



Lite fantastic

Michael Roscoe finds out whether the Lastolite HiLite background can be a star performer in a photographer's studio set-up

Lastolite has certainly broadened its appeal since the days when it was most associated with the humble, collapsible reflector. This company still produces silver, gold and white reflectors that come in all shapes and sizes but it has expanded its portfolio of commodities to include everything from a range of budget monobloc flash heads and lighting kits, to products as diverse as a 'baby poser' and exposure and calibration tools.

One of the latest goods to roll off the Lastolite production line is a device called a HiLite Background. It doesn't take an Einstein to work out that this new device is designed to ease the process of achieving a pure white high key (overexposed) backdrop. It is primarily aimed at photographers

who have small studios or who work in environments that are not particularly spacious, such as domestic settings.

The HiLite Background is available in two sizes and I tested the bigger of the pair, measuring 1.8x2.15m. It comes in a distinctive soft blue pouch almost identical to the type of bag in which their famed reflectors are presented, apart from the fact that this one was nearly waist height when standing on its end. Despite its cartwheel dimensions, however, as it is still light enough to be considered portable so that it can be used on location. And when it's not needed, it won't take up too much storage space in its flat, collapsed position.

The setting up process is very straightforward and takes just a

few minutes even when doing it for the first time. Photographers could be forgiven for thinking it's an oversized reflector, even after opening the pouch, as it unfurls in a much the same way as a reflector. It is worth being reasonably cautious at this stage of the setting up process, as it suddenly springs into place and could catch unsuspecting users by surprise when it rapidly extends itself to its full size. It is then transformed into a three-dimensional pod-like object by fitting four black rods to each corner so that it can stand up without support in either a horizontal or portrait format position.

Operating issues

The HiLite Background is made out of a lightweight material

with a plastic coating. The corners and back are black and this whole rear area is made out of a thicker rubbery plastic impenetrable by light. There are four zips on each of its side sections so that several flash heads can be poked inside the pure white interior of the HiLite.

I first positioned one monobloc head attached to a boom through the top of the background and fired a test shot to check the spread of light. I was surprised at the very even illumination achieved when using a single flash unit – I also tried it out using another couple of flash heads placed at the side.

I determined that the single flash was more than adequate to achieve a soft and diffused high key effect, especially so when

Above: The HiLite background from Lastolite, in action – set-up is quick and simple.



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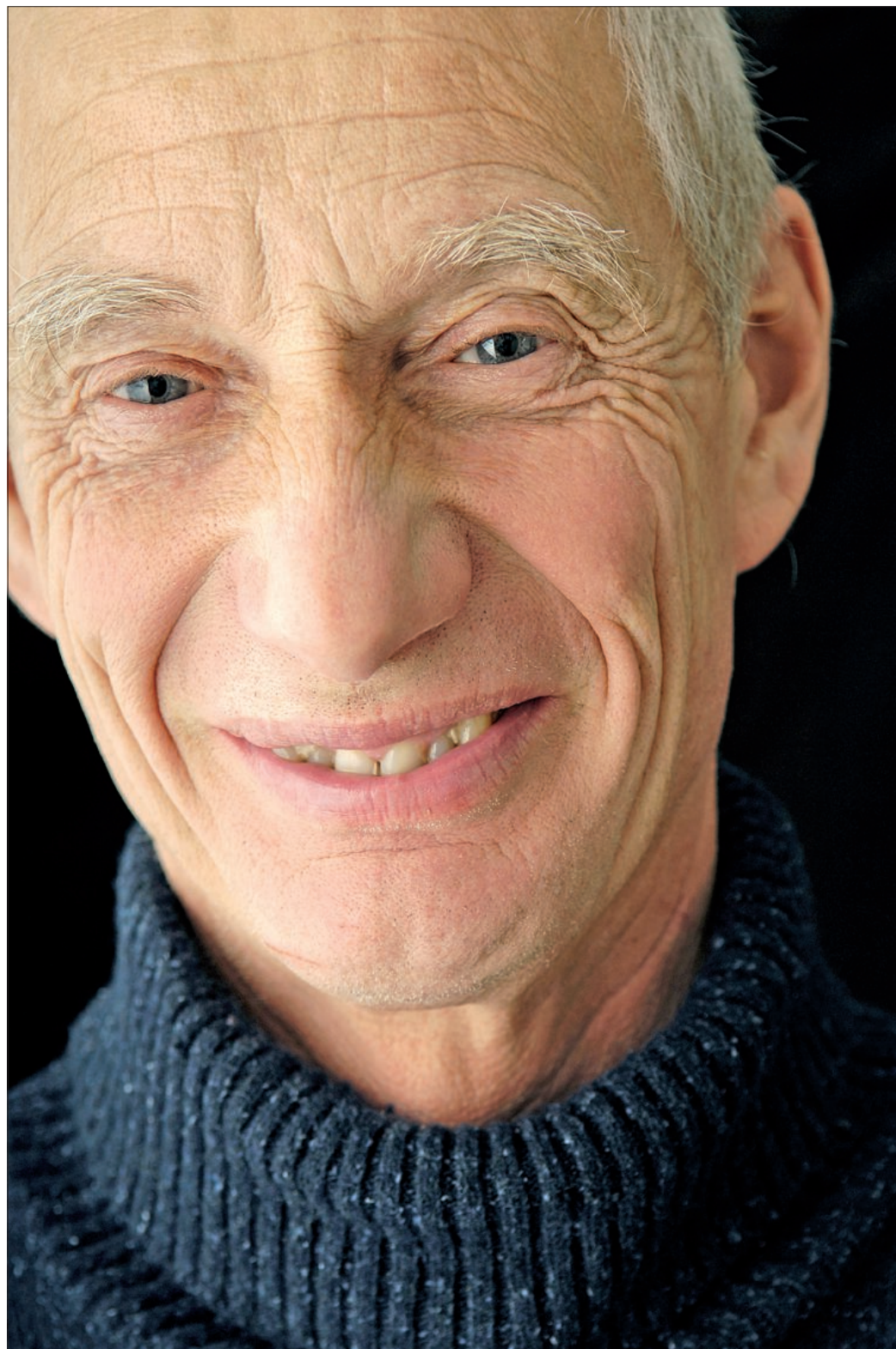
shooting a close up headshot.

