

9. PORTRAITURE

CONSULTING WITH THE SUBJECT

A great portrait depends on more than just light—certainly, the pose and the mood created in the image are also important. If you define the subject's face well and create lighting that is appropriate for your subject, you will make more successful portraits.

This is one of my favorite portraits. I call the shot *What?*



Before I take a single shot, I talk to the subject about how they want to appear. Listening to the client voice their expectations gives me time to study



their face and decide whether I want to work with hard or soft light. I also try to identify features I want to highlight or hide and consider what background might complement the clothes. I make it a point to ask the client how the image will be used. A shot that will be in an annual report should be carried out differently than a portrait made for a loved one.

Since all people do not look alike or want to be shown in the same way, lighting should be customized for each subject. While department store studios don't do this, it is one of the ways an independent photographer can add value to their services.

All people have different facial features and skin tones, which depend on their ancestors' origins. I use a longer tonal scale with pictures

Top left—Light creates definition, shape, and color to any shot. Each portrait should be lit to suit the subject. **Bottom**—Sometimes character is what makes a shot compelling. **Facing page**—Not all portraits are about the face.





of people of African origin than persons of European origin. For persons with Asian ancestry, I build more contrast into the face to make the image more three-dimensional.

Finally, when you are making decisions about how to light your subject, you should consider his age. We might create character lighting for a man using a small light source, say just an umbrella. For someone who wants to appear more youthful, I would use a large light source and a reflector, just as a start.

LIGHTING IDEAS

There are a few things that I do for most portraits. I start with a large light source (usually the umbrella/light panel combination) placed to one side of the face to accentuate the shape of the face. Sometimes this is the only light, but I typically add a smaller, harder light near the camera. This gives me catchlights in the eyes and changes the contrast in the face. I might use a warm filter on this light. I may even mount this on a camera bracket rather than a light stand, so the light travels with me. The third tool I have is a reflector, usually a light panel. I have a silver cover on one side and gold on the other. I don't use this setup constantly. Nothing works for everyone. I would set this

For this shot, the only light was a snoot. I used a large reflector for fill.





Top and bottom left—A simple setup was used to create this soft and delicate image. There are three lights: an umbrella/light panel (large light), a beauty dish (this smaller light was used for the catchlight), and a reflector (background light). **Right**—In this shot, the hair light was important. It added definition and sparkle to the hair.



up if I didn't know anything about whom I would be shooting. Since I do commercial shooting, this happens pretty frequently.

There are many special-purpose tools for portraiture, and there are other ways to use the more typical tools. The basic tools I use are the large light source, a hard light for contrast, and a reflector. I may use a hair light on a boom or a rim light positioned behind the subject. However, I start with a simple setup.

USING STROBES OUTDOORS

This is probably the best use for a dedicated strobe. This is an easy way to control the light your camera will photograph and create better outdoor portraits. The object of this lighting, called flash fill, is to add light that will primarily affect the shadows in your shot, while leaving the highlights unchanged. I should point out that I almost always use flash fill when shooting outdoors. It is better to ask yourself why you shouldn't use flash than to wonder why you should.

Most cameras on the market have a flash compensation dial that enables you to balance the flash with daylight. While some cameras will make good decisions about flash fill automatically, it is often useful to set the compensation to a negative setting. This will mean that the sun, not the flash, will be the dominant light source for your shot. If you are shooting in open shade or on an overcast day, the compensation should be set to a negative value so the contrasty lighting from your flash doesn't overwhelm the soft light from the sky. Of course, you can and should check the lighting effect on the camera's LCD screen.



The sun is behind the subject. Without flash fill, the subject would have been just a silhouette.



One of my favorite flash fill shots. I only used a little light from the strobe. If I had added more, I would have ruined the delicate feel of the shot.



A friend made a small studio space very useful. Notice how curtains have been used to block windows and the equipment storage. In a small space, you need to be very careful about what can be reflected back into the subject.

You can also do this with a strobe that is not dedicated to your camera, checking your exposure with the histogram and the proofing image. Changing the aperture will affect both the light from the strobe and the ambient light, while the shutter speed will affect only the ambient light unless you go over the sync speed. I use manual strobe frequently for flash fill. I find that changing the power of the strobe, rather than changing the camera settings, is the quickest way for me to work with a manual strobe for flash fill. In fact, I can leave the camera on auto and have my strobe set to $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ power for many shots.

INTO THE STUDIO

A studio is a place where the photographer controls the light. You don't need a huge space to run an efficient studio. If you're using strobes, you can control all the light almost anywhere, as your strobes can overpower almost any other light source.

