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# Low light photography: 40 pro tips for any situation



How many times have we heard the old adage that ‘photography is all about light’? Thousands, but it’s true – light makes all photographs. When there’s an abundance of good quality light, there’s no denying that it becomes easier to take a good picture. That doesn’t mean you have to stop shooting when the light starts to disappear or avoid low-light photography altogether, though; things just get a bit trickier and you have to know how to set your camera up to make the most of the failing light.

Armed with the right techniques and advice you can explore the possibilities opened up by low-light conditions and get some enviable shots that wouldn’t be achievable in conventionally perfect lighting conditions.

Below we meet four professional photographers who actively seek out low light in

their daily work and are keen to share their photography tips for making strong images when the light is weak.

## Danny Payne, music photographer



*Image © Danny Payne*

### **Low light Photography Tip 1: Shoot manual**

Assisted exposure programs can be useful, especially if you've only got a three-song limit and don't have the time to get your settings right. But the results can often be sketchy, so you shouldn't rely on them.

If you shoot manual and monitor your exposure in the viewfinder, you can tweak your settings on the fly and you're safe in the knowledge that some random strobe isn't going to drop your exposure into darkness.

### **Low light Photography Tip 2: Single point AF**

When shooting with a fast lens in dark conditions, getting sharp shots can prove tricky. Shooting at  $f/2.8$  gives you an increased depth of field, so you need more control over what you're focusing on.

Using single-point AF allows you to focus on a specific point, so you can get a clean shot of an artist's face rather than the guitar headstock.

### **Low light Photography Tip 3: Get a grip**

Instead of holding your lens with your thumb and forefinger, hold bigger/heavier lenses like a bowl of soup – cradle in your hands, so that the lens is held by all of your fingertips, over a large area of the lens, to distribute the weight.

You should notice a real difference to the clarity of your shots when you start using

this technique. Remember to also keep your elbows in to reduce lens shake.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 4: Keep an eye out**

Shoot with both eyes open. It's a tricky skill to master, but watching the action on stage with both eyes allows you to use your left eye to monitor what's going on that your lens can't see.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 5: Geek up on YouTube**

If the band you're shooting is in the middle of a tour, why not see what footage is kicking around on the internet? Knowing what to expect helps you to prepare - where people will be stood, what the lighting will be like in each song and so on. The more prepared you are, the better.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 6: Listen**

Pay attention to the music while you're shooting. When the music builds to a key point in the song, you can normally expect someone in the band to react with a jump or some form of energetic expression.

Generally, lighting tends to follow the same pattern as the song, so when you hear a massive chorus of a band's anthem, expect the lights to be at their best too.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 7: Find the lights**

Understanding your environment is key to great music shots. Before a show, find out where the main lights are so you can position yourself accordingly and make the most of their effects.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 8: Know your enemy**

Microphones are evil. Sometimes it's better to shoot key figures away from the microphone for a few reasons. Firstly, more often than not microphones act as a magnet for auto-focus. Secondly, you can often get some more unique and natural shots of people when they're not singing.

Bear in mind everyone else shooting the same gig as you will have a picture of the singer singing, but what they might not have is the cheeky grin he throws at the guitarist when he notices he's messed up his solo...

#### **Low light Photography Tip 9: Get familiar**

You need to know your camera inside-out to be able to make changes to your camera quickly - you don't want to miss a great shot because it's taken you too long to change settings.

If possible, take two cameras into the pit, so you have a backup should something go wrong.

