Lighting for digital

Dave Montizambert – Masking Your Retouching

Here we see my image (Image 001) from a previous article (Lighting for Digital 16) which I created of Hollywood actress/playwright Sherri Synder, acting the jilted siren, contemplating love gone south, while striking the perfect 'S' curve in a fiery-red cocktail dress – she was perfection at work, and I wasn't! If you recall my story, all had gone wrong that day upon arriving in Hawaii making us some three hours late for the shoot and arriving on site slightly past last call (sunset's last call that is) making it impossible to transport and assemble the three-light set-up (battery powered strobes and lighting modifiers) I had planned for this shot. Having to make do with just one Speedlite (see Image 002) and no stands or lighting modifiers, I managed to get a shot that made us all happy. The only problem with the image was way too much information – too much information for facial detail in a character/glam shot like this (see Image 003 A). What I mean is, since this key-light was a dinky little light source relative to Sherri, and that for dramatic effect, it was placed behind and to the left of her, lots of attention-grabbing hard-edged shadows were projected across her face towards the camera – fine for the big theatrical shadows, but not so fine on a smaller scale, where every facial hair, wrinkle, and bump was overemphasised. This wouldn't have happened if I had had time to transport and set up the larger light sources that were still back at the beach parking lot, napping in the trunk of the rental vehicle. Those larger light sources would have created much softer shadow edges making the hairs, wrinkles, and bumps nearly invisible. Be that as it may, I was stuck with having to deal with these in post. Now the usual procedure is to open the image in Photoshop and soften the flesh by blurring or smoothing it, which when overdone (and it usually is), makes skin look like plastic. I too used to be addicted to this artificial look, but got over it a few years back and tend to avoid it by using larger lights sources and, when necessary, the Healing and Clone tools in Photoshop, rather than carpet-bombing the face with some sort of blur. As it was, this retouching of Sherri's face would have taken way too long to Heal/Clone on a pixel-by-pixel basis and so a little carpet bombing was required and so I resorted to softening her skin.

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To help make the flesh softening look more natural and to speed up the process of selectively painting in the effect, I used a luminance mask. Luminance masking is nothing new and is based on pre-digital analogue pre-press techniques that you might be aware of if you have ever studied the teachings of ex-pre-pressers' such as Dan Margulis (www.ledet.com/margulis) or Guy Gowan (www.guygowan.com). We live in a multi-dimensional continuum, but we photographers are mostly concerned with capturing and compressing the third dimension into the second dimension; in other words once we capture an image full of real world depth, we flatten it like a pancake into a print or screen image and, once flattened, the ability to edit in the third dimension is lost, we are stuck in 2D. So in the case of this image of Sherri, if time had permitted, it would have been way easier to lose

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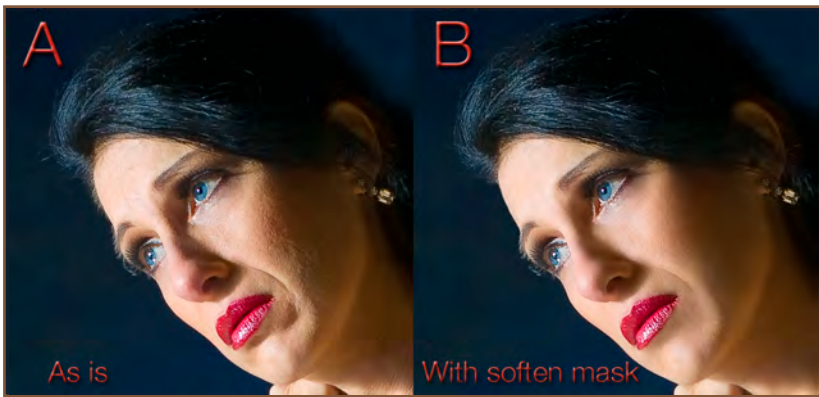## Lighting for Digital Part 22

