THE HIDDEN POWER OF
ADOBE PHOTOSHOP

MASTERING BLEND MODES
AND ADJUSTMENT LAYERS FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

SCOTT VALENTINE

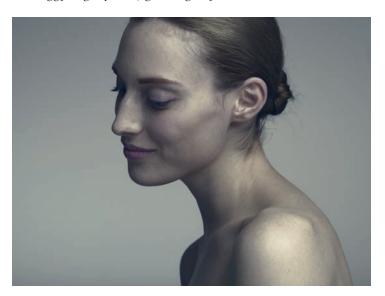FOREWORD BY MEREDITH PAYNE STOTZNER, PHOTOSHOP SR. PRODUCT MANAGER, ADOBE

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that complement them in some way—either enhancing or mitigating their results. The Curves and Screen result is a good example of reducing the effect, or "pulling it back." Similarly, using Soft Light with a Color Lookup Table (using the Foggy Night preset) gives a gritty look.
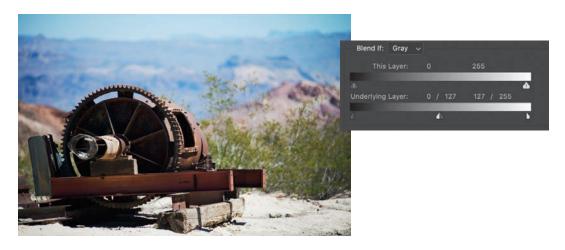

In one final example, this single frame is reasonably well exposed but kind of boring. To enhance the contrast, I added a Curves adjustment layer set to Overlay blending mode, which had nice results in the midtones, but muddied the shadows and blew out the highlights.

To correct for this, I went to the Advanced Blending section in the Layer Style dialog box set Blend If to Gray, and split the Underlying Layer sliders.

Splitting the sliders in this way allows the enhanced contrast to reach to the shadows and highlights more gradually, avoiding serious loss of detail.

HARD MIX CONTRAST

A more specialized application of using an adjustment layer to apply a blending mode takes advantage of the special nature of Hard Mix; it behaves differently when used with Fill compared to Opacity. See the "Blending Modes" chapter in Part IV, "References" for more details on why this is.

For images with low contrast, especially due to haze or extremely soft light, this trick can do some pretty amazing things. The shot below is from Coronado, California, showing some early morning fog. There's not much detail or contrast to work with.
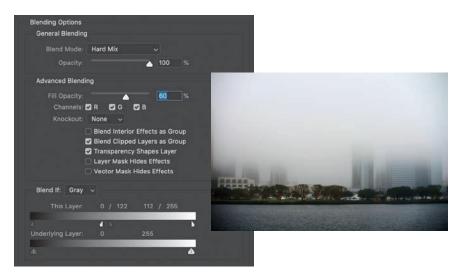
Just adding a Curves adjustment set to Hard Mix, and lowering the Fill to about 60% gives a pretty dramatic change everywhere so there's at least some detail to work with.
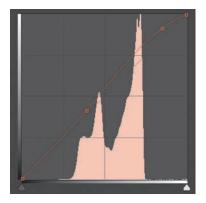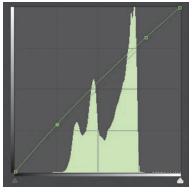

If you've used the Clarity slider in Camera Raw or Lightroom, this effect will look familiar to you. By now, you should recognize a good opportunity to use Blend If to clean up the muddied shadows. Splitting the sliders and in this case, crossing the highlight and shadow regions recovers those muted blacks well.
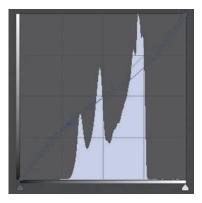
At this point, we can start to apply some of the usual techniques to adjust color and contrast in any way we like. Because we already have a Curves adjustment for free, let's exploit that by tweaking the individual channel curves a bit. I want a warmer, dreamy effect in this version. That requires a tiny boost in red and green, with blues dropping out. From the menu in the Curves Properties

panel, choose each of the channels in turn and apply minor changes. The thing to keep in mind, if you're not familiar working on each color channel individually, is that you're looking mostly for tonality in the first color you adjust, then sneak up on the colors you want with the remaining channels (more on this in a bit). The figures show what I ended up using.

The adjustments to each channel are pretty small, except the Blue channel where I wanted to retain some coolness in the deep shadow areas. I really enjoy this technique because it can recover some otherwise unusable images. And in this case, it only took one layer to do pretty much everything I wanted.
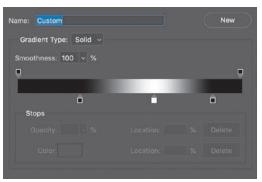
A more complicated picture is this lonely cactus in the northern New Mexico snow. It already has some bright areas and lots of tiny details with the snow-flakes blowing about.

The photo was intentionally underexposed to preserve some texture in the snow patches, which means additional steps will be needed to avoid blowing out highlights. Also, the darks are perilously close to full black. That suggests we should attack the mids and low mids more than anything, and so this is a great spot to try out a few tricks. In the "Selections & Masking" chapter, I showed you a quick way to select ranges of values in an image using a Gradient Map.

With the Gradient Map visible, it's fairly easy to pick out the range we want to affect. In this case, it's the slightly brighter midtones. Close the Gradient Editor and in the Channels panel, make a selection from any of the channels, then turn off the Gradient Map adjustment layer. Create a Curves adjustment layer; the mask is automatically applied. Here's the result of setting the unchanged curves layer to Hard Mix at 40% Fill.

The brightest highlights in the snow and darkest shadows around the rocks are untouched, but the high mids are moderated. Let's talk a moment about why this is an advanced move. While I did not have a final vision in mind, I could describe some of the features I wanted in the results: Protect the ends of the dynamic range, and increase contrast and detail in the upper mids. Setting just those goals allowed me to use previously known skills to make an intelligent choice in creating the mask, namely by isolating the region of interest.

Further, we know that the Masks Properties panel comes with some extra goodies, such as Density and Feather adjustments, as well as the ability to access the Select And Mask workspace for refinement. Rather than hand painting the mask or trying to carefully combine multiple selections, the first pass got me close to an 80% solution, or more. The Feather and Density controls also allow me to exercise non-destructive creative decisions about the mask. I can even use Blend If should I wish.