■ Converting to Black & White is a great way to gain confidence in post-processing

Learning to love the
Digital
Darkroom

Not spending a little time processing your photos is the modern equivalent of collecting a bunch of prints from the chemist. **Ewen Bell** shows us why processing is important and how to make it more rewarding.

In the beginning...
An entire generation of today's digital photographers grew up with cameras and film, where the emphasis was on the camera instead of the computer. In reality the camera was only ever half of the job, because how you processed a roll of film or developed prints from the negatives was always key to the final result. Only for most amateurs the cost of doing it yourself was prohibitive.

Taking a roll of film to the chemist for processing spelled the death of creativity. Automated machines average out exposures on each roll and deliver a folder of prints that had very little room for photographic expression. You had to get pretty organised or get professional by investing in your own gear and exploring the creative potential of a darkroom.

Slide film was a good compromise, preserving the original intent of the photographer while keeping the door open to high-quality exhibition prints. In many ways choosing to work with slide film was a clear signal of creative intent;

"Capturing an image on a digital camera is only part of the creative process. It's what you do next..."

a step away from happy snaps and towards creative control. You could still send off a roll of Kodachrome to be processed in a lab under standard conditions, but knowing that your original exposures were unadulterated.

Presenting slides limits the photographic expression to what happens in the camera. As soon as you decide to make a print from a slide, the potential is present once more to alter the image. The same is true of a digital image. Capturing an image on a digital camera is only part of the creative process, because what you do with it next when sharing it online or printing into a book also changes the character of the photo.

Whether you intend it or not, you are already processing your images before

HOW TO BUY A FAST COMPUTER
A powerful computer is not essential, but it helps. When you get tired of processing on a NetBook, here's a good recipe for RAW speed...
■ 3rd Generation Intel Processor (i7 quad core recommended);
■ Dedicated GPU (graphics controller) with 1GB of independent RAM;
■ 8gig of memory for Windows or MacOS;
■ SSD storage is better for lots of RAW files;
■ Thunderbolt or USB 3.0 for external storage.

sharing. If you shoot in JPG, the camera is applying a set of furious adjustments to the capture in real time, using whatever settings you have pre-configured on the camera. By uploading a photo to Facebook or Flickr, you're also allowing their software to make a few adjustments on your behalf.

■ Among the Gracebrook vineyards in King Valley, Vic. Canon 1DMkIV; 50mm lens; 1/800sec; f/2; ISO 200

■ Rooftop dining at Café Martini in Wangaratta, Vic. Canon 1DMkIV; 24mm lens; 1/100sec; f/2; ISO 800

"The play of light and dark within an image is critical to monochrome composition"

JOIN THE CLUB: THEY'RE NOT JUST FOR CAMERAS
Joining a camera club these days offers more than just advice on capturing images, but processing too. Most good camera clubs will offer classes on the finer points of processing RAW files. The skills you learn on one piece of software are essentially transferable to others.

In the case of Flickr, the colour space is modified and images scaled for presentation, both of which alter the character of the images. If you ever felt that your photos just don't look as vibrant on Flickr as they did on your computer, you might just be right. Jump across to 500px.com and you notice your photos simply look better, partly because they have a more generous algorithm for uploading, partly because the site presents photos large and lively.

Printing digital photos is another step that hides a bit of processing. The choice of paper and print technology impacts the final result, but how you prepare the photos for printing can make a difference as well. Screen colours and print colours aren't identical; what looks nice on your laptop may change when turned into ink. Your choice of how to adapt images from one colour space to another, either manually or using the default process, will bear on the printed version.

When old becomes new
For pro photographers the chores of processing RAW files on a desktop are a necessary evil, but for every photographer the digital darkroom is an opportunity to advance your work. Not only are you able to alter the visual appearance of an image, but you're spending time immersed in your own work. The feedback you get from rummaging through files and contemplating new creative outputs is valuable in the extreme.

There's a chicken-and-egg scenario happening here too. In the absence of any processing expertise, the process of reviewing a collection of RAW files can be little more than a sorting exercise. You need to jump in and explore the potential for processing an image, while at the same time learning more about what is or isn't achievable.

Once you have a few processing techniques in hand, looking through your old RAW files takes on a whole new perspective.

In some ways the digital darkroom lets you retake the photo, by adjusting the cropping, mood or tonal emphasis of an image. Manipulating RAW files can bring new life to old photos, giving you new reasons to love an image or the experience that created it.

Conversion to Black & White is a great example of the power of processing. I often use a standard set of B&W treatments to bring uniformity to a collection of disparate images that would not otherwise sit nicely together. I can bring harmony to a collection that begins as chaos.

B&W is also a good starting point to learning processing because the results are immediate and obvious – plus there's lots of room for subtle manipulation within the style. I don't just mean choosing a warm or cool tone for your B&W treatment, but by tweaking the colour channels you can dramatically

alter the exposure of selective elements in the frame.

