

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB. . . BUB?

by
J.B. Harlin

I keep hearing about all of this controversy over film testing. There seems to be an almost hysterical ongoing argument over who is right and who is wrong. What is this all about? What are these folks all up in arms about? Is there something I am missing? There seems to be a battle developing (and I use the word developing as a direct pun). As best as I can determine there is this escalating disagreement between what appears to be several different camps. You have the “Zone System” camp. . . the “BTZS” camp. . . the “Minimum Time for Maximum Black” camp. . . the “Expose & Adjust” camp. . . the “Develop by Inspection” camp. . . and who knows how many more. . . all in disagreement with each other. Each camp seems to have some grudge against one or all of the others. Why???

This is as futile as discussing politics, religion, the clothes you wear, the house you live in, the color of your couch, or the car you drive. There is no one and only way of doing most anything. There is only the way that works for you. I have my way. . . you have your way. No method can be right or wrong as long as we both achieve our goal. Always keep in mind that the goal is to produce the end product. For a photographer, that end product is the finished photograph. What difference does it make what “method” you utilize?

Stop and consider a few things for a moment. Does a pilot need to know how to build an airplane in order to fly somewhere? Does a captain need to know how to design and build a ship to sail the seven seas? Do you have to know how to build a car in order to drive it to some desired destination? Do I need to know how to build a television in order to watch a program? All anyone needs to know is how to use the device to achieve some goal. Certainly a minimal amount of knowledge is required, but you do not need to know every exacting detail to use something to your advantage. In reality, how interested would you be in watching a television program if you had to understand all of the technical details of broadcasting and receiving a TV signal?

Photography is no different than any of the above mentioned activities. You only have to know a certain amount of the details to successfully use the medium. There are many different approaches and each practitioner, of each approach, uses whatever methodology they feel best suits their vision. How do you define best? What is best for you may be totally unacceptable to me. That does not make you wrong. . . it certainly does not make me wrong either. . . it just signifies that we have a different view of how do approach the task at hand.

Each of these film exposure and development testing methods has its strengths and weaknesses. Each and every photographer has to decide what works for them. They have to determine what fits their working style. You have to define what procedure produces an acceptable image for you. You have to decide just how complicated you want your technique to be. Do you want simplicity. . . or do you want complexity? What best fits your way of thinking? And how does your way of thinking fit the kind of photographic results you see in your mind's eye?

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So What Do I Think? Are You Sure You Really Want to Know???

I for one, am for absolute simplicity! I do not want graphs, numbers, dial calculators, computers, and such distracting things in my way when I am in the field working as an artist. Wasting time twiddling knobs, twisting dials, punching buttons and looking up numbers on some sort of calculator dial is not in any way acceptable for me. I am out making a photograph. . . the one and only thing on my mind is the photograph!

I use my light meter only to validate my instinctive feeling for the correct exposure. I know my materials! Why? Because I use them to make photographs. . . not to collect numbers and plot curves. I do not photograph step wedges. I photograph scenery and objects in the real world, using a real camera. For me, what goes on in the real world is different than what goes on under laboratory conditions. Experience using the materials in the field will give you the knowledge you need to make images, not plotting curves and punching buttons.

I have a very good idea of what my exposure and development will be even before I pull out my light meter. Exposure, the determination of lens settings, and development is, at best, a fleeting consideration. It is a quick mental exercise, based on experience that is quickly considered and then moved to the background so as not to get in the way of my creative focus. I know, from experience, not plotting graphs and running tests, what I am going to get on my film. I know because I spend my time making photographs, not playing with test strips, computerized machines and studying graphs. I have no interest in such things since they are not the focus of art.

Now don't get me wrong here. . . there is nothing wrong with testing. You certainly have to do some amount of testing to establish a starting point. But it is not a religion. Basic testing is just that; very basic, simple, quick and does not require you to remember a lot of details.

If you are truly interested in making photographs, you will want to do the very least amount of testing possible so you can get on with what is important. . . making photographs! So test all you like. But just keep in mind that if all you are interested in is numbers, graphs, calculators, computers and generating plots, you are a scientist! A Techno-Wizard. If you have a desire to study sensitometry fine, but you are not a photographic artist. An artist is interested only in the images they make. . . not the process. Don't get the two confused!

