HDR
PORTRAITS

If your people shots lack character and impact, HDR could be the answer.
Lee Frost shows how to create portraits with High Dynamic Range

WORDS & PICTURES: **LEE FROST**

HDR PORTRAITS

Cigar man, Cuba

"Using HDR software on portraits really brings out detail in the subject's face – every wrinkle, blemish and whisker. Not good for the ladies, mind!"

ALTHOUGH I WOULD NEVER describe myself as a portrait photographer, whenever I find myself traveling through foreign lands, I can't help but photograph the local people. The fact that I tend to visit countries like Cuba, Morocco and Zanzibar probably has a lot to do with it. Not only are the places slightly rough around the edges – which is what makes them so fascinating – but the people are too! Stick me on a city street in the UK and the last thing I'd want to do is start photographing passers-by, but Havana or Marrakech, well, that's a whole different story.

It's all about the faces. They are just so full of character. Thankfully the people behind them are usually warm and friendly too. If you walked up to someone in London and asked if you could take their portrait, you'd probably be told where to stick your zoom lens, but head for a country where your camera would cost more than a year's salary for the average worker and surprisingly, you're almost guaranteed a warmer welcome. There must be a moral in there somewhere!

Despite having the opportunity to photograph many fascinating faces over the years, the big problem I've always had was producing portraits that really captured the character of my subject, warts and all. I've tried filling the frame, boosting contrast, converting to black & white… I even tried to emulate the superb work of Polish photographer Andrzej Dragan (www.andrzejdragan.com – well worth a look), by following a magazine tutorial on 'The Dragan Effect'. But the results were rubbish, and the technique took flippin' ages, so I gave it up as a bad job and binned the free CD I'd been following in sheer frustration!

Then one day, a creative light bulb went on in my head. I'd been playing around with Photomatix Pro HDR software and getting some half decent results. Normally, HDR is restricted to subjects that are stationary – like landscapes and buildings – because you need to shoot a sequence of images at different exposures, then merge them using the software – which means all the images must be in perfect register to avoid overlapping and ghosting. That theoretically rules out portraits because it's impossible to take several shots of ➤

Photomatix Pro 3.0

Although there is a HDR feature in recent versions of Photoshop (CS3, CS4), HDR devotees tend to use Photomatix Pro as it's quick, easy, controllable and relatively cheap. I purchased version 3.0 as a download direct from www.hdrsoft.com. The latest version, 3.2, costs $99 (around £60) as a standalone application. Spend $119 (around £75) and you get the full application including a plug-in for Adobe Lightroom, plus either a plug-in for Photoshop CS2/3/4 or Apple Aperture. If you just want Photomatix as a plug-in for Photoshop that will cost you $69 (£44) or if you want it just as a plug-in for Apple Aperture it'll set you back $79 (£50). There is no plug-in available for Lightroom.

> "Despite having the opportunity to photograph many fascinating faces over the years, the big problem I've always had to producing portraits that really captured the character of my subject, warts and all"
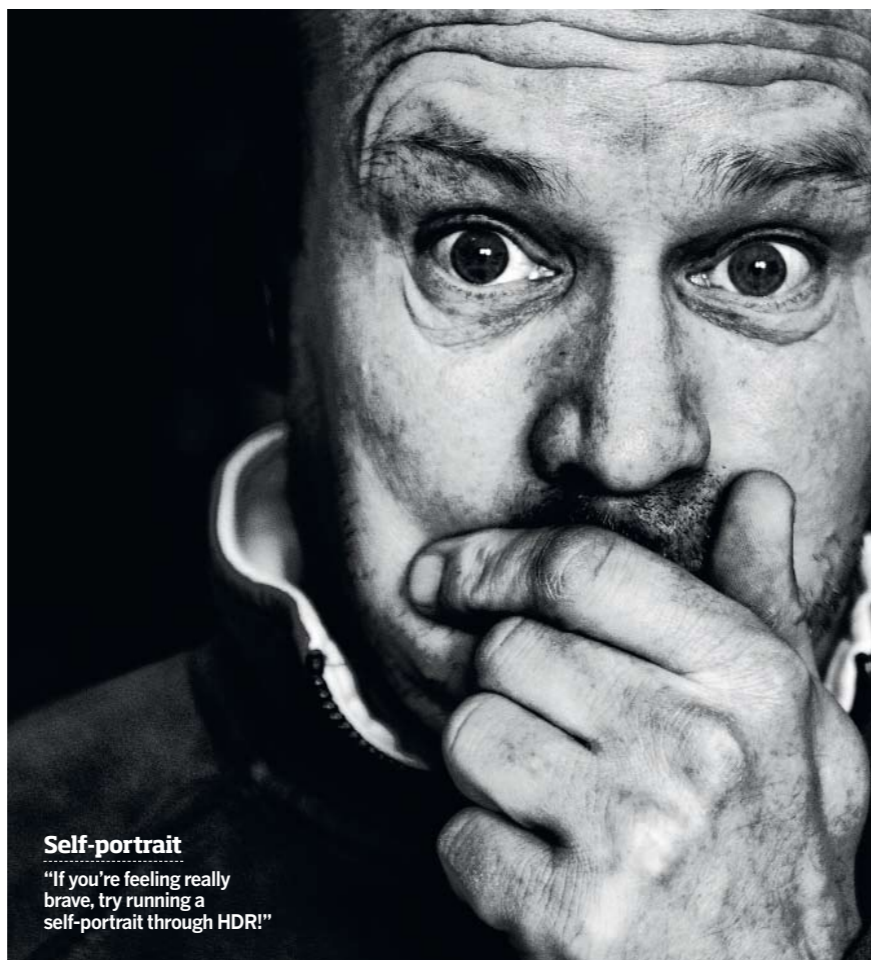
Convert to monos

