

## *In A Jazz Club With No Flash*

*Many places are too dark for normal photography but won't allow using a flash... and flash pictures tend to look flat and boring anyway. Here are a few survival tips for such situations. You may not get sharp pictures, but you may come back with some that are much nicer and more interesting than you would've expected.*

Available-light situational photography is extremely demanding, both on equipment and on the photographer's skills. It's too dark for the AF to lock on properly, the metering to work, and, most importantly, for shutter speeds short enough to freeze the action and permit easy hand-holding of the picture.

The bad news first: there's no way of getting sharp, clear pictures in a situation like this with a consumer or "prosumer" digicam. The lens isn't bright enough and the sensor isn't sensitive enough by a long shot. Even armed with the best DSLR with the brightest lens you can get (or a film SLR with the most sensitive film you can get), you would have your work cut out for you.

However, while you may not be able to get *clear* pictures, it doesn't mean you can't get *good* pictures. Raymond Ruan has some really fantastic shots of moving subjects in low light: the motion blur adds a lot to the subject, giving it motion, atmosphere, and rhythm. So, you can get beautiful, unique, and atmospheric pictures by turning a weakness into a virtue and incorporating the motion blur into your pictures.



(c) Raymond Ruan. Used with permission.

### *The technicalities*

1. Use Daylight white balance (Tungsten would give you more realistic whites, but it will make blue-channel noise a bad problem, and for this type of "atmospheric" shot, "incorrect" white balance can actually look quite pleasing), M mode, maximum aperture, preferably maximum wide (so you can use f/2.8), ISO400 or ISO800.
2. Meter manually. Take some test shots where you progressively increase the shutter speed until you get reasonably well-exposed pictures. When you see what's in the picture but the highlights aren't clipped (pure white), except if there are actual lights or reflections of them off metal in the picture, you're OK. The automatic metering won't work because of the big contrasts -- get a light in your picture, and you'll underexpose badly.
3. Use a support for the camera: a table, chair back, beer mug, wall, monopod, or tripod; anything really.
4. Focus manually: pick a stationary item on stage, AF on it, then switch to MF mode. (The AF may not be able to lock on the moving musicians in the low light.)
5. Go to continuous drive mode.
6. Take extra care to hold the camera steady against your support, and squeeze off a series of 3-5 frames at a time. The ones in the middle of the series are much less likely to be motion-blurred due to camera shake caused by squeezing or releasing the shutter release.
7. Take lots and lots of frames. Out of 200 frames, I'd expect maybe 20 to 30 to be technically OK, and maybe 5-10 to be worth bragging about.
8. If you have enough memory and you have the 7Hi (I forgot and don't feel like checking back now), use RAW -- it'll give you more headroom for correcting the exposure and white balance afterwards. If you have the 7i, don't bother: you won't be able to use continuous-drive, which means that most of your shots will be blurred, and you won't get enough of them.
9. Tone down the noise afterwards. There are several ways of reducing the chromatic component of the noise and making it more film-like. Use Vincent Bockeaert's noise reduction technique (see the 123 of Digital Imaging eBook [<http://www.123di.com>]), smart blur the red and/or blue channels, go to Lab mode and smart blur the a and b channels, use NeatImage (very gently), etc.
10. Don't forget to enjoy the music.

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