Do Painters Analyze Their Materials?

Just to illustrate how asinine this film testing thing has become, think of this. Imagine a painter. I am talking about a painter that paints on canvas, say using oil paint, that specializes in landscape and still life. So, the story of our imaginary painter goes something like this.

Our painter decides to paint a seascape. He goes to the local art supply store and purchases a few new brushes, several large canvases and some paint. He is concerned that his whites for the clouds and sea foam should be very white, so he buys several tubes of titanium white paint.

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Now he returns home and proceeds to put a small sample of his titanium paint on a piece of board and measure its reflectivity with a reflection densitometer to get an idea of just how white it really is. He repeats this exercise with several different brands of titanium white. He then takes the paint samples, and one by one, proceeds to place them into his mass spectrometer and do a chemical analysis of the contents. Now he enters all his data into his computer and makes endless plots of the chemical contents versus the reflectivity of each material. Now he has lots of graphs and numbers that is sure to impress his colleagues.

Next our imaginary painter needs to analyze his canvas. Same drill. He measures the reflectivity and then performs a chemical analysis of the material from all of the canvas he has. Then more graphs and numbers representing his various choices of canvas. More useless data to impress his colleagues.

Now don't forget that he bought a few new brushes. He take samples of bristles from each brush to be analyzed in his mass spectrometer to check its makeup. Then he places a sample of each bristle into his scanning electron microscope for further analysis. He can now determine the bristles are organic and came from a Camel from some country in the southern hemisphere. More useless data to be graphed and plotted.

So, how realistic does anyone think this description of this imaginary painter really is? Now I must admit that I know few painters, but the ones I do know have no idea of what any of this lab equipment really does nor how to use the things. Nor would they spend the money to obtain such a laboratory, because it is totally unnecessary.

Painters (the artistic types) have no need for graphs and numbers to create a painting. They simply put a canvas up on their easel and begin. They squeeze some paint out on a pallet, mix by eye, then select a brush and begin to apply the paint. They use the correct brush and technique to apply the paint in such a way that the viewer sees what the artists feels and wants to convey. The artist uses his skill, and acquired technique, to create an emotional response in the viewer. He does not give a rat's ass about any numbers, nor what they mean. He does not need a graph to make his clouds and water look convincing. It is all about the art, nothing else!

Now what does this all have to do with photography? It is simple! If you really think that knowing all this techno BS will make you a photographer, you just could be in for a real surprise. Will all those numbers and graphs make your images better?. Who knows? I would say the odds are very unlikely. Wasting your time with elaborate testing and plotting curves will do little to improve your photography. More than likely, just making a few simple tests and then adjusting as you go will lead you to the results that you are looking for. Experience in the real world is your best teacher.

Consider this for a moment. How does a painter learn to paint? Do you think they study graphs and numbers? No, they study the work of others. Then they pick up a brush and make a mark. You learn brush technique by doing it, not by making graphs and plotting numbers. Likewise, if you want to make better photographs, get out and make photographs, not graphs.

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB... BUB?

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Testing and More Testing

The degree of film testing required is dependent upon your intentions. If you are interested in comparing two, or an number, of films for purely scientific reasons, then you will have to adhere to very stringent laboratory practices. On the other hand, if you are just interested in making photographs, your testing requirements are much less demanding. It is up to the individual to decide what is important to them. Do you want to run test, gather numbers, plot curves and make comparisons of materials? Or, do you want to make photographs? Once you answer this question, you will know your next logical step.

When it comes to film testing for the purpose of making photographs, how can any one method be any better than any other? Especially in the light that the image is the final product. Assuming any finished photograph is successful in conveying what the artist wants in its content, can you look at the finished photograph on display and tell what testing method was used to expose the film?

I challenge anyone to look at a really good photograph and tell me what camera it came from? . . . tell me what film was used? . . . tell me what film developer was used? . . . tell me what paper it is printed on? . . . tell me what paper developer was used? Ask yourself if you are interested in the photograph? Or are you just interested in its technical attributes? This is an important question you must answer. It will tell whether you are a Techno-Wizard or an artist! Be careful, you may be surprised at what you find.

