





Kickin' It Up a Notch

Make Your Wedding Shots Sing with Backlighting

Hey gang, you know by now that, for me, it's always about the lighting. If we can get that light really working for us, we can create some imagery that blows the competition away. Wedding photography is more than just running and gunning, and hoping that out of the hundreds (or thousands) of images you take, you capture a couple hundred that look good.



I remember a photographer, years ago, who joked with me as I was telling an audience that I photographed on average about 600 or 700 images per event back in the film days. At that time, that was unheard of—600 or 700 film exposures on the wedding day. That amounted to about \$1,000 of film and processing. He thought I was crazy. He said, “So, Ziser, what you're telling me is this: If you can't shoot them good, shoot them fast.” You know, it got a chuckle from the audience, but folks, unfortunately this seems to be the mentality for a lot of wedding photographers these days.



In this chapter, we are going to discuss backlighting. Backlighting is one of the fastest, coolest ways to add dramatics to your wedding images. This is a “money shot.” Our clients love it.

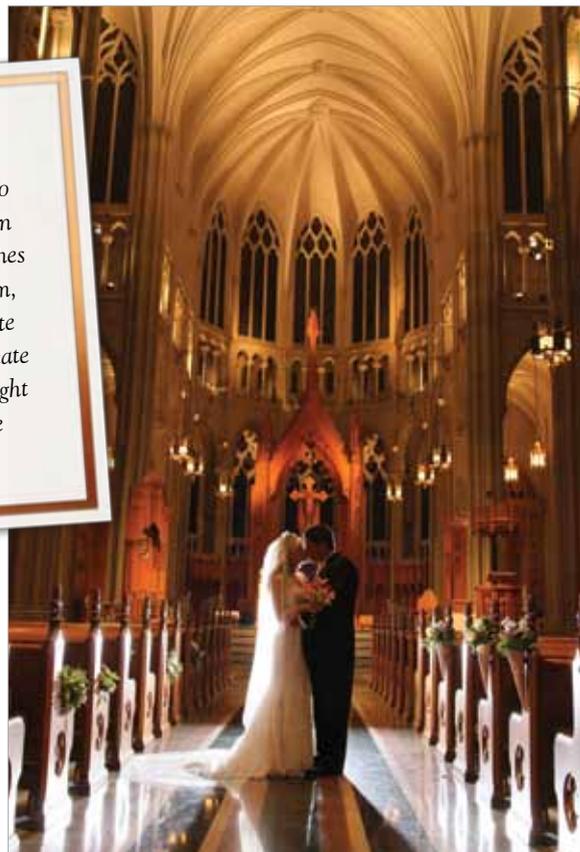


There are many ways we can add backlighting to our images, too. We can use backlighting to create a simple silhouette, or to create a soft accent light on the bride's veil. We can even use backlighting to illuminate the background for a completely different look in our wedding photography. Let's take a peek at each one of those techniques.

K.I.S.S. Backlighting: Keep It Simple Silhouette in Church

I've been taking wedding photographs for most of my career and backlit photographs have *always* been my best-selling images. Take a look at the first image here. See how the backlighting is just rimming out the subjects and separating them beautifully from the surrounds of the church? Let me walk you through the simple steps to create this beautiful image:

If my assistant is too far away, then when the light finally reaches the bride and groom, it just won't be quite bright enough to create the dramatic rim light effect that we're looking for.



Step One:

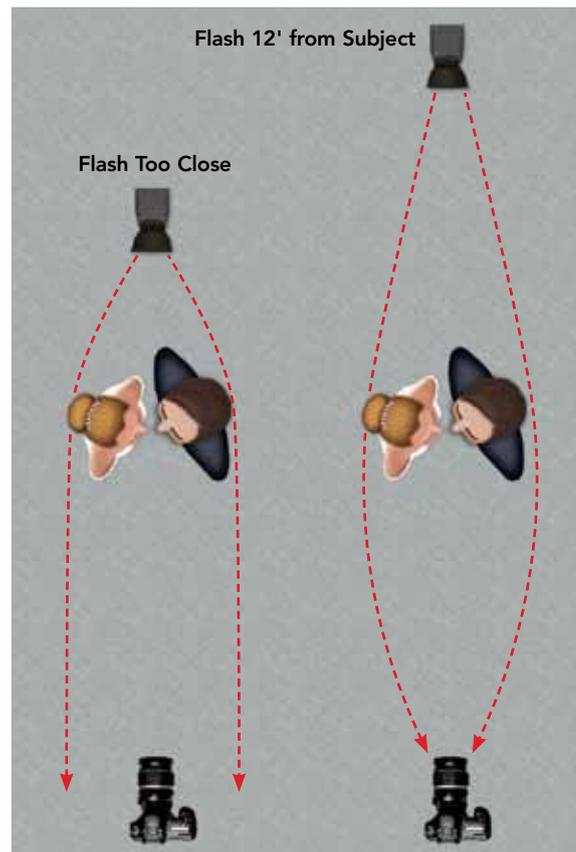
Position the bride and groom about two-thirds of the way up the aisle from the front of the church. I choose this position most of the time, because it really frames the bride and groom dramatically against the beautiful architectural elements of the altar area. But, by all means, check out other locations, too.

Step Two:

Look at the diagram (☞ *Figure 1*) and notice that when the light is too close to the subjects, it does not adequately wrap around them—they block most of the light from the lens.

Step Three:

The light needs to be far enough behind the subjects so that it will really wrap around them. The “magic” distance is from 12–15 feet (3 meters, for my international readers) behind the subjects, about 4 feet off the ground, with the flash head pointing at the subjects’



☞ *Figure 1*

shoulder blades. Check out ¶ *Figure 1* again. It shows how, at this distance, the light wraps around the couple enough to make it to the lens and become a beautiful rim light.

