

Black And White: Digital And Silver Combined

An Interview With Eric Luden

Grateful Dead with Dylan



Eric Luden is a former executive at Ilford Photo, a noted commercial and fine art photographer, and the founder of Digital Silver Imaging, a New England lab that works exclusively in black and white. During the 1990s, he served as a consultant with Eastman Kodak's black-and-white division before joining Ilford, where he worked for over 12 years. In 2006, he became the VP of North American Marketing

for Ilford's parent company, Harman technology. Luden has extensive knowledge regarding silver gelatin papers, digital laser technology, and black-and-white printing.

I interviewed Luden recently about the current state of black-and-white printing and the tools that are available to photographers to obtain quality prints.

Shutterbug: With the advent of digital imaging, have

Heaven & Earth



© Andy Ryan, All Rights Reserved

Belt Fish 1

photographers forgotten about black and white?

Eric Luden: Black-and-white photography is bigger than ever. Just look at any photographer's online gallery and you will usually find several black-and-white images. Also, with the advent of digital photography amateurs can now create black-and-white images easily, whereas in the past black and white was only for pros and serious amateurs. In addition, with new options like converting digital cameras to black-and-white infrared, photographers are exploring new ways to be creative and digital opens up new doors.

SB: Has digital imaging made black and white obsolete?

EL: After the initial explosion of color-based digital output, we have seen both a return to, and reverence of, true black-and-white output. Black and white is the root foundation of photography and remains a classic. You see magazine covers, entire editorials, and gallery shows dedicated to black-and-white images. Digital photography brought more amateurs into the black-and-white realm of professional shooters and printers.

SB: Is the gallery scene still doing well with



© Francine Zaslow Photography, All Rights Reserved

Birds Nest



© Andy Ryan, All Rights Reserved

black-and-white images?

EL: Traditional, silver black-and-white photographic prints continue to be valuable. I just checked one of the big auction houses and silver prints from photographers like Ansel Adams, Robert Frank, and Irving Penn are all selling in the five- to six-figure range. Many of the black-and-white prints from the Polaroid collection that sold in July far exceeded Sotheby's expectations. I think that with the advent of so many dye and ink technologies on the market it has just made true silver gelatin prints more valuable.

SB: Do you see a market for black and white?

EL: There is a strong market for true silver gelatin prints. The saturation of dye and ink output solutions has increased the value of true silver gelatin prints.

SB: Are archival prints possible from digital files?

EL: Archival is often misused as a definition. If you mean an image's ability to be around for 100 years, the answer is yes. According to Henry Wilhelm, the fiber-based black-and-white print, when reasonably well processed and washed—and especially if it's selenium toned—can be considered the high-water mark of photography in terms of permanence. At Digital Silver Imaging we use traditional

photo paper and chemistry. Our fiber baryta paper is proven to withstand the test of time. Giclee, LightJet, inkjet, and other prints have only been around for a very short time and their longevity is not known.

SB: Can you make a true black-and-white print with no tone to it?

EL: Most definitely. Our paper is true silver gelatin black and white. The paper is exposed to light with a tricolor photographic laser and then processed in traditional Ilford black-and-white photo chemicals. Unlike many other processes there is no color involved, so our prints are completely neutral. By using traditional chemical toning methods, like sepia or selenium, we can produce traditional black-and-white tones with added archival benefits.

SB: Is there a preferred method of converting color images to black and white in Photoshop?

EL: Any method that preserves the RGB layers is best because you retain the most amount of information in the file. There are myriad methods to achieve this, but one has to avoid overdoing it in Photoshop. The biggest mistake to be made is adjusting one of the color sliders too much and essentially discarding valuable information for the printer to render a specific tone or

Country and Sann Running the Swings at the Puerto Rican Festival: Rochester, NY



© Jim Stone, All Rights Reserved

detail. We advise our clients to maintain the native resolution of their file when uploading to Digital Silver Imaging to avoid an unnecessary artifacting.

SB: Do you have software recommendations other than Photoshop?

EL: Lightroom and Aperture work equally as well. We especially like Nik Silver Efex Pro as a plug-in to Photoshop, Lightroom, and Aperture. Silver Efex Pro is just like working in a darkroom, it's very intuitive and the control it gives you is amazing. Working with Nik allows us and the photographer to ensure proper files for optimal printing.

SB: Can you tell me about current papers for printing in black and white?

EL: Ilford currently produces two silver gelatin papers. Ilford Galerie FB Digital is identical to the Ilfobrom Galerie double-weight fiber paper they have made for years. It has a neutral image tone and a semigloss finish when air-dried. Ilfospeed Pearl RC Digital is also identical to their traditional resin-coated darkroom papers, like Multigrade RC. Both of these products are only sold in rolls intended for commercial lab use.

SB: Is it possible to get a true black-and-white image using a color process like RA-4?

EL: I would argue that this is not possible at all. By the very nature of the "color" RA-4 process, you are trying to replicate a pure black-and-white process utilizing unstable color dyes. The most common complaint is the magenta or cyan color cast seen on black-and-white prints from color labs.

SB: Describe what you believe is the path to optimum print quality.

EL: For today's digital shooter, we recommend shooting in Raw to capture the greatest detail and information. The file should be adjusted in Adobe Camera Raw for exposure and any other compensation prior to being imported into Photoshop or other image-editing software. We open the file as a Smart Object in Photoshop to allow us to go back and edit any of the Nik filters we utilize. We have found that the Nik Silver Efex Pro software does a phenomenal job of converting a color RGB file to black-and-white RGB with *all* channels remaining neutral. We work with the files in Silver Efex Pro by using the film grain engine and control points to recreate a very realistic black-and-white file. By printing on silver paper and fixing in traditional chemistry, we produce a darkroom-quality print from a digital file. It is exciting to be on this forefront of technology enhancing traditional photography.

For more information, visit: www.digitalsilverimaging.com. 