Varis PhotoMedia Tutorials

Welcome

This tutorial has been prepared for the photographer who is striving to learn digital imaging. I make an effort to supply current information about digital imaging techniques and general information about computer technology that is pertinent for today's professional photographer. This information is based on my personal experience down in the trenches at the front lines of the digital revolution that is sweeping the photographic industry.

One thing is certain: all of the information contained herein will be obsolete in a fairly short time - how short, I can't say. Be forewarned that things are changing very rapidly and the only way to stay competitive is to keep learning. I devote a good percentage of my time learning new things and I am attempting to share what I learn with you but this information will go out of date so you should be flexible and not take this tutorial to be the ultimate statement on the subject.

I maintain a web site where I post additional information, examples and tutorials. You are invited to browse various portfolios as well as download free material and purchase additional tutorials at:

http://www.varis.com

I hope you find the information contained in this tutorial helpful. Please let me know if you find any errors or ommissions - I'm always trying to improve these materials! You may contatct me via email at:

varis@varis.com

best regards, Lee Varis 2002

Download Sample Files

Sample files for this tutorial are available for download. All images are copyrighted © 2003 by Lee Varis unless otherwise noted. Use of these files is restricted to personal education in this tutorial - no other use is permited. By clicking the download button below you are agreeing to these terms.

Download Files

These files are compressed in a Binhex archive. To use these files you must first extract them from the archive using a file compression utility. You can download the excellent free “Stuffit Expander” utility from Aladin Software by clicking below:

Stuffit Expander

Choose your platform from the buttons at the top of the web page - Mac, Windows and Unix

Blue Sky Speakers

creating an environment for a studio still life

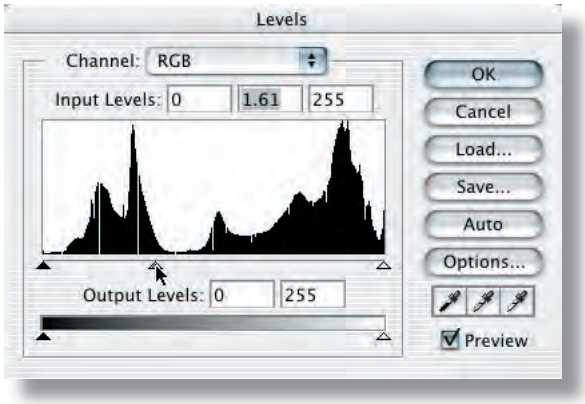
This project demonstrates how you can compose elements from separate photos into a still life arrangement. I shot all the speakers separately – this allowed me much more freedom in my lighting setup and afforded the tremendous depth of focus that you see in the composite image. One of my stock images rounds out the environment and it makes a much more compelling image than the typical seamless tabletop image. It is also a very simple project relying on only basic compositing techniques.

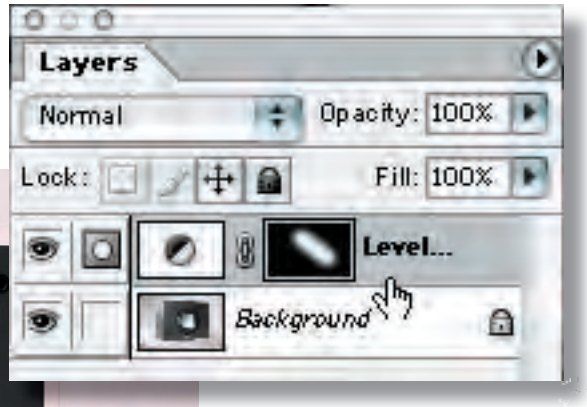
These are the separate shots, all taken with a Megavision S3 single shot digital camera. I attempted to keep the camera centered top to bottom on the subject in order to maintain the vertical alignment but, as is usually the case it was hard to be precise enough and as a consequence I had to adjust the alignment with Free Transform (Cmd/option "T"). You can see the evidence of the adjustment in the main speaker at the upper left where the edge of my selection is displaced. To create straight reference lines or "guides" you simply show rulers from the view menu (cmd/option "R") and drag a line from either ruler with any tool. Use the guides as, well... guides, to line up the edges of the speakers. I include the original uncorrected main shot for you to practice on as well as the finished versions shown here. I've already built the easy paths used to select the speakers so all you have to do is click on the path to selection icon at the bottom of the paths palette to select the speakers for dragging onto a background.