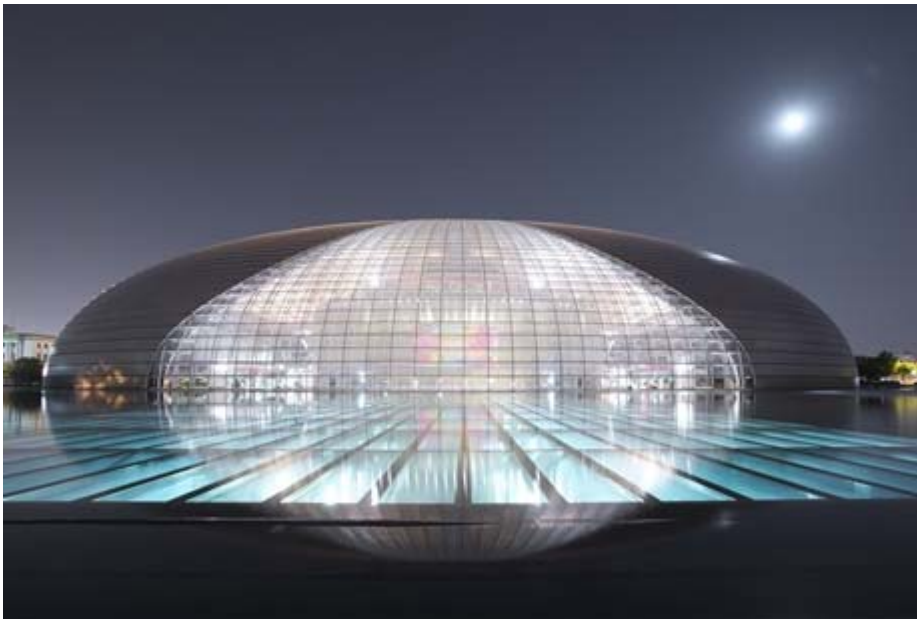
## Low light Photography Tip 10: Be artistic

Sometimes tough light forces you to push the envelope slightly and can result in more creative and expressive shots. Strobe lighting, silhouettes and lens flare are just a few things that regularly occur at gigs, so it's worth using these instead of waiting for a burst of white light on the vocalist that may never appear. You need to make the most of the situation you are in, and utilise all possible light to get something special.



Danny Payne is a freelance music photographer based in West Yorkshire. See more of his work and find out about future exhibitions at [www.dannypaynephotography.com](http://www.dannypaynephotography.com)

## Kristopher Grunert, architectural photographer



*Image © Kristopher Grunert*

## Low light Photography Tip 1: Bring a friend

Before heading out, make a conscious decision as to whether or not you should invite anyone else along. A solo mission can be rewarding, but collaboration is also invigorating.

Safety should always be a deciding factor, so if you choose to go out alone, be sure to always tell someone your destination and when you plan to return.

## **Low light Photography Tip 2: Pack well**

Besides the necessary camera equipment and accessories, be sure to bring water, appropriate clothing, and perhaps a snack. You should feel comfortable, so that you are able to focus solely on the image-making process. If you are hot or cold, hungry or thirsty you may not find inspiration in your subject, even if it's there.

## **Low light Photography Tip 3: Find the light path**

When you arrive at the location for your shoot get familiar with the proper orientation of the site in relationship to the path of the sun and/or moon. You don't necessarily have to have a compass, but it does help.

When necessary, I use the SunSeeker app on my iPhone, which accurately illustrates the path of the Sun and Moon at any one place on a given day. The light should lead you and your curiosity should propel you. Observe it, learn and remember. Trust your intuition as it guides you around or through the structure.

## **Low light Photography Tip 4: Compress**

You will be using longer exposures because of the lack of light, so be aware that you are essentially compressing time onto a single frame. Think of how you can use this technique to make a more exciting photograph.

It is important to eliminate any camera movement, so use a sturdy tripod and a shutter release to reduce camera shake. I use a remote release and set the delay timer appropriately to make sure my images are sharp.

If your exposure is between 1/60sec and 5 seconds you may also want to use mirror lock-up to avoid any internal camera vibration.

## **Low light Photography Tip 5: Use your car**

Try capturing the movement of light. Vehicle headlights can even make a cookie cutter warehouse look interesting. If there are no vehicles, have a friend drive through your scene a few times.

