glen Coe - A High resolution Jpeg Monochrome - Running Time 23:52

If we were to be asked which is best, Raw or Jpeg images, we would have to say Raw for the vast majority of the time. However, there are always exceptions.

The reasons we like shooting Raw images is that Raw gives us the extra latitude to adjust exposure when it was impossible to get it perfect in camera. Remember, practically every exposure you make will be a compromise in one area or another and that has nothing to do with your abilities.

Here we didn't have difficult lighting conditions or harsh contrasts, so to add balance we have created this image from a high resolution jpeg image. As you can see, even from our small thumbnail, we don't seem to have had any problems in doing that and we can demonstrate how in this video.



The Histogram and Understanding the Jargon - Running Time 10:22



One of the down sides of many tutorials is when jargon is used by the author. It doesn't seem like jargon to the author of course, who assumes you understand what he is talking about, but what if you don't? It can make the whole tutorial worthless.

Here we take a few minutes to explain some of the terms that you may hear me use throughout this disk. We appreciate many will already be aware of them, but this is aimed at those who may not be quite so familiar.

We also suggest a great way to improve your exposure technique by making use of the settings your cameras histogram may be able to offer you. Some digital SLR cameras allow you to see the histogram showed to you on your LCD screen in a way that is extremely helpful.

Some DSLR's will show you areas of the image with no detail as a flashing black shadow. Its a great benefit if your camera has such a facility.

The Red Car - Running Time 25:10

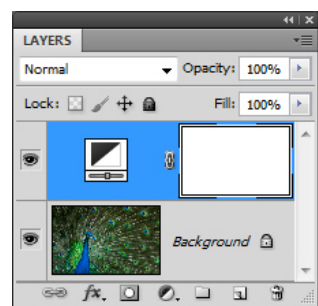
In this tutorial we take an image that had brilliant colour to start with. The main centre of interest was a brilliant red. So, here we can use the image as a colour version and a monochrome. What is best? Well that rather depends on your own personal taste.

Remembering how a black and white conversion can simplify an image, perhaps we can claim here that it adds emotional power to the original. As long as we are not being too pretentious of course.

Perhaps it is just better to say, the monochrome just has something extra. The tone the final car ended up with was solely in our hands from a beautiful black to a pure white.



Destructive and Non Destructive Editing - Running Time 14:35



If you do any research on line regarding Monochrome conversions you will hear quite a bit about destructive and Non Destructive editing. In this section we explain what that all means.

However, if we shoot Raw images or always make sure we retain the original Jpeg image we shot, then all our editing is Non Destructive. We will always have an original to go back to.

Non Destructive editing really means we should not make a change to an image on top of a previous change or we could start to affect the quality of our image.

Monochrome via Lab Colour - Running Time 3:39

There are a number of ways to convert a coloured image into Monochrome, but we can't really pick one out as the very best option. One of the most consistent is the Black and White options we have already used.

Lab Colour is another option, but we have to understand that it is limited in the control we have over the tones and it is also a destructive process. Putting limited control and a destructive process together is not a great way to achieve the very best of results. You can see that we include Lab Colour in a short video, but would not recommend it.



Monochrome via Channel Mixer - Running Time 6:50



Channel Mixer is another option for converting colour images to monochrome and it can be used in a destructive way by selecting Channel Mixer from the Image menu.

However, it also can be used via an adjustment layer in a totally non destructive way too. Here we take this image through the Channel Mixer process. Like the standard black and white tools we have a number of preset options with Channel Mixer, that we feel are a very helpful starting point for any conversion process.

The Road - Running time 30:45

In one part of this disk, we said that, generally speaking, high contrast wasn't good for black and white images, but that is just what we have here. In this case, it's the contrast that creates a lot of the appeal. When we suggested that high contrast should be avoided, we meant in those cases where the highlights and shadows could not be captured together in one shot.

This style of image is an exception, because we deliberately took away what detail there was in the darkest areas, because we didn't need it. The original exposure, while contrasty retained all that was good about the image.

However, we had to use our image editing to give the image the impact and balance it required.