One of the things I take advantage of a lot with digital photography is to create lighting affects with adjustment layers. Its pretty simple to change the photo above into the one below by using a levels adjustment layer with a layer mask.

Create a new “Levels” adjustment layer by clicking on the new adjustment layer icon at the bottom of the Layers palette.

Move the middle slider in the Levels dialog to the left to brighten up the image. Then invert the layer mask of the Levels adjustment by hitting – cmd/option “I” creating a black mask to hide the brighten effect.

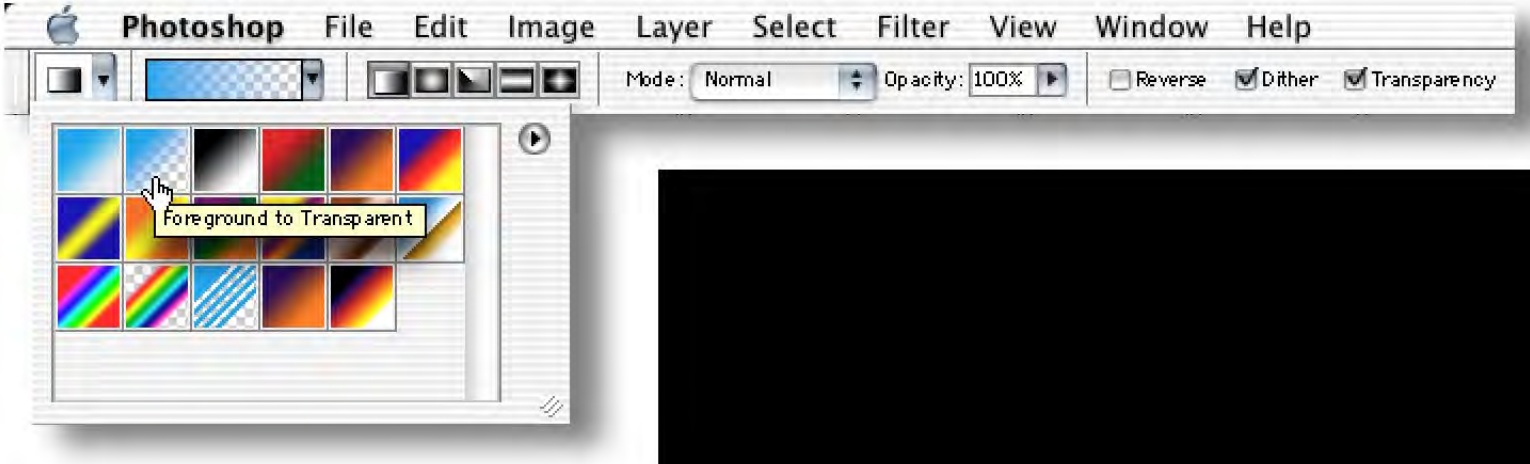




Next take a fairly large soft brush and paint a diagonal slash with white into the layer mask to create the illusion of light across the speaker.

You can create very precise slashes or highlights on products with this approach and its much easier to do than rigging gobos on C-stands and directing fresnel spots.

