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The New World of Wireless Flash

Studio lighting on automatic. No wires. (Well, maybe one.)

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When Joe McNally wanted to do this firehouse shot using three flash heads, he didn't have to worry about extension cords or bulky location battery packs.

He took his lighting kit out of his gadget bag, thanks to wireless TTL flash: three Nikon SB-800 flashes, a couple of lightweight stands, and two folding diffusers.

One of today's outstanding photography tools still scares many photographers—for no good reason. It's great for everything from portraits to party pictures, for lighting up a dark room or filling shadows in bright daylight.

In many ways, wireless is easier than wired studio flash: you're not working with cumbersome power packs or hefty monolight heads. You can vary lighting ratios from a single master unit, and have the flash system figure exposures automatically.

You may already have one piece of a starter kit. You'll need one master dedicated flash unit that's the "big flash": the Canon Speedlite 580EX, the Nikon SB-800 Speedlight, etc. And you'll need at least one other unit that works with the master. You can get another big unit but a smaller satellite unit like the Canon 420EX or Nikon SB-600 costs less. You should have three flash units, but you can do plenty with two.

Some wireless pointers:

Know your units: While working with wireless flash is easy, the control sequences of these flashes can be daunting. (And in general, manufacturers make these things nonintuitive, even cryptic.) You'll need to spend some time curled up with your flash instruction manual going through the settings.

Think in EV: If your flash unit can be set in EV units, it's less confusing than using flash ratios—number pairs like 1:2 or 1:4. One EV equals a stop of light. Dead-on exposure is 0.0 EV flash compensation. Mild fill is about -1.7 EV. Some units, though, use only ratio.

Think manual: For the camera, that is. While it's OK to use P (for program) or A (for aperture-priority) mode, manual exposure on the camera combined with TTL auto for the flash gives you lots of control, and isn't really any more difficult. You can vary apertures for depth-of-field control (see the caution, next page) and/or use the shutter speed to increase or decrease the



ambient light in the picture. Remember, varying the shutter speed has no effect on the flash exposure.

Be properly dedicated: Plenty of flash units of various brands provide TTL automation connected to the camera. For wireless TTL, you need a unit with the specific circuitry to send and receive exposure signals. See chart below.

Pay attention to power: Even big TTL flashes are still no match for big studio units. And bouncing the light eats up even more output. Pay attention to flash-OK signals, and check your preview images or histograms in digital capture so you're not underexposing. Be especially careful when using small apertures, and open up the lens if need be.

Don't flash into the lens: Some cool setups call for putting flash units behind your subjects, or lighting from the side. Make sure the flash illumination doesn't spill into the lens, or it will flummox the exposures.

Play, play, play! Sure, you'll make a few mistakes, but remember there are a lot more right answers than wrong ones. Vary the output of different units and see what happens. Reposition them to bounce off a different wall. Use the zoom head to widen or narrow the beam angle. Have fun—that's an order!