

Light Matters

Cliff Mautner follows the light while sharing 34 years' worth of shooting experience.

BY JACK CRAGER

In his ongoing series Lighting & Skillset Bootcamp: Workshops for Wedding and Portrait Photographers, wedding photographer, Nikon Ambassador and lighting guru Cliff Mautner draws on more than three decades of experience as photojournalist for nearly half his career, and shooting around 50 weddings a year the next half. "I'm Bill Murray in Groundhog Day," Mautner quips. "I know it might be my 1,000th wedding, but for the bride, it's her first. I still take this work very personally. But I used to have an attitude—a wrong attitude, I might add—that these are my images. They are not. It's my artistic interpretation of their day, however, they are the clients' images."

Mautner contends that the wedding photographer's job is to put his or her customers in the best light—literally. To that end, he is focused on not only lighting but also developing crucial skills behind the camera and in the business realm.

PICTURED: Created during "first look," this was shot at 2 p.m. in harsh summer light. Mautner says he deliberately chose this location so that the dark background would allow the highlights on his subject to really stand out. "In order to combat the difficult light, I kept the subject between myself and the sun and exposed for the faces. I chose manual exposure mode because the light wasn't changing. (Shot at 1/320th of a sec., f/4 @ ISO 500.)

PHOTO © CLIFF MAUTNER

"CLIFF" NOTES

Mautner started his workshop series in 2007 in response to what he perceived as "homogenization" in the wedding photography industry—a certain stylistic mimicry resulting from a lack of basic-skill mastery. With this in mind, Mautner emphasizes a few key lighting skills photographers should learn to develop a style of their own:

1 SHOOT DELIBERATELY

"The most important thing is the final image—in camera!" Mautner says. "There is no un-suck filter in Photoshop. Think about your framing and your exposure in camera."

Regarding the latter, Mautner cites a real world example of a scene of a very dark-skinned Nigerian man with a very light-skinned Iranian woman. "How do you expose for this?" he asks. "If they are in the same frame together, you can't have two exposures. And you don't want to 'open up' for the dark skinned person or 'close down' for the light skinned person. Both individuals can be properly exposed with

the same exposure value. The highlights on the dark complexion and the shadows on the light complexion are what give the subject dimension—and there are supposed to be shadows and highlights on faces. Pick an exposure, take a look, and see what works. Too many people struggle with exposure and then they forget about creating the image."

2 MANIPULATE EXPOSURE

The next step is exposing for a chosen effect—sometimes outwitting the camera's settings. "If your subject is brighter than the overall scene, the subject itself is a highlight and shouldn't be blown out

when using Aperture priority. Mautner says. "So if the overall scene is darker than the subject, you'll want to compensate under: If you're in matrix metering mode, our camera will want to attempt to make everything 18 percent gray and the subject will generally be overexposed. By using exposure compensation, you'll tell the camera, 'It's not as dark here as you think it is.' And you camera speeds up the shutter so the highlight is exposed properly. And the inverse would be true if the overall scene was brighter than the subject and you'll want to compensate over, thereby slowing the shutter to exposed properly for the face instead of the background. As good as the meters are today, they can still get fooled, but we don't have to."

Mautner says such adjustments often need to be made on the fly. "When using the manual [exposure] mode, if the overall exposure for a scene is consistent, then this mode would work flawlessly," he says.

PICTURED: One of Mautner's very favorite images, of a couple married for 69 years. Because the scene is fairly evenly lit, Mautner says it could have been captured in nearly any exposure mode with ease. (Shot in manual mode with a Nikon D4, 1/160th of a sec., f2.8 @ ISO 400.)



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD © CLIFF MAUTNER

"But you can learn how to predict the compensation so that aperture priority becomes a rather instinctive tool when the lighting scenario is rapidly changing."

3 MASTER THE TECHNICAL

"If it's not innate, you can't create," Mautner says. "How can you create imagery when all you are thinking about is exposure and focusing? You're not thinking about light or composition or mood. You're not seeing three-dimensionally, or about the foreground-subject-background relationship; you're just hoping to get a technically accurate image, in focus—and that's not creativity. The creative process begins when the technical part is instinctive."

ABOVE, LEFT: Mautner utilized the directional light coming from a huge arch of a city building. "The intent was to juxtapose the highlights created by that light against the very rich, dark background of the building. It was important to expose for the light on their faces." ABOVE, RIGHT: Utilizing directional side light at 3 p.m. in May. "I made sure the light was directly on her face, and then exposed for that. Thanks to my Nikon D4S, I was able to use ISO 2000 with no issues."

"When using this mode, it's important to predict the amount of exposure compensation needed before pressing the shutter."

A case in point is your chosen camera mode. "There are vast differences in the various exposure modes. Using aperture priority all the time would be great—if the world was 18 percent gray," Mautner notes, referring to the typical default setting of your camera's light meter. "But you need to decide what to expose for. When using this mode, it's important to predict the amount of exposure compensation needed before pressing the shutter."

4 JUXTAPOSE HIGHLIGHTS AND SHADOWS

"These are my three watchwords: texture, dimension and mood," Mautner says. "The goal is to create images with impact, and usually the images we love have these

attributes. In order to get them you need to juxtapose highlights against shadows: using the edge of the light to create a sense of dimension."

One key decision is whether to emphasize light or dark areas. "Shadow is my canvas and light is my paint," Mautner explains. "The highlights in certain situations are more important than the shadows; sometimes the shadows are more important. It's a matter of deciding what you're trying to communicate with the image and exposing accordingly."

