Glowing Desires

When photographing people I think we innately understand what a correct exposure is – it is when the subject's captured tones match reality. But how do you set exposure for things that glow, and when is that exposure correct? For instance, what is the correct exposure for fire (see Image 002), for light bulbs (see Image 003), or for glowing liquids (see Image 001)? Truth be told, there is no correct exposure for things that glow – unlike a flesh-tone, a glowing brightness is subjective – its exposure is whatever you want it to be.

When you photograph a glow, you are really capturing an image of a light source, whether that be an actual light-producing origin such as a bulb, a strobe/flash, the sun, or a reflection of one the aforementioned light origins on a reflective surface. Take a look at Image 001, this bottle of scotch has several carefully crafted glows showing through the liquid. These glows come from several sources: on the camera-right-side edge of the bottle, we see a thin elongated reflection (aka specular highlight), which appears deep amber because the light from this reflection on the inside back edge of the bottle has to pass through the whisky; the whiskey acts as a filter, kind of like a lighting gel; the bigger, less bright amber glow running through the right side near the middle comes from a light source that is placed behind the bottle. Creating glows through liquid has traditionally been done by placing a piece of foil-board (silver-foil-covered card stock) behind the liquid, then angling it to catch a reflection on the foil from one of the subject lights. This is a tedious job and can easily eat up an hour of fussing around cutting and recutting the foil-board to what you think will be just the right dimensions, then angling and re-angling the card in an attempt to find the best angle with the express purpose of creating that illusive glow that is just the right size and shape, as well as just the right brightness with just the right gradation from light to dark. Of course, perfect never happens, instead it is about how much time you are willing to devote and how healthy your patience stores are. Of course, all this fine tuning of the glow has to be done from the camera's point of view, any other angle of view will render differently.

At one point, before digital capture, I found myself with a deficit in the patience department with foil-board glows and so came up with a novel way of creating them; I created miniature light-boxes that were open at both ends. These boxes were constructed of heavy black card stock and held together with flat black camera tape. A sheet of translucent white acetate material was placed over the front open end of the box. A small flash that allowed manual power adjustments was placed partly inside and at the opposite, open end of the box; it was angled to back-light the white acetate material. With this small light-source in place behind the bottle, the camera would see through the glass and amber liquid to the back-lit white translucent material of this miniature 'soft-box' creating a nice glow.

Back in the days of film, to set the brightness of a glow, careful metering was necessary since instant preview was not yet an option. Even today with previews instantly popping up on my big, profiled monitor and with my Raw process settings automatically applied for that preview, I still meter my glows before shooting the first frame. Now why would I do that? It's about speed and accuracy, this really speeds up the process of lighting – getting me to the desired result faster than trial and error 'chimping'. That isn't to say that I don't use or like previews, I love them and use them in conjunction with meter readings. These meter readings are done first to quickly get me to what I think I want, then I capture an image and fine tune from there. This method gets me to the brightness I want in less time and it tells me exactly and objectively what I'm getting, removing any variables such as ambient light changes in the monitor viewing area – these can mess up perception of what the lighting looks like on your monitor. It also provides a numeric value, a ratio, that I can remember, record and refer to on future shoots.

You may be wondering how to meter a glow? Should you use incident readings or reflective readings? Where should you point the meter? And where should you meter from? When metering glows, incident readings are useless, they are only useful for correctly exposing objects that have actual tones such as a facial flesh-tone, or the tone of a garment. To set a desired brightness for a glow, you need to take a reflective reading with the meter pointed directly at the glow. With that first reading made, you then decide whether to lighten, darken, or keep the glow at the brightness you just read. In the case of the liquor bottle glow in Image 001, the liquid held in the glass bottle creates a lens of sorts and so the glow must be read from the camera's point of view; any other angle and the glow will appear different from that which the camera sees. To meter this glow, I stuck my head in front of the camera lens, then using my 1° spot reflective meter, took a reading. When shooting film with a view camera, I have a wand with a very small light metering cell near the wand's tip that attaches to one of my old light meters; this wand assembly sits against the film plane inside the camera and can move around to read just about any spot of the image. This takes reflective spot meter readings from the exact angle of the camera. Without this you can remove the lens from the front standard and the ground glass from the rear standard, then take spot meter readings through the back of the camera. But both of these are overkill for most situations – the head and meter in front of camera lens mentioned earlier serves well enough. Once you have a reading, such as the f32.0 5/10 reading I got off the brightest point on the scotch glow in Image 001, you compare this reflective reading to what the camera exposure is set to, the difference between the reading and the camera setting tells you what this brightness will photograph as. So if the camera aperture is set to f16.0 and the burst of light from the light source behind the bottle reads f32.0 5/10 reflective, f32.0 5/10 is 2.5 stops brighter than f16.0 and so this brightness will reproduce as a +2 5/10's, meaning 2 5/10 stops brighter than the mid-tone of the photographic grey-scale; I usually read the brightest and darkest parts of the glow to get a better idea of the glow's brightness gradation.

With the advent of digital compositing, the job of creating the perfect glow became much faster and much easier. Now I often place a soft-box behind the glass or bottle, or if not enough room, I hold a white translucent fabric behind and then light the fabric. A capture is made solely for the glow exposure. This 'glow-image capture' becomes a layer in the composite and gets selectively painted in using layer-masks overtop the main image layer. This is way easier than my earlier glow methods, and it allows for greater control of glow intensity and gradation. Plus, when capturing the glow exposure, you don't have to worry if the source creating the glow appears outside the confines of the bottle or glass since it will be masked away in Photoshop.

Remember, when you are creating glows, you are actually photographing a light source and that light source's brightness is subjective, there is no right or wrong; a light source, unlike a face, has no true tonality, it can be any brightness you or your client desires – so go fulfil these glowing desires and get a near perfect 'Glow On!'

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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.