

Home alone



Great portraits are possible in your living room with just one studio light. Roger Payne shows you how it's done

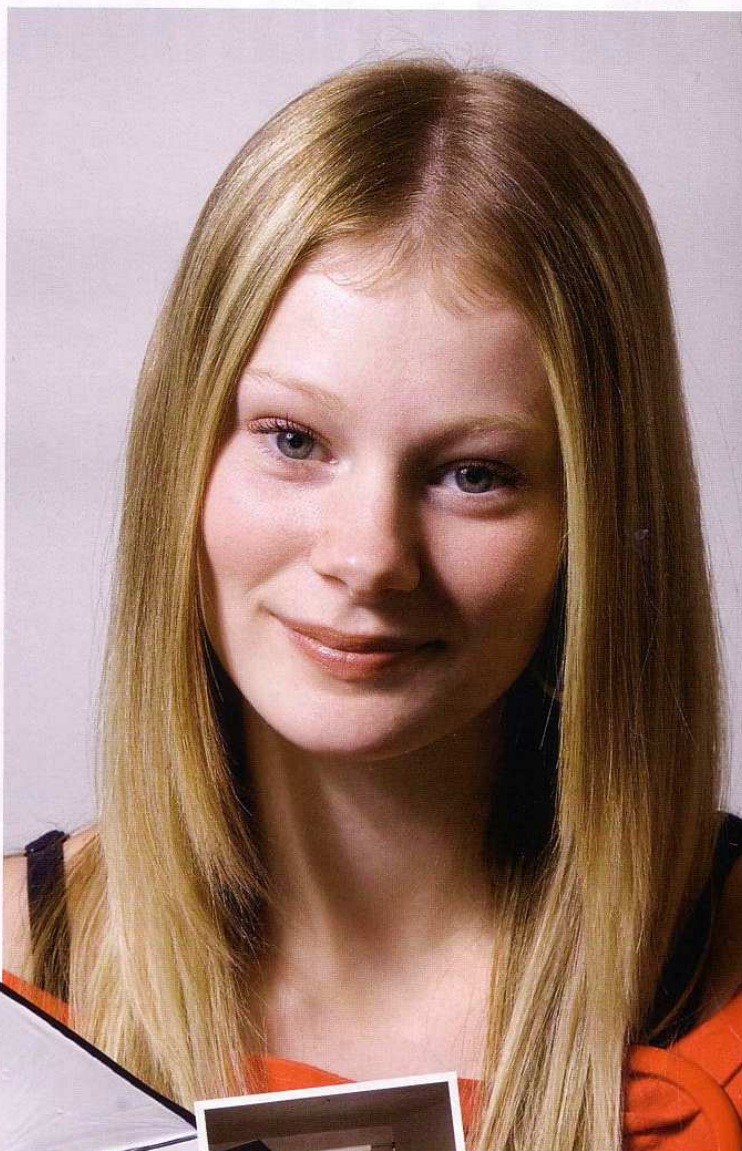
It's easy to over complicate studio lighting; to think that the more lights you use, the better the result you're going to get. But the fact of the matter is, studio lighting needn't be overly scientific, in fact it can be kept very simple, which is what I set out to show here.

All these pictures of Melissa were taken with a single studio head, in a conventionally-sized living room, using a couple of home-made accessories. There's nothing complicated in that, now is there? **FW**

Technique

Setting up

The living room we used for our portrait shoot measured approximately 12x20 feet, giving us more than enough space to work. After bundling the sofas at one end, we set up a half width roll of white paper on a background system and used a Lastolite Lumen 8 studio head to provide the illumination. Exposure was calculated using a Sekonic lightmeter, although it is possible with digital SLRs to use the histogram to work out the correct settings.



Brolly only

We started off nice and simply, by firing the light into a white brolly positioned to the left of the camera. The result is acceptable, but has created harsh shadows on the opposite side of Melissa's face. This type of lighting would work better on a male subject.



Brolly with white reflector

The easiest (and cheapest) way to balance lighting is with a home-made reflector. In this case we used a 5x3ft white polystyrene sheet positioned just out of shot on the right. I had an assistant, but a spare lighting stand can do the job just as well. The result is a definite improvement.



Brolly with white reflector under chin

I sat Melissa back down again and pressed the white polystyrene reflector back into action. This time, however, I positioned it on her crossed legs to add some definition to her chin and neck area. The result is quite flattering.