After correcting the individual shots its time to build our background. In this case I make a new 8.5 x 11 size black document as a base from which to build up the environment. This could work as the final background but in this case its just a template to build on top of

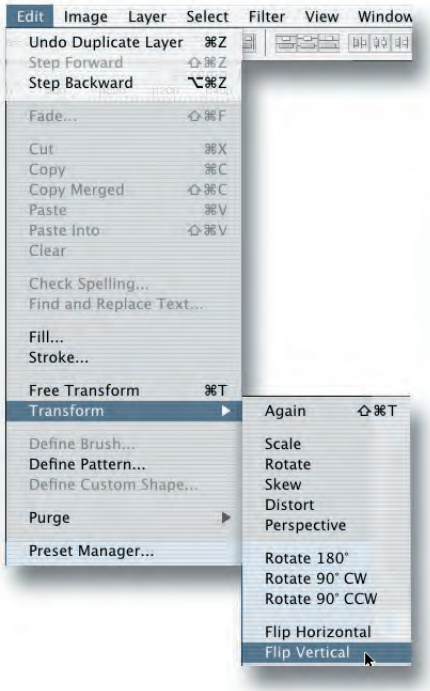


Choose a blue color for the foreground and then select the gradient tool. Pick the Foreground to Transparent style from the drop down menu in the control bar and then drag down from about 1/3 of the way from the bottom of the frame. You can constrain the gradient to a perfect horizontal by holding down the “shift” key as you drag.

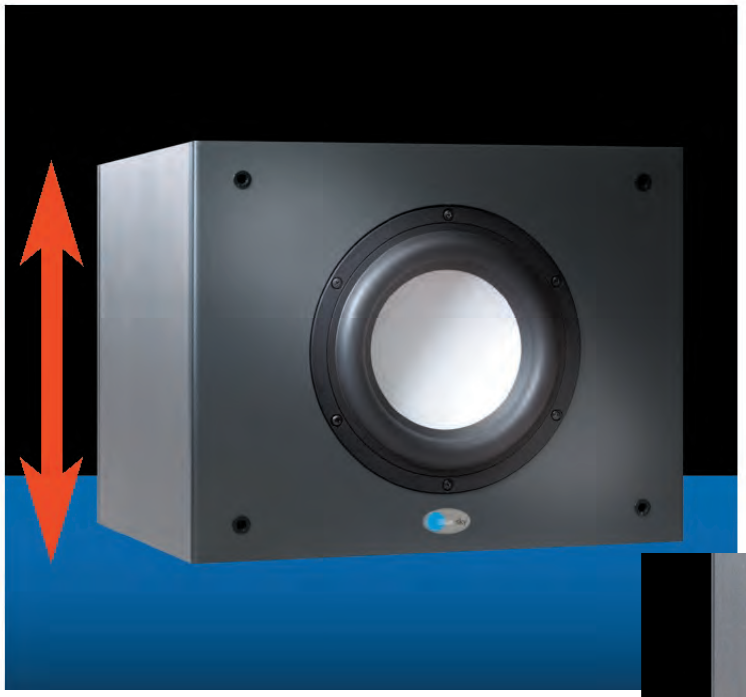
The next step is to drag the individual speakers into this document, re-size and position them. Select the path in each file and turn it into a selection before dragging it into the background.

Here is the result after dragging the speakers over and re-sizing/positioning them. I normally just use Free Transform (cmd/option “T”) and re-size by dragging one of the corners. Remember to hold down the “shift” key when you do this in order to constrain the proportions or you might end up distorting the speakers. The next step is to create the mirror reflections.

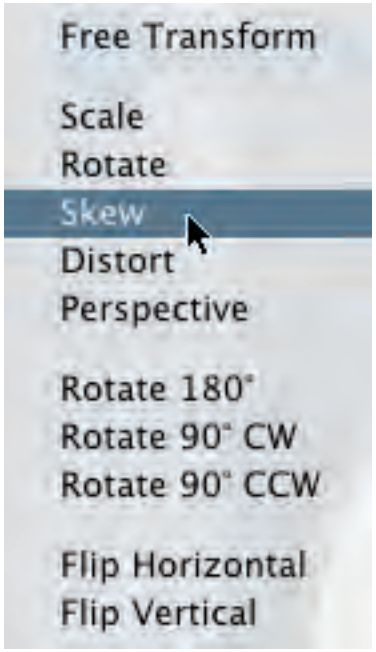
We start by simply copying the individual speakers by dragging their respective layer to the new layer icon at the bottom of the layer palette. Let’s start with the center speaker because that is the easiest.



