



RAW or JPEG?

'Why should I use RAW files over and above JPEGs?' This is a question that we are often asked on our Masterclasses. In reply, we would normally start by talking about the pay off between the smaller compressed file size of the lossy JPEG, and the larger unmolested RAW file. Although size, as always is an important aspect but it is only part of the story. More important to us, is the control that RAW file gives you. Why, we tell the students, would you want to take ages setting up a shot, checking the composition, making sure the exposure is right, waiting for that elusive cloud to track across the sky and put up with your wife moaning about out taking too long, only then, to let the camera guess at what settings are best for your image? How can the camera know what you want?

But beyond this need for control, there are some solid reasons for shooting in RAW rather than JPEG. A RAW file is akin to shooting with negative film. The great thing about negative film is that you can always go back and rework from the original negative, to revise your print or to make a totally different interpretation of your image. Shooting in RAW is like recording a master file, to be used again and again to produce a range of differing prints. As we have already mentioned, the RAW file is a large file size, and hence it contains more information. It allows you to work with 100% of the captured information. When you work with JPEG's or even GIFF's you can be discarding up to 88% of this information.

But is RAW the ideal file format for archiving? We have seen that RAW is by far the better file format to produce your work from. So you would think it would be the best format for archiving, and we would agree, with some slight reservations. Whenever there is a new innovation there is always a power struggle for supremacy. It was the same with video. If you had saved information on a Betamax video system you would find it hard to access it today, and in a few years time even harder. With the digital photography world becoming larger and cheaper to access, so the number of RAW file formats have risen. Often this format changes not only from one manufacturer to another, but from camera model to camera model.

Every new camera seems to have its own matching new software and an individual RAW format. It is quite possible that a RAW file you laid down with your first digital camera a few years ago would have problems opening without your original software. If this is a problem now what could it be like in 20 years time?

The standardised DNG (digital negative) RAW file format (developed by Adobe) will hopefully lay the future situation to rest. We are sure the DNG will live up to its hype, not only is it flexible enough to cater for future developments and new technologies, it is an open standard, and available for any manufacturer to use. Although the consumer needs a standardised RAW file format there is no guarantee that manufacturers will give up producing their own software.

We do have other options though. Some independent companies, Adobe being the most obvious, have devised RAW converters to read the majority of the plethora of RAW file types. Maybe camera manufactures should in future concentrate on making cameras and stop worrying about the software.