

Compensating for Flash and Backlighting

Photography is all about lighting—specifically, how light reflects off a surface and into the camera lens. So things tend to turn ugly when the lighting is all wrong. One classic example of bad lighting is *backlighting*, where the background is bright and the foreground subject is in shadow. Every photographer knows that you adjust for backlighting by adding a fill flash, but even the best of us forget. An opposite problem occurs when shooting photos at night or in dimly lit rooms using a consumer-grade flash. You end up with unnaturally bright foreground subjects set against dark backgrounds.

Whether your subject is underexposed or overexposed, the solution is the Shadow/Highlight command, which lets you radically transform shadows and highlights while maintaining reasonably smooth transitions between the two. Here's how it works:

1. **Open an image.** Open the file called *Rooster in shadows.jpg*, found in the *Lesson 02* folder inside *Lesson Files-PsCS3 1on1*. When I shot the image, I chose an exposure setting with the bright Key West sunlight in mind. As a result, the highlights are balanced but the shadows are not (see Figure 2-32). A fill flash might have helped, but alas, I didn't have my flash with me. So an unacceptably dark and murky rooster is what I got.
2. **Open the Histogram palette.** Choose **Window** → **Histogram** to display the **Histogram** palette. (If the palette was already visible, choosing the command will hide it. Choose the command again to display it.)



Figure 2-32.

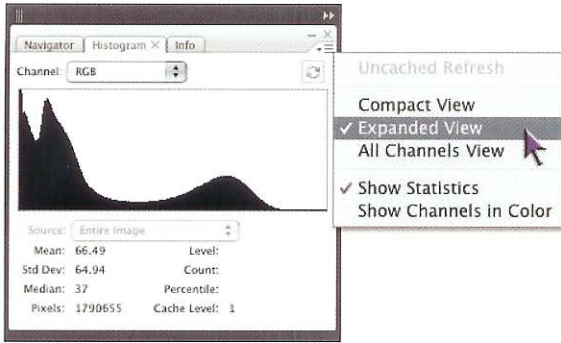


Figure 2-33.

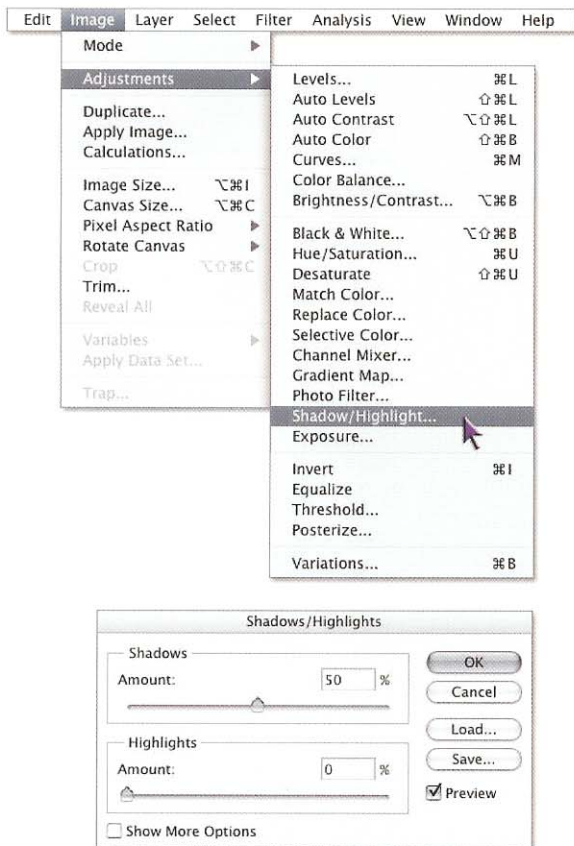


Figure 2-34.

3. *Hide the color channels.* Unlike Levels and Curves, the Shadow/Highlight command lacks individual channel controls. Photoshop applies your changes to all channels at once, so there's no point in wasting valuable screen real estate on multiple histograms. Click the \equiv icon in the upper-right corner of the Histogram palette, and then choose **Expanded View** from the palette menu to see just one large histogram, as in Figure 2-33.

4. *Choose the Shadow/Highlight command.* Choose **Image** → **Adjustments** → **Shadow/Highlight**. The resulting **Shadows/Highlights** dialog box is simple compared to the ones we've seen so far, containing just two slider bars (see Figure 2-34). The Shadows option lets you lighten the darkest colors; the Highlights option darkens the lightest colors.

