

Magic Bullets and Pixie Dust

I've done it. I'll bet everyone has done it at one time or another. You stand there looking at a truly awesome photograph and convince yourself that there must be some cosmic connection, some Divine intervention that elevates the photographer's abilities far above those of mere mortals. Surely the photographer must possess some secret, an undisclosed bit of knowledge to be kept from those not privy to the inner circle of imagingdom. That must be it!

Or, if not some intervention from the pixel gods, then it must be the camera itself or the lenses they use. Undoubtedly, if you were to obtain the very camera and lenses that that photographer used, then certainly the quality of your images would be every bit as good, and you would be immediately catapulted to the level of master photographer

Right!

Photographers do not generally possess knowledge that is not available to everyone especially with the availability of the internet. There are pages upon pages of information on countless websites all aimed at making you a better photographer. One merely has to search the word photography to be inundated with more links than can be followed in a day. Take a look at the photography section in your favorite bookstore. You'll find title after title on every genre of photography with subjects ranging from general to the more specific. Forget for a moment about books on Lightroom or Photoshop or Paintshop Pro. You will find

more reading material about photography than one could digest in a decade.

Photographers do not own or use equipment that is not generally available to anyone with enough room on a credit card. Try this out for yourself. Visit the websites of your 10 favorite photographers. Most will have a section or page entitled "my camera bag" or, if not, they will in some way indicate what camera and lenses are their favorites. Make a list then visit any of the mail order websites (B&H, Adorama, Hunt's, etc.) and see how hard it would be to obtain the same equipment. You may be surprised at how expensive some of this equipment is but that's not the point. It is obtainable.

Knowledge is not enough. Try reading everything you can about playing the piano and see if it makes you a better pianist (or if it makes you a pianist at all.) Think of any professional football player (or tennis player or golfer.) Think they got where they are by reading the sports section in the Sunday paper?

Equipment is not enough. I could sit for hours waiting on my "great camera" to take an image but it's not going to happen. You may hire a carpenter to do some work on your house but you will never ask him what brand of circular saw he uses. He is likely (hopefully) hired on the quality of his work not the brand of his tools.

If not knowledge and not equipment what then?

A street performer, long haired and shaggy, sat playing his saxophone on the streets of Manhattan when a tourist

happened by. The tourist, lost, asked the street performer "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The sage old street performer looked up at the tourist over his dirty glasses and said, "Practice man, practice!!"

And so it is with our photography, like anything else, to get better or excel at it one has to practice it. And not just practice shooting images, but practice with your equipment as well. Turn the television off an hour early one night and spend the time reading your camera's owner's manual (you can find your owner's manual can't you?)

Spend some time learning to hold your camera properly (did you know there is a right and a wrong way?) and learning the switch positions and dial settings to get the camera to do what you want. Which direction do you turn the dial to open up the aperture? To increase the ISO? How do you change focusing points? Did you know you could change focusing points? Changing camera settings like these and others should become second nature to you and you should be able to make these changes without looking at the camera much like the saxophone player plays without watching his instrument.

Practice shooting at every opportunity. Analyze your subject but don't forget to analyze the light that that subject is in. Pick any ten great photographs and I'll bet you what makes them great is the light they are shot in. Even the best subjects shot in the wrong light will yield a mediocre image, and yet often, a simple subject shot in fantastic light will make a great photograph. If you are able, move around your subject until you see it in the best light. Do you practice your photography during the "Golden Hour,"

that is, the first hour or so after sunrise or the hour or so before sunset. If the light is not right for the subject there is seldom a way to make an acceptable image. Often the difference between an amateur and a professional is that the pro knows when *not* to shoot.

When you have found your subject in great light, practice with different exposure settings to best capture that light. You must learn to recognize how your camera handles different lighting situations and how to adjust for each of them to get the proper exposure. All cameras handle front lighting, back lighting and side lighting differently and you must learn to adjust for this. Your eyes have the amazing ability to capture an enormous dynamic range, or range from light to dark. Your camera however is not capable of capturing nearly the same range and so you must practice until you are comfortable with how it sees light.

Are you using a tripod? More importantly, are you using the correct tripod? Most folks buy a tripod based on what it weighs or costs without any thought as to what they're going to put on it. Is your tripod heavy duty enough to hold your camera and lenses and the lenses you anticipate getting? Practice setting up and breaking down your tripod until you can do it quickly and smoothly. Also don't fall into the trap of setting your tripod up at its full height and then shooting everything from there. Those legs were made to be extended and retracted for a reason. Instead of setting your tripod up and looking for subjects at that height why not look for a great subject and set your tripod up to match it. And while you're searching for a great subject why not try to find one on a great

background as well? Would a different vantage point of the same subject yield a better background? I find that a number of photographers don't pay nearly enough attention to the background.

Once you find that great subject on a great background and are ready to shoot take a moment to look carefully through the viewfinder at all four sides to make sure you have nothing unexpected encroaching into the image. Often a stray branch or other item from the foreground will be unintentionally included in the image possibly ruining an otherwise great shot. Keep in mind that most cameras don't necessarily show the full area that will be included in the image. Practice with yours until you are comfortable with what's actually captured compared with what you see in the viewfinder. Occasionally just a short step right or left will make all the difference.

When you are out shooting, slow down take your time. Enjoy the experience. Look for subjects that convey the feelings and emotions you get from being

in a great location. Take stock of what you're shooting. Look at the light, its color, intensity and direction. Pay attention to composition. Are you including all that you need to? Are you excluding those objects that don't belong? Are you seeing through the view finder what your mind's eye wants to capture?

You see most, if not all, great photographs are essentially a combination of many things. Knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of photography and the right equipment for the photograph play a small part. But most great photographs were taken by someone who, like the street performer who knows only one way to get to Carnegie Hall, practiced and honed his skills to a razor sharp edge, searched out a great subject in fantastic light, tracked down the best vantage point to put that subject on a great background, and captured an image that expressed his feelings and emotions about the subject.

No magic bullets. No pixie dust.