Although HDR portraits can look amazing in colour – as the example here hopefully shows – sometimes the colour itself can be a distraction, taking attention away from the subject's face, which should always be given priority.

For this reason, I sometimes convert my HDR portraits to black & white, as the removal of colour makes them much simpler and more powerful. The 'warts and all' effect can also be enhanced even further.

There are endless ways to convert colour digital images to black & white, but my favourite at the moment is to use Silver Efex Pro from Nik Software (www.niksoftware.com). It's not cheap – €200 (£173) – but it is quick, easy and effective. All you do is open the chosen image in Photoshop, go to the Filters menu to find and open Silver Efex Pro, and it automatically opens the image as a black & white conversion. You then have numerous tools and controls at your disposal to enhance the images, though for HDR portraits I find that the High Structure preset is all I need. Click on it – job done.

Silver Efex Pro applies changes to a duplicate layer, not the main image, so you can delete the layer if you choose to. I flatten the layers when I'm done as it reduces the file size – images with Silver Efex Pro applied can be 200-300MB!

Self-portrait

"If you're feeling really brave, try running a self-portrait through HDR!"

Noah

"My poor son wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry when he saw this wacky wide-angle caricature of himself. Could do with a wash by the look of things!"

Seven tips for better portraits

Though this feature is about how to make the most of portraits you've already taken, it helps a great deal if the images you have to work with are usable, so before jumping on the next EasyJet flight to Marrakech, here are a few pointers to consider.

1) GET THE LENS RIGHT: For head and shoulders portraits, use a short telephoto focal length from 85-135mm – not only will it help to blur the background by reducing depth-of-field, but the slight foreshortening of perspective is flattering on the face. Not that the final portraits will be!

2) ASK PERMISSION: Rather than hiding behind lampposts and sneaking candids, approach people and ask their permission – not only will the resulting portraits be much better, because eye contact makes a huge difference, you'll also avoid the risk of offending anyone.

3) AVOID BACKGROUND CLUTTER: Throw distracting backgrounds out of focus by using a wide aperture, such as f/4.

4) KEEP IT FUN: If your subject is looking awkward, try chatting to them, pull a funny face – do anything to break the ice and get them to loosen up.

5) TAKE CONTROL: Don't be afraid to ask your subject to move if the background doesn't work – take control of the situation rather than accepting second best.

6) FOCUS ON THE EYES: They're the windows on the soul. It doesn't matter if any other part of the face isn't in sharp focus, the eyes must be because they're the first thing we look at.

7) INVOLVE YOUR SUBJECT: Show your subject the pictures you've taken – they'll love being able to see their face on the back of your camera.

"HDR portraits are far from flattering, so choose your subjects carefully and beware! I find that people who live thousands of miles away and are never likely to see me again are the best bet!"

the same person without them moving fractionally between each one – unless you tie them down! But one of the advantages of shooting in Raw format rather than JPEG is a single Raw file contains far more data than you actual need, so it can be re-processed several times (I use Adobe Camera Raw in Photoshop CS3), with the exposure on each version adjusted to produce what is in effect a bracketed sequence of images. These images can then be run through HDR software.

