Digital Lith – An Alternative Method

Darkroom Lith images have a very distinctive appearance with soft, glowing highlights and gritty shadows. The image tones vary from a soft pink/peach through to more rich brown tones. The darkroom technique, although complicated, produces some really attractive results that have provided difficult to emulate digitally. This is a method that goes some way towards producing a credible result.

The trick is to start with a suitable image. This should have a full range of tones with strong shapes. Quite often the highlight detail can be lost and the image should be able to stand that to be successful.

Open an image in Photoshop.

Convert it to monochrome if it is a colour image. Do not 'Convert to Greyscale' or desaturate. The use of Channel Mixer or the Black & White conversion option available in later versions of Photoshop.

Duplicate the Background. Ctrl+J

With the duplicate layer active **create a Levels adjustment layer and clip it to the layer**.

To clip a layer do one of the following:

- Click the icon at the bottom of the adjustment layer panel (CS5 only) outlined in red on the right.
- Menu > Layer > Create Clipping Mask
- Hold the Alt key, place the mouse point on the join between the adjustment layer and the layer being adjusted. When the mouse pointer changes to overlapping circles (see right) click the mouse.

Note: Adjustment layers affect all underlying layers by default. Clipping an adjustment layer to a specific layer restricts the affect to that one layer without affecting any other layers.
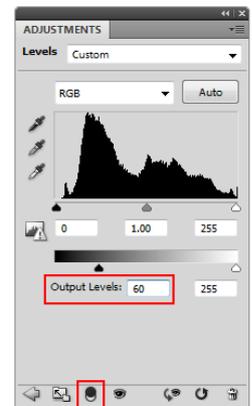
Set the black triangle on the Output slider to 60. Outlined in red on the right.

This will reduce the contrast of the image.

Create a Hue & Saturation adjustment layer.

Tick the Colorize box and alter the Hue and Saturation sliders to give a suitable tone. Try a Hue of about 25 and a Saturation of about 30. The choice is yours.

Turn off the duplicate layer (The clipped levels layer will 'grey out').

Activate the Background layer.

Create a Levels adjustment layer. Set the Input sliders from 0-255 to 30-130. This will significantly increase the contrast.

Sharpen the Background layer using Unsharp Mask. This will increase the contrast further and provide an element of grittiness. The setting used will depend on the resolution of the image. A higher resolution image will require a higher degree of sharpening. As a recommendation try: Amount 120-150%, Radius 5-7, Threshold 0.

Activate the duplicate layer and change the blend mode to Multiply.

Recheck the upper Hue and Saturation layer and, if necessary adjust the settings.

To add more glow to the image:

Activate the Background layer.

Active the Channels panel.

Hold the Control key and click on the RGB thumbnail. This will select all values from 128 up to 255.

Go back to Layers.

Copy the selection. (Ctrl+J)

Go to Filter> Distort > Diffuse Glow. The image in the display area will probably be too big. Hit Ctrl+0 to bring the size down to fill the frame.

Set Graininess to 0, Glow to 5-6 and Clear to 10.

If the highlights are blown out. Create a layer mask and paint with black at about 30% to bring a bit of detail back. Don't overdo this as you may reduce the glow too much. Once you hare content with the result merge this layer with the Background. Do one of the following:

- Ctrl+E
- Layer > Merge Down

A characteristic of a Lith print is grittiness in the shadow areas. If your image needs more grittiness add some noise.

With the Background layer active create a new layer.

Fill the new layer with 50% Grey in the Contents area. Leave the Blending to Normal mode and Opacity at 100%.

From the Menu select: Filter > Noise > Add Noise.

Select Amount 10%-15%, Distribution – Gaussian and tick the Monochromatic box.

Change the blend mode of this layer to Linear Light. If the effect is too severe reduce the opacity of the layer.

Finally, readjust the H&S adjustment layer, if required.