Toning B&W Images
for Effect and Better Range

Many wet darkroom photographers prefer toning their prints for effect and permanence. The color of the toned photograph depends on the chemicals used in the process and may vary from warm sepia tones to cooler selenium or cyanotype colors. Some photographers also standardize on a particular toning to give their prints better visual acuity and character.

In the digital world, we still like to use toning for similar reasons. Some photographs benefit from cooler appearance, and others, warmer. The great advantage in the digital world, though, we can try many variations with great ease. Many toning methods exist, including commercial filters for this process. I will share with you one of my favorite Photoshop adjustment tools for toning. It is a rather obscure but very powerful adjustment. Many do not even remember seeing it there. But after this presentation, I hope you will put it to good use that it was meant to.

Have you been to Gradient?

Hiding among the adjustments or adjustment layers is a tool called "Gradient Map" as if it refers to a country. For the longest time, I thought it was only for people who create drawings from scratch. Little did I know that it was one of the more potent tools of Photoshop. I will first use it for toning, and then explain another use that you may find extremely helpful when you have burned out skin tones or other similar areas.

I will use the image on the left to demonstrate this technique. This image consists mostly of green, yellow, red, and black. In another tutorial, I used the same image to demonstrate a B&W conversion method. Here it will serve another and rather useful purpose as you will later see.

Most toning processes begin with the conversion to B&W first, then to monochrome, then to duotone, then applying various colors, curves, etc. Here, we will do all that in one-step, using only one tool, and with great deal of flexibility. On this image, I will add a gradient map adjustment layer and do everything there. Using the Yin-Yang icon at the bottom of the layers palette, add a Gradient Map layer. Depending on the last used gradient colors, you may or may not have the correct color, but don't worry the fix is one mouse click away. Below is what you may see, some unnecessary color combination, but I have the tool under my control.

Gradient Map is a tool that maps the colors in its spectrum to the luminosity values of the image. Here, the darkest parts, including the blacks are assigned an apricot color, and the lightest values are mapped to white. The assignment of the shades from the apricot to white evenly applies to tones from black to white. Since we want to first try converting this image to B&W, we want to change the gradient to go from black to white. To get down one more level into this adjustment, click on the gradient bar. This will bring a more detailed control panel where we will really have fun. Go ahead, click on the gradient bar itself, to see the panel below. Depending on your Photoshop configuration, you may have more presets in the area reserved for them. No matter, we will do our own gradients here.

Since we want a B&W image, we need to change the left color stop below the gradient area to black. To bring the Photoshop color picker, double click on the color stop on the left. From the color picker, pick black; alternately, you can enter 0, 0, 0 for Red, Green, Blue colors, and click on OK. Now you have a B&W image. Is that simple or what? As my good friend, the Ginsu Guy says, "But wait! There's more."

Now, click on the left color stop again and notice the little diamond in the middle of the gradient bar. Bring your mouse over it, when it is really over the diamond, your cursor will turn to an arrow. With that, click and hold the diamond and gently drag it to the left. Notice that you are adjusting the tonality of the image. If you did not do this step right, you might have ended with an extra color stop, simply hold and drag it out of the area to delete it.

More control, coming up!