The large size of the HiLite model that I tested meant that models had enough scope to move around freely, without the exposure or quality of light varying much in the background. It is possible to get an even more diffused light effect by zipping up and firing the flash heads through the side panels but it is more likely this way that you'll get some light spillage unless the lights are flagged off.

One notable aspect of the HiLite is that sitters can be positioned at around half a metre away from the translucent screen with minimal light spilled on to the subject, or next to the front panel to create a pleasing soft highlight across the side of the face. I used the HiLite continuously on several occasions, including for a whole afternoon, with three flash head modelling lamps on full power pointing directly at the side panels. I was

reassured to notice that although they did become hot, they didn't look anywhere near melting or smouldering.

Once I'd finished using the HiLite, the final test was to put it away. It certainly wasn't as simple to break it down and pack it away as it was to set up in the first place. There is a knack to collapsing this device and the first time I did it, there was a lot of head scratching. The second and third attempts became less



challenging, so perhaps it's just worth practising before trying to pack it in front of an audience.

Further functions

If you never use the HiLite for anything else apart from its primary purpose as a white high key background, you won't be disappointed, but it also has a few extra features that extend its creative potential. There is a Velcro strip along a seam in its front panel that will help attach

a cleanable vinyl train that will join the floor and background together so that full-length body shots can be captured as if the model is being photographed on a large infinity curve.

A product like the HiLite also lends itself to other applications such as a large, softbox diffuser for front or side light that would be ideal to fully illuminate models from head to toe. It can also be equally as useful for shooting cutout product shots or used to

Left to right: This sitter was positioned about 15cm away from the HiLite with only minimal light spill cast onto the side of the subject's face. The HiLite was illuminated using three flash heads and the sitter was lit from the front using a ringflash.

The HiLite Background is as effective for product or still life set-ups as it is for portraits. This wine bottle and glasses were lit using three flash heads positioned inside the HiLite, next to front panel, to increase light spill onto the Perspex tabletop.

The HiLite doesn't only have to be used as a tool to create a High Key background, as the light emitted from it is very soft and useful for other applications. This sitter was side-lit with the HiLite and two flash heads against a black velvet background.

SUPERWHITE VINYL BACKGROUND



The HiLite background certainly complements the studio infinity curve but the conventional version is also here to stay. Most pro studio photographers have reasonably positive experiences of using a permanent glass fibre or hardboard curve but the simple paper roll background has some inherent failings. Paper is notoriously easy to damage with knocks, marks, scuffs, and creases, meaning that all too often the rolls have to be replaced after a single use.

A hardwearing, economical, alternative comes in the form of Lastolite's Superwhite Vinyl Background. It's the same width as Lastolite's paper rolls, measuring 2.75mx6m. Although

it feels heavier, I was still able to suspend it in reasonable safety from two lightweight Manfrotto 052B stands and a 272B cross bar. A detailed look at the vinyl reveals that on one side it is smooth and, as the names suggests, 'superwhite', and on the opposite side it has some small indented dimples and a slightly glossy surface.

In use there were no perceptible differences between it and a paper version, light bouncing off them both in a similar manner. One noticeable distinction was that the vinyl didn't curl up like the paper background, although it was still best to secure it with some gaffer

tape. It also didn't habitually ripple, it withstood the odd knock and models could walk freely without rendering it useless afterwards, as it was possible to sponge it down after use.

The main drawback is that it is a bigger financial initial outlay than its conventional, tree-derived cousin at £199.99 (including VAT), but the fact that the vinyl will undoubtedly outlast the paper should make it cheaper in the long run. Another minor disadvantage is that it only comes in (super) white, but overall there can't be many more reasons not to make it your next purchase. My only big question is 'Why hasn't it been invented before?'

replicate soft daylight illumination for still life scenes – shots like a food set-up. Truly desperate photographers could use it for more obscure functions like a portable dressing room (as long as their models don't mind being seen in silhouette) but it's probably best to keep things very simple and employ the HiLite as a large, white reflector to bounce or fill in light, following in the company's best traditions.

Conclusions

Overall, the HiLite is undoubtedly the latest must-have product for the studio practitioner. The manufacturer has taken the simple engineering of the collapsible reflector and developed a logical but clever byproduct. It makes creating an even white background quick and simple, even if it is to be illuminated by a single flash head. It is well constructed but don't count on it to last for-

ever – the zips look a bit flimsy and at this price the seams will not be indestructible.

But it should appeal to a broad range of practitioners, from high-street portrait studios to catalogue, fashion and product photographers. The HiLite would not replace the traditional paper roll backdrop but it's an additional tool in its own right and it will undoubtedly facilitate studio work. **BJP**

Contact

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