



# LANCE KEIMIG'S DARK OBSESSION

## A 30-YEAR VOYAGE INTO THE NIGHT

BY JEFF WIGNALL

SOME PEOPLE KNOW right away when they've found their life's path, others spend a lifetime searching for it. Photographer Lance Keimig ([www.thenightskye.com](http://www.thenightskye.com)) is one of the lucky ones: he knew from the first exposures that night photography was going to become one of his passions—though surely he had no idea where that infatuation would take him creatively. “The first roll of film I ever shot was in my bedroom with the lights turned off and the camera on a tripod. My girlfriend and I waved a flashlight around experimenting with lighting each other, and pointing the light back at the camera,” he says in describing his first pilgrimage into night photography. “The pictures sucked, but I was thrilled at the time, and it obviously inspired me to continue down that dark alley. I loved the idea of capturing or creating something that didn't exist in real time and couldn't be seen with the eyes. Playing with time, compressing minutes into a single image was—and still is—exciting.”

For the past 30 years Keimig has devoted most of his professional life to night shooting, light painting and to teaching others what he knows. In 1997 he co-founded the Nocturnes Night Photography Workshops (with then partner Tim Baskerville) in San Francisco, and has been teaching workshops and classes on the subject

ever since. He has taught night shooting as an adjunct professor at the New England School of Photography and at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston. His book *Night Photography: Finding Your Way in the Dark* (Focal Press) has been translated in to 5 languages and (along and with his teaching partner Scott Martin),

Birsay, Orkney, Scotland, 2013, 2:45 am. Simmer Dim—the name of the everlasting twilight of Scottish summer as the sun skirts just below the horizon for a few hours. Keimig exposes the scene for 30 seconds at f/8 (ISO 160) with a Canon 5D MKII and an Olympus 24mm f/3.5 PC lens.

Keimig runs a very popular series of night photo workshops. He also leads international photo tours aimed at both daytime and nighttime shooting.

He has, in short, turned a playful experiment into a very creative and prosperous career.

### THE LURE OF THE NIGHT

Like most night shooters Keimig (who splits his time between Santa Cruz, California and Duxbury, Massachusetts) readily admits to being a born night owl but says it was the mixing of darkness with different sources of light that drew him into night shooting. “In the daytime, we're working with a single light source, either the point source of the sun on a clear day or the diffused sky on an overcast day. At night, in the manmade environment, the light comes from many different sources, from every direction and in almost every color,” he says. “Out in nature, of course, it's different. In the darker natural landscape, time becomes the dominant factor.”

All photos © Lance Keimig



Lerwick, Shetland, Scotland, 2013. Keimig stitched 2 shots together to form this panorama of this incredibly picturesque little harbor. "I spent the whole night photographing in this one area," he recalls. The exposure was for 30 seconds at f/5.6 (ISO 100). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII with an Olympus 24mm f/3.5 PC lens.

The passage of time and the interaction with the night also play a major role in many of Keimig's night shots. "The extended exposures required by lower light levels mean that there is plenty of opportunity for transformation and that can be in the form of time compressed into a single image, recorded and expressed in a photo in a way that we cannot directly perceive or the long exposure time may simply afford the opportunity to be an active participant in the process of making the image, by adding light. Some light painters go so far as to say that what they do is performance art. I wouldn't go that far, but it is a ritual and a source of both relaxation and energy for me," he says.

Keimig says he is also fascinated with the changes that occur in the environment during the length of an exposure. "I like that over the course of a long exposure, the world goes on its merry way and time does not stop for my photos—whatever else is going to happen, will. If I'm lucky, those changes that occur during my exposure make something interesting happen. The most boring night photographs are static, not much has happened, and the resulting image looks like a slightly weird daytime shot with the faint lines of star trails in the sky."

## A WORLD OF SUBJECTS

Keimig's subjects range from the deserts of the American Southwest to the



Callanish Standing Stones, Isle of Lewis, Scotland. "A car pulled into the parking area for the standing stones just as I was setting up this shot and the low fog was emphasized by the backlighting from the car headlights," Keimig says of this foggy Scottish landscape. The exposure was for 60 seconds at f/11 (ISO 100). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII and a Nikkor 28mm f/3.5 PC lens.