Step Four:

Next, I have my assistant get in position about 12 feet behind the subjects. My assistant needs to get small and compact, and tuck in the elbows and knees as much as possible. If he is closer than 12 feet, the shadows cast by the backlighting will be at a very severe angle and really detract from the composition.

Step Five:

With my assistant 12 feet behind the subject, I have him/her raise the flash head 4 feet off the floor and point it at the subjects' shoulder

blades. I use a Quantum Instruments Qflash T5d at half-power, or about 100 watt seconds, for this shot (see ¶ *Figure 2*).

Step Six:

So, now you ask, "Dave, if my flash is at half-power at 12 feet away and 4 feet off the ground, then what f-stop should I be shooting?" I would say, "Use my f-stop of convenience— $f/5.6$ at ISO 800—it works every time without fail." See ¶ *Figure 3a*.

Step Seven:

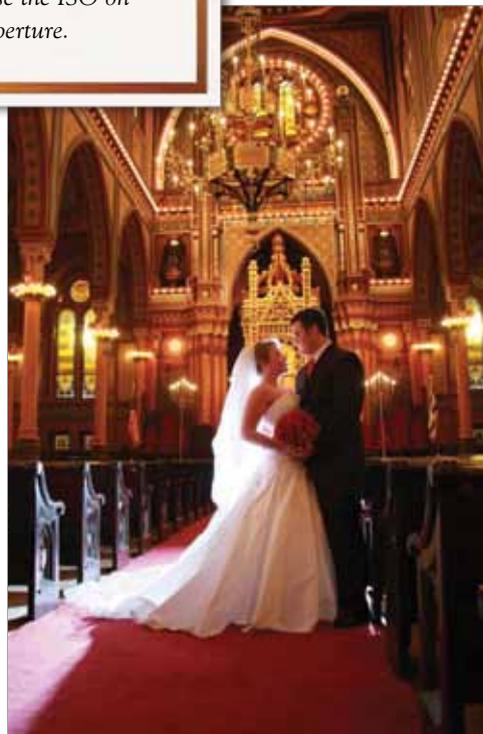
I can see that you have one more burning question on your mind. You want to know what shutter speed I used to make this photograph. Well, take a look at the second image (¶ *Figure 3b*). Doesn't the background of the church look substantially darker in this shot?

To create this effect, I dial my shutter speed up about two stops more than the correct exposure for the ambient light. Another way of saying this is that I am underexposing the ambient light by about two stops. It's this magic number—one to two stops—that seems to give me the most consistent result when creating these backlit church photographs. It's really up to you and the visual effect you want.

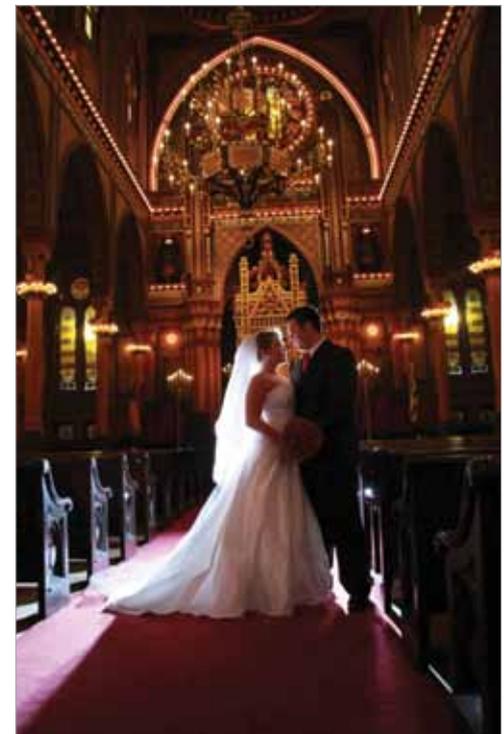
The bottom line is this: I use a medium amount of light firing behind the subjects. If you own a lesser-powered strobe, just increase the ISO on your camera or open the aperture.



