

WORDS IAN FARRELL / IMAGES BJORN THOMASSEN

CREATE PORTRAITS WITH MOOD

Some images have an atmosphere about them, and Bjorn Thomassen's portraits have it in spades. Through a mixture of careful lighting and diligent Photoshop retouching, he has achieved a look and feel that has become his trademark. Ian Farrell persuaded him to share his secrets with you!

IT'S IMPORTANT FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS to develop a signature style – a way of working that identifies images as their own. My own has been described in many ways over the years ('moody', 'dramatic', 'powerful', 'atmospheric'), and has come about through a gentle and continuous refinement of how I light scenes and treat images in post-production. By recreating these methods, you can get the 'moody portrait' look too, and it's easy to adapt it to your own ways of working. Play around and you'll soon be putting your own stamp on it.

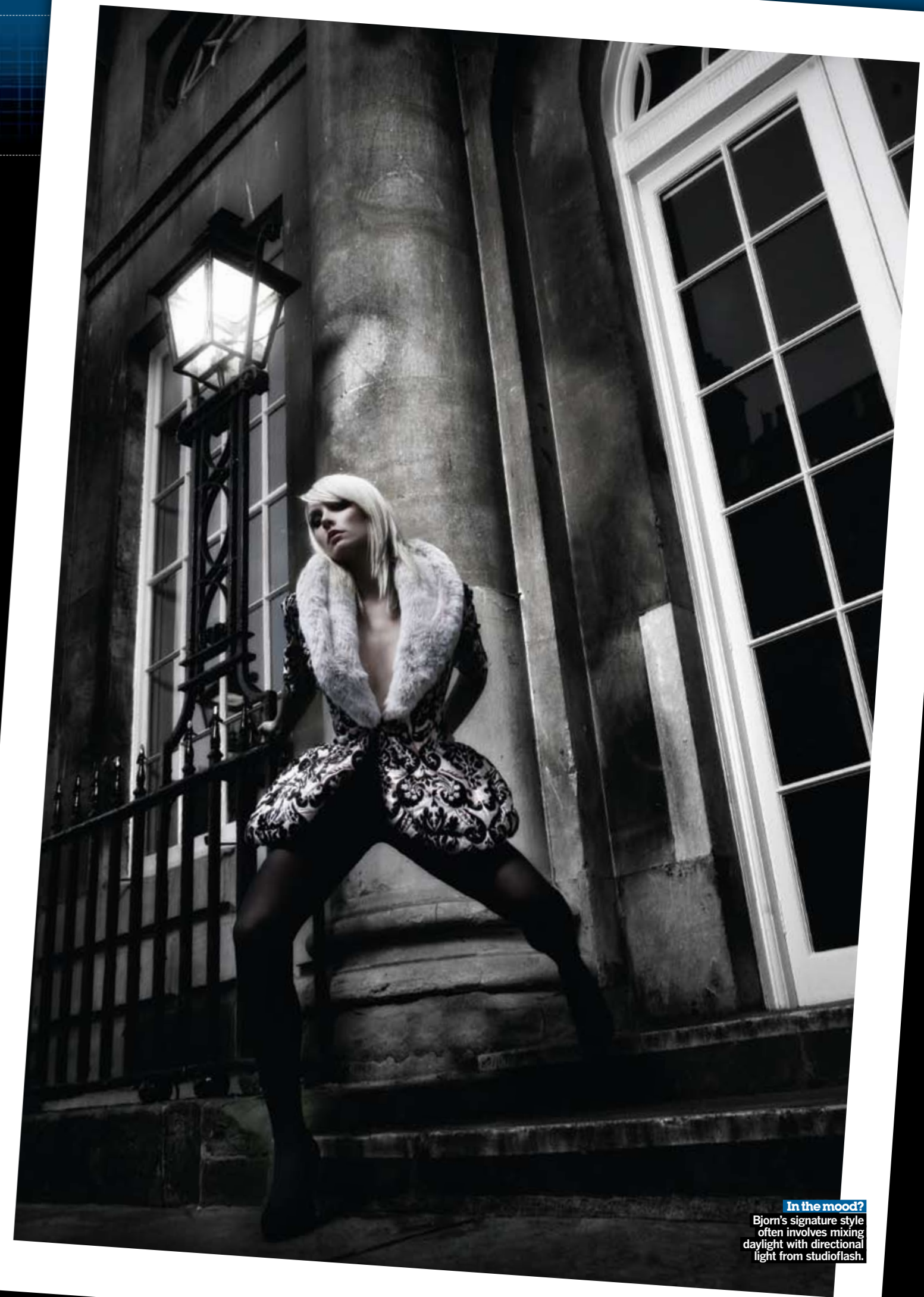
For me, the creation of a moody portrait begins at the lighting stage. The importance of getting your lighting right on the day of the shoot just cannot be emphasised enough. Yes, it's possible to do some extremely impressive post-production work in Photoshop, but it's easier and faster to get it right in-camera at the time of shooting. Good lighting makes a statement, setting up the atmosphere and ambience of the shot.

I use Elinchrom studio flash heads, both indoors and outside, but these days, with the advances in wireless TTL flash, there's no reason why you can't use a high power flashgun like a Nikon SB900 or Canon 550EX, along with a softbox diffuser. You don't

need fancy multi-light set ups either. As a friend once told me there is only one sun, and that's OK for most photographers.

I tend to work with a small light source used close to my subject so I can be more direct with my lighting. I may also use a reflector to bounce light into other areas of the scene. A common failing in portrait photography is people putting too much light on their subject; be mindful of what not to light, as well as what to light. There are ways of positioning your light source that will flatter your subject. For instance, with a light off to one side of a model, try turning their face away from you slightly so the cheek nearest the camera is receiving the least amount of light. It's a flattering approach that will save you tons of time in the retouching phase later on.

I usually position a light high up and to one side of the model because I want to introduce shadows into the picture. A lot of people are frightened of including strong shadows, but they are essential for this look. We want to create a feeling of depth and three-dimensionality. Directional lighting accentuates contours and makes the viewer feel as though they can actually reach into a photograph and hug the model! ▶



In the mood?

Bjorn's signature style often involves mixing daylight with directional light from studioflash.