Back Button Focus

By Gerry Gerling

I had often heard of photographers using back button focus, but never gave it much thought because I was so used to using spot focus, pressing the shutter half way to focus, then recomposing to take the picture. I was happy with focusing that way, but I was always confounded by having to decide between AF-A, AF-S and AF-C. knowing that in some cases, the picture would be gone, if I had to take the time to choose and reset.

Note: The names of the focusing functions which I am using, are for Nikon cameras. Those for other brands may be slightly different.

The manual will lead you to believe, that the hybrid AF-A setting will give you the best of the other two. After trying AF-A, I was more often than not, disappointed in the results.

I came to the realization that good results were hit and miss. I wouldn't even recommend AF-A to beginners. Higher end cameras don't even offer AF-A.

Setting the camera to AF-**S** is great for **stationary** objects, but again, it will only keep the subject in focus as long as you hold the shutter button half way. Then, what will you do if the bird suddenly takes flight? **Bummer!**

Setting the camera to AF-**C** is great for **continuously** moving subjects, but if you use it for stationary subjects the camera will continuously hunt for movement and again, it will only keep your subject in focus, as long as you hold the shutter half way. **Bummer again!**

Of course you can manually reset between AF-S and AF-C, for each picture situation, but I found that to be a time consuming pain, and more often than not, when that great shot was only going to last a few seconds, the camera always seemed to be at the wrong setting. **Bigger bummer!!**

Does any of the above sound familiar?

Enter **BACK BUTTON FOCUS**. I have come to the conclusion that back button focus, (BBF) is the most logical solution to all of the above. (Single point focus is usually used with BBF.)

When you have your camera set for BBF, you do not press the shutter half way to focus. Pressing half way will only activate the light meter.

To focus on your subject, place the single focus point wherever you want to focus, and press the BBF button once, with your right thumb. (Think AF-S) However, the camera **stays** focused on the subject, even if you take your hands off the camera, and when you do take the picture, it will not refocus at half press when you activate the shutter. If for whatever reason, the distance between you and your subject changes before you take the picture, just press the BBF button again to refocus.

Now, after you have focused on that bird perched on a branch and perhaps taken a few pictures of it, the bird suddenly takes flight.

All you have to do, is press and hold the BBF button with your right thumb and you will immediately be in AF-C, i.e. the camera focus will track the bird, as long as you hold your thumb on the BBF button.

You can then take as many frames as you want, you can even be in continuous high, shooting several frames per second.

When taking pictures of water drops or dropping object into a glass, BBF allows you to instantly focus on the exact spot that you want and it will stay there. Other focusing methods are tedious and less accurate.

To recap, the benefits of BBF are:

- You don't have to continuously hold the shutter down halfway after focusing, while deciding how to compose the picture;
- When you press the BBF button, the focus stays set until you take the picture, or until your press it again;

- When you need continuous autofocus (AFC) you don't have to take time to reset your camera, just press and hold the BBF button. AFC is always instantly available. (And you don't even have to take your eye off the viewfinder because your thumb is always there.)
- Without BBF, if you do set the camera to AFC, you will not have to reset the camera back to AFS again after you have taken the action shot.
- Without BBF, and taking an exposure on a tripod with a cable release, the camera will refocus when the shutter is activated. Of course you will have previously composed the shot so the spot focus will likely be in a different place than where you want it. With BBF, you select the focus point before composing, and it stays there.

It took very little practice for this to become intuitive. When you see a group of professional press photographers on TV, just watch where their right thumb is. You guessed it, it will be on the BBF button.

If your manual does not give instructions to set your camera to BBF, see if there is a U-tube video which will show you how to set your camera.

If you want to give Back Button Focus a try, you will have to set your camera up to do so.

The procedure for every brand of camera is different, and even some models within the same brand are different. You will have to consult your manual or go on-line, or to a U-tube video for your particular camera.

In general, here is what you will have to do:

- Select a single point focus (and lock it in if your camera will do so);

- Select the option for your shutter to actuate on *release*, not on *focus*;

- Select continuous auto focus, **AFC**, (not AFS or AFA);

- Change the function of the programmable button which is at your right thumb, from whatever it originally was intended to do, to *focus*

The button at your right thumb is intuitive to most photographers, but you can designate any of the other programmable buttons on your camera to perform the focus function.

You can even designate one button for single point focus, and another to a small tight group of points for birds in flight, both giving the benefits of BBF. This is especially handy if your camera has two back buttons.

BBF, a real Bummer Beater!!

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