¶ *Figure 2*



¶ *Figure 3a*

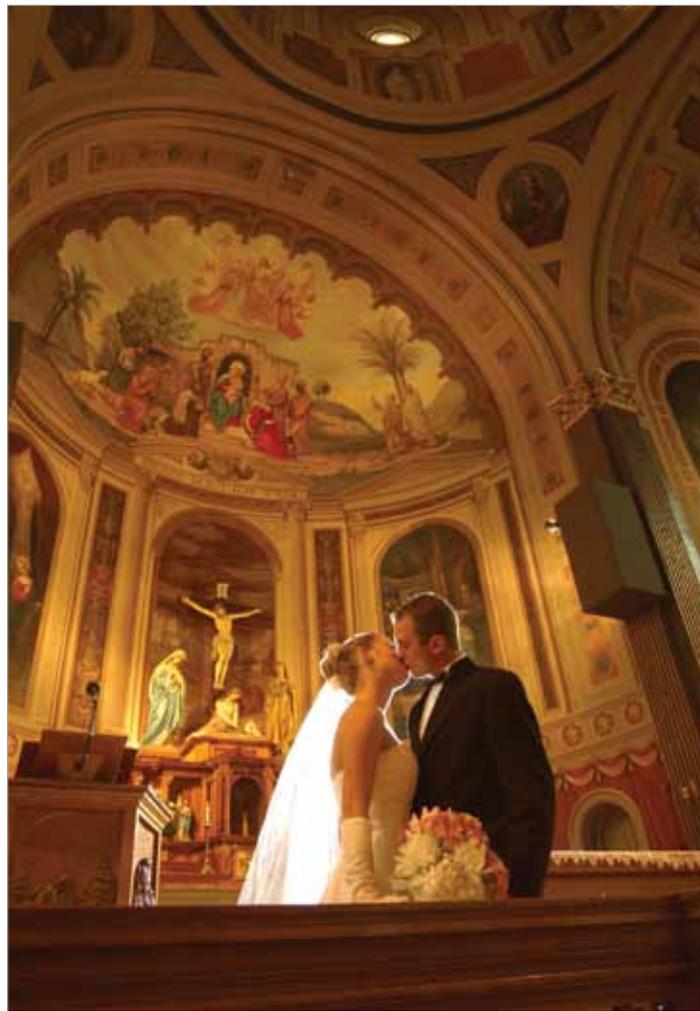


¶ *Figure 3b*

(Continued)



⌘ Figure 4a

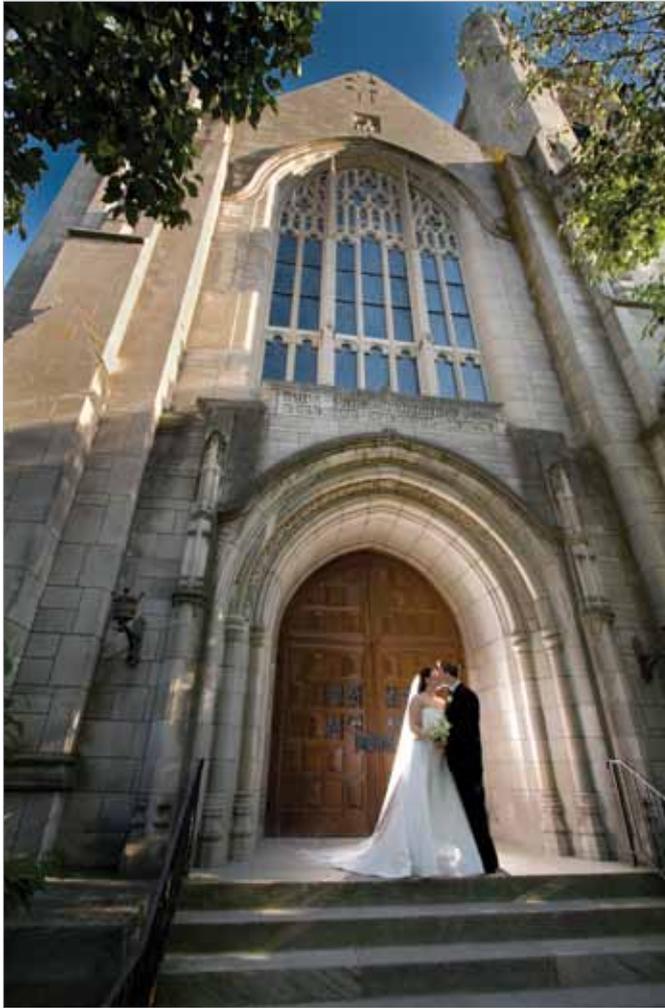


⌘ Figure 4b

Step Eight:

Be sure you take a couple variations of the backlit church shot. Have the couple look at each other, have them kiss, maybe have the groom carefully dip his bride—just be sure they're having fun. Also include several images at various focal lengths, just to get a different look and feel. Don't forget to take one or two outside on the way to the limo, if possible. It only takes a minute or two to set up the lighting, so really explore the possibilities (see ⌘ *Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c*).

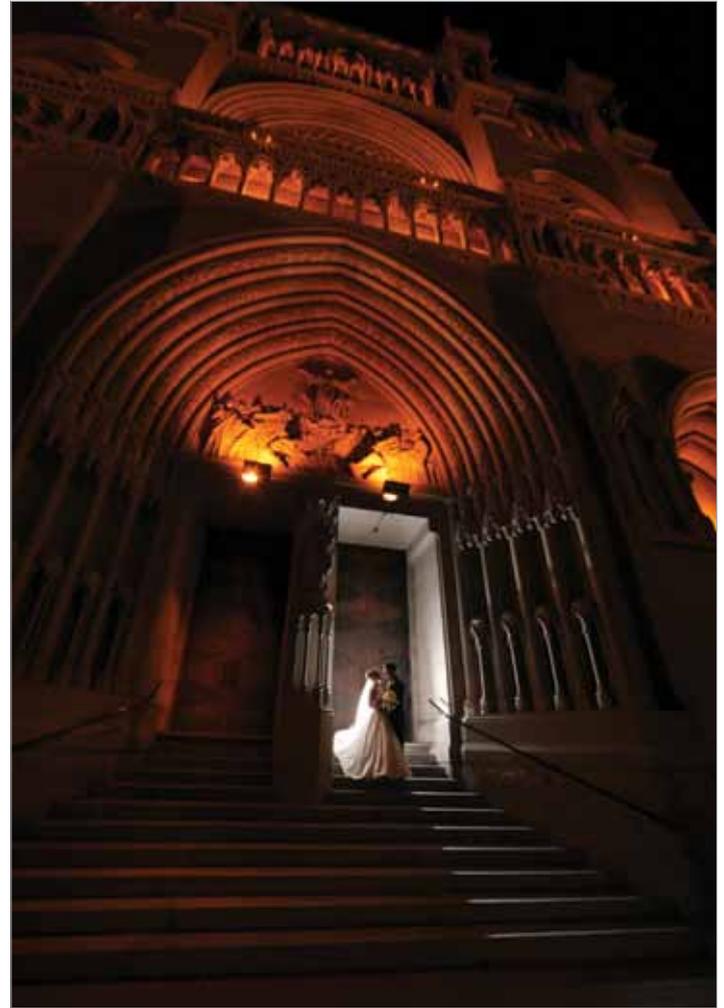




⌘ Figure 4c

Step Nine:

⌘ **Figure 5** is another nice result I got when I asked the bride and groom to pause for just an instant as they came out of the church. In this case, my assistant was much closer to the couple and, as a result, the light splashed off of them and added some illumination to the arch of the cathedral doors, highlighting the couple even more.