The other advantage to working in B&W is that it brings your creative eye back to the essentials of composition. The play of light and dark within an image is critical to monochrome composition, and as you experiment with treatments you're getting powerful feedback on your photographic captures. Observations made on the desktop can advance your work the next time you head out with a camera in hand.

Processing RAW images can be seen as a positive feedback mechanism that continually improves not only your presentation, but your captures as well.

Making it fun
The real hurdle to spending more time processing files is the level of enjoyment most people get out of it. Very few photographers really enjoy processing their files, even those who are good at it. Sitting at a desktop feels like work, not play, and some serious motivation is required to get over that hurdle. Anything that makes the job a little less painful is a step forward.

■ Fine wines at Baileys of Glenrowan. Canon 1DMkIV; 50mm lens; 1/400sec; f/2.8; ISO 100

■ Delicacies at Derailleur, Vic. Canon 1DMkIV; 24mm lens; 1/80sec; f/4; ISO 400

"Observations made on the desktop can advance your work the next time you head out with a camera in hand"

Having a slow computer with a small monitor is certainly not the best way to embrace processing. As DSLR cameras pack increasingly larger pixel counts, the grunt required to process the RAW files grows too. Just downloading and sorting your photos can have you hitting the limit of your patience. Getting a fast machine to do the job will save you a good amount of frustration.

A big screen isn't a bad idea either, but this places even more demands on the desktop. A "Full HD" screen with 1920x1080 pixels gives you lots of real estate to hang tools, browse thumbnails and preview the image. Inches don't matter as much as pixels, so a Full HD screen packed into a 15" laptop is a good combination, as the finer pixels make it easier to spot which frames are sharp or fuzzy. (If you're an Apple fan, the Retina Display is the same idea, but taken to the next level.)

Choosing a decent computer is half the battle; choosing good software is the other half. Adobe Photoshop is all things to all people, but there are better solutions to processing RAW files that save you time and hence make it more fun. Adobe Lightroom and Capture One are two examples of RAW workflow software that are built from the ground up to do the job.

Workflow solutions simply make it easier to work with lots of files, combing the process of browsing with editing into a seamless experience. As dedicated RAW processing tools, they also offer performance advantages over more general image editing software. The more reduced the "feature set" of a piece of software, the more efficient they are at finishing a task.

Spending a few dollars on good software can change your entire attitude towards post-capture processing – but only if you can learn how to use that software effectively. Getting results is the key to getting enjoyment from the task.

It's a lot more rewarding to sit at the desktop once you've learned a few techniques and decided on a handful of treatments that you really like. Reaching the stage of seeing the results you want may require some training. Building skills is difficult if you're relying on web tutorials, so jump-starting the process with a dedicated workshop is a good idea.
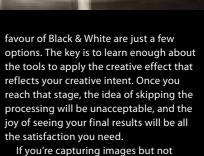

Creative essentials
If you're going to enjoy the world of processing, you need to be brave and push hard on exploring the tools of manipulation. Making a little tweak here and there isn't always the best approach, particularly when starting out. By cranking hard on the sliders you get a feel for what each one does and can dial back the effect afterwards. To begin with, go extreme and see what each tool can do.

The more creative your mood, the more rewarding the process will be. Black & White might not be your thing, but perhaps an "expired film stock" look might appeal instead. By dialling back the saturation, adding a little extra contrast and dragging the colour temperature into the high Kelvins, you can create a washed-out look that's anything but ordinary.

I like to add a little vignetting to my images as well, which might seem ironic having spent good money on modern lenses that avoid this very artefact. I like the look of a vignette partly because it evokes a more traditional film feeling, and partly because it delves into the wider dynamic range concealed beneath the RAW capture. The darkened edges often reveal detail in a frame that would otherwise remain obscure.

Faking a film look, swapping into high or low keys or dropping the colours in

■ Dining at Watermarc, Vic. Canon 1DMkIV; 50mm lens; 1/250sec; f/2; ISO 1600

favour of Black & White are just a few options. The key is to learn enough about the tools to apply the creative effect that reflects your creative intent. Once you reach that stage, the idea of skipping the processing will be unacceptable, and the joy of seeing your final results will be all the satisfaction you need.

If you're capturing images but not processing anything, then you're really only doing half of the job. You may not be spending enough time exploring your own images either, and the opportunity to learn from your own photographs is being overlooked. Photography is about expression more than documentation, and processing is an invaluable part of that creative expression.

HOW TO CULTIVATE PROCESSING SKILLS
■ Go hard on adjustment tools to learn how they impact an image;
■ Look at RAW workflow tools in preference to single image RAW editing;
■ Don't be afraid to overstep the boundaries, try to push them hard;
■ Attend a workshop but make sure you follow up and practice after classes are over;
■ Set yourself an objective like printing off a Blurb Book;
■ Look back at the before and after so you can appreciate the improvements.