

# Funlight

by Noella Ballenger

Santa and his sleigh ... with wiggle and bounce.



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As the Christmas season approaches with all its decorative lights, I thought I'd share a new way to photograph light. It's also a great way to loosen up and unleash your creative powers. "Funlight" is any light that is used as you'd use a paintbrush on a canvas of film. Funlight is a means of breaking all the photographic rules and opening the doors to creative exploration.

My photography partner Jalien Tulley and I travel as a team and frequently drive into the night to reach our photographic destinations. Night driving can be long and tedious. To break the monotony, we turn to our cameras and experiment with color and light. Our subjects include lighted signs, headlights, taillights, and any other lights we

pass. By turning sound photographic rules upside down and inside out, we open up new channels of creativity. The results of our early experiments were delightful, but more importantly, the process itself refreshed us and gave us a ready-to-go attitude for the next day's assignment. (*Important note: one rule we never broke was that the driver couldn't drive and photograph at the same time.*)

## Where to Start

Start wherever you find lights--beside city streets, on the freeways, or along old country roads. We prefer places that have lots of fast food establishments or gas stations. The neon signs are bright, colorful, and offer a variety of shapes and designs. Since we frequently travel from Los Angeles to the Eastern Sierra Nevada region of California, our favorite Funlight spot is the small desert town of Mojave. Because there are no intrusive city lights and/or tall buildings there, our background canvas is as large as the night sky.

It's best to wait for the sky to grow dark rather than to start at twilight. With a rich, black background, the color and intensity of the lights will be more vivid. We use our 35mm SLR's for mobility, but any camera with variable shutter-speed control can be used. It's important that your camera has long exposure capabilities (eight seconds or more) or has a Bulb (B) or Time (T) setting. Automatic cameras need to be used at their long auto exposure settings (if they are long enough) or switched to manual mode.

Our lens preference is a 70-210mm zoom lens. If you're using fixed focal length lenses, stay with the medium-to-long telephotos, as they help to condense distant lights into a more concentrated array. However, there are no restrictions on film. We select the slowest film speed we have available, because we want the longest exposure times. We use all types of film--tungsten to daylight--for a variety of effects. Also, funlight photography provides a great chance to use up outdated, overheated, or X-rayed film. Remember, abstract design and visual exploration--not reality--are the objectives.

The key to painting with light is to keep the shutter open long enough to record the light streaking on the film. The exposure time can be from 1/30 to several seconds (or even minutes) or more. There are no hard and fast rules in determining correct exposure with this type of photography. The variables include the amount of bright light available, the cumulative length of time the film is exposed to the light, and an even balance between the light and dark tones in the image area.



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If you're trying to meter the scene, keep in mind that a camera meter can easily be misled. An averaging meter will give the wrong exposure unless there is a balance between the amount of light and dark tones. If they're balanced, the averaging meter will be accurate. Weight the amount of dark, black tones against the brightness of the lights. If the scene has more black tones, the meter will call for long exposures and not take into account the intensity of the lights in the scene. In this instance, you'll have to compensate accordingly.

Look at the amount of light you're going to include in the image area. If you like dainty, small streaks of light, use a wide-open aperture setting and a faster exposure time. On the other hand, if

you prefer an overall multi-patterned abstract, try a long exposure time and a smaller aperture setting. Experiment with both the aperture and shutter speed settings to determine the results you prefer.

Get ready



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City lights with zooming

To get your creative juices flowing, open the channels in your mind. Permit yourself to be receptive to new ideas and new concepts. When we learn photography, most of us begin by memorizing some very rigid rules. These are good for beginners, but tend to stifle the spirit of exploration and discovery that are the building blocks of creative advancement.

### Breaking Rigid Rules 1-5

1. When handholding your camera, let it shake. Help this along by slowing your shutter speed to no faster than 1/30. Your camera isn't a camera any longer; it's now a paintbrush. Hold it like a paintbrush and use it like one.
2. Ignore the edges of your viewfinder. In fact, don't even look through the viewfinder. Try to do a true "point and shoot."
3. Forget about keeping the filter over your lens free of dust and fingerprints. Your "filter" is now the dirty car windshield. Dust and fingerprints don't matter in Funlight, and shooting through the windshield beats hanging out the window.
4. Forget the super-sharp, well-focused image for a little while. Experiment by not focusing your lens or by turning the focus ring while you're shooting. See if you can make your image work with little or nothing in focus. Think in the abstract. Then, think more abstractly; think super abstractly!
5. Fly by the seat of your pants; leave exposure considerations to chance. Ignore your meter. Set the camera manually for a slow shutter speed or set on bulb (B) or time (T) and push the button. When your finger becomes tired of holding the shutter open, let the button go. Remember, no cheating by counting out the seconds!

Be wild ... go for it!

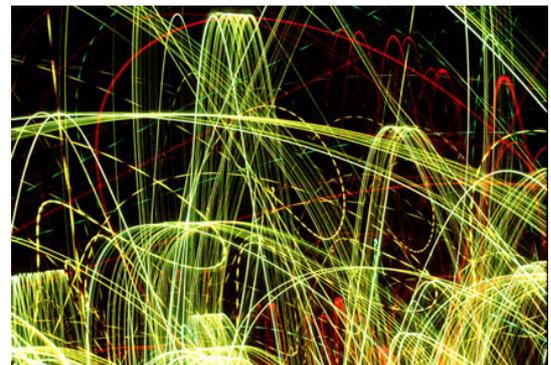
Are you beginning to get the idea of breaking the rules? Feeling more relaxed? Are you having fun? Get into the swing and break as many rules as you can remember. Keep your mood lighthearted, and let your body stay loose. As you shoot, let your body create movement. Bounce up and down, side to side, weave and bob. The looser your body is, the more fun you will have, and the more exciting your images will be.

Zoom lenses seem to be the most satisfactory tool for this kind of fun. You can do so much with them. Try zooming in and zooming out. Try zooming part way and stopping. Defocus and zoom at the same time. Who says that every shot has to be sharp? And remember to pan--vertically, horizontally and diagonally. Not wild enough for you? How about panning and zooming at the same time? Or how about this one: pan vertically and let car lights stream by horizontally? Find your own combinations of panning, zooming, moving, and focusing.

Since you're in the mood now and beginning to go with it, try circles, loops, and figure 8's. For more fun, add music and swing and bounce to the beat. Keep that shutter "hot." Write your name. At this point, remember to let your driver have some fun, too. Play fair and change places. As you drive, find all the dips, bumps, railroad tracks, and speed buttons you can. Teamwork is essential for Funlight, and so is driving safely. If you're alone, stop the car and work from the sidewalk. You can catch great images both in the car and out of it as long as you loosen up and remember to have fun!

<http://www.apogeephoto.com/dec2004/nballenger1.shtml> to see more photos

Noella Ballenger teaches photography workshops in a number of western U.S. locations--including Bodie, California. Joining her Bodie/Eastern Sierra workshop this October will allow workshop participants to enter the buildings to photograph artifacts left by the early pioneers and miners--a privilege regular park visitors do not have. Please check her Website [www.noellaballenger.com](http://www.noellaballenger.com) for her workshop schedule. You can also e-mail her for additional information on her workshops.



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Going wild dancing to the music with small aperture and sort of long exposure