⌘ Figure 5

So, there you have it: all the magic in nine easy steps. Now you, too, can make the wedding image that will sell 100% of the time. Let's say that you photograph just 20 weddings a year for the next 10 years and take this photograph at each wedding. Now let's say you sell a wedding image for just \$20. You can do the math: $20 \times 10 \times 20 = \$4,000$ added to your bottom line! Worth the price of this book alone, wasn't it? ;-)

**K.I.S.S. Backlighting:
Keep It Simple
Silhouette
Everywhere Else**

But wait, dear readers, there's more! These same techniques that work so well in the church, also work in any number of locations. Let me show you:

Backlighting is great to incorporate at several points in the wedding day, including outdoors (⌘ *Figure 1a*), at a cool hotel (⌘ *Figure 1b*), and at the wedding reception.

Now take a look at ⌘ *Figure 2*. Notice that we have a great photograph of the bride and groom enjoying their dance. If we look closely, we can even see some guests as they watch the happy couple.

How do we pull it off? The band calls for the bride and groom to come onto the dance floor, the music starts, and they are off dancing the wedding dance. Sometimes, we see a couple that has taken dance lessons, and are demonstrating the foxtrot, waltz, or rumba. They are all over the dance floor. So, I know you're wondering how



⌘ *Figure 1a*



☞ Figure 1b

we're going to get a backlit dance photograph with the bride and groom making giant swaths of motion all over the dance floor. Here are the steps:

Step One:

As we learned from our backlit church photographs, we have to have our assistant about 12 feet behind the couple, with the flash about 4 feet off the ground. So, everything remains the same at the reception.

Step Two:

If you took my advice earlier and have a room light in position for the reception, then remember that you've got to turn it off when doing these backlit dance photographs. I accomplish this easily, because I use Quantum's FreeXwire remote control system. The room light is on another channel, so I simply switch off the room light when making these images to get that dramatic effect (☞ Figure 3).

Step Three:

Here's some good news: My f-stop and my assistant's power setting are the same for these shots as they were for the backlit church photographs. That means that my assistant sets the flash at half-power, and I'm at f/5.6. The shutter speed will be substantially faster, though. Typically, it's around $\frac{1}{60}$ of a second.

I prefer the higher shutter speed to cut down the ambient light of the scene, while still creating a nice rim light on the couple.



☞ Figure 2



☞ Figure 3

(Continued)

Step Four:

So, how does the assistant stay behind the bride and groom as they are dancing all over the dance floor? Well, that's sort of their problem. If the assistant is out of position, then it ruins the shot (see ⌘ *Figure 4*). Sure, they sometimes look like hopping frogs as they try to stay in position behind the bride and groom, but heck, they're young and agile. It's my expectation that they will get themselves into position, whatever it takes, so I can capture the shot(s).

Step Five:

Okay gang, this is where you can really make it interesting. Many times, clients hire a lighting technician to illuminate the dance floor with some very beautiful dappled lighting textures. How do we get some of those dappled lighting textures to show up in the bride's gown? It's simple—slow down the shutter speed to about $\frac{1}{20}$ of a second. At ISO 800, that's usually enough to let the dappled lighting expose sufficiently on the shadowed side of the bride's gown. Check out ⌘ *Figure 5* to see the effect.



⌘ *Figure 4*

In the next shot (⌘ *Figure 6*), I slowed down the shutter speed to about $\frac{1}{15}$ of a second to pick up some of the ambient light of the reception location. The wide-angle lens adds dramatics to the impact.

Step Six:

In ⌘ *Figure 7*, I was pleasantly surprised to see that some of my assistant's backlighting bounced off of the groom's shirt and reflected back into the bride's face, capturing a wonderful expression. I think it really shows the true, raw emotion of the moment.

Step Seven:

Hold on—there is still more to come. Just because you got that beautiful backlit dance photograph doesn't mean you're finished. You've still got a lot of other opportunities to capture some great shots. I want that first photograph to be a really nice wide-angle photograph of the bride and groom, showing the ballroom. But once I know I've got it, I'll switch to my zoom lens and zoom in on the couple to capture some great expressions, then continue with some tight backlit close-ups (see ⌘ *Figure 8*).



⌘ *Figure 5*



☞ Figure 6



☞ Figure 8



☞ Figure 7



(Continued)



☞ Figure 9a



☞ Figure 9b



☞ Figure 9c

Step Eight:

It's at this point that I turn my room light back on, and it's now okay for my assistant to assume his position in our three-point triangular lighting system, which we discussed in Chapter 4.

With the bride and groom in the middle of our lighting triangle, I make several additional images of them enjoying their first dance. My goal is to get some great photographs of the groom looking into the bride's face, hopefully capturing a wonderful expression. I'm also trying to catch the same wonderful expression on the bride's face as she gazes into the groom's face. Sometimes there are some really nice surprises in their expressions: a loving look, a giggle, joy, and endearment as they look into each other's eyes. Check out ☞ *Figures 9a, 9b, and 9c* to see what I mean.