## **Low light Photography Tip 6: Multiple exposures**

Take multiple exposures without moving your tripod. Personally, I don't use dedicated HDR software but from time to time I will layer two exposures together and use a layer mask to paint in areas of the image that exceed the latitude of a single exposure.

## **Low light Photography Tip 7: Shoot in all weather**

Don't be afraid to shoot in the rain. If it's not pouring there will be minimal softening of image, and surface reflection will add drama to your shots. Protect your camera but don't hesitate to take an exposure or two if a few drops land on your lens, it can also add interest.

### **Low light Photography Tip 8: Shoot raw**

We say it a lot, but people often forget. Always shoot raw so that you can adjust white balance later, if needed. This maximizes your chances of getting more 'keeper' shots.

### **Low light Photography Tip 9: Move fast**

If shooting at dusk the light will remain longer in the West. Work around the building shooting from East to West.

If you're shooting pre-dawn, then West to East. Remember the light changes very quickly during these times so be prepared to move fast.

### **Low light Photography Tip 10: Unwanted water**

Beware of lawn sprinklers! They are often scheduled to turn on after dark and can give you quite a shock!



Canadian photographer Kristopher Grunert uses line, atmosphere, movement and light to create his stunning architectural images. See more of both his commercial and personal work at [www.grunertimaging.com](http://www.grunertimaging.com), signup to his mailing list at [www.grunertimaging.com/maillinglist](http://www.grunertimaging.com/maillinglist), or buy yourself a limited edition print at [www.editions.grunertimaging.com](http://www.editions.grunertimaging.com)

### **Miss Aniela, portrait photographer**



Image © Miss Aniela

### **Low light Photography Tip 1: Keep it steady**

Because one of most important considerations in low-light photography is the shutter speed, it is important that the camera is as steady as possible to avoid camera shake. As a general rule, for sharp images you should use a tripod when the shutter speed is greater than the inverse of the lens focal length (for example, if you are using a 50mm lens and the shutter speed is 1/50 or longer). A tripod is also important when shooting multiple images of the frame when you might want to give yourself the option to incorporate several exposures.

### **Low light Photography Tip 2: Go slower**

In my work I don't always want to obtain 'correct' focus/sharpness, and I often purposefully shoot at a slower shutter speed than the norm for the context to obtain a painterly effect of movement within the camera. You can see this effect in my image 'An impromptu performance', which I shot on f/2.8, focal length 14mm with a shutter speed of 1/15 sec.

The dress's brushstroke-like effect on this self-portrait was achieved in-camera, by jumping into the air as the shutter released on a timer. It also gave a soft look to the edges of the figures, which is common in any kind of relatively long exposure, and can instantly create a timeless look.

### **Low light Photography Tip 3: Improvise with light**

If you are using only ambient light it can be fun to explore the different 'improvised' lighting sources that can be incorporated into an image - candles, lamps, and torches for example.

'An impromptu performance' was shot only with the light from the overhead ceiling fitting in a dark corridor at home. The final composite was created by bringing together three figures all shot in the same spot, and processing the whole image to make the whole surroundings appear darker, giving a final result a similar look to the figures in a Degas painting.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 4: Dress light**

When you are shooting with any kind of low lighting, especially if you are making use of ambient light or 'improvised' light sources, it is appropriate to shoot with outfits that are pale or white, and that will effectively reflect that ambient light available.

The same principle can apply to pale/white flesh, which is why it is interesting to experiment with nudes in low light. In my picture 'Something moved her', the model was wearing a white flowing dress which suited the low light and the sense of movement in the image which would not have been so dramatic with a darker outfit, and resulted in an ethereal, angelic appearance.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 5: Use a reflector**

A source of light in a low-key situation could be a waning sunset, or a beam of light from a skylight, which can be transformed with the strategic use of a reflector. A reflector can take that small amount of diffused light entering the scene and point it back at the subject, even and diffused, making the subject stand out against a dark background even more, exaggerating the light falloff.