Now, click below the gradient bar roughly in the mid point from left to right. This will insert another color stop. We can do several things with it. Change it a shade of gray and adjust it towards left or right to change the mapping of the gray tones on the photograph. But, let's go wild and pick a color and see what happens. Double click on the newly inserted color stop to bring up the color picker. Enter the following values, R=204, G=165, B=90, and click on OK. Voila! Sepia tone! Here is something you cannot do with other methods of toning: grab the middle color stop and drag it to the left until the location window reads 35. It will use more of the lighter tones. If you do the opposite, it will use less of the lighter tones. Now how much will you pay? But wait! There's more.
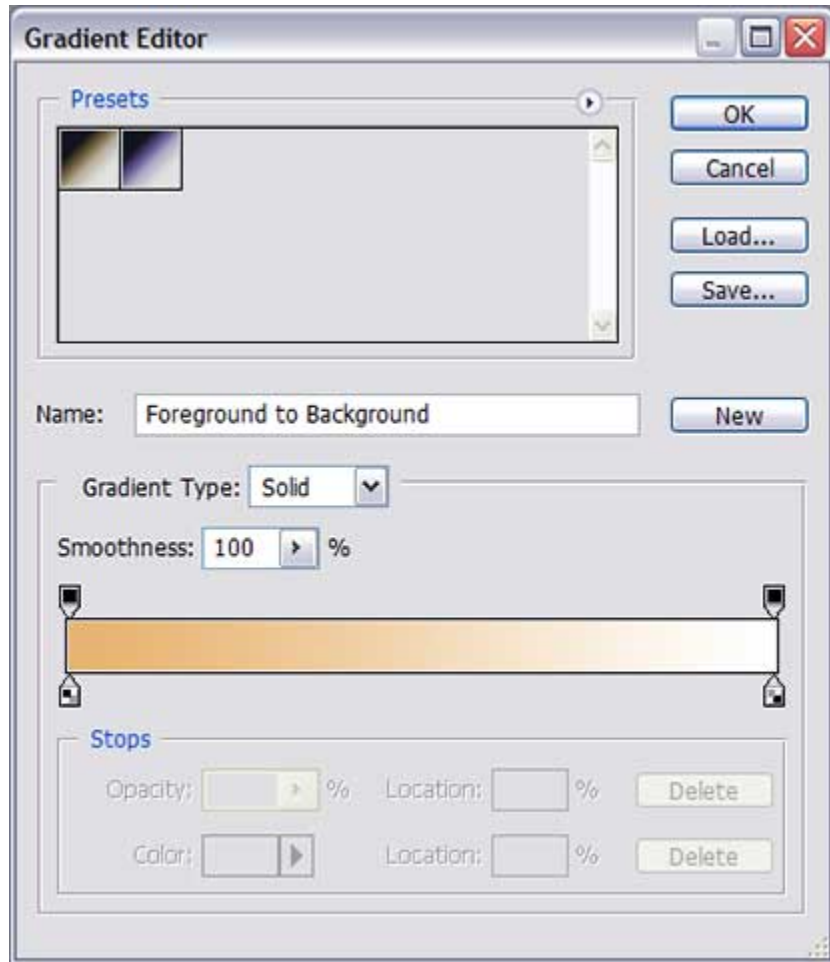
Let there be color again

We will duotone this image. Double-click on the middle color stop and enter the following values: R=175, G=70, B=3, and click on OK. Then slide the middle color stop to location 40. Now, add one more color stop between the middle one and the one on the right, and slide it to position 82. Now double-click on the new color stop to access the color picker and enter the following values: R=253, G=248, B=12. Click on OK and look at the image. We have the yellow flower, the red monarch, but we got rid of the green. That gives a very different look to the image while retaining reasonably accurate colors of the compositional elements.

Add density to burned out areas

This tool, the gradient tool, is also quite useful to add gentle amount of density where the highlights are totally burned out. Of course, it will not bring back the missing detail, but it may cover an otherwise totally washed out small areas.

Look at the portion of an image where the tops of the hands are all burned out. No matter how hard you try, the lost detail will not return. However, we may be able to fix it to the extent that it does not look as distracting. What we need is a way of applying the gradient map of the skin tones only to those areas of the hand. It turns out that we have the tools; we have the colors on the hand. What are we waiting for? Let us add a gradient map layer and fix these hands. Since the image will start taking the colors of the gradient map as soon as we apply colors, we will not be able to sample colors from the image. So, we do it ahead of time. Using the "Foreground/Background" color patches below the toolbar on the left, I selected the areas so that the foreground values are R=254, G=217, B=195; and the background values are R=253, G=246, B=227. When we add a gradient map layer, it will automatically use these colors. Add the gradient layer, make sure that you have the same colors, click OK, only to see that the whole image is kind of apricot color. Now, right-click on the Gradient Map layer icon and select "Blending Options", which will bring a new control panel where we can adjust where this layer will

apply to the layer below it. Looking at the image below, adjust the blending sliders as shown. To separate the black and the white triangles, hold the Alt key and drag the right or the left side of the triangle, it will split into two. After they are a little apart, you do not need to hold the Alt key while you adjust their locations. After making the adjustments as shown, click on OK. Most of your image should be back in color and you should see a little more density in the burned out areas of the hands. On the right, you see the image after it has been repaired using the gradient map tool.