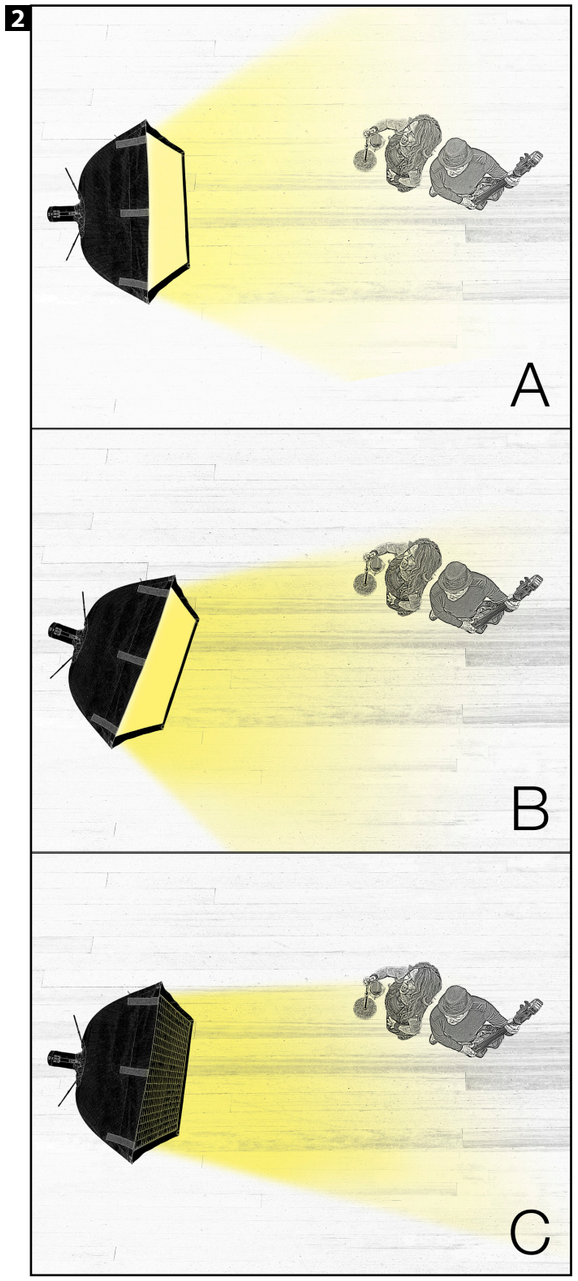
For this publicity image of ' Easy Street' musicians, Annie Handley and Dave Devindisch, I wanted to create an impression reminiscent of the old jazz Blue Note LP covers and posters from the 1950s and 1960s. These old covers and posters were B&W portraits of musicians with very high contrast (really dark shadows and bright specular highlights), and so safe flat lighting wouldn't give me the full-on dark-and-dirty lighting drama I so dearly lusted for!


1

Creating dramatic lighting on more than one person at a time can be a little challenging in terms of good exposures for all. When lighting more than one person on a set, photographers tend to play it safe by placing their main-lights further away from the subjects in an attempt to light near and far evenly. When you move the main-light further away, the brightnesses of near and far subjects start to even out, the further the light gets from the subjects the differences in brightness become closer and closer to equal. Essentially you have given up dynamic lighting for exposure; this uniformity usually creates boring lighting that is far from dramatic and is often so flat that it begins to kill the illusion of depth. For me this just will not do because I believe lighting is the most potent maker of depth in a photograph – when you lighten a tone it pulls that tone forward in the image, when you darken a tone that tone recedes. Both of these tone adjustments work together to create the illusion of depth!

Since a photograph is a two-dimensional medium (and so has no actual depth), I work hard to separate my subjects from their surroundings. I often do so by making critical parts of the subjects (eg eyes) fully lit and exposed as well as in sharp focus while all else, such as the background, foreground, props, and secondary parts of subject, are under-lit and soft focus. Backing the main-light away pushes the lighting of subjects and set towards fully and evenly lit, this means that our subjects 'blend into' rather than 'stand out' from their surroundings.