Just remember this, don't make a career of testing, unless you just want to test for the sake of testing. What do you think you will gain from extensive testing? You will end up with lots of numbers and graphs. But as far as I am concerned, graphs don't look that good in a frame on my wall. What do you want on your wall?

You Might be a Techno-Wizard if . . .

(Presented with my heartfelt apology to Jeff Foxworthy!)

- you believe that anything can be translated into numbers
- you believe that any piece of art is just a series of numbers
- you believe that great art can be created through the sole use of numbers

NOTE: There are those that believe that everything in the physical world can be expressed by numbers. . . and taking this ever further, they believe that anything can be created by numbers. . . even art!

- you believe that the human factor can be replaced by a machine

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB. . . BUB?

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- you run endless tests and collect numbers
- you plot graphs and carry them into the field when you photograph
- you carry a computer into the field when you photograph
- you think that technology is the root of creativity
- you believe you can't make a meaningful photograph without some techno-gizmo
- I could go on, but enough. . .

Think of it this way, the world is more than just numbers. Art is more than just numbers. Certainly you can communicate any piece of art by using only numbers. That is what a digital scan of a photograph is. . . a representation of the original expressed as numeric values only. Try going the other way. Take a grouping of numbers and translate them into a meaningful image.

I will take this even further; to the point of saying that the creation of meaningful art does not require numbers at all! The artist creates from within, without calculation. At least that is what my experiences have taught me. Just think about this; many of the great masterpieces in photography were made without the aid of a light meter. Also consider this; there was a time when all this electronic gadgetry didn't exist. Yes Myrtle, there was a world before the computer!!! WOW!!! Yet photographs were made very successfully! How can that be? Any self respecting Techno-Wizard will tell you that you need a battery of gadgets, graphs, dials and buttons before you even consider going out to make an exposure. I highly disagree!!!

I believe you cannot produce art (at least meaningful art, with emotional content) by sheer numbers. There has to be a human factor! The person is the single most important commodity in art. Do not diminish the human factor by adding more techno-babble.

Today people are obsessed with gadgets, do-dads, high tech toys and such. We have become a society obsess with instant gratification and the desire to have it all, and have it all now! No matter how much you have, you will never have it all. The sooner you realize you have to make choices and that simplicity is your best choice, the sooner you can become more productive at the things you choose to do. When it comes to photographic art, look to simplify, refine, distill to its very essence your technique so you can use your creativity wisely.

Consider Reality

Keep in mind that when you are out in the real world, making real photographs, under real conditions, that laboratory conditions do not exist. Things happen quickly, you have to be prepared to act instantly, or risk losing a fleeting image. There are times when you must act

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB... BUB?

by
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now! You may not have the luxury of time to calculate and measure. You have to work instinctively and efficiently, or risk losing the photograph.

I think that most photographers are aware of the story of Ansel Adams and the making of one of his most famous photographs, "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico." What would have happened if Ansel had waited until he found his light meter? He had to work quickly, and expose by the seat of his pants. This meant that he had to make his exposure determination on the fly, without the aid of any gadgets. He had to rely on his experience with his materials to make an educated guess. If he had been 100% reliant on some calculator dial gadget, computer, or elaborate metering scheme, the photo would not have happened. If he had been a slave to the Techno-Wizard approach, he just as well have kept driving.

My only question for anyone, using any system is, does your approach to film exposure allow you the freedom to catch a fleeting moment on film? Does your exposure system allow you to make a correct assessment of the correct exposure settings with little more than a second or two of thought?

So, what happens if you guess wrong? At the worst, there might be a couple of stops error. More than likely the error will be much less than two stops. Even with some error in exposure, it is better to capture the once-in-a-lifetime photograph than to let the moment slip away while you fumble with some techno-gadget trying to find the perfect exposure. A perfect exposure is worthless if you miss the moment! You may be right on with your exposure, but what is 100% of nothing?