CHANGING A LOOK

You can use lighting to create different moods in your images. By changing the placement of your strobes or the way the light is modified, you can create numerous portrait looks, suited for different viewers or recipients. Let's take a look at some examples.

The first shot (facing page) was created by a big light source (an umbrella) and a large reflector (a light panel). Since the light sources are so large, the light is very soft and the transition from light to shadow is gradual. This type of lighting tends to make a subject appear younger, and it did so in this shot.

SCULPTING THE FACE

Your lighting can help you sculpt the shape of your subject's face. If there is a shadow side of the face, the face will appear thinner. If you light both sides of the face evenly, the face will appear broader.

To create this shot, I used a big light source and a reflector. The light softens the details of the subject's face.

Next, I decided to create a setup that would render my subject a little more mature and elegant. To do this, I used a harsher light. I put a Norman 200B on the camera as a second light. This gave me a hard light, which I set at very low power. In addition to this, I used the light with the large umbrella that was used in the last shot, and I removed the light panel reflector. Most of the light comes from the light with the large umbrella, but you can see the effect of the 200B when you look at the catchlight in the eye and the shadow under the chin.

These are the easiest to see differences, but you can also see differences in the area around the eye and the eyebrow. If you changed the power levels of these two lights, you could make additional changes in the face. I will be





talking about changing the power levels between lights a little later in this chapter. This small change in light, coupled with a change in the model's expression, creates a big difference between these two images.

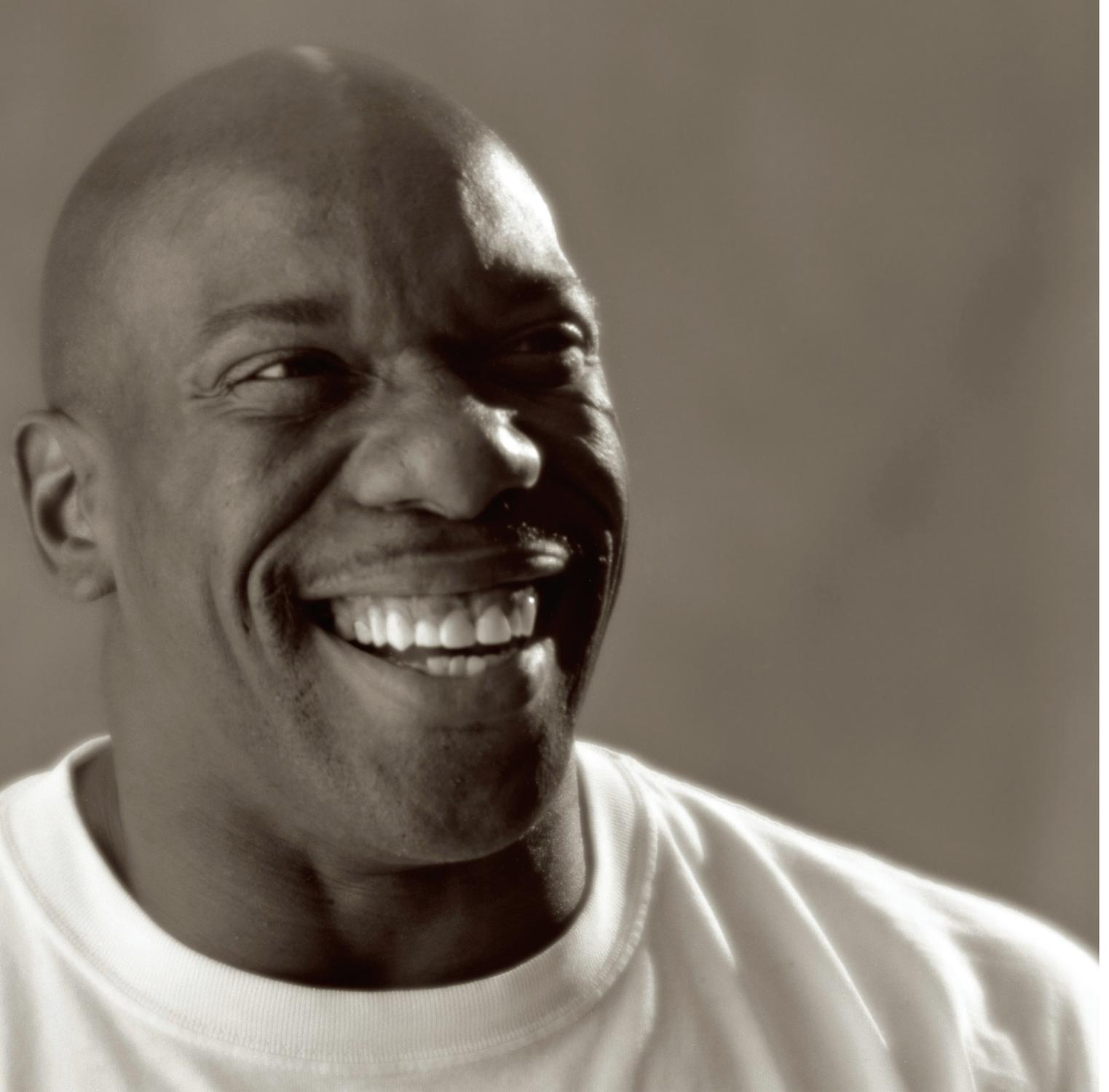
One thing I want to point out about these images: the lights are close to the subject. This enables me to control what they do and assures me that my big light sources will act like big light sources.