Step Nine:

And, in our final image, you can see how the light reflected off the bride's wedding gown and the groom's white shirt, and bounced back into the faces of not only the bride's mom and dad, as they proudly watch the couple's first dance as husband and wife, but also a few surrounding guests (see ☞ *Figure 10*).

A few things to remember:

- ☞ When you think you've got the shot, don't give up, you still have got a lot more to go. Our first goal was to get the backlit silhouette of the bride and groom dancing. I prefer to keep my camera position fairly low to the floor; I'm usually kneeling for these photographs, because the shadows coming back to the camera look better that way.
- ☞ After you've captured that great backlit candid, slow down your shutter speed to $1/20$ of a second at $f/5.6$ and ISO 800 to get that great photograph of the dappled lighting on the bride's gown.



☞ Figure 10

- ⌘ Continue shooting the bride and groom dancing, and zoom in closely on their faces to see if you can catch the light reflecting off the groom's shirt back into the bride's face to create another great image.
- ⌘ And, lastly, finish up coverage of the wedding couple's bridal dance with all strobes firing, keeping the couple within the center of your lighting triangle. Try to capture some great expressions on the bride's and groom's parents, friends, and family as they watch this traditional first dance.

How does it look in the wedding album? You can see I suspect that I'm not going to put just one of these images in the wedding album. I've created a whole series of wonderful images for the couple.

Typically, for us, when we lay out this section of the wedding in the bridal album, the primary image is the backlit image of the bride and groom positioned on one side of the two facing pages. On the other side are the secondary images of them enjoying their dance. Check out ⌘ *Figure 11* to see how this page looks. We really want to tell a story, and have them relive the emotions they felt.

For me, it's about catching the whole series of actions and reactions, thereby capturing the moments for our clients—moments which, when put in their wedding album, tell a great story of the treasured memories of their wedding day.



⌘ *Figure 11*

Accent Lighting on the Veil

Okay, everybody, let's talk about a different version of backlighting. When taking the traditional photograph of the bride in church—the classical bridal portrait—we can spice the image up considerably with a little backlighting on the veil, accenting it for a more beautiful effect.

Whenever I'm creating an image of the bride in church, one way to add a little pizzazz to it is to have a little accent light on the back of the veil. That little accent light is created with my mini-slave unit, as shown here in **⌘ Figure 1**. It's a fairly low-power flash unit that is fired optically by my other off-camera strobe.

What I love about this little strobe is that it has a foot on the bottom of the unit, which lets me adjust the flash in an upward

direction instead of just laying it flat on the floor. By positioning it on the floor of the church and adjusting it upwards just a bit, I can direct the light into the back of the bride's veil. This is so simple to do. Let me walk you through it:

Step One:

First, pick yourself up a little inexpensive flash from a photography supply store (I prefer B&H). Here are a couple different models I use: (1) the Smith-Victor PG250S Wireless Mini-Slave Flash (my favorite); (2) the Smith-Victor PG160S Wireless Mini-Slave Flash (a little less powerful); and (3) the SP Studio Systems Mini-Slave Strobe (very similar to #1).

Step Two:

I prefer a working distance of around 10 or 12 feet from the subject when using the mini-slave. Check out the before and after images here (**⌘ Figures 2a** and **2b**). It just adds a little twinkle, a nice touch, to the photograph.

Step Three:

The thickness of the bride's veil can have an effect on how the backlighting is rendered. If it's a very thin veil, the backlighting may be too strong and actually blow out the highlights in the veil. In this case, I simply cover the flash head with a single layer of a clean handkerchief to reduce the output by two stops, and create a softer accent on the veil.

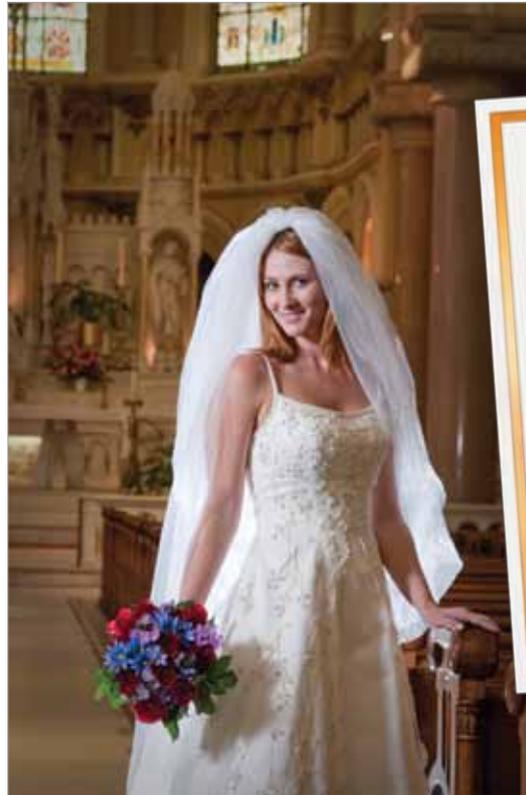
*It is your choice
how much accent you
prefer on the bride's veil.
Remember: just don't
cover the optical eye
of the mini-slave with
the handkerchief.*



⌘ Figure 1



⌘ Figure 2a: Before



⌘ Figure 2b: After

If you are using just your on-camera flash, then the mini-slave may not trigger, because your on-camera flash will be blocked by your subject. If your flash is on E-TTL (or i-TTL, for Nikon), the pre-flash may trigger your mini-flash. If you insist on using your on-camera flash—and it may work in some cases—then be sure it is in manual mode, so the pre-flash doesn't trigger the mini-slave before the actual exposure is made. This is why I prefer to use my off-camera flash.