Remember Ansel and his fight to quickly capture the moment on film at Hernandez. He missed the exposure and development. The negative is a little thin. But he was able to make the print by judicious use of his skill as a printer in the darkroom. The most important thing to remember is he had something to work with. A moment in time that was extraordinary. His negative wasn't perfect, but sometimes perfection is not all there is to the process.

The Minimalist Approach

Why not try the minimalist approach? You only need your camera, film, lens and light meter! Do not use the meter to gather numbers, just use it to confirm and fine tune your exposure. Concentrate on the photograph, not the numbers. Keep this in mind at all times; in art, numbers mean nothing!!!

Here are a few things to consider for a change:

- try forgetting the gadgets and numbers
- stop listening to the Techno-Experts and their endless babble about the numbers
- try being an artist first. . . do the necessary testing, but only as a means to an end
- try getting out and make photographs

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB. . . BUB?

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- make mistakes. . . solve the problem. . . then get on with more photographs
- try to simplify, refine, and distill your technique to its very essence
- try to use your creativity wisely. . . don't waste your energy on numbers

This is my approach to creative fine art photography. It works for myself and my wife. Maybe you should try it also. Try just forgetting the numbers and creating what you feel, not what you calculate you should feel. Numbers are for the Techno-Wizards, art is for the artist.

Disclaimer. . . Don't Blame Me, I'm Just the Messenger!

So I am sure there are those that think I am crazy. And those that are just chomping at the bit to tear into me and my beliefs. Well, don't bother. You are wasting your time. What I do, how I do it, and why I do it is not up for review nor discussion. These are the conscious decisions I have made and I have no intention, nor desire, to change a thing. As long as my way works for me, I will not change a thing.

If you have a problem with what I have to say, why not take a pill and go out with your camera and make some photographs. I have absolutely no problem if anyone disagrees with what I have to say. I will not argue my point in any degree. If you disagree, that is OK with me. I can assure you, in no uncertain terms, that I will not try to sway your opinion. I expect the same respect from everyone else, no matter what the opinion. If you do agree, great! Maybe we have something in common. Hopefully that commonality will be a deep felt love for the art of photography. . . and maybe a little distaste for making things far too technical and complicated.

You may wonder why I would write something like this. I know there are those that are just starting out and are trying to find their way into creative photography. For the beginner, there are so many choices that have to be made. So many mistakes also. There is so much misinformation out there. The Internet is full of rumors, half truths and so many self proclaimed experts. How do you sort through it all? If just one beginner reading all of my ramblings here obtains something useful, then I have achieved my goal.

Why would I go to all this trouble? What I am offering is something I wish I had found when I was just getting started; a simple approach to getting started with a minimum of fuss. If you are artistically minded, you want to get through the mechanics and get on with making photographs. There are simple and easy ways to start making creative images. I only wish I had found this simplicity when I first started many years ago. If you are interested in exploring the easy, no nonsense way, to creative photography here are a few places to look. Yes I do have something to sell. Maybe my book is what you need;

“The Film Exposure Work Book” by J.B. Harlin
<http://www.jbhphoto.com/jbhbooks.htm>

WHAT IS THE HUBBUB... BUB?

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Not interested in my book? Then here are a few other places to look for simplicity in the art of photography;

“Zone VI Workshop” by Fred Picker

“Perfect Exposure” by Roger Hicks and Frances Schultz

“A Simple Way To Test For Film Speed and Developing Time” by Steve Simmons
www.viewcamera.com

There may be even more information on simple film testing, but the references above should be all you need. Once you know where to start, all that is left is to get out and make photographs. Do not use testing as an excuse not to photograph.

Last... A Little Shameless Self Promotion...

If you like with what I have to say, then great! May I invite you to visit our web site;

www.jbhphoto.com

Look around and see what you can find. Take a look at our photographs. If you don't like them, that is all right. Just remember I make my art for me. If you do like something, be a sport and drop me a line... if you really like something, be a real sport and buy it!

I wish you only the very best and hope you find your creative voice through photography.

For comments, questions, or inquires contact:

J.B. Harlin
P.O. Box 26994
Benbrook, TX 76126
jbharlin@jbhphoto.com
www.jbhphoto.com

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