

GO GREEN SCREEN

Some photographers may consider shooting **chroma key** (now commonly known as "green screen") is difficult and expensive. Not so! At a bare minimum, all you need are two speedlights that can operate in wireless mode, and a green cloth. And thanks to some free software I'll talk about shortly, the creation of the final composite images is not at all difficult to tackle.

The idea of being able to remove a solid, known colour used as a backdrop and replace it with another photographic scene was actually invented in the 1930s. It didn't come into its own until the 1960s, where it was adopted universally by television news to put the action behind the newscaster. The blue screens used at first gave way to a green colour less likely to be found in natural subjects or clothing after several embarrassing situations where the anchor's blue suit or blue eyes caused the audience to see right through them.

Here's what you need:

- 1) A bright green cloth
- 2) At least two light sources.

You can get away with one if your subject is far enough away from the background).

- 3) A free *Photoshop* plug-in called *Easy Green Screen*.

- 4) ...*Photoshop*... which of course is not free.

You may well ask "Why is special software needed? Why can't I just select the green colour using *Photoshop's* magic wand tool, then remove it using the eraser, leaving a transparent background?".

If you've ever tried it you'd know the answer – this technique fails miserably when it comes to fine details like hair. You see patches of leftover green everywhere.

This is taken care of brilliantly by a product called *EZ Green Screen* (www.ezgreenscreen.com) and what it does is far from trivial. This software employs several steps, including the creation of a superior mask layer. It also adds a special "spill correction" layer which gets rid of green that may have reflected off the background into the camera (it happens a lot!) This makes for a very fast masking process that is more accurate than if you were to do it manually.

Normally the software sells for \$169, but you can download a free trial version from here:

<http://bit.ly/1KunDHK>
(Windows and Mac).



Gary Friedman uses a small studio chroma key set-up to create fun family pictures and portrait shots. These days it's not expensive – or difficult.



Light your subject simply, and colour and contrast match to the scene...



B&H Photo sell literally hundreds of choices of chroma key backgrounds and materials, starting at under \$60 for a purpose-made cloth drop. See: www.bhphotovideo.com and just do a search on the site for 'chroma key'.

In Europe, **Photomart** specialise in supplying complete green screen set-ups for professionals and the software is very similar in price, via: shop.photomart.co.uk

It includes *Green Screen Wizard* (full license £62.70, Plug-Ins separately sold for Windows or Mac at £98.23, and a range of options including Pro Studio batch processing, video and free trial versions). They also sell Lastolite green or blue chromakey backdrops (£56.60 and £66.00 respectively).

You can also buy pop-up backgrounds, roll material and the correct colour papers from all branches of **Calumet**:

www.calumet-photo.co.uk

Simple lighting

Now, the lighting set-up – the examples I show here use two wireless speedlights. One is pointing directly at the background, to make background removal easy and shadow-free. The other is fitted with a softbox and is lighting the subject. Both flashes are on manual output.

It's usually best to pick your background image first and show it to the subject, that way they know what's going on and won't look quite so out of place once



Mark Stewart, who tours with Paul Simon and is the world's best Xaphoon player is show against my green screen drop, left; centre left, how crude magic wand Photoshop selection can be; centre right, how good the free Easy Green Screen 3.3 plug-in proves in comparison. Simple sky background, bottom. Right – young subjects love to give you ideas with some simple props and some artwork files. Check for copyright in animation stills unless it's just for private family use and fun, as here. Commercial use would require commercially released graphics.



the new background is added. If you're like me you're likely to start dipping into all of your beautiful images whose compositions stand on their own, only to discover that this can be a horrible choice since they result in two subjects and a busy image overall!

Since my first green screen I've started to shoot differently out in the field. In addition to getting well-composed shots I'll then shoot with backgrounds in mind... landscapes with no subject, pure textures, shots that are just boring. You don't want your finished product to have two subjects!

Another great resource for backgrounds is to look for **Creative Commons free licensed work** using *Google Images* though this source comes with two potential pitfalls:

1) High-res copyright free images from *Google Images* may just take as much time to find as to shoot your own.

2) Many times you may find that a subject needs to be removed from the image in order to make it

work for you (above). *Photoshop* has numerous tools (like *Content Aware Move and Fill* tool, and similar *Healing Patch* tool) to help facilitate the removal of subjects. These tools work either magically well or not at all. If not at all there's always your old friend the rubber stamp clone tool.

As for copyright artwork – well, we've probably broken all the rules in some of these illustrations.

Shots using dramatic backgrounds or well-known scenes evoke more "Wow!" (in person) or "Like" (on *Facebook*) than your average family shots, which is a pretty good metric for your photography. One thing I can say for certain – these shots bring a smile to customer's faces more than any other kind of studio work I've done.

Some photographers specialise in elaborate costumes and studio sets with green screen. That's a bigger story. Here I'm looking at basic entry level. Enjoy!

www.friedmanarchives.com



Find out what your young subjects (or indeed your adults) would find fun – their interests or dreams. The recording studio and the shark-surfing wave are both popular and no-one expects 100% realism, especially with the shark! It's the equivalent of the funfair head through the photographer's board.