One situation that I found effective was when I was shooting a nude in a sheltered piece of woodland that had light entering thinly from the treetops straight up ahead. Bouncing the light back at the body had a dramatic effect on the tone of the flesh and really emboldened the whole image.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 6: Use motion**

Slow shutter speeds combined with motion, either subtly or more dramatically to really distort and fragment a person, is a vastly intriguing terrain to explore in all kinds of lighting. In low lighting, though, there is the added artistic dimension of capturing motion blur in your images which can be used to creative effect, even as one composited part of an image, and not always the entire frame.

In 'Something moved her', I had the model move her dress on both sides and then I shot her standing still so I could bring together the static body and moving skirts into one frame, as layers in Photoshop.

#### **Low light Photography Tip 7: Shoot HDR**

What if you want to shoot a static sharp portrait, but not with a dark background? Why not shoot more than one exposure to bring together into the same image? This is the notion of HDR images, where shorter and longer exposures are combined to make an even distribution across shadows and highlights in a frame.

This is particularly appropriate when shooting high-contrast situations with dark areas in the frame, rather than a completely dark scene overall. Set your camera to auto-bracketing mode and use a tripod. The exposures can be merged in Photomatix or in Photoshop's 'Merge to HDR' function (for more on how to make subtle HDR images, see page 36 of this issue).

### **Low light Photography Tip 8: Composite different pieces**

My shot 'Suspended' uses the principle of HDR to tackle a difficult lighting situation. I was shooting a trick image of a girl hanging, under a spotlight on a theatre stage, which was very bright in comparison to the dark auditorium around.

However, shooting three exposures resulted in too much ghosting around the hanging girl. Instead, I simply shot the model in one shot exposed for the spotlight, and shot one longer exposure for the background, with my camera mounted on my tripod between the shots. I merged the background into the final image as a layer mask in Photoshop.

### **Low light Photography Tip 9: Split-light with flash**

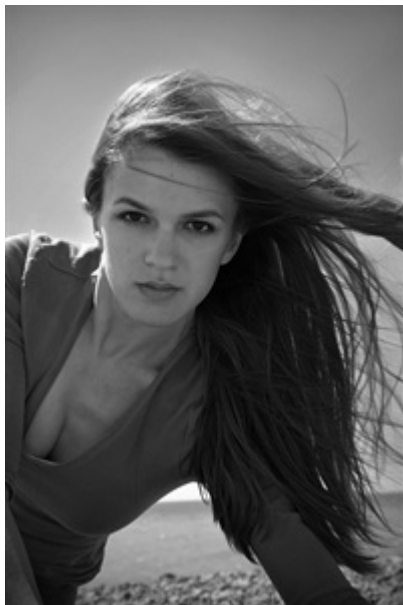
One of the ways I use flash lighting in a low-key image is to position the flash to one side of the subject, in a split-lighting technique, which has the advantage of heightening their stature and giving a cinematic atmosphere, but with relative subtlety.

I shot 'In the laboratory' in this manner, positioning a TritonFlash light inside a room to the right in this abandoned building, so that it entered the dark corridor in the same manner of the dim natural light that was coming in from that doorway. It is a way of injecting enough illumination into the scene to give the subject's eyes catchlights without appearing too dramatic.

### **Low light Photography Tip 10: Constant lighting**

I consider constant lighting to be an exciting continuation of all those improvised tungsten sources I've liked to use in the past, but a more controlled way of illuminating a scene by eye.

I shot 'Hook' with a constant light positioned to one side, which dramatically lit the model in a high-contrast fall-off from one side of her to the other. One side of her remained almost in shadow, with a distinctive gleaming blue eye, which complimented this eerie fashion portrait well. I make sure for fashion portraits like this that I change my white balance to 'tungsten' when shooting with constant light.