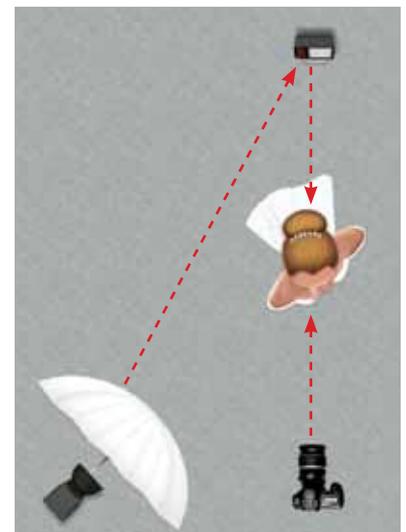
Step Four:

I use an off-camera flash 99.9% of the time. Therefore, with the off-camera strobe coming from the left or right side of my subject, it isn't a problem to have my little mini-flash seeing and syncing with the light coming from my off-camera flash (see ⌘ *Figure 3*).

Step Five:

I double-check that my assistant is in the proper position. Remember, during this setup I'm using two light sources: one source is my off-camera flash unit, to apply the proper lighting pattern on the bride's face; the other source is the "twinkle" flash unit I've just placed on the floor behind the bride. The optical slave built into the mini-flash requires a line of sight of light to trigger it, thus my assistant, providing my main light on my subject, is also firing the mini-slave.

This little flash is inexpensive, easy to use, reliable, and just adds that final twinkle touch to the beautiful bridal images.



⌘ Figure 3

(Continued)

Lighting the Background

Here is one more way to backlight creatively. This time we are going to illuminate the background directly. Remember, backlighting is a way to focus the viewer's eye on the subject. Well, studio photographers have been using a "background" light for years. Since the whole world is my studio, my "background" may be the wall, ceiling, or even the exterior door of the church. Here are some cool ways to bring a little more pizzazz to your wedding photography:

Step One:

Here, I have found a nice place for the portrait of my groom (see ¶ *Figure 1*). The problem is that the wall behind him is too dark. I need to brighten it up. No problem, I have my assistant head to the front of church and point my off-camera flash at the background (see ¶ *Figure 2*).

Step Two:

Run a few tests until you balance the flash illumination on the background with the rest of the scene, then take the shot. See ¶ *Figure 3* for the result.

The distance to the background (which controls the cone of light we discussed earlier) and the vertical distance (how far up the background your assistant is pointing the flash) all contribute to the look of the final result. You may have to experiment a bit, but the result is worth it.



¶ *Figure 1*



¶ *Figure 2*



¶ *Figure 3*



Step Three:

Here I am in the same church on another shoot. This time, I had a problem with the ceiling being too dark behind the bride (see *Figure 4*). I needed to illuminate it.

Step Four:

My assistant headed to the back of the church, kicked the flash up to full power, and I fired away. You can see the difference in *Figure 5*.

Step Five:

I didn't like the cool look of the light from the strobe. So, I had my assistant add an orange gel to it and fire again. I finally got it (see *Figure 6*). How did I light the bride? With the on-camera flash and panel bounce technique I discussed in Chapter 3.