A

B

As is

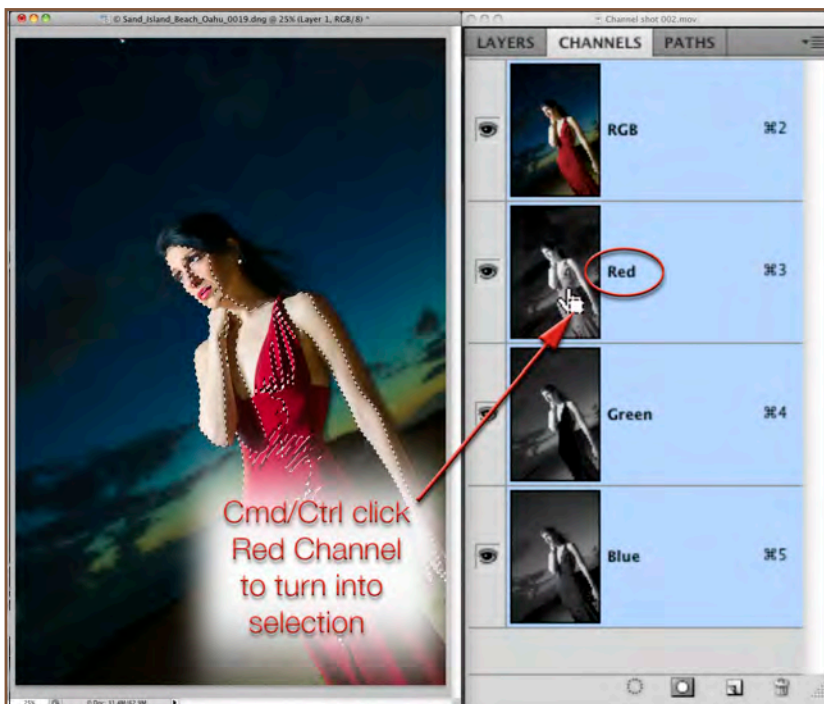With soften mask

Cmd/Ctrl click
Red Channel
to turn into
selection

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the unwanted details on her face by enlarging the light source (working in the 3D world). Luminance masks gives us back some of that 3D ease and the best thing about them is that they are already made for you – each image brought into your computer has several custom made masks for that image, ready to go. These masks can be found in the Channels palette; each RGB image comes with four channel masks (the composite RGB, the Red, the Green, and the Blue channel) and more if you consider stealing from temporary versions of your image in other colour spaces such as CMYK or *Lab*. A luminance mask allows you to apply your effects to your image proportionally, making those effects look more 3-dimensional.

To soften the effects of the harsh lighting on Sherri, after using the Spot Healing Brush and the Healing Brush Tool to remove the big stuff (such as lines and wrinkles that flesh softening will not hide), a softened version (such as blurring a copy of the Healed version of the image with something like Gaussian Blur from the Filter > Blur menu) sits at the top of the layer stack. Now the whole image just looks blurry. From here most photographers paint away parts of the top, soft, layer with a layer mask wherever the sharp background layer needs to show through (ie, eyes, lips, teeth, nostrils, and all non-flesh areas). This last step is time consuming and could be greatly improved upon by engineering a luminance mask into the layer mask of the top soft layer. Where this mask is darker, all or some of the bottom, sharp layer shows through, and where the mask is lighter, all or some of the soft layer version is seen, ie the eyes, lips, teeth, nostrils, and all non-flesh areas appear sharp while the flesh of the face appears soft. The time-saver here is, as stated earlier, the masking for the layer mask already exists – you don't have to create it. Go to the Channels palette and Cmd/Ctrl (Mac/PC) click on the Red channel, this loads the luminance of the Red channel as a selection (see Image 004). Click on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers palette (the grey rectangle with a white circle in the middle which sits between the 'fx' and the 'half black, half white circle' icons). You will suddenly see the eyes, lips, teeth, nostrils, and all non-red areas have become sharp again. If you look at the layer mask it will now look like the Red Channel from the Channels palette. Where this top layer layer-mask icon is white, the top soften layer is revealed, where the mask is black the underlying sharp layer shows through, and finally where the mask is a shade of grey it will only be partially softened in varying degrees. Now the really cool part which I learned from Guy Gowan, is to constrain this layer to just the face, so that it cannot effect other red things such as Sherri's red dress, and to do it without much tedious painting on the layer mask, put this top layer into a Group – with the top softened layer active (highlighted), click on the "Create A New Group" icon at the bottom of the Layers' palette (the folder icon to the left of the Create New Layer icon). This places the softened layer inside of the layer Group. By putting this layer into a layer Group you can now effect the layer with a second layer mask. Click on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers' palette while holding down the Opt/Alt (Mac/PC) key. This creates a black Hide-All layer mask on the Group layer which completely hides the effect of the softened layer. Select the Paint Brush tool by typing the letter B and then type X to switch the Foreground Colour to white. Drag the Paint Brush cursor over just the face – the white paint is applied to the layer mask of the Group and not the actual facial pixels. The white paint begins to reveal the softening layer with each brush stroke, obviously just paint over any exposed flesh parts (ie not the red dress). These paint strokes can be done with large, fast, sloppy brush strokes at 100% brush opacity and flow since the intricate brush work was done for us by the mask created from the Red channel. It is a good idea to switch the Foreground Colour back to black and paint over the eyes and lips a little to make sure that all the softening is fully hidden from view over them – the Red channel mask hides most but not all the softening layer in these areas (see Image 005).

Finally, consider changing the Group's layer opacity to tone down the flesh softening effect a little, to make it more subtle. The end result of all these steps is a beautiful, proportional, subtle, application of the softening over the face (see Image 003 B) which doesn't obliterate all flesh texture and is executed in less than half the time of painting the mask out by hand, from scratch.

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Dave Montizambert lectures internationally on lighting, digital photography, and Adobe Photoshop. He is also a published author having written two books on lighting and digital photography (www.montizambert.com) plus numerous magazine articles on these topics in North America, Europe, Russia and Asia. Dave also creates Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com. Dave is available for lectures and workshops and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.

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