A professional landscape photographer tells why and how using advanced capabilities in software can give new life to color images by converting them to black-and-white

Text And Photography By James Kay

Making A Conversion

Whenever the terms "black-and-white" and "landscape photography" are mentioned in the same sentence, most of us conjure up the dramatic work of Ansel Adams or perhaps Edward Weston. Along with several other photographers, Adams and Weston formed the *f*/64 group in the early 1930s and set the aesthetic standard for American photography for years to come.

At the same moment in time that Adams and his colleagues were mastering the art of black-and-white photography in the '30s, Kodak and Agfa introduced the first modern color transparency film. It may come as a surprise to the general public that Adams began working with color photography soon thereafter and made more than 3,000 color images during his career. He was the consummate experimenter, always seeking new ways to capture his subjects on film. He stated on many occasions that he felt color was the future of photography and that he had no hostility toward it.

It took many years, however, for color to replace black-and-white as an accepted form of fine-art landscape photography.

As color began to dominate the field, black-and-white receded into the background. But just as radio didn't disappear when television came on the scene, black-and-white was always there and more recently has made a big comeback with the advent of digital technology. While purists may still argue that using digital technology to convert a color image into black-an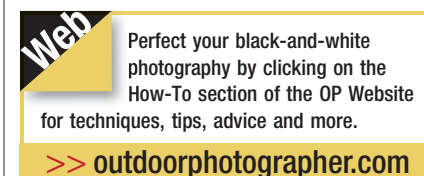d-white is somehow cheating, most people familiar with the career of Ansel Adams would likely agree that if he was in his prime today, he'd have the latest version of Photoshop installed on his computer and he'd be spending more time developing images on his computer than in his darkroom. And as a consummate experimenter, he would surely explore the realm of color to black-and-white conversions.

The extraordinary prints produced by Adams during his career weren't simply a direct reproduction of what he captured on film. Capturing the image was only the first step in his workflow. Once he entered the darkroom, he spent hours dodging and burning to achieve the exact effect he wanted. That was simply his era's version of image manipulation. While he employed analog techniques, we have an entirely new toolbox of digital tools at our fingertips.

When I first ventured into landscape photography, I concentrated much of my attention on the surreal landscapes of the Colorado Plateau in southern Utah. If there was ever a location for which color film was invented, this was it. Looking back at the evolution of color landscape photography in America, the vivid colors found in this region probably acted as a catalyst for many early landscape photographers to make the switch to color film. Although I experimented with black-and-white capture early in my career, once I began to focus my attention on landscape photography, I couldn't imagine not using color film. Even before the days of Photoshop, I knew that I could always produce an acceptable black-and-white print from color film if I wanted one. I simply didn't want to take the chance of missing a dramatic color scene because I was shooting in black-and-white.

However, being familiar with the black-and-white work of the early masters, I fully appreciated the drama and powerful emotional response evoked by their mesmerizing images. The broad range of tonalities in their prints, the pure whites and the deep blacks all worked together to portray the real world in a stark, yet brilliantly luminous way. It could easily be argued that this effect would be diminished if color was added to the equation. Color could simply overwhelm the other elements in the image and act as a distraction to the underlying shape, form and texture.

Landscape photography is about capturing a unique confluence of light and composition. Once I made the decision to capture my images exclusively in color, I knew it would affect how I searched for those elusive five-star images in the field. I gave as much emphasis to the color of a scene as I did to the tonality range in the light and the overall composition. I'd often concentrate my shooting efforts around the warm early-morning or late-

evening light. When thinking in terms of black-and-white capture where color isn't an issue, those first and last rays of the day aren't as important. If you take a look, you'll notice that many of Adams' most dramatic black-and-white images were captured nowhere near sunrise or sunset.

As powerful, new digital tools began to appear on the scene, I became aware that I hadn't been limiting myself by shooting exclusively in color. I could now convert my color captures into black-and-white with a degree of sophistica-tion and control that Adams couldn't have imagined. As I began to experiment with converting color images in Photoshop, I discovered that some of them produced spectacular results when converted to black-and-white, often more satisfying than the original color image itself. The color images that provided the best conversions were those that had strong contrast and a wide range in tonality. After a while, it became easier to determine which color image would make a pleasing black-and-white conversion.

Color To Black-And-White

Before I get into a discussion on converting color images to black-and-white, let me mention that if you're working with a digital camera that has a black-and-white setting, keep in mind that while you can convert a color image to black-and-white, you can't go in the other direction. This is why I wouldn't recommend using this setting simply to capture a black-and-white image at the beginning of the process. The results you can achieve by starting off with a color image in Photoshop will far surpass the results you'll get if you simply capture a black-and-white image up front.

Also, to do justice to black-and-white capture, the use of color filters is mandatory. Keep in mind that these filters are used to lighten subjects in the scene that share their color while darkening other colors. For example, a red filter will lighten a red barn or red leaves and darken a blue sky to make clouds stand out. A green filter will lighten green foliage and darken reds. This same process can now be duplicated in Photoshop. Instead of applying filters to your lens as you're shooting, simply apply these filters to the image in Photoshop after you've captured it, but with much more flexibility and adjustment capabilities.

There are many ways to perform a black-and-white conversion in Photoshop. One technique I wouldn't recommend is to convert the image to grayscale by using Image > Mode > Grayscale. This provides the same middle-of-the-road results as setting your digital camera to Black-And-White mode. The most effective processes use adjustment layers. Some of the earlier conversion techniques were complicated, involving piles and piles of adjustment layers. With the introduction of CS3, a new tool in the form of a black-and-white adjustment layer demystifies the entire process.

Armed with a basic understanding of adjustment layers, begin the conversion process in CS3 by choosing any color image with a full range of tonality and good contrast. Open the Layers palette and click the round New Adjustment Layer button at the bottom of the palette and choose Levels. The first step in the process is to set the black and white points using the Levels dialog box. This ensures that you have a full range of tonality in the image from pure black to pure white. Click the New Adjustment Layer button again and choose Black & White. A dia-

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log box will open with sliders for six colors. Pick the color in your image you want to lighten or darken and move its slider to affect the change. You also may choose one of the preset filters in the drop-down menu, including an infrared option. If you put a check in the Tint box at the bottom, you can adjust the Hue and Saturation sliders to create a sepia or other effect. Once you have these global adjustments to the point you like them, you can perform local adjustments using Curves adjustment layers. I always save my black-and-white conversion images as a layered PSD so I have the option to revisit and readjust the file in the future. For earlier versions of Photoshop, use the New Adjustment Layers button in the Layers palette to select Channel Mixer. Put a check mark in the Monochrome box and use the three color sliders to adjust the tonality of the original colors.

These adjustments also can be applied to color images in Lightroom in the Develop Module using the HSL/Color/Grayscale panel. First convert the photo to grayscale by selecting Grayscale in the Treatment area of the Basic panel, then go to the Grayscale panel and drag the individual sliders to adjust the tonality. You can use the Targeted Adjustment tool, as well, by clicking the little circle in the upper left of the Grayscale panel. Move your pointer over the area of the image that you want to adjust and slide your mouse/pen up to lighten and down to darken. This is perhaps the most intuitive way to adjust tonality, and hopefully this tool will be included with the next version of Photoshop.

Thanks to this ability to convert color images to black-and-white, I now see additional photographic options when I'm out in the field, especially outside those magic moments of light near sunrise or sunset where I concentrate my efforts when shooting in color. I now pay more attention to the overall tonality and contrast of a scene throughout the day, knowing how I can make it work to my advantage by using these exciting new digital tools. **OP**