Facing page—I added a small strobe to the large light source and removed the reflector. The strobe and the increase in shadow give more definition to the shape and detail of the face. **Below**—I used just a single umbrella to light this subject. I wanted to maintain the detail and texture in the face.

CHARACTER LIGHTING

Charlie has a great face for photographs. He looks like he just walked out of the Dust Bowl. When somebody has a great face, they are generally easy to light. You want to put contrast and detail into the face. Consequently, you





are going to use a smaller light source. In this case, I used one 42-inch ribless umbrella. This gave me everything I could want from the face. The umbrella is about 60 degrees to the left of the camera. The fill comes from the light scattered by the umbrella. The background is black seamless. While I often don't like a black background, I think it works well in this shot. Although I made several shots of Charlie, this is the only time he smiled.

Randy also has a great face, but this shot has a lot more going on in it. First, the light is soft because I used a large light source again. I also used a Hoya

I used a large light and a light with a snoot for this shot. The snoot was placed behind the subject, on the right side. This produced the highlight on the right side of the image. I used a soft focus filter to create a glowing effect.

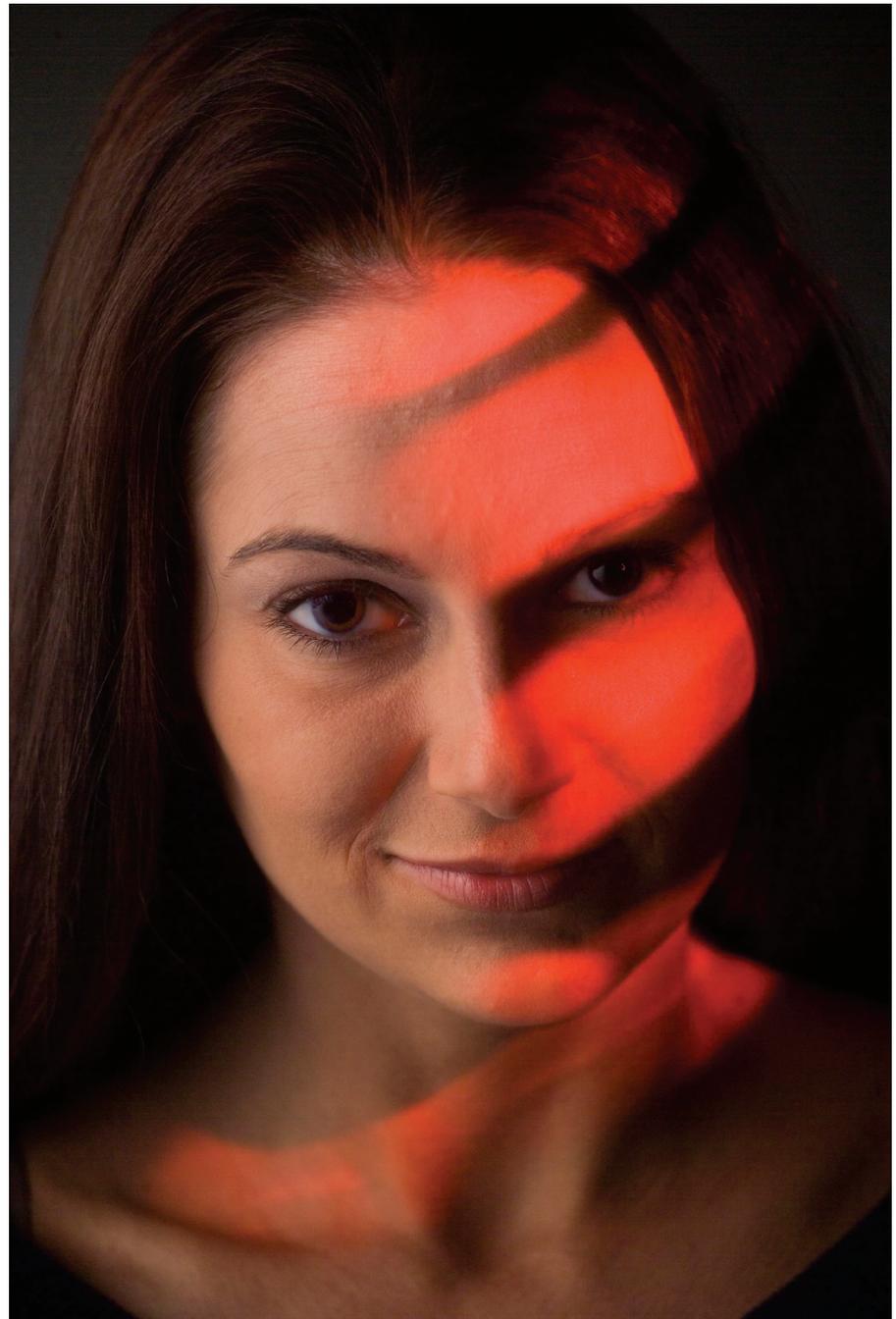
Softener A filter, which further softened the shot. These are the best soft focus filters. In portraiture, hard light is often used to create highlights in the hair (a snoot is a great tool for this) and to create a rim light around the subject (the light is placed behind the subject and creates a glowing outline around him or her). The rim light on Randy came around to the front a little bit and added light on the side of his head. That area of brightness draws the eye away from his shirt, which would otherwise be the brightest part of the shot.