When you learn to interpret light, he adds, you can even use bad light to your advantage. "Difficult lighting conditions, such as midday sun, can create opportunities for interesting, dramatic images when harnessing that harsh light," Mautner says. "By looking for backgrounds that are fairly dark—such as a group of trees—you can place your subjects between yourself and the sun and expose for the faces. The gorgeous backlight creates a halo of brilliance around the subject if the background is darker than the highlights. Once you understand this shadow-highlight relationship, the safe, flat light is no longer preferable to me because there is no texture, dimension, or mood to the image."



5 UTILIZE FLASH WHEN NEEDED
Mautner regards off-camera speed lights as tools to be used when the scene lacks quality light. “When you’re using a speed light, you want your shutter speed to control the ambient light,” he says. “For example, if you turn off all the lights and use a flash, you can take a picture at an extremely slow shutter speed and still produce a sharp image. When the exposure settings are set two or three stops below the ambient reading, you’re generally going to freeze your action. That flash duration controls whether or not that image is going to be frozen—and then the exposure value that you are using will be fine.

“But as we bring the lights up in the room, at that same slow shutter speed, we may see that the people are moving. So you’ll need to speed your shutter up because the flash is no longer able to freeze the action. You need to take in account the relationship between flash, ambient light, and shutter speed.”

6 ACCENT THE MOOD
“The mood of an image is enhanced with gesture,” Mautner notes, “but the light itself—its quality, temperature, and direction—are what dominates the mood. If you have a very dramatically lit image where you’re just using the edge of the light and that’s juxtaposed against a dark, shadowed area, then there’s a mood to that. Lighting only part of a frame is much more interesting than lighting all if it.” Whether you’re using available light or speed light, the light must be controlled. It’s the reason why he doesn’t use bounced flash very often; it just raises the ambient light level in a room, rather than “painting” with it. Such an effect can artfully draw the viewer in and spotlight the subject. When creating mood, the direction and dispersion of the light is essential. Mautner likes modifiers that give him control so the light isn’t spilling everywhere. [At left, a good example of how he painted with light. Nikon D4S 1/250th of a ssec. f/3.5 @ ISO 1250.]

PICTURED: Late day, directional sunlight. As the sun gets lower in the sky, it becomes softer, and more manageable. Once again, it was important to expose for the highlights to give the images dimension. (Nikon D3S 1/160th of a sec, f/2.8 @ ISO 200.)



PHOTO © CLIFF MAUTNER



PAINTING WITH LIGHT

Philadelphia-based wedding photographer **Mike Morby** credits Mautner’s bootcamp with opening up several lines of inquiry. “Instead of running to the shade, I learned how to utilize harsh light for creating dramatic portraits,” Morby says. “On the other hand, you can create dramatic images with just a sliver of available light if you use the edge properly.”

Morby cites the tool of lens-compression: “I learned that my 70-200mm lens can compress my backgrounds in less-than-ideal conditions, as well as bring a background closer,” he says. “This creates the illusion that the backdrop is directly behind my subjects, which helps to highlight them.”

Now shooting more than 50 weddings a year, Morby regards light as an artistic tool. “For reception lighting, I’ve learned how to properly utilize off-camera flash in Shutter priority mode, especially during toasts,” he says. He points to the image above as an example of “freezing” the main subject within its blurred background. “This way you can isolate the subjects with a clean directional light, creating compositions that have depth and contrast.”

For his part, Mautner delights in seeing his protégés apply lighting lessons to their own photo practices. “I’m not going to hand you fish so that you can eat for the week,” Mautner says of his lighting lessons. “The whole idea behind it is to teach you to fish so that you can fish for a lifetime.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Mautner’s lessons have helped seasoned pros and amateurs alike to extend their creative boundaries. “Prior to Cliff’s workshop, I played it safe by shooting in shaded areas,” says **Hilary Gauld-Camilleri**, an award-winning wedding and family photographer based in Southwest Ontario, Canada. “I’ve now learned how to photograph in situations that many people might avoid, like midday sun. This has allowed me to



PHOTO © HILARY GAULD-CAMILLERI

stretch the types of light I work with and the times of day I work in. It’s given me the confidence to handle varied lighting situations, leading to new opportunities for my work outside of early-morning or late-day shooting times.”

Camilleri says she now regards challenging light as a creative tool; her image above is an example of utilizing strong backlight. “I try to embrace darkness with just shreds of light as well as the harshness of direct sun,” she says. “Now I look for light to add to each session, whatever the location. Understanding the technical side of exposing for tricky lighting situations has been invaluable to shaping the style of my commercial and family work.”



“The light didn’t hit anything it didn’t need to—no distractions, just the right spots were highlighted to tell the story.”

TAKING CONTROL

Kristi Odom, a wedding photographer based in Washington, D.C., garnered lighting tricks from Mautner while assisting him on a wedding job. “I learned not to be afraid to go into a room and change it up as much as I need to produce the best possible image for my clients,” Odom says. “It was illuminating to see Cliff start by turning off all the lights, then slowly build in the lights he wants. He opened window shades from one side, then the other. He had no problems telling the bride where to stand. When he put her there, a backlight from the window and the side window brought out her face and expression. The light didn’t hit anything it didn’t need to—no distractions, just the right spots were highlighted to tell the story.”

Odom has developed a similar approach in her work. “In the past I didn’t do as much deconstruction,” she says. “I would just try and use my lights over what the scene had. I now have no fear going into a room, turning off the lights that are there, then adding the lights that need to be there. You need to take control: It is our job to get the best shot possible for our clients, which usually requires more than a little construction and direction.” *Rf*

Cliff Mautner’s “Lighting & Skillset Bootcamp: Workshops for Wedding Photographers” will take place May 17–19 in Haddonfield, New Jersey.

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