Internationally exhibited photographer and published author, Miss Aniela, runs workshops teaching the construction of a trick-levitation image, from shoot to edit. Miss Aniela also runs 'Shoot Experiences' inviting photographers of all levels to shoot a range of fully styled models in large locations. Shoot your own fashion portraits with a range of lighting techniques, guidance on hand. Everything from props to lighting equipment and lunch is supplied, and most importantly, full rights release to your images. The next Shoot Experience is taking place on 22nd October in London. For prices and booking on Miss Aniela's event please email [contact@missaniela.com](mailto:contact@missaniela.com) or see [www.missanielablog.com/events](http://www.missanielablog.com/events)

### **Jason Swain, landscape photographer**



*Image © Jason Swain*

### **Low light Photography Tip 1: Invest in equipment**

If one of the more expensive prime lenses is beyond your budget, consider the Sigma 10-20mm f/4-5.6 - it's a versatile lens and still the first one in my bag.

It offers great value for money, even after all these years. Shooting at such a wide angle (10mm) really grabs a lot of sky, making the most of any available light out there as well as giving you that ultra-wide look.

### **Low light Photography Tip 2: Dramatic mono**

When the colour is draining from the sky, abandon colour shots and go for dramatic black & whites instead. If you're having trouble visualising what your landscape will look like in mono, set the picture style to monochrome in Live View mode and preview how it will look.

### **Low light Photography Tip 3: Filter it**

ND filters are useful for retaining details in the foreground when shooting into a relatively bright sky, so always carry a set with you. Don't be afraid not to use them however. Shooting without them will help to silhouette foreground features for dramatic effects in low light shooting.

### **Low light Photography Tip 4: Increase your speed**

When using a shallow depth of field to focus on foreground items and create bokeh, increase the shutter speed to let in less light and retain the low-light look and feel of your scene.

### **Low light Photography Tip 5: Ditch the tripod**

Most people will tell you that to take great landscape shots you need to use a tripod and that for successful low light shots they are imperative. Well, I very rarely use one, except for long exposures, favouring instead the freedom that handholding gives me.

### **Low light Photography Tip 6: Handhold properly**

Faster and brighter lenses and higher shutter speeds really help when you are capturing low-light landscapes. Don't forget to try the different IS (OS) modes on your lenses too.

If you haven't got a lens with that option, you can always use the ground or wall as a makeshift tripod, with the added bonus of also getting a unique point of view for the shot.

### **Low light Photography Tip 7: Create composites**

Sometimes I like to create composite landscapes in low light. Experimenting is key to success here. If you want focus to remain consistent, then shoot at a lower shutter speed for the darker areas, but you can also try the same shutter speeds with different aperture settings to manufacture a depth of field that might normally be beyond your lens' capability.

### **Low light Photography Tip 8: Accept some underexposure**

Remember with low light landscapes the whole point is to embrace the gathering darkness and celebrate the last rays of light and the reflections on the waters surface.

Don't use fill-flash, just accept that some areas will stay underexposed. You're interested in the highlights and having them remain natural and for the whole scene to feel natural, moving away from the computer generated feel of HDR imagery.

### **Low light Photography Tip 9: Don't rush**

Don't rush into your shot, I often like to sit and enjoy the sunset before getting the camera out, only taking pictures once the sun has gone below the horizon. This also helps me notice the little details that I want to later include in my composition.

### **Low light Photography Tip 10: Use reflections**

I'm not necessarily looking for perfect symmetry when I include reflections, but I do often use the reflections to help create leading lines and draw the eye to where I want the focus of the shot to be.



Based on the Isle of Wight, Jason Swain specializes in fine art landscapes and action/lifestyle photography with the common theme of the islands beautiful coastline. See more of Jason's portfolio at [www.jasonswain.co.uk](http://www.jasonswain.co.uk).

*To see more pictures by the photographers above, and to read more tips like these from other photographers, pick the October issue of Photography Monthly, currently on newsstands*

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