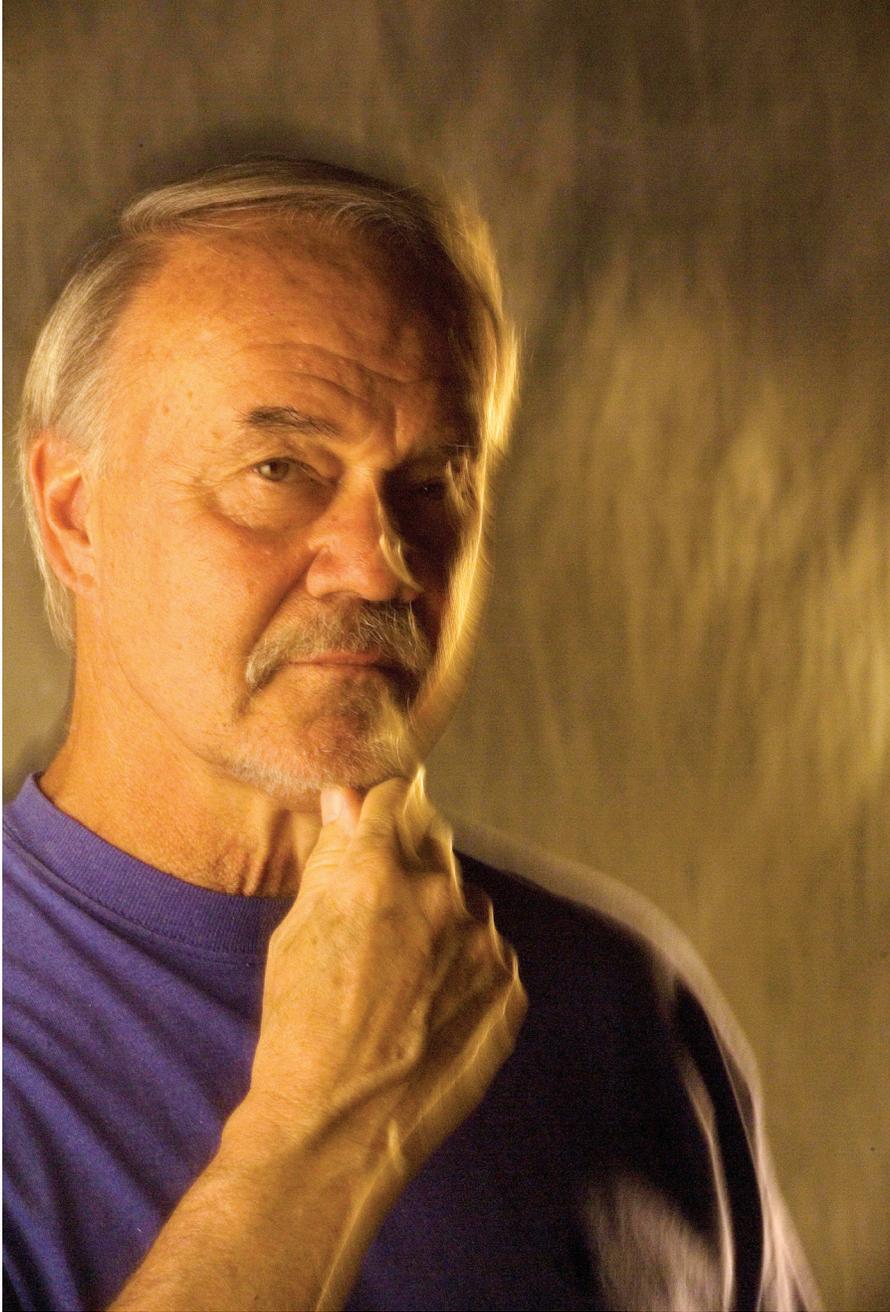
SPECIAL LIGHT

I wanted to do a shot that could only be done when the photographer has control of all light, in the studio. To create this image, I positioned an umbrella/light panel at camera left. This was the main light. I introduced a hard light, my Kodak slide projector, as a second light source, positioned at camera right. To modify the light from the projector, I slid a piece of Cinefoil with cutout crescent shapes and a red gel where the slide would typically be



Above—The slide projector is a great special purpose light. You can see the projector mounted on a tripod in the setup shot. This requires a heavy-duty tripod. **Right**—A slide projector, a red gel, and a piece of Cinefoil with cutout shapes allowed me to create this dramatic image.





A large light source, the umbrella/light panel, was used to light the subject. I used continuous lights on the background. This created the blur.

inserted. By changing the position and the focus of the projector, you can control the pattern on the face.

The trick in doing this kind of thing is that you have to focus when the room lights are on and then lock the focus on the camera by setting it to manual focus. Be sure to turn all the room lights and the modeling lights off when you shoot; otherwise, they will affect the light on the face. You should also use rear-curtain sync, as the subject may move or blink when the strobe goes off. If you use rear-curtain sync, the movement will occur after the shutter closes.

The exposure on this shot was $\frac{2}{3}$ second at $f/5.6$. The strobe was at just 100 watt-seconds. If you try something like this, shoot a lot of images, as many will not work. This is because it can be difficult to see your subject's expression using just the light of the slide projector.