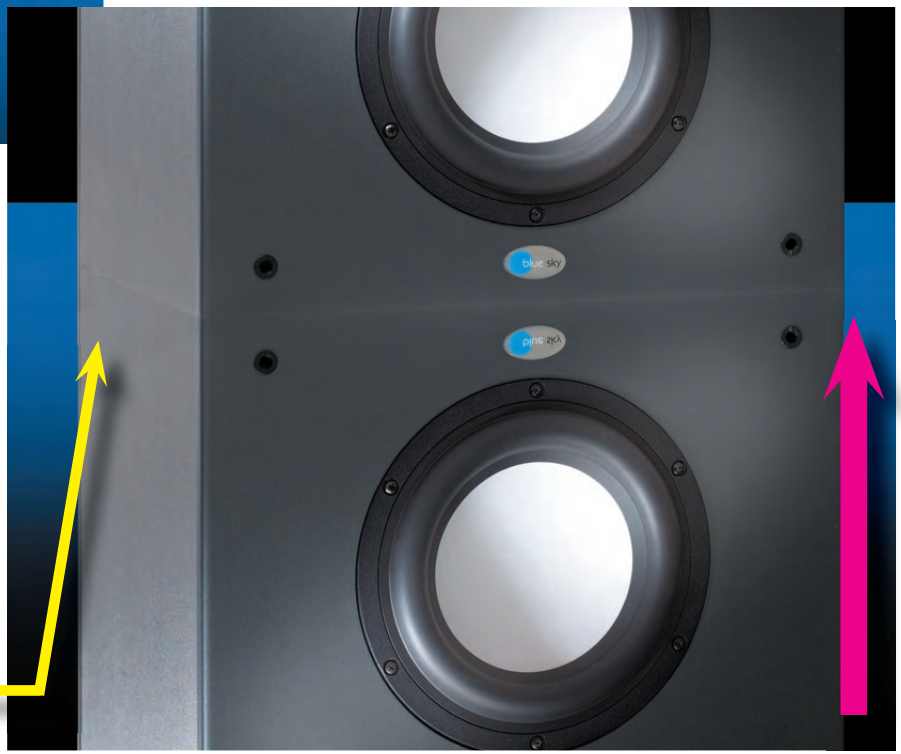
Duplicate the center speaker layer and drag the duplicate under the original layer. Then go to Edit-> Transform-> Flip Vertical

