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STORY OF AN IMAGE
Lighting the Way

▼ Brian Matiash

The "Story of an Image" is a new series that will walk you through the entire life cycle of a photo. With each installment, we'll cover everything from how the image was taken (with some cool behind-the-scenes shots), why particular gear was used, and then finish things up with how the image was edited and stylized.

Earlier this year, Matt Kloskowski and I visited the beautiful coastal town of Bandon, Oregon, for a few days. We had planned this trip for some time and had all of our must-see landmarks to visit. We knew that our prime shooting times were early in the morning and late in the afternoon (and through the night for star photography). On our second-to-last day there, a pretty big storm started making its way toward us, bringing along with it some fast-moving clouds and ominous lighting conditions. It was the perfect time to book it to the Coquille River Light.

CAPTURING THE LIGHTHOUSE

When we arrived at the lighthouse, I noticed a few different options for photo compositions. At the time, I was experimenting with keeping my camera as low to the ground as possible, and my Joby GorillaPod Focus let me get my camera a lot lower and with more control than my normal tripod (Really Right Stuff TVC-34L with a BH-55 ballhead). At first, I tried placing my camera really close to some tall reeds, but I wasn't really pleased with the way the reeds took up so much of the frame.

I then tried positioning the camera on a fallen tree, closer to the main pathway, but wasn't feeling the weird imbalance between the lighthouse and the water (top right).

I finally found the perfect position that let the lighthouse take center stage while also retaining a bit of the water and a good portion of the sky.

Other than the GorillaPod, the hardware that I used to capture the photo was a Canon 5D Mark III and Canon

EF 24–105mm lens (at 24mm). To help drag the shutter and really capture the motion of the clouds and water, I affixed a Lee Big Stopper 10-stop neutral density filter, giving me a shutter time of 65 seconds at f/20 and ISO 100—plenty of time to capture all of that great detail. You may also be wondering what that little widget is that's sitting in the hot shoe in the photo on the left. That's a Canon GPS Receiver that automatically applies pinpoint GPS data to every single image that I take. It's a wonderful device and is highly recommended for any photographer (with the supported hardware) who cares a lot about geotagging.

EDITING THE LIGHTHOUSE

Now it's time to edit! Before I do any sort of stylization, I like to get my basic edits locked in.

STEP ONE: Start by getting your white and black points set. Hold down the Option (PC: Alt) key while dragging the Whites and Blacks sliders. Doing so lets you see a mask that displays any blown-out or clipped areas.
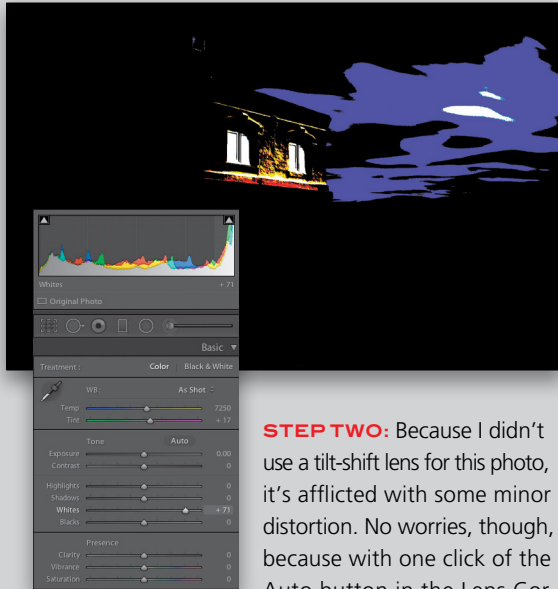

STEP TWO: Because I didn't use a tilt-shift lens for this photo, it's afflicted with some minor distortion. No worries, though, because with one click of the Auto button in the Lens Corrections panel, I have a perfectly aligned photo against the verticals and horizon.

STEP THREE: After that, I apply some basic BCS (brightness, contrast, and saturation) adjustments. I tend to let my image fall a bit brighter and flatter right before the stylization phase. The upcoming edits tend to boost contrast and shadows a lot, and by starting with a flatter image, I give myself some wiggle room. It also helps prevent making the image too punchy or gritty (not that there's anything wrong with that).


STEP FOUR: For this image, I'm going to use a rather new product, Analog Efex Pro, which is the latest addition to the Nik Collection by Google. I really like the way this app simulates specific film looks and alternative processing methods from prior days in photography. To begin, all I need to do is Right-click on the image, go to Edit In,
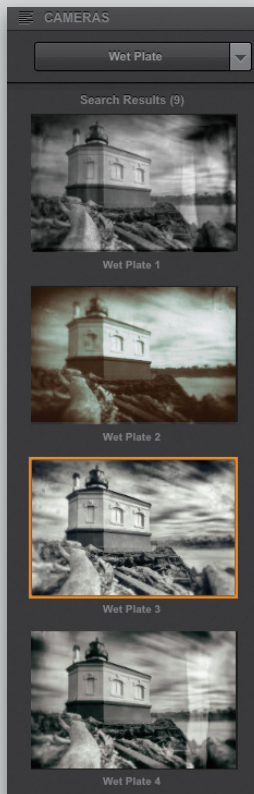
and select Analog Efex Pro. There are quite a few Lightroom plug-ins available for creating film effects, so if you already own one, just select it from the Edit In menu.