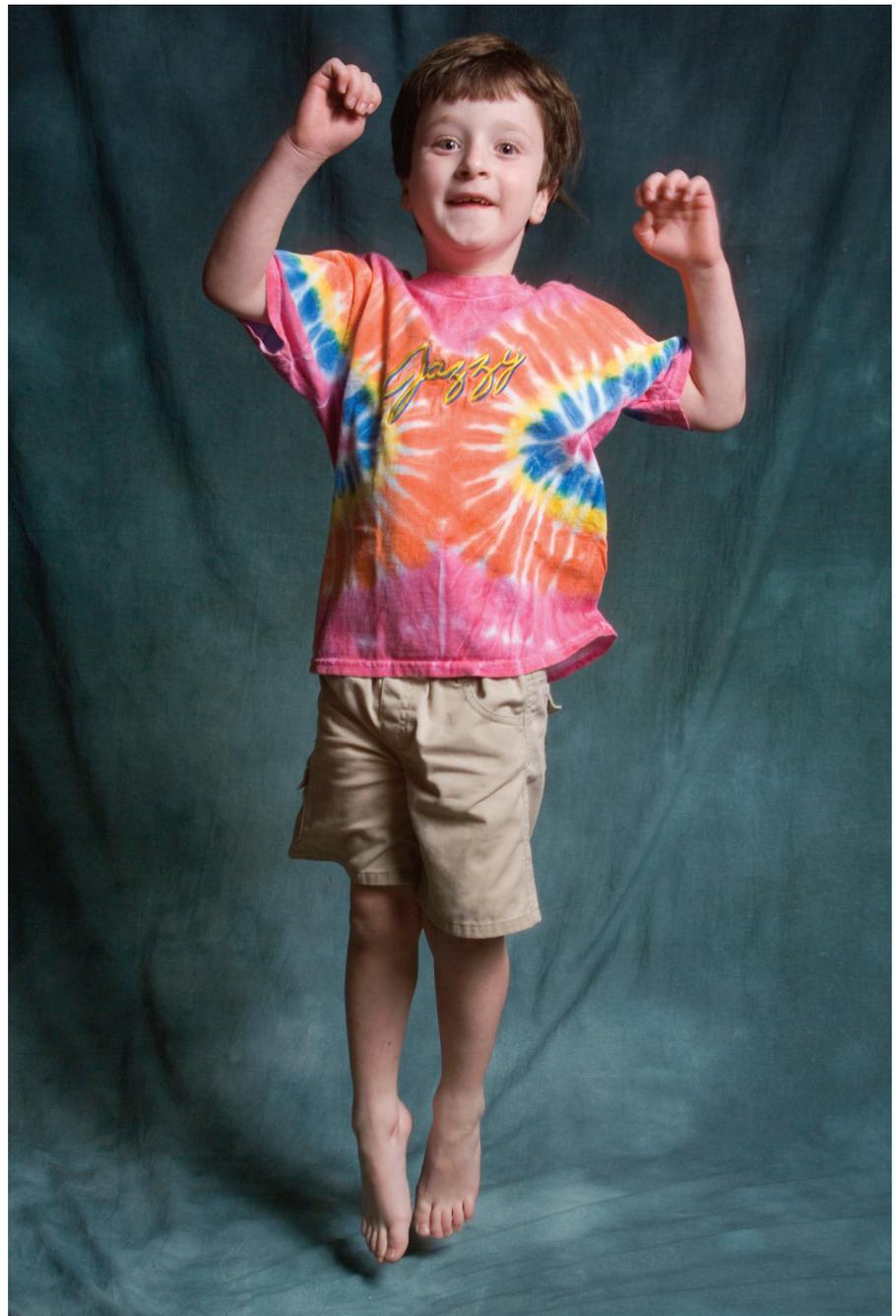
You can also make use of existing or continuous light sources in your portraits. In this shot, I used a few continuous lights on the background and had the subject move while the shutter was open. This can add a very interesting look! The great thing is that the movement creates additional separation, which can make the face pop out of the image. This works well with a window for a background. I shoot a lot of frames when I do this; a good image requires some luck!

LIGHTING THE BACKGROUND

Most of the time, we need a background that will support the image of a person without competing with the subject. I have several backgrounds that I use for portraits made in the studio, some of which I also use on location.

I think that 9x20 feet is the minimum. Why so big? Well, you can do a full-length shot on this size backdrop and have the subject standing on the background. Another important aspect of a big background is that you don't

You need a large background because some subjects just can't stay still!



have to worry about whether you have enough on the sides. This frees you up to move around in front of the subject. The other thing a big drop provides is the ability to move the subject away from the background light separately from the light on the subject. This allows you to manipulate the color and density of the background without changing the light on the subject. The extra distance between the subject and the background means that you can solve the problem of the subject's shadow falling on the background. I generally want at least 5 feet between the subject and the background, and I often use even more.

