



Tiffen Dfx: Designed for Creativity

BY LARRY BROWNSTEIN

WITH SO MANY digital filter packages available for photographers these days, what can a newcomer to the market bring that is not already available? Having reviewed many of these products in the past, it was clear to me what the answer should be: a logical way to organize filters so that the appropriate ones are easy to find, and an easy way to explore all the filters, options and variations. A new product, Tiffen Dfx, appears to have been designed with just these ideas in mind.

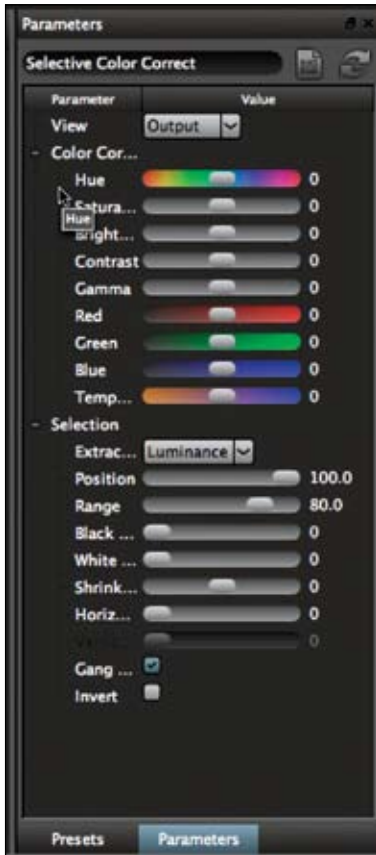
The numerous filters available in Tiffen Dfx have been grouped into quite logical categories: Film Lab, Gels, HFX Diffusion, HFX Grads/Tints, Image, Lens, Light, Photographic and Special Effects. As an example, under the Film Lab category you will find such options as Cross-processing and Grain. Under the Lens category, you'll find such things as Vignette, Chromatic Aberration and Depth of Field. Under the Photographic category, you'll find Color Compensating filters, where you could, for instance, add 30cc of Magenta to fix an image shot under fluorescents with the white balance mistakenly set to daylight.

Tiffen Dfx comes in several different packages. You can choose either Standalone or

Plug-In. In each case, you can choose either the Complete set or the Select set. My comments in this article apply to the Tiffen Dfx Complete Standalone edition, which has some filters that are not available in the Select edition. Also, the Tiffen Dfx Complete Standalone edition has functionality, such as masking, that is not available in the other editions. Tiffen Dfx Complete Standalone has 94 individual filters and up to 1000 variations, according to



The image at right of a rock-and-roll band was done with Infrared 2 (under the Special Effects category).



The Parameters palette

the Tiffen website. (Most filters have defined Presets—variations that are available with a single click of the mouse.)

There are also numerous black-and-white effects that are spread amongst the previously mentioned categories. In the Image category, under Black and White, you can choose the Presets for Red, Green, Blue, Yellow or Orange to simulate shooting black-and-white film with any of these color filters to adjust contrast in the image. Under the Special Effects category, a Black and White Infrared option is available. Also under Special Effects is Black and White Looks, which has about two dozen presets with names such as Warm, Sepia, Hicon, Ice and Hollywood. I think there are enough good black-and-white conversion

options spread throughout those categories that the next release would benefit from a new category strictly for black and white, even if it duplicates some of the filters in the other categories.

One of the most interesting and unique filters is called Light (under the category of the same name). This is used to simulate the effect of projecting a shadow on a background (using a gobo) and provides presets such as French Doors, Church Windows, Venetian Blinds and many others. Presets represent where much of the power of the application comes in. For many of the filters, the presets simply provide several options of the intensity of an effect.



Dfx's clean and logically arranged user interface

The Enhancing Filter mimics the effect of one of Tiffen's most unique and popular glass filters, which goes by the same name. The glass in the Enhancing Filter is made of rare earth elements and causes warm colors to pop. The digital version mimics their famous glass filter but goes beyond it by providing many levels of intensity with the Enhancing Red. There are also presets for Enhancing Green and Enhancing Blue. The Enhancing Green and Enhancing Blue don't have glass counterparts, but the concept is the same—they make the greens and blues pop.

With so many categories—each with a wide variety of filters and many of them having a myriad of presets—there is a wealth of options available. But Tiffen Dfx takes it one step further. After you select a filter and select a preset you can go to the Parameters palette to adjust all the image parameters that the program is manipulating to create the effect. You can attempt subtle changes to nudge the program a little closer to what you want the image to look like, or you can really go wild with the sliders and see what kind of interesting effects may come of it. There is also a Variations palette that generates variations for you once you select the parameter you want to change. Finally, once you have homed in on your own custom settings of the parameters, you can save this as one of your own presets. In other words, you can make your own filters. The photo on the opposite page shows a screen shot of the Parameters palette for the Selective Color Correct filter—as you can see, it gives you a great deal of control.