So what is the solution? The one I favour is feathering gridded light sources. If you compare diagram A with diagram B in Image 002 (both without soft-grids), notice how the light path striking the subjects in A puts more intensity of light on Annie since she is closer to it. Dave who is further away receives less light. Now look at diagram B, the main-light source is angled away from Annie and on to Dave so now the more intense mid-portion of the light path strikes Dave and the less intense edge portion of the light hits Annie. Feathering (turning) the source away from Annie drops her exposure so that it equals or comes closer to equal to Dave's exposure. When you feather the light you lose some brightness on the subjects so an increase in exposure is necessary. Unfortunately, this can decrease shadow contrast (lighter shadows) if you have a light-toned environment and/or tight quarters to shoot in. You see, a greater intensity of light bouncing off walls, ceiling, floor, etcetera gets into the shadows making them less dark, less dramatic. Now compare diagram B with diagram C in Image 002; this set-up has a 40˚ Light Tools Soft Egg-Crate grid installed on the main-light soft-box. Notice how the grid narrows the path of light down from 180˚ to just 40˚; this makes feathering the main-light more profound – a little does a lot! In addition to this, the grid blocks much of the light spill (the extra light spilling past the subjects caused by the feathering) from striking the walls, ceiling, floor, etcetera, resulting in higher shadow contrast (darker shadows).