I set up a series of shots of a male subject to show you how changing the light on the background can change its appearance. I used a mottled gray background. I think this is the most useful background to have, particularly if you are changing the color of the background with lights. To light the subject, I used a single strobe with a small, shoot-through umbrella positioned close to the subject. The light defines his features, creates a sense of three-dimensionality in his face, and adds some definition to his hair. Next, I placed a light panel with a black cover between the light and the background to reduce the light falling on the background. (*Note:* When the subject's light strikes the background and you add the background light, the background will be rendered a more pastel shade, which can be useful for some shots.)

To create the second image, I added a blue gel. The background light and the subject light are at the same power. Pretty vivid blue, huh? I wanted to make a point with this; in an actual portrait, I would make the background darker (this would require a simple adjustment of strobe power).

For the third image in the series, I reduced power to the background light and used an orange gel. I think this is a very usable background.

For the final image, I lit the background from behind. This brought out the different densities in the fabric. It also created a more interesting falloff. I also used a red filter on the light. I like this look. It seems more three-dimensional.

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Below—The setup. The light on the left is for the background. For the last shot in this series, I put it behind the background and lit through the muslin. **Right**—The background isn't lit. There is some spill light from the light on the subject. Notice the subject's distance from the background.



Left—A blue filter on the background light. **Center**—I used an orange filter here, and I reduced the power of the background light. **Right**—For this image, I placed a red filter on the light and positioned it behind the muslin background.