Brolly with silver reflector under chin

As an alternative to the previous shot, I quickly fashioned a home-made silver reflector using a sheet of A3 card and some tin foil. Although much smaller than the polystyrene reflector, its effect is quite dramatic.



Technique

Balancing ambient and flash

Feeling a little more ambitious, I decided to use the softbox to combine studio flash with outdoor lighting. I started by taking a meter reading for the daylight – it was a dull day giving an exposure of 1/30sec at f/5.6. Next job is to set the flash so that you get a reading of f/5.6. The variable power on the Lumen 8 head made this simple. If your studio flash only has one or two power settings, move it further away or closer to the model to get the right aperture reading.

Once both ambient and flash readings are delivering f/5.6, take the picture using the original ambient exposure. In brighter conditions, you need to ensure that the shutter speed doesn't exceed your camera's flash sync speed. In our case, we had to make sure that we didn't get any camera shake.

AMBIENT ONLY



AMBIENT & FLASH



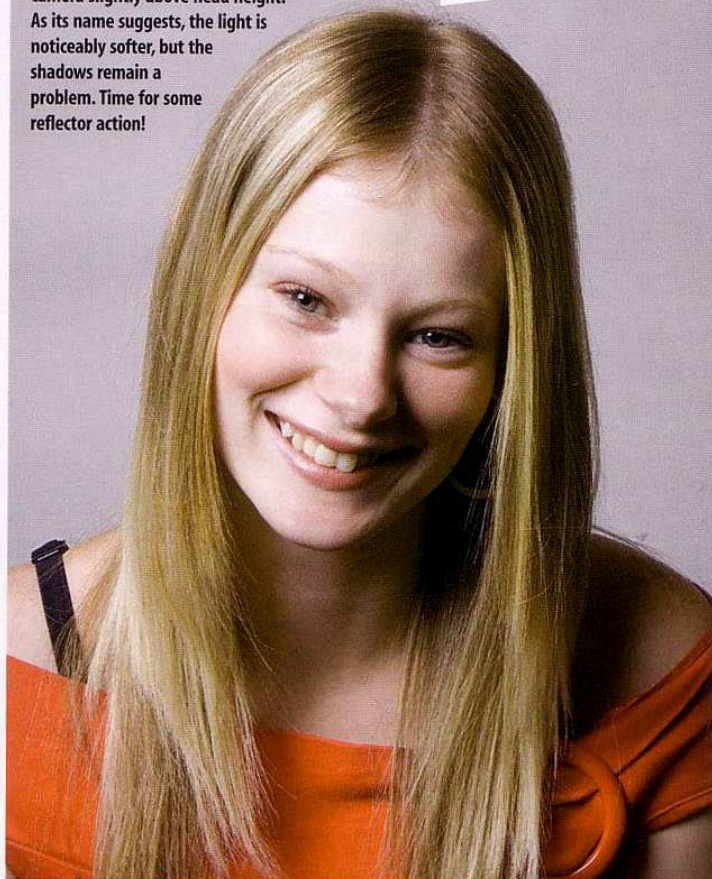
TOO MUCH FLASH



Softbox only

Having exhausted all the options with my light and broly combo, I switched over to a single softbox and positioned it on the left of the camera slightly above head height.

As its name suggests, the light is noticeably softer, but the shadows remain a problem. Time for some reflector action!



Softbox above, reflector below

In theory, I expected this to be the best set-up with a white reflector under Melissa's chin and the softbox directly above the camera. The reality is that, while it's a nice enough portrait, I prefer the result I got with the softbox to the right of the model (see opposite). It's definitely worth experimenting with both set-ups, though.



Softbox only above

As a final option, I moved the softbox so it was positioned directly in front of Melissa, above the camera. This resulted in a slightly more even light, but shadows persisted.



Softbox with white reflector under chin

From my previous experiments, I preferred the reflector's effect when it was positioned under Melissa's chin. The combination of the softbox and the diffusing glow of the reflector have made for a lovely portrait, arguably the best of our session.



What can go wrong?

! Thankfully, not too much can go wrong, but here are some common problems that you may encounter.

1 SHUTTER SPEED TOO FAST Stick to the camera's flash sync speed, or below it.



2 MODEL CLOSING EYES If this is happening regularly, take a break.

3 REFLECTOR IN SHOT Try an alternative viewpoint, or lower the reflector ensuring that you don't lose the lighting you're after.



4 BACKGROUND ROLL IN SHOT A common problem in home studio shots. Ask your model to sit down, go for a slightly higher viewpoint or (if ceiling space allows) take the background roll higher.