



LED Lighting: Professional Techniques for Digital Photographers

By Kirk Tuck

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Accessible for professionals and hobbyists alike, this guide helps photographers navigate the transition from traditional flash and hot lights to light-emitting diode (LED) lights, the hottest new trend in lighting technology. The arrival of cost effective LED lights has facilitated radical advances in photographic science and required photographers to change the way they use lighting. This book explains how these innovations have influenced conventional light theory and offers a seamless transition from old lighting technologies to new ones. It demystifies the process of choosing the right LED light for projects, presents common sense methods for using LEDs, and offers suggestions for achieving the perfect lighting color and balance. In addition, numerous examples using a range of LED lights provide instruction on how to use them in still life images, portraits, and even moving pictures. Using the tools in this handy reference, visual artists can invent new styles unencumbered by the limits imposed by standard light sources.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This book marks the start line of the next big wave of evolution for photographers. . . . The best place to start I've seen." —Will Crockett, CEO of CrockettCo Technologies and FridayPhotoSchool.com

"Tuck, a corporate advertising photographer, demonstrates to digital photographers techniques for using LED lighting and how they work." —www.BookNews.com

"If LED is indeed the lighting of the future, Tuck's enlightening and informative book is a great introduction." —www.portlandbookreview.com

"Easy to follow and an invaluable tool for anyone who is using LED lights professionally, or is an amateur looking to learn more about using LEDs effectively." —www.ephotozine.com

From the Author

The road to my LED Lighting book is a bumpy one that includes twenty years of working in the trenches of advertising photography. The actual book is the distillation of new information about LEDs mixed with a couple years of shooting with them, and my general knowledge of photographic lighting. When I started out I worked as a teaching assistant for several professors who taught commercial photography at the University of Texas. We used 4x5 and 8x10 inch view cameras and, to get deep enough focus, we used small f-stops and very powerful studio electronic flash units. Over time film got better and better which meant you could get nearly as good quality with smaller and smaller formats. Flashes got smaller but the lighting essentials remained the same. You worked with:

Color Temperature

Quantity of Light (volume)

Quality of Light (hard or soft)

&

Direction of Light

*

When I started working in the advertising field as a creative director in the early 1980's I started coming up with creative ideas for television commercials and writing the scripts for the commercials. This required me to be "on the set" to inform the director how I wanted a scene or segment or read to "feel." With my background in commercial photography it was only natural that I'd delve into what made TV lighting work.

*

The first thing you realize is that all light on a set is going to be continuous lighting. And in ample quantity. Tungsten lights were the lights of the day and that meant "hot lights." Very hot lights! I learned what all the different kinds of movie lights did and why DP's set up their lights the way they did. How they "designed" with lights.

*

I quickly realized that all lighting directors had their own styles and their own looks. And I realized that you

could get a nasty burn just handling the light fixtures. On film sets and TV sets of yore everyone who handled the lights had a pair of heatproof gloves hanging out of a pocket. And you had to be careful of what you hung in front of the lights, too. If a gel got too close to the light beam of a powerful light it would start to smoke. So would wooden clothespins.

And all the lighting back then, still and motion stuff, was very, very heavy and consumed a lot of electrical power. In the case of tungsten lighting it returned most of the power back to you in the form of infrared=heat.

*

When Canon and Panasonic started coming out with DSLR's that had really, really good HD video, coupled with big sensors, I started to get excited again about shooting video. Or making my own little "indy" films.

So I started doing research. I wanted to find the current sweet spot in the market for things like microphones and fluid heads for tripods. But most of all I realized that I'd need a source of continuous lighting.

I had a *wish list* that came about because I like to be able to go out at the drop of a hat and shoot with myself as *my only crew*. That meant everything on my list should be small and light and easy to handle. I can't do projects by myself where sound is important but I sure can light stuff and then shoot by myself....

*

The wish list:

1. Small and easy to move/handle
2. Capable of good runtime on battery power.
3. Close to daylight balance.
4. Cool running. (Hey, I live in Texas, the last thing I need to do is heat my studio in the summer.
5. Able to be pressed into service for still photography.
6. Affordable.

**

When I hammered down the list everything pointed to LED's. I bought a bunch of different units and started practicing. When I felt like I was getting to the point where I could light most things as well with LED's as I had been able to with studio electronic flash, and I had samples of successful shoots, I approached my publisher with the idea of doing a book about the subject. It would be the first book dedicated entirely to using these new lights in still photography.

This book has a very specific target audience. It's not aimed at a novice user. The person I wrote for is: A working professional photographer who has come to the realization that he or she needs continuous lighting in order to move the business in the direction of including some video services for clients. It also includes advanced amateurs who understand lighting and have probably worked extensively with off camera flash, light stands and modifiers, ala David Hobby's Strobist work.

*

LED's have an obvious appeal to film makers but when photographers give them a good hard look they find the lights to be useful for most still life work, and quick portraits where balancing ambient light and fill light are important. The one group I think will benefit most are food shooters. WYSIWYG lighting combined with no *lettuce withering heat* means that set ups are quicker and surer and the comfort level, on set, is much better.

When I wrote the book I didn't have a huge backlog of images that were created using LED lights. In previous books I could save time by dipping into twenty years worth of flash lighting and coming up with photos that accurately illustrated the text. This meant that I had to start setting up test shoots with my favorite models and trying out techniques while I was in the process of writing the book. Sometimes I'd write a page or two and then run into the studio and shoot in the style or manner I'd just described to make sure it worked. Like a cookbook writer testing recipes.

*

I know this will be obvious the minute I write it but photographers who write books are at a decided vocational disadvantage. We train for one thing but have to do everything. Writing a book is hard enough but imagine having to write it and illustrate it at the same time. You go back and forth, from one side of the brain to the other.... Even though the images illustrate the text I tried to write this for my readers in such a way that one could make do without the photos. The photos are like the icing on the cake and make *getting* the concept that much easier.

My biggest help in getting the book finished and out the door was my friend and sometimes assistant, Amy Smith. She patiently set up lights, positioned models, shot behind the scenes sequences and was a charming companion at many a lunch and coffee break. She was also instrumental in helping bring my book on studio lighting to life as well.

*

The biggest challenge for writers is always to keep working at our day jobs (mine is photography) and stealing time to write in the early mornings before the family is up and late at night when everyone else is settled into their beds. If we stop doing photography to write about photography we end up writing about the past. Not about what is relevant right now.

I hope this book provides a starting point for anyone interested in learning to integrate and use LEDs in their practice of photography or video. It cannot be comprehensive, with respect to what's current in the market, because that changes all the time, but it should serve as a guide from which you can launch your own research.

*

Cool. Light. Shockproof and fun. The more I use LEDs the more I like them.

About the Author

Kirk Tuck is a former photography professor and creative director of an advertising firm. He currently works as a freelance photographer with clients such as IBM, Dell Computer, Motorola, "Elle" magazine, Time Warner, and Tivoli Systems. He is the author of "Minimalist Lighting: Professional Techniques for Location Photography," "Minimalist Lighting: Professional Techniques for Studio Photography," and "Photographic Lighting Equipment: A Comprehensive Guide for Digital Photographers." He was chosen as the 2008 chapter president for the Austin/San Antonio American Society of Media Photographers. He lives in Austin, Texas.

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