Aurora Borealis in Iceland to foggy night street scenes of Scotland and, he says, much of his work is inspired by travel. "One of my favorite photographers, Michael Kenna, once said something like, 'I'm not sure if I travel because I photograph, or the other way around', but that's very much how I feel," says Keimig. The two are inter-connected, and I always find inspiration in new environments. Some may say that it's easier to photograph in unfamiliar surroundings, since everything is new. That may well be, but I try to get below the surface, and photograph more than just the obvious things that jump out at you. Photographing at night goes a long

way toward that end as it forces me to slow down, spend quality time and get a better understanding of a place. There's a huge difference between pulling over along the side of the road and taking a few shots, and spending 3 or 4 hours photographing in the same location. I like the treasure hunting aspect of travel photography too, and that is also amplified at night because you have to look that much harder."

He is particularly fond of the desert. "Most people experience the desert as a barren and empty wasteland from the comfort of their air-conditioned cars. Cruising along at 75 mph, it's easy to miss the subtlety and beauty of the



Owens Dry Lake, near Keeler, California. Keimig stitched 4 vertical shots together with Photomerge in PSCS6 to create this star-filled panoramic. "Only a fraction of those stars were visible to the naked eye," he says. The exposures had to be kept to 20 seconds to prevent trailing. Each exposure was 20 seconds at f/2 (ISO 6400). Shot with a Canon 6D, Rokikon 24mm f/1.4 lens.



Stones of Stenness, Orkney, Scotland. Backlighting with a warm LED flashlight, plus side lighting on the front stone made this dynamic shot even more dramatic. "I needed to get some exercise, so challenged myself to get the lighting done in 30 seconds," says the photographer. He made the shot with an exposure of 30 seconds at f/8 (ISO 800). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII mounted with an Olympus 24mm f/3.5 PC lens.

quiet landscapes between the national parks of the American West. I'm drawn to the desert by the fierceness of the landscape, and the unique culture of the sturdy people who live there," says Keimig. "The evidence of humanity's tenuous existence there is slowly absorbed back into the Earth, and I've long been compelled to photograph it while it lasts. The night provides cover for my photographic explorations, cover from the blistering heat, and the hard light of the midday sun. Like the many desert creatures that inhabit the night, I'm most at ease after the sun has set, free to explore the solitary wonder of this hidden world."

In what seems kind of like a journey to a polar opposite, he's also done extensive shooting in Iceland—in winter. While in Iceland he got the chance to photograph the Aurora Borealis and says seeing that unexpectedly flare up was a "huge bonus" visually. "What an experience. It's surprising that they are so much brighter in camera than what we see with our eyes," he says. "That said, we see in real time, but the camera accumulates light over time, and does not lose sensitivity in low light the way our eyes do. People are always amazed at the color in their first night images because all they could see was blue when they were out photographing."

#### **LIGHTING DECISIONS**

One of the issues that Keimig has to address is deciding how a particular



Shack, Rhyolite, Nevada. Stars filled the western sky about an hour after sunset on a moonless night when Keimig shot this desert shack. A dim LED light was placed in the shack (on the floor) and a dim warm LED light was used to light the bushes. The exposure was a relatively brief 30 seconds at f/2.8 (ISO 12800). "It's very difficult to light paint at high ISO with short exposures, as it is hard to have much control when you are moving so quickly—but I enjoy the challenge of getting it all in one shot," he says. Shot with a Canon 6D and a Sigma 35mm f/1.4 lens.



Chicken Coops, Rhyolite, Nevada. This shot, says Keimig, represents another super fast lighting job. "This was the most difficult shot I've ever tried to pull off in 30 seconds, as it involved lighting the interior of both coops, as well as running all the way around the structure lighting the landscape. It took about 7 or 8 tries before I got this one," he recalls. The exposure was 30 seconds at f/2 (ISO 6400). Shot with a Canon 6D with a Rokinon 24mm f/1.4 lens.



