

The Best of Imaging U.S.A 2007

(A First Hand Report From the Trade Show)

Boys and Their Toys – A Trade Show Junkie’s Report

So here’s the deal. I’m a trade show junkie. I got hooked when I was a kid; in my early years, my Dad took me to the “car show” where we actually paid for the right to look at cars and talk with car salesmen; we didn’t buy anything; we just slammed doors and communed with metal. Since then, I’ve been addicted. My favorite part of any state fair? The huckster tent. Don’t believe me? I’ve got two *Flip and Folds* in my closet, a *VitaMixer* on my kitchen counter, and a cousin of the *Little Giant Ladder* in my studio.

So, while most of my time was spent in the classrooms, I’ve got to get this trade show stuff out of my system before I burst. A review of the best classroom performances will be out in a week or so.

This was not a show where a lot of cool, new stuff was shown for the first time. But, there were a few definite “stars” – products and companies that took the “wow” factor over the top. Here’s a quick report on the things that caught and held my attention.

The “Star of the Show”: The Sekonic L758DR Light Meter¹

The “Star of the Show” a light meter? A light meter? Yes, a light meter.

A light meter is a light meter is a light meter – except when it isn’t. Light is a constant. It hasn’t changed Light is light. So why all this fuss over a light meter?

Because, this is a light meter designed for the digital photographer – a light meter that gives you the power to mate your camera and meter so that they see the same light and speak the same language.

¹ <http://www.sekonic.com/products/products.asp?ID=130>

As we've moved to digital photography, we've been harangued about the importance of getting our exposures "right" in the camera. We've been told that digital is less forgiving than film because we won't have a lab and custom film processing to save our bad exposures. And, we've been told that since digital does not have the same "dynamic range" as film, we are constantly at risk of losing data at both ends of the spectrum. While some of us might disagree with this "attack on digital" and argue that, in many ways, RAW gives us some of the same fall back room that the lab gives the film shooter – all of us can agree that getting the right exposure in the camera is essential to getting consistent, high quality images.

The L758 takes us a big step toward "getting it right in the camera".

Simply stated, the L758 let's us calibrate our meter to see light the same way that our camera records it. A few steps and "Voila" what you meter sees is what your camera gets. Read 5.6 on the meter -- set 5.6 on the camera, and you get proper exposure. Not close exposure but "spot on" exposure.

Why? Because, through a profiling procedure, you've taught the meter how the camera responds to light. Your meter is married to your camera – at one with the light.²

Why is this necessary? Because no matter how careful the quality control, meters and cameras – especially across brand lines – are idiosyncratic. They see and record light differently. Although the differences are probably minute, I'm sure that my D2x does not see light in exactly the same way my friend Ed's D2x sees it. And, my meters don't see it the same way as their production line brothers and sisters. Usually those differences won't matter. But, sometimes they do – and that's where the L758 steps in; it eliminates the minute differences.

Last year, at Texas School, one of my classmates was having trouble getting proper exposures. She was using a good meter, a new camera and proper metering techniques. But, she was constantly underexposed. The quick solution was to calibrate her meter so that it would read the light and recommend a lower f-stop. All meters allow this calibration – but doing it was a "hit or miss" proposition; we dialed in numbers until we thought it looked right on a gray card histogram. The results, though they worked, were not carefully reached or replicable. It was a "one time" solution to a problem that she might face over and over again. (Yes, she could also have solved the problem on the camera end by using "exposure compensation" or bracketing – but why bother?)

So what does the L758 do differently? It allows one to calibrate the meter – they call it exposure profiling – so that it will work with a specific camera, without further adjustment, no matter the light source or situation.

The "mating" procedure sounds like test-tube-sex; full of geeky instructions, it doesn't look like fun. I've read the instructions but, because HCE³ was sold out of the L758 when I went to get one, I've not actually performed the act. But, it doesn't look that difficult. There are 4 steps. You shoot a target. You put the images of the target into an image-processing program like Photoshop or Bibble; in the program you look at your test shots to find the settings that best reproduce the test target. You enter those settings into Sekonic's software. Finally, you hook the meter up to your computer, by USB cable, and download the settings from the computer to the meter.

How hard is this to do? I won't really know until I do it myself. It looks like it will take an hour or so to do, carefully.⁴

² "Married" in the bigamist sense. The meter will allow you to store the profiles for three cameras.

³ HCE =s Houston Camera Exchange – a Hands On Seminars Sponsor -- <http://www.hcehouston.com/>

⁴ If it does turn out to be a bit harder than it appears to be, I'll probably write a "Calibration for Dummies" newsletter – similar to the one I did on Nikon's CLS system.

Do you want to do this? I do and will. But, I know some of you won't.

For those who don't want to shoot targets and go through the exercise, Sekonic is providing camera model specific profiles. You simply use their numbers and download them to the camera. While this won't be as "spot on" as a complete custom profile, it will be a lot closer to perfect than a meter/camera combination that has never been calibrated.

Whether you do your own calibration or use Sekonic's, there are other reasons to buy an L758. It has a built in transmitter to trigger your Pocket Wizards. I has a built in spot meter. Without the calibration features, it reminds me of the L558 I currently own. For those who don't want to go through the calibration process, and don't care about the spot meter, the less expensive L358 is a perfect take-it-out-of-the-box and use it meter.

Whatever the initial effort, I look forward to owning and using an L758. I think the results will be well worth the time spent calibrating. The more confidence I have in my equipment, the less I have to think about the technical stuff like exposure compensation, the more I will feel free to focus on the creative side of my photography. That's why I look forward to getting and using the L758 and that's why I've named it the "Star of the Show".

This excerpt from the *Hands On Newsletter* is being distributed with the express permission of Stephen J. Herzberg who is solely responsible for its content.

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