Putting this theory to the test for the first time was a nerve-racking experience, because if it didn't work I'd be back to the drawing board or fishing out my Dragan Effect CD from the bin.

Fortunately, I needn't have worried because it worked brilliantly. The amount of detail revealed in the subject's face when given the

HDR treatment is amazing – every blemish, every wrinkle, every strand of stubble or hair. Even the texture of the weave in clothing is enhanced. Best of all, it's so quick and easy. From opening the original Raw file to seeing the final HDR image takes no longer than five minutes, yet to look at the results you'd imagine they had taken hours of blood, sweat and tears in Photoshop man-hours.

Just one word of warning – HDR portraits are far from flattering, so choose your subjects carefully and beware! I find that people who live thousands of miles away and are never likely to see me again are the best bet. Life partners on the other hand, should be avoided – unless you fancy the life of a singleton again. Come to think of it, "Er, darling, have you got a moment for a quick photo?"

Original

STEP-BY-STEP TO THE PERFECT HDR PORTRAIT
We use a drunk man in a hat to show you how!

Step 1 Choose the Raw file you want to use and open it in whichever Raw file converter you normally work with. Personally I favour Adobe Camera Raw in Photoshop CS3.

Step 2 Now it's time to make any general adjustments to the Raw file you feel necessary then, with the Exposure slider set to 0.00, open the file and save your first copy of it.

Step 3 Now we're going to make our underexposed file. Open the Raw file again, set the Exposure slider to -2.0 (two stops underexposed), then open the file and save it.

Step 4 For our third image, we're going to overexpose the Raw file. So this time, set the Exposure slider to +2.0 (two stops overexposed), then open the file and save it again.

Step 5 Open your HDR software – I used Photomatix Pro 3.0 – and click on *Generate HDR Image* then drag and drop your three images into the window and click *OK*.

Step 6 Because you're not working from Raw files, the software doesn't always recognise the exposure increments you've used so correct this manually and then click *OK*.

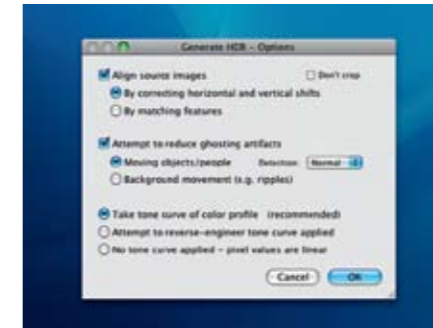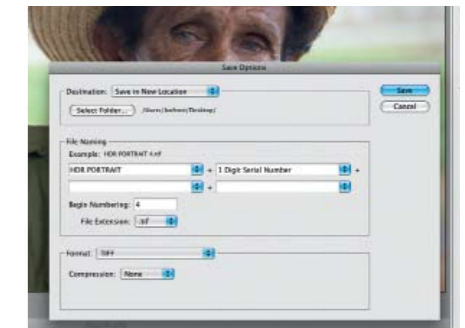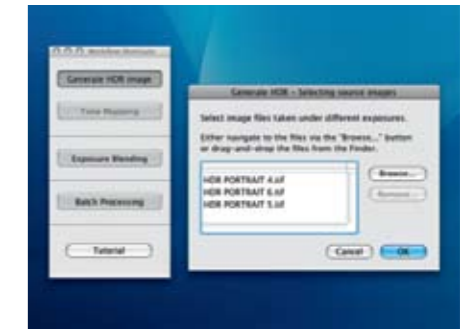**Step 7** Another window appears with various options for alignment of images, reducing artefacts etc. I always tend to go with the default settings so just click *OK* again.

Step 8 The software will merge the images automatically – depending on your computer's speed this usually takes about 30-60 seconds – then you're presented with the basic HDR image.

Step 9 The initial HDR image may not look much different to a 'normal' image, but click on *Tone Mapping* and you can get to work on changing the look of the image by adjusting the slider options.

Step 10 Try all the options in Smoothing and adjust Strength, White Point, Black Point and Gamma. It may take a while but once you're happy with the look of your portrait, click *Process*.

Step 11 Once the file is processed, save it as a 16-bit TIFF then make any final adjustments – here I selected the face and hat and adjusted Levels to lighten the area. There, all done!

NEXT ISSUE: WE REVEAL HOW YOU CAN CAPTURE CREATIVE AND COLOURFUL ABSTRACTS