STEP FIVE: With these types of stylization products, I usually browse through the presets, looking for a creative launch pad to start from. It's from this start point that I fine-tune the image using the rest of the tools at my disposal. I know that I want to keep this photo very bleak and contrasty but not quite black and white, so I start by applying the Wet Plate 3 preset. Because I don't really care for scratches and textures in this particular case, I turn off the Dirt & Scratches and Photo Plate filters on the right.

STEP SIX: A lot of times, users don't think about using the Saturation slider in products such as Analog Efex Pro or Silver Efex Pro, but by returning just a bit of color into your image, you can really add a different dimension of moodiness, and that's exactly what I did here under the Basic Adjustments filter. You can see how adding just a bit of the original color (globally, not selectively) really adds a nice sense of drama.
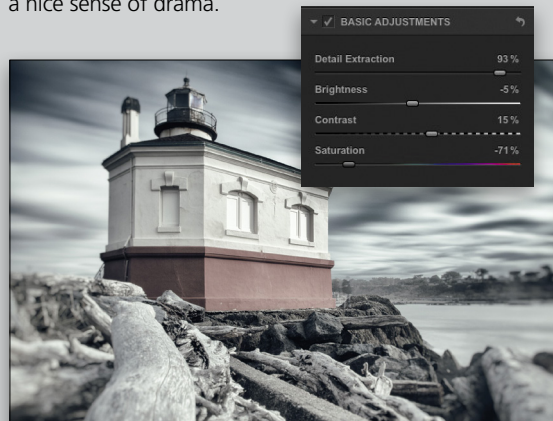

STEP SEVEN: Let's turn our attention to adjusting the toning of the image. The adjustments that I want to make can be found under the Film Type filter. Much like browsing through presets, experiment by clicking on these color swatches. If you find one that works for your image, be sure to refine it further by adjusting the Strength and Neutral/Faded sliders below the color swatches. I found the perfect

toning treatment under the Subtle section, which gives this image a more neutral look and adds a nice punch of contrast.

STEP EIGHT: Finally, to really draw the viewer's eye to the lighthouse, I adjust the positioning and strength of the Bokeh filter so that the structure is sharpest and the rest of the image gradually falls into softness. With that, I click Save to return to Lightroom for some final touches.

STEP NINE: I want the lighthouse to really stand out against its drab, cool surroundings. To do that, I start by creating a new Adjustment Brush (K) that boosts the color temperature toward the warmer scale, as well as increases Exposure, Contrast, and Clarity. Before I start painting on the lighthouse, I turn on Auto Mask because this will help prevent any spillover due to my awful drawing skills, and as you can see, I'll definitely need the Erase brush to clean up my mess.
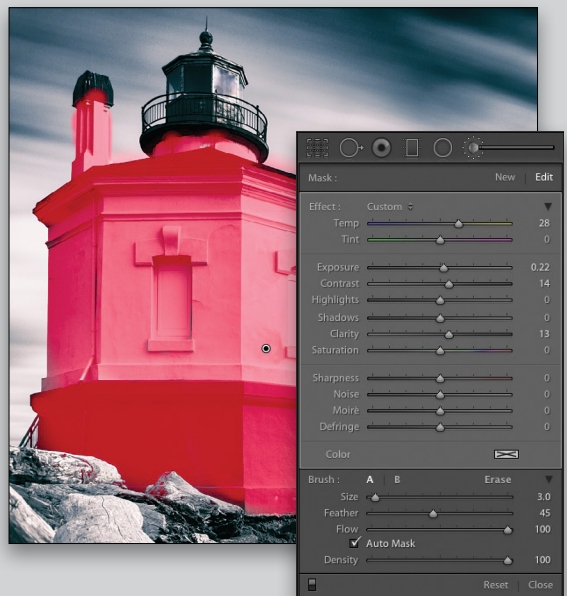
STEP TEN: After that, I refine the look of the image again, adjusting every slider in the Basic panel to lock in the final look for the image. Before finishing things up, though, I zoom in close on the lighthouse and apply some sharpening (I always zoom in to a 1:1 view when sharpening). I'm a big fan of the sharpening tools in Lightroom and use them all the time. To start, press-and-hold the Option (PC: Alt) key while dragging the Amount slider in the Detail panel. This converts the image to grayscale and makes it *much* easier to see the sharpening in effect. To ensure that the sharpening only applies to hard edges and not to smooth areas like the sky, water, and clouds, use the Masking slider. Just like with the Amount slider, hold the Option (PC: Alt) key while dragging. This displays the actual mask showing where the sharpening is being applied. Anything that's white has sharpening applied; anything that's black has the sharpening masked out.

STEP ELEVEN: Okay, we're nearly at the finish line! The last thing I want to do to really drive the viewer's eye to the lighthouse is apply a Radial Filter (Shift-M). Positioning it over the structure, I drag the Exposure slider to the left to darken the areas around the lighthouse. This lets the lighthouse really stand out as the dominant element within the frame, thus completing this story of my image. ■