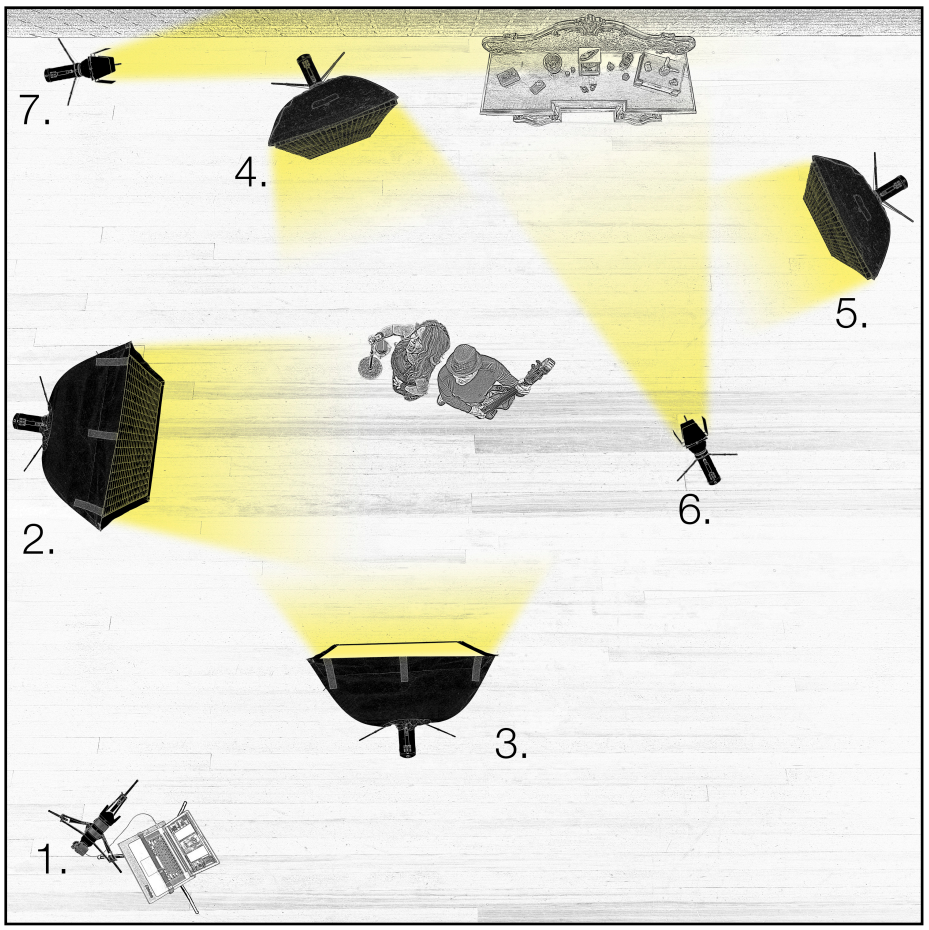


2

There was an added bonus to shooting with the soft-grids; they are real rebels, breaking laws wherever they can! These grids are not unlike my chickens who refuse to conform, they do not adhere exactly to the Inverse Square Law (the grids not the chickens). This is caused by the way they block light. First of all, adding those little light-directing/light-sucking black fabric cells to your light source drops the overall exposure. Now this probably sounds like a bad idea, however, there is a payback to that loss of light – when the subjects move away from the source their brightness should diminish by the Inverse Square Law. However, it does not because as the subject gets further and further away from the light, the grid blocks less and less light which helps to negate the decrease in exposure caused by distance. When the subjects move towards the source their brightness should increase by the Inverse Square Law, however, it does not because as the subject gets closer and closer to the light, the grid blocks more and more light which helps to negate the increase in exposure caused by distance. This is a little-known fact about soft-grids and it is this feature that gives our subjects a lot more freedom to move without the photographer having to constantly compensate exposure. Now that's a dark and dirty trick, or I guess a bright and dirty trick depending on whether you are decreasing or increasing distance, that every lighting mavin should have!

Bio

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 lighting and Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com & www.PhotoshopCAFE.com/video and authors 'Dave On Demand' (www.montizambert.com) lighting tutorial based photo-training. Dave is available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.



3

Lighting Specifications (see diagram of complete set-up Image 003)

1. Camera: full frame mirrorless with 70–200mm lens set to 70 mm mounted on tripod positioned 5.8 metres from subjects and was 1.6 metres from floor to centre of imaging sensor. Exposure was set to f2.8, 1/125, at 100 ISO. Camera was tethered to a MacBook Pro using a Tether Tools rig.
2. Main-Light: a 1,200 watt mono-block strobe fitted with a 90 x 120 cm soft-box with 40˚ soft-grid was placed 2.6 metres from subjects. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 2 metres. Exposure via incident meter put this light's brightness (at subjects) equal with camera exposure setting. This expressed as a Lighting Ratio as a ' +0 Incident' value – plus zero means hypothetical mid-grey card would record as mid-grey if placed against subjects.
3. Fill-Light: an 800-watt mono-block strobe fitted with a 90 x 60 cm soft-box was placed 2.9 metres from subjects. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 1.9 metres. Exposure via incident meter put this light 3 stops darker than camera setting. Lighting Ratio: -3 Incident (minus three).
4. Left Rim-light: a 1,200 watt mono-block strobe fitted with a 70 x 180 cm strip-light-bank and 20/50˚ soft-grid was placed 2.4 metres from subjects. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 1.6 metres. Exposure via incident meter put this light 2 stops under camera on edge of Dave and 1 and 7/10 under on Annie. Lighting Ratio: Dave = -2, Annie = -1 and 7/10 Incident.
5. Right Rim-light: a 1,200 watt mono-block strobe fitted with a 70 x 180 cm strip-light-bank and 20/50˚ soft-grid was placed 3 metres from subjects. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 1.3 metres. Exposure via incident meter put this light even with camera setting on edge of Dave and 8/10 under on Annie. Lighting Ratio: Dave = +0, Annie = -8/10 Incident.
6. Right Background Accent Light on Floor: a 600 watt mono-block strobe fitted with barn-doors was placed 2.5 metres from background. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 70 cm. Exposure via incident meter put this light 4 and 3/10 stops under camera setting on cabinet against the wall background – this light provided specular highlights on the cabinet. Lighting Ratio: -4 and 3/10 Incident.
7. Left Background Accent Light on Stand: a 700 watt mono-block strobe fitted with barn-doors and a single layer of diffusion material – white opaque acetate lighting gel called 'Roscolux Tuff-Frost' – was placed 3.0 metres from centre of background. Height of this light source from floor to strobe tube measured 1.6 metres. Exposure via incident meter at background wall put this light 2_4 stops (left side to right side) under camera setting. Lighting Ratio: -2 to 4 stops Incident.