Figure 4



Figure 5

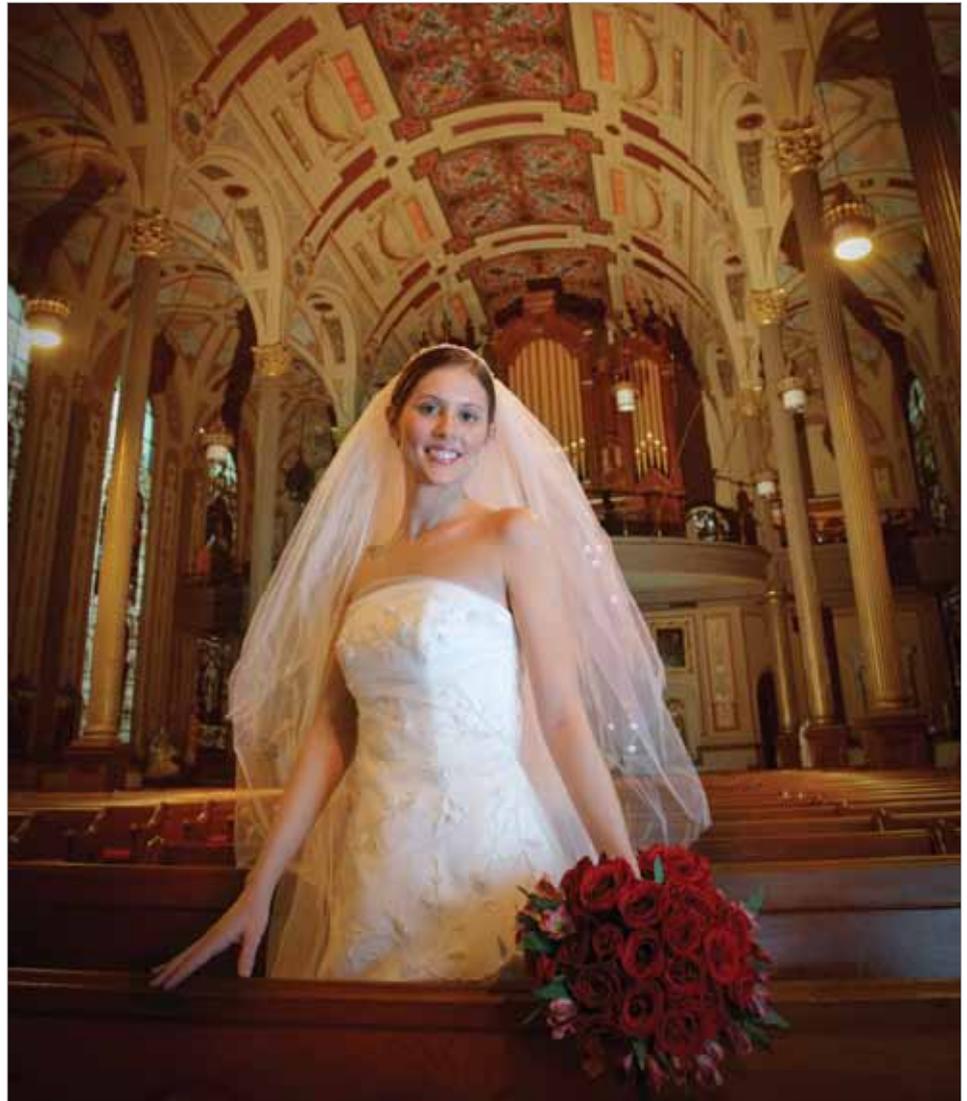


Figure 6

(Continued)

Step Six:

Okay, this is one of my favorites. I did everything as outlined above, only this time, after taking the backlit image of the couple (☼ *Figure 7*), I had my assistant light up the side of the church. Since I was outside, I used a much higher shutter speed and smaller f-stop. The use of the fisheye lens added quite a bit of dramatics to the shot (see ☼ *Figure 8*).



I was so close to the tulips in these shots, that when I asked the couple to give each other a hug, they thought I was talking to the flowers.



☼ *Figure 7*



☼ *Figure 8*



⌘ Figure 2



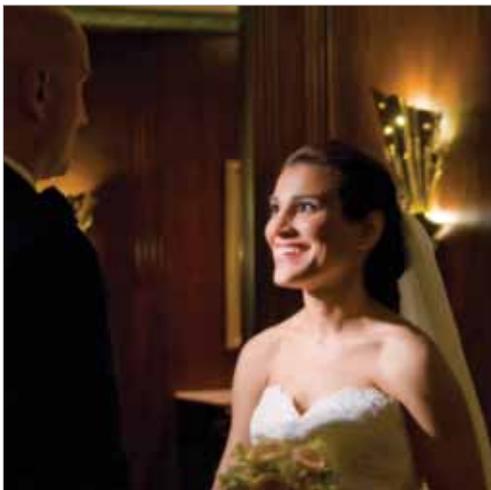
The Z-Ray for Weddings & Portraits

Okay, gang, let me tell you about what I think is one of the most fun ways to create some very cool wedding day images. I call this technique Z-Ray lighting, with my double-barreled, Kryptonite-powered, Z-Ray light. How did the Z-Ray get its name? I'm sworn to secrecy, so I'll let you make your own best guess.



⌘ Figure 1

Basically, what I'm using is a high-intensity flashlight (⌘ *Figure 1*) to throw a beam of light on my subject to create some very dramatic lighting. Check out ⌘ *Figure 2*. It looks like the lighting we see used on the Hollywood stars of the '30s and '40s, and gives a similar result to what we saw earlier in the Hollywood lighting section in Chapter 4.



⌘ Figure 3



⌘ Figure 4

I love how it lets us isolate the subject from the scene, and really focuses all the viewer's attention right on our bride (see ⌘ *Figure 3*).

Shoot Some Z-Rays on Those Tables

The first time I started playing around with my Z-Ray lighting technique, I was shooting scene setters at a wedding reception. The centerpieces were not illuminated quite as well as I thought they should be, so I had my assistant bring in the Z-Ray lighting to better illuminate them (see ⌘ *Figure 4*).

(Continued)



⌘ Figure 5



⌘ Figure 6



⌘ Figure 8



⌘ Figure 7

Another time, the client set out menu cards at each place setting, but the cards seemed to fade into the surrounding table décor. I hit the menu card with my Z-Ray light, and popped it out from the background (⌘ *Figure 5*).

You can also use it to spotlight some of the bridal accessories at the bride's home while she is getting ready for her special day. This may include the bridal headpiece, jewelry, shoes, a special detail on her gown, etc. (see ⌘ *Figure 6*).

I've also found that I can get great results with the Z-Ray as the bride is getting dressed, and going through the last-minute preparations—shots like the mother or the bridesmaids buttoning up the back of the gown, adjusting the veil, the bride resting with her hands on her lap, etc. (see ⌘ *Figure 7*).

Z-Rays for Portrait Lighting

It is also very cool to use the Z-Ray as the primary light source for an unusual and beautiful bridal portrait. Take a look at this image (⌘ *Figure 8*) I recently captured as the bride finished her preparations. I had her lean against the counter with the makeup mirror behind her, and had my assistant bring the Z-Ray lighting in from the right to illuminate her

face with the standard loop lighting pattern. Notice how the light falls off gently down the full length of her body, leaving the primary illumination on her face. Let me walk you through, step by step, how I use my Z-Ray lighting to photograph the bride:

Step One:

Find a cool background for your shot. Remember, when looking for backgrounds, you're looking for three-dimensional spaces that will look great rendered as a two-dimensional space in your photograph. That means the background can contain many different compositional lines, shapes, and forms.

Step Two:

Position your subject for the best composition. I generally follow the rule-of-thirds composition (see ⌘ *Figure 9*), which we'll discuss in detail in Chapter 7, although sometimes I take a very symmetrical approach.