5. *Adjust the shadows and highlights.* By default, Photoshop is too enthusiastic about lightening the shadows and not enthusiastic enough about darkening the highlights. To temper the dark colors, reduce the **Shadows** value to 30 percent. Then raise the **Highlights** value to 10 percent (see Figure 2-35).

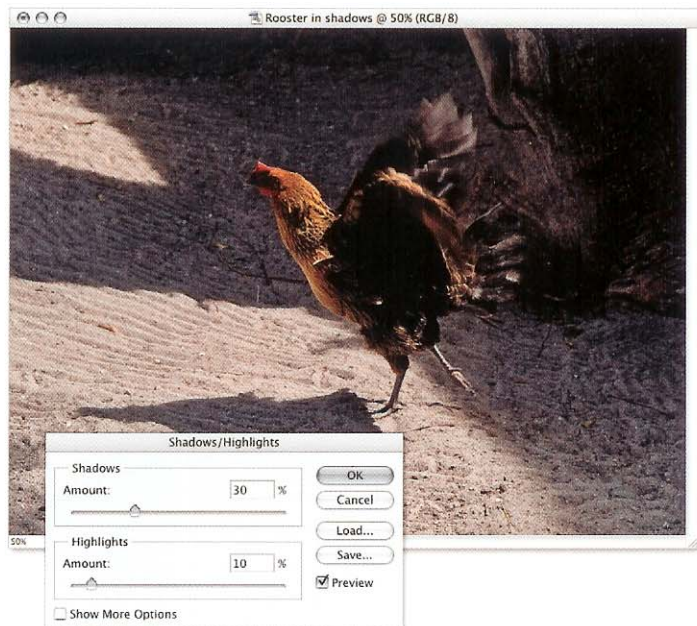


Figure 2-35.

6. *Show the advanced options.* The Shadows/Highlights dialog box may appear a bit feeble—especially when compared with the likes of Levels and Curves—but it’s got a tiger in its tank. To unleash that tiger, select the **Show More Options** check box. Photoshop unfurls the options pictured in Figure 2-36.

7. *Maximize the Radius values.* The underlying code behind Shadow/Highlight bears a closer resemblance to the filters discussed in Lesson 8, “Adjusting Focus,” than it does to Levels and Curves. (In fact, some of Shadow/Highlight’s underlying code is based on the High Pass filter, discussed in the “Using Blur to Sharpen” sidebar on page 272.) This means that, left to its own devices, the Shadow/Highlight command tends to sharpen an image. To prevent an overly sharpened effect, raise both **Radius** values—one under **Shadows** and the other under **Highlights**—to 100 pixels. A large Radius value distributes the effect, resulting in the smoothest possible transitions between our friends the highlights, shadows, and midtones.

8. *Modify the Tonal Width values.* The two **Tonal Width** options control the range of brightness values that Photoshop regards as shadows or highlights. Because our image consists of slightly more shadows than highlights, we want to lightly narrow the definition of the former (the shadows) and barely widen the latter. So reduce the Tonal Width for **Shadows** to 40 percent and increase the Tonal Width for **Highlights** to 70 percent.

9. *Increase the amount of shadow.* Having tempered the shadows by decreasing the Tonal Width and increasing the Radius, the dark shades can tolerate a higher **Amount** value. Raise the Amount in the Shadows section from 30 percent to 60 percent to increase the brightness of the darkest colors in the photo.

10. *Lower the Color Correction value.* Much like the Saturation value in the Hue/Saturation dialog box (see Step 18, page 56), the **Color Correction** option lets you adjust the intensity of colors. For the most part, the colors are fine in this image, though the reds in the rooster’s beak are a bit too intense for my taste. Lower the Color Correction value to +10 and leave the other **Adjustments** values as they are. Figure 2-37 shows the Shadows/Highlights dialog box with the final values entered.

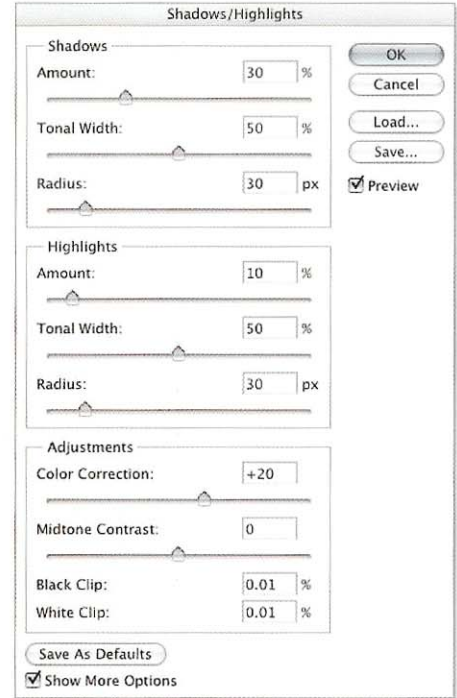


Figure 2-36.