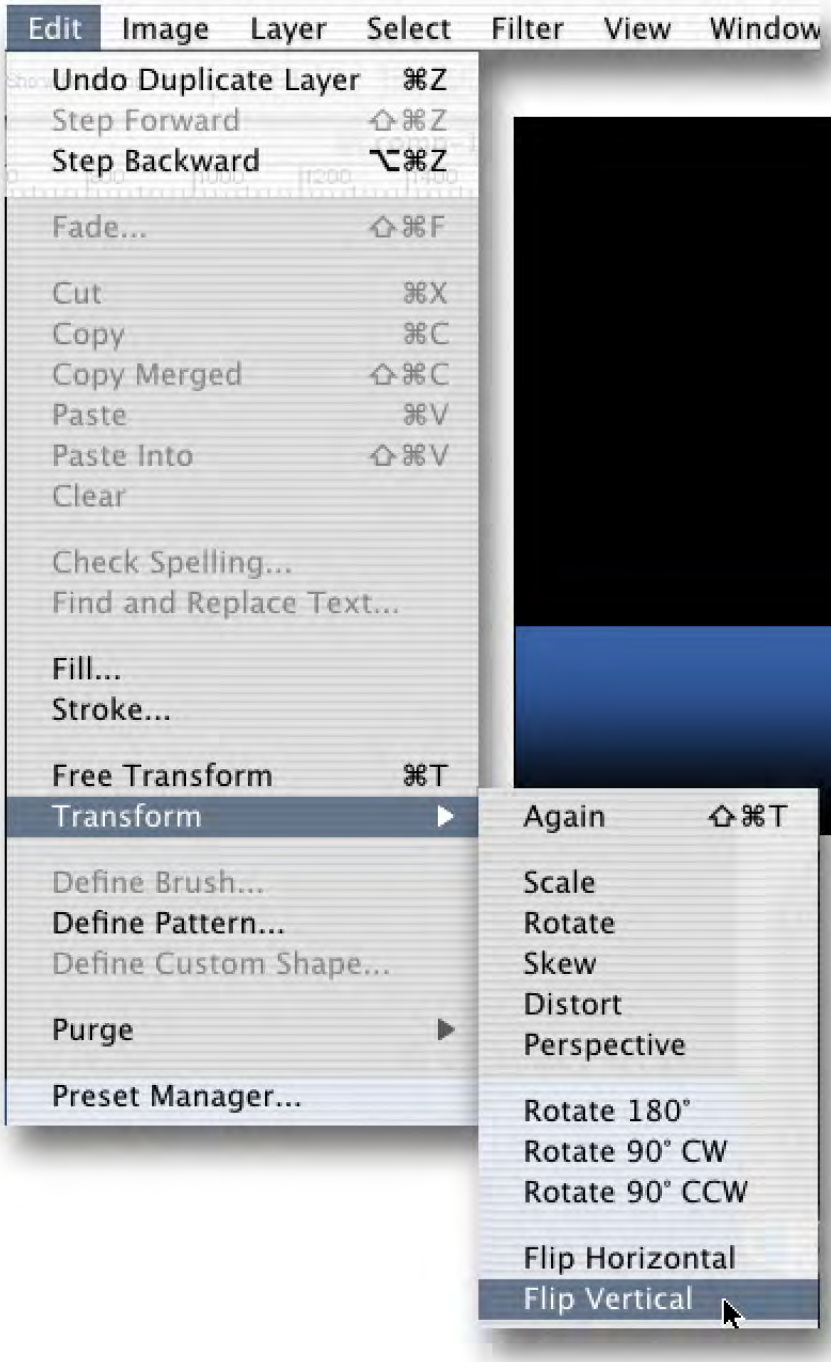


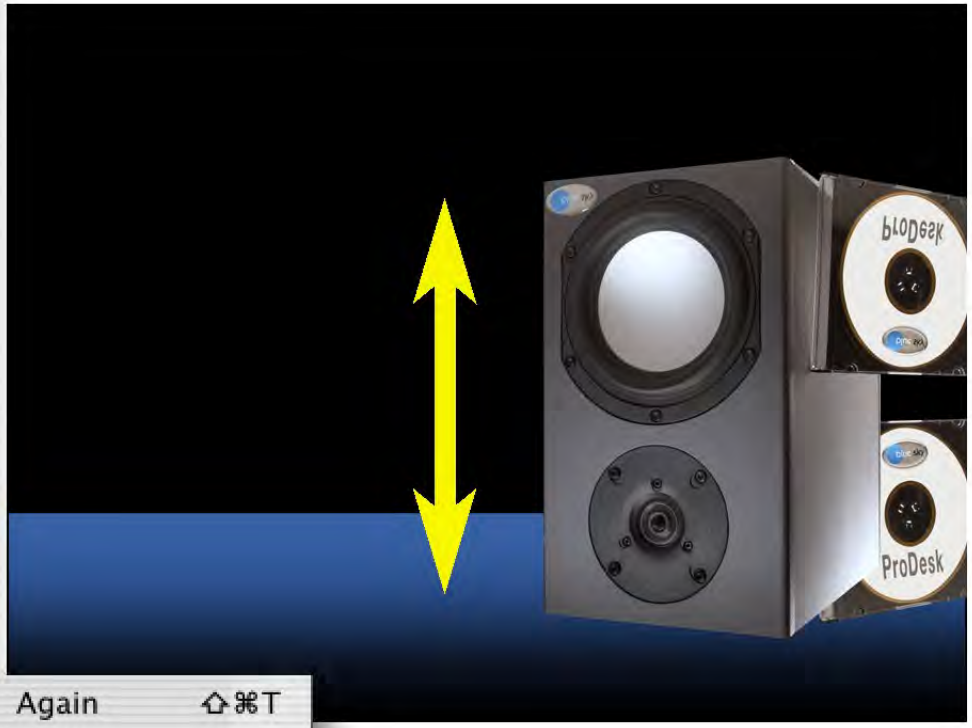
Drag the flipped copy to place it under the original like a reflection.