Aurora Borealis, Iceland. "Exposures for photos of the Aurora Borealis need to be kept short and the Aurora often moves quickly in the sky," says Keimig. First quarter moonlight provided illumination for the landscape, but also reduced the visibility of the Aurora. The exposure was 20 seconds at f/4 (ISO 3200). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII with an Olympus 24mm f/2.8 lens.

location should be lit—and what the balance should be between the ambient light and whatever light he chooses to introduce. "It depends on the location. For urban locations I generally rely on existing light for the most part, I spend my time looking for light rather than making it. I mostly look for mixed lighting, often where light sources do not necessarily overlap, but where one wall is lit with sodium vapor, another with metal halide, for example," he says.

In a departure from his early night-shooting experiments, Keimig says he depends less on painting and more on the atmosphere of the ambient lighting and says that when he adds lighting it's often to contrast with the existing lighting colors. "I have always been interested in how we humans alter the landscape, and my images are usually about manmade objects in nature. I consider light to be a manmade object too," he says. "If I am photographing in an urban environment, usually the lighting is sodium vapor, which is pretty warm. In those instances, if I add light, I usually pick a complimentary cool LED light. In nature, where the natural light is cooler, I use warm incandescent."

Ice Monster, Iceland. Retreating tides carved this limousine sized ice sculpture, which took 3 people an hour to figure out how to light. The varying density of the ice and small footprint made it both difficult to light evenly and difficult to avoid being seen behind, says the photographer. Exposed for 30 seconds at f/4 (ISO 400). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII equipped with a Nikkor 28mm f/3.5 PC lens.



Aurora Borealis, Iceland. Keimig says he loves mixing natural and man made lights and enjoyed combining the glow of distant sodium vapor lights in Reykjavik with the Aurora Borealis and light painting on the house in the foreground to create this very unusual image. "Most people try to avoid any artificial light with Aurora images," he says. He shot the photos with an exposure of 20 seconds at f/4 (ISO 3200). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII with an Olympus 24mm f/2.8 lens.



Thermal Conduit, Myvatn, Iceland. "I'm particularly proud of this image because it has so much going on," says Keimig. "An unusually static Aurora allowed for a long exposure and star trails, plus a long steam plume from a nearby thermal energy plant and a key bit of red light added to the foreground pipe, that was also keeping me warm during this frigid night. The icing on the cake was the unexpected iridium flare in just the right part of the sky. Iridium communication satellites create distinctive streaks of light in the sky as the satellite rotates and reflects sunlight. I didn't notice the flare until I loaded the image into Lightroom." The exposure was 11 minutes at f/5.6 (ISO 640). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII with a Nikkor 28mm f/3.5 PC lens.



Jupiter Rising, Terlingua, Texas. A short exposure was used in this shot to freeze the movement of the stars and Jupiter combined with moonlight, and ambient artificial light. "The planet Jupiter is a key part of the composition, and the challenge was composing the shots so that all of the elements worked together and the distractions were minimized," says Keimig. He exposed the scene for 20 seconds at f/5.6 (ISO 6400). Shot with a Canon 5D MKII and a Nikkor 28mm f/3.5 PC lens.

The lighting design is largely a process that is dictated by the subject, and what he wants to say about it. "It's an evolutionary process that unfolds as I start photographing. I usually have a pretty good idea after a few exposures, then try to nail it down and refine the lighting," he says. "I light to draw attention to something, and do it thoughtfully so that I can create a mood, atmosphere or feeling. I think of my photographs as suggestive rather than literal."

## GETTING STARTED

What are Keimig's best tips for finding success in night shooting? "Take time to work through a shot from concept to completion, don't give up because it doesn't look the way you expected after 1 or 2 exposures. Look at the work of others, figure out how they do what they do, and then improve upon it and make it your own," he says. And take a class or a workshop if you can, the experience of learning with a group of others who are similarly curious and inspired is exhilarating."

Lastly he says, while you're out there, don't forget to stop and look up at the stars, or the moon. "Leave your phone in the car." ■