✿ Figure 9

Step Three:

Once your composition is set, get the light correctly positioned on the subject's face. Always remember that you don't want to point this high-intensity flashlight directly into the subject's eyes, or have them look directly into the light. It is a very bright beam of light and may damage their eyes if they look directly into it. The light should be coming in from an off-axis direction, with your subject looking back into the camera.

It's your assistant's job to create a beautiful lighting pattern, as we discussed in earlier chapters. You can vary the contrast of this lighting pattern by how close to or how far from your subject you have the Z-Ray lighting. Moving it closer creates a more intense

amount of light on your subject's face relative to the ambient light of the scene. Moving it away from your subject creates the opposite effect, reducing the intensity of the light on your subject and balancing it with the intensity of the ambient light.

Step Four:

It's important to have your camera set properly. Since the Z-Ray lighting is fairly intense, and since the area being illuminated by it is substantially brighter than the surrounding area, your camera's light meter may be fooled as to what the exposure should be. So, take a test image, and adjust your exposure accordingly.

(Continued)



⌘ Figure 10



⌘ Figure 11

Step Five:

I typically have my camera set to aperture priority mode, tungsten white balance, and ISO 800 or 1600 for this. The new high-ISO cameras give you even more versatility with this technique. Once you've determined your optimum lighting and camera settings, shoot away.

Variations on a Theme

Look what happens when I use the tungsten-balanced Z-Ray as my main light source and then backlight the subject with my daylight-balanced strobe (see ⌘ Figure 10). With the camera set to tungsten white balance, we get the proper color balance on the subject, but the backlighting becomes a very vibrant blue, creating another unique and different look.

Let's look at one more example (⌘ Figure 11) where I used my Z-Ray as the main light source on my bride. The backlighting was supplied by my daylight-balanced strobe, resulting in the cool rim lighting surrounding her. Notice, too, that since I was shooting outdoors, the overall color temperature of the scene was quite cool. This, once again, created a unique and beautiful bridal portrait.

Wait, there's more. Check out this image created with the Z-Ray (⌘ Figure 12). I opened the Bible to Corinthians and balanced the groom's wedding ring in the crease of the book. I then had my assistant position the Z-Ray to give me the heart-shaped shadow. Yes, you could do this with a flash, but with the Z-Ray, I know exactly how the shadow is going to fall.



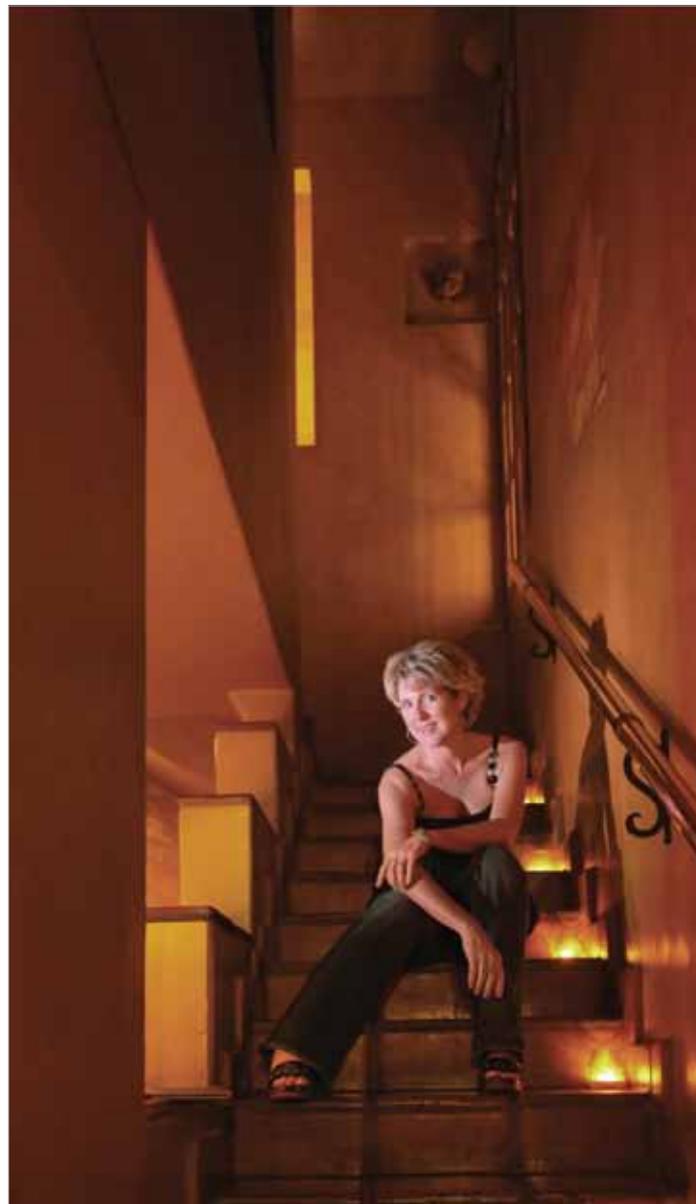


☞ Figure 12

You can also try a small LED flashlight and a higher ISO to get the same effect (as I did in ☞ Figure 13). Here are a few tips to remember about Z-Ray lighting:

- ☞ A regular high-powered flashlight works best with your camera set to tungsten. You can warm it up a bit by adjusting your camera's Kelvin setting to 2800K.
- ☞ High-powered flashlights have a very specific hotspot. Be sure that the hotspot is centered on the main part of your subject—the face, for example.
- ☞ When using an LED flashlight, set your camera to daylight. If you want to warm up the lighting a bit, then use a 6500K setting.

The Z-Ray lighting just brings a very different look to the illumination of our subjects and, when used judiciously, I think it can add some very exciting images to your wedding coverage.



☞ Figure 13