Now do a Free Transform (cmd/option T) on the flipped copy and change the transform to skew. You do this by holding down the control key (rt click, Windows) and click inside the control handles area – you'll get a menu like the one to the left. Select "Skew" and grab the control in the center of the handle line to the right of the flipped speaker– push the handle up and skew the flipped speaker until the bottoms match up. Now you will only have to clone the left side up to meet the edge of the top speaker.







Lets now tackle the right speaker. This is a little more complicated be-cause the CD at the right creates a more complex shape to distort.

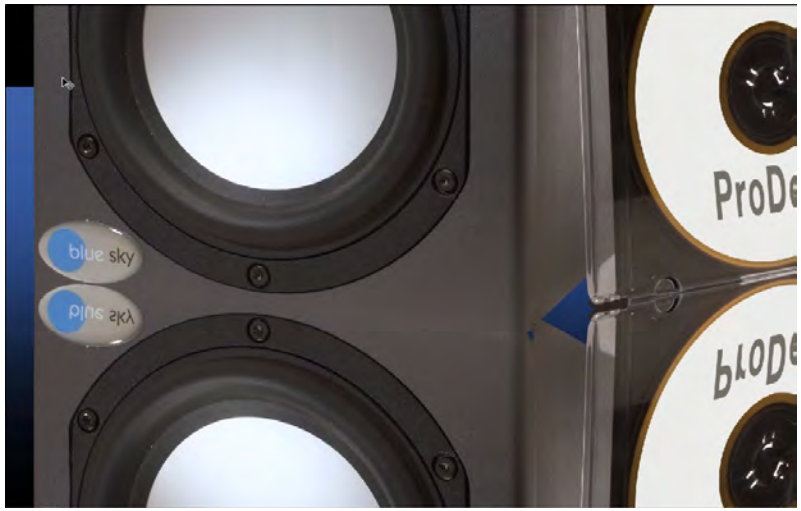
Start the same way by duplicating the speaker and flipping the copy.

After doing this we are going to have to copy the CD only so we can manipulate it separately.

Move the flipped speaker off to side and drag the layer below the original in the layer stack.

Select the CD using the marquee tool. Hit cmd/option – "J" to duplicate the CD into a new layer, then drag the CD to position it under the original as a reflection.

Use the "Skew" function in the Free Transform command to get the bottom edges to match up



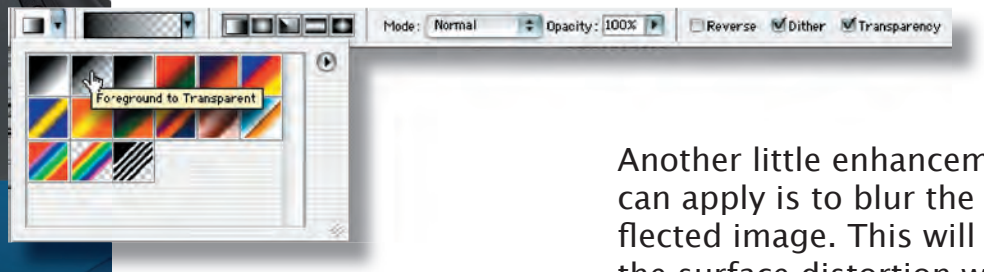
After the CD is positioned you can position the rest of the speaker, skew it to match up the bottom edges and then clone in the "holes. Finally, you'll want to merge the CD reflection layer with the rest of the reflection – select "Merge Down" from the Layer options menu of the Layers palette (click on the upper right triangle at the corner of the Layers palette.