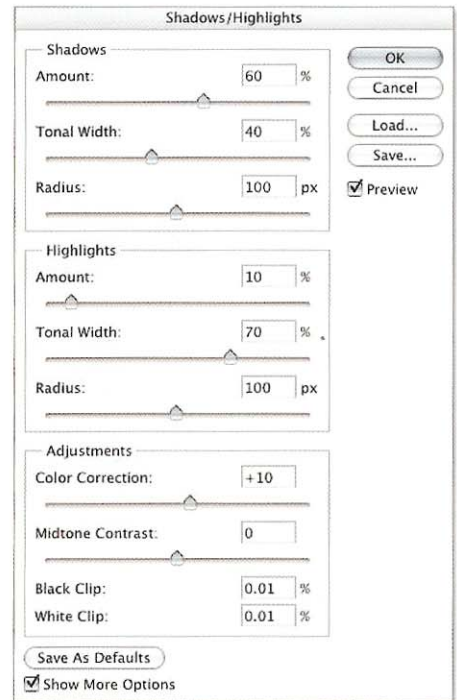


Figure 2-37.

11. *Accept your changes.* Click the **OK** button or press Enter or Return to apply your changes and exit the Shadows/Highlights dialog box.

Shown in Figure 2-38, the result is pretty impressive. Pressing Ctrl+Z (or ⌘-Z) a few times will show you how effectively this command has improved our image. We've successfully pulled a ton of detail from the shadows, all without blowing out the brighter areas, pushing the midtones into grays, or shifting the color balance (as Curves can sometimes do). This makes Shadow/Highlight the best one-stop method in all of Photoshop for correcting extremely high-contrast images.

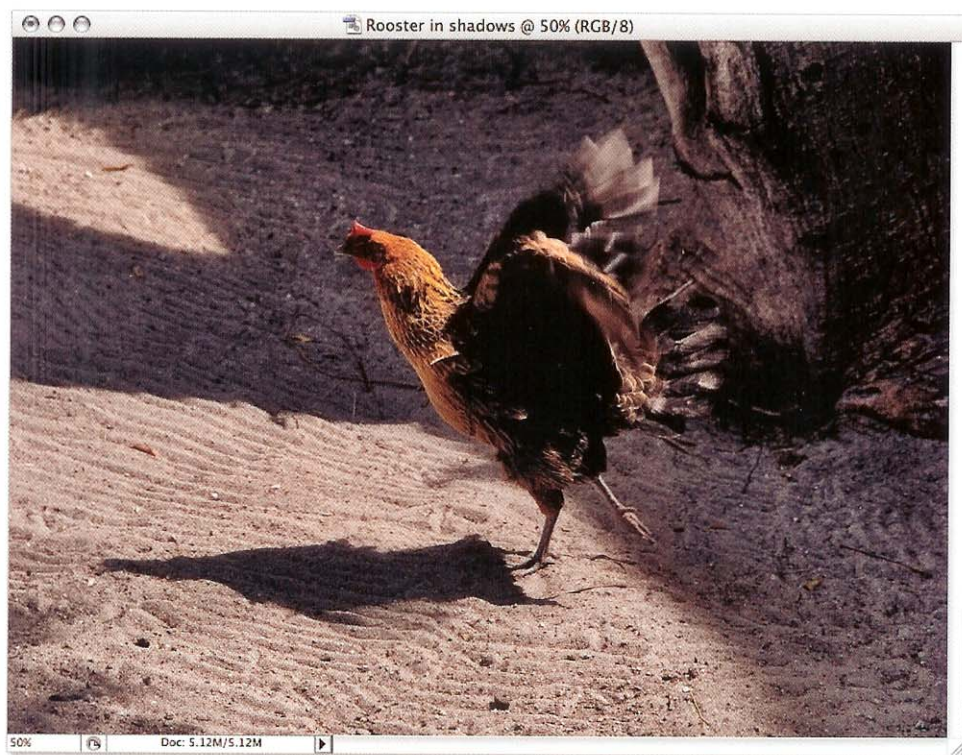


Figure 2-38.