You can apply more than one filter to an image by using the



This photo at right of a July 4th bike parade was altered with the Lens Distortion filter (under the Lens category).



This photo of dresses was made in a bridal shop and altered (right) with the Color Looks filter (Special Effects category).

Effects palette, which allows you to stack (layer) several filter effects on top of one another. Tiffen Dfx allows you to apply masks to one layer, allowing the filter beneath to show through.

The program provides a variety of excellent masking features. It was a bit of a culture shock to relearn to do some of the things that are second nature to me in Photoshop in the Tiffen Dfx environment. But taking the time to learn was worth it. Applying masks with linear or radial gradients was fairly straightforward. Masks can also be made by defining user-drawn paths or by painting the mask on. The EZ Mask is particularly interesting. If you have a figure that you want to extract from the background, you can simply draw a fairly loose line defining the inside border and another loose line defining the outside border, and the program will find the edge in between and make a mask for you. Unfortunately, the functionality for blending and adjusting opacity to mix filter effects is not very elegant or complete. It seems like an area that needs further development in a subsequent release.

The user interface has some excellent features. Besides the very logical grouping of the filters by categories, I like the options for viewing and comparing the results. There are buttons that allow you to compare before and after by toggling back and forth or by viewing side by side; there is even a split window that displays half the image as filtered and half as unfiltered. You can zoom in and out easily, and there is a convenient button that returns the image to full size after zooming in. Also, there are keyboard shortcuts, e.g., F for Fit Image, I for Zoom In, O for Zoom Out, etc.

Nevertheless, the user interface struck me as the program's weakest point. The problem for me was the Effects palette—the layer implementation. Even though I used it for a while, I kept getting confused about what the icons were representing. Perhaps I am so used to working in Photoshop that I found it akin to having to learn a whole new language. Certainly though, I wouldn't be alone in that. There are two problems with the icons. First, they are not very distinct—they don't stand out from the background well, and some look similar to one another. Second, the graphic icons don't seem to me to be related to their function. The bottom line is that I simply felt a bit clumsy with it.

Tiffen Dfx is very ambitious—it even provides a RAW converter. This makes sense since it is designed to be a standalone program and most professional photographers these days shoot

in RAW format. A RAW converter is a great idea and speaks well for the future of the program, as it will get more mature with subsequent releases. However, the current implementation lacks a few important details. It provides all the basic adjustments—Histogram, Temperature, Tint, Exposure and Shadows. However, it doesn't provide more features such as Contrast, Brightness, Auto White Balance, Cropping, etc. While it might suffice in many instances, I have a feeling that many photographers will prefer to start with their favorite RAW converters to generate a TIFF file and bring that into Tiffen Dfx.

Another issue is that the manual was a bit too PC-centric with discussions of right-clicking the mouse and no equivalent for Macs.

In spite of its weaknesses, Tiffen Dfx is definitely starting on the right track. While many digital filtering packages seem to be merely a collection of interesting filters, the experience with Tiffen Dfx is quite different. It seems like it was designed by a team of software engineers working in close contact with professional photographers to design a system that encourages exploring all the options and thus enhancing creativity.

On the Tiffen Dfx site, there is a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page where the question was asked, "What about optical filters? Are they passé? Why buy Tiffen Dfx?"

The answer, paraphrased here, highlights the uses and limitations of digital filters: "Tiffen Dfx software lets you expand your creative process with an awe-inspiring range of filters and effects. Tiffen Dfx digital filter software emulates many of our award-winning Tiffen optical filters, as well as adjusting for, or introducing optical distortion, depth of field and gobo lighting effects, as well as a host of other special features and capabilities.

"Only an optical filter can protect a camera's lens, only a Polarizer filter can eliminate reflections, while graduated neutral density filters insure the image is properly exposed. Remember, that you cannot put back into an image what was not captured in the original exposure."

I think that sums it up pretty well. Don't expect a digital filter to take a bad image and fix it. Instead, work to get the best image you can in-camera, and then make it even better with a digital filter, such as the excellent ones provided by Tiffen Dfx.

The photos shown in this article, many of them taken with



This image of a dancer's shoes were made using the Tints filter (under HFX/Grads category).

models provided by BMG Models in Los Angeles, illustrate the use of filters that should be particularly helpful for portrait and wedding photographers. To see more examples of the filters provided, you can visit the Tiffen website. Go to www.tiffen.com/dfx_filter_effects_ig.html to see before-and-after images for dozens of other filters.

Tiffen Dfx Complete Standalone sells for \$199.95. Tiffen Dfx Select Standalone sells for \$99.95. Tiffen Dfx Complete Plug-in Set sells for \$299.95. Tiffen Dfx Select Plug-in Set sells for \$159.95.

These are the Web download prices; there is an extra \$10.00 fee for the boxed edition, which is available on the Tiffen website.



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