When the reflections are placed we can adjust the opacity of the reflection layers to create a realistic effect. Its best to keep all the reflection layers separate in case you need to move them later. We can link the reflection to its parent layer in the layer palette so the speaker and its reflection can be moved as a unit.

The effect looks pretty good at this point but the top (bottom) of the left speaker reflection looks weird because of the distortion we applied to make the bottom edges match up. The solution is to fade out the reflection at the top/bottom.

We can use a layer mask to do this and it will also help to lend a little dimension or space to the reflection.

Make a layer mask for the speaker reflection – then use the gradient tool, with black to transparent style, to paint a gradient into the layer mask for the reflection. Starting at the bottom of the reflection drag up to fade the reflection.



Another little enhancement we can apply is to blur the reflected image. This will simulate the surface distortion we might have with a Plexiglas table top. Make sure you have the image of the reflection layer selected (you want to see the little paintbrush icon to the left of the layer in the layer palette) the call up the Gaussian Blur filter:

Filter-> Blur-> Gaussian Blur

Pick a radius that gives you a noticeable blur without totally obscuring the image. Apply the same radius blur to all of the reflection layers.

The final step is to create a drop shadow for our speakers. Jeff Schewe likes to call these “contact shadows” and it really helps to give a sense of reality to the image. Select the speaker in the layer by cmd/option clicking on the layer in the Layers palette. Create a new empty layer under the speaker layer and fill this with black: Edit-> Fill-> 100% black.

All you need to do next is give this black layer a slight Gaussian blur and offset its position down and to one side. Any black that sticks out anywhere but the bottom of the speaker will have to be removed – you can select it and delete or you can erase it with the eraser tool

The finished reflections now look very convincing. This technique is very good for enhancing any regular tabletop still life and you don't have to obsessively clean any Plexiglas or polish out scratches.

I decided that what the Blue Sky speakers need is a blue sky so...

A stock sky image is dropped behind the blue gradient layer and now we have the speakers emerging out of a mirage in the desert. This will be used as a product announcement PR shot and possibly a promotional poster.

Varis PhotoMedia Tutorials

Thank you

I hope you enjoyed this tutorial. The techniques outlined here represent just the tip of the iceberg. Photoshop is a very deep application - a person could spend years studying it and there will always be more to learn. If all this seems a little overwhelming, take a break, do what you feel comfortable doing in Photoshop and return to this tutorial again later on. Often, it takes several weeks for a particular technique to sink in so give it time.

I have other tutorials available online (navigate to the methods section), some are free and some are available for a modest charge. See tutorials and some examples of my work at:

http://www.varis.com

There are many learning resourses available on the web - here are a few other sites with good information:

http://www.russellbrown.com

http://www.creativepro.com

http://luminous-landscape.com/

http://www.imaging-resource.com/HOWTO.HTM

http://www.photoworkshop.com/

http://www.adobe.com/misc/training.html

http://studio.adobe.com/expertcenter/photoshop/main.html

http://www.ledet.com/margulis/articles.html

http://www.steves-digicams.com/

http://www.photoshopuser.com/

http://www.handson.nu/

http://photoshopgurus.info/

Thes last two links are typical of the majority of Photoshop tutorial sites - they are focused on cool graphics effects not photography. You might want to look over this material anyway - sometimes you can learn alot about basic functions in Photoshop.

I'm always trying to improve these materials and I'm always open to your feedback. You may contatct me via email at:

varis@varis.com

best regards, Lee Varis 2002