We could argue this is a good example of Black and White, because our process has simplified the image, it has great composition and that all important Black and White Sparkle.



The 3 Kookaburras - Running Time 19:25



Its not too difficult to select images for black and white conversion when you have a large number of images to select from, but many of those we would like to use, need a little more work.

In this example we carry out the vast majority of the remedial work using the tools of Adobe Camera Raw.

When the image is first converted to black and white there are a number of distractions were parts of the image competed with the main subject. The answer was to use the Camera Raw Adjustment Brush. In fact we use two adjustment brushes for different parts of the image.

When we opened the image up in Photoshop, the result was that it was just about complete.

Just Good Technique - Running Time 7:26

Here, we ask the question, is there one technique that will consistently provide good black and white images? Well, perhaps not one single technique, but certainly one approach that will.

We need good exposure and good solid Photoshop techniques to provide an image with a balanced tonal structure. In fact the very same things we need for our colour images.

So, the simple answer is that what makes a good colour image will almost certainly make a great black and white too. Here we test that theory by looking at a random batch of images created with no thought of a monochrome conversion. So, how do our images shape up?



Reach for the Sky- Running Time 29:43



Here was take a raw file and work it through to create exactly what we discussed in the video above. We create two versions of our Raw file, an alternative to using Smart Objects and also a way for those who work with high resolution Jpeg images to work in a non destructive way.

Our aim here is once again, bringing out the best tones across the entire image using the tools of Photoshop. Its only at the end of the exercise that we convert to Black and White and the results speak for themselves.

The addition of the bird, just filled in an appropriate place in our image, but we demonstrate that technique too. The resulting image is a black and white picture that has the impact and appeal we are looking for.

Aggressive Manipulations - Running Time 31:42

Sometimes photographers find themselves in front of a subject that has been photographed many times before. In those cases we try and find a different angle or something unique, so our image stands out from the crowd.

However, that is not easy with some subjects like the Eilean Donan Castle in Scotland. Its probably one of the most photographed castles in the world

Our idea to try and create something with some difference to others is to be very aggressive with our black and white conversion. To try and add that emotional power we are looking for. To create enough impact that it overpowers the fact that it is a familiar subject.

So, in this tutorial we do get very aggressive with the options in Camera Raw and push them as far as we dare.





Here we convert our original colour image into monochrome, but with Black and White Infra-Red in mind.

Black and white Infra red film was quite difficult to use, but it did create a unique look. Blue skies would turn very dark or even black, giving them a power all their own.

Leaves and grass would be turned almost white, with a ghostly glow and the whole image had enhanced grain which just seemed to add to the appeal.

We cannot claim to completely recreate that technique digitally, but we can come close.

And Finally - A great companion to your Monochrome Magic Disk - Camera Craft

Great monochrome photography requires the same approach as our colour photography does. Black and White isn't a second choice when the colour version isn't good enough. Black and White isn't about just removing the colour.

It is vital in both B&W and Colour photography that we capture the best exposure possible. Far too many photographers find themselves carrying out lots of remedial work in Photoshop just to get to a position they should have been, when they pressed the shutter button.

In those circumstances, you will always be fighting your image editor and trying to hide the evidence of your remedial work. If your basic technique is at fault, you can find shadows blocked up with no detail and highlight blown out to pure white. These problems with exposure are not random errors we must accept. They are all predictable and easy to sidestep once we understand why they are happening.



Perhaps we are lulled into the wrong thoughts at times. We consider our camera so sophisticated that it can't possibly get things wrong. Well, we don't want to shock you too much, but it does, more often than you may realise. The result is the failure rate some photographers accept as an occupational hazard. Once you understand your Digital SLR, the Apertures, Shutter speeds and ISO, you will then understand the exposure triangle and how they all link together.

In our disk called Camera Craft we explain and demonstrate in a simple way, why exposures fail. Once we know why, we can side step those failures and your success rate will then go through the roof. No more throwing the majority of your images away.

Check out our Camera Craft disk and learn how to use a Digital SLR. Go to our main web page and you can't miss it.

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