

Excalibur Studio Flash

Two great cutting-edge strobes for the studio photographer on a budget provide versatility and live up to their name



by Jack and Sue Drafa

You've undoubtedly heard the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. As a boy, Arthur pulled a sword from a stone, revealing his destiny as king. In case you're not a legend buff, the sword's name was Excalibur. When the sword is portrayed in books and movies, a bright light reflects from its edge. It seems appropriate that a studio strobe, which gives off a similar bright light, has the same name.

The Excalibur studio flash system is made by SP Studio Systems, and marketed by BKA (Brandess-Kalt-Aetna Group, Inc.). The Excalibur was designed to slice through the problems of studio lighting by offering total flash control. King Arthur had two Excaliburs (one in the stone, and the other from the lady in the lake), so it seems appropriate that there are two Excalibur flash systems.

The Excalibur SP 1600 is a 160-watt-second (ISO 100 guide number 140, in feet), five-pound flash designed to fit on any standard studio light stand. It has a screw at the base that locks the flash to the tip of the

stand and a secondary release lever that allows you to pivot the unit up and down. At the front you will find a large, round flash tube surrounding a modeling-light socket. This flash tube is user-replaceable. A standard 100-watt soft light bulb fits in the socket, and serves as the modeling light. A bayonet mount surrounds the flash tube, allowing you to add different lighting attachments or the protective cover.

Arranged for easy operation, the flash controls are located on the back of the unit. At the top are power controls for the flash tube and the modeling light. Each can be set for 1/4, 1/2, and full power. Both Excaliburs have a port on the back for connecting a sync cord to your camera. A handle, located on the top back, makes it easy to move the flash around in the studio or carry it safely from one location to another.

The slave on-off control in the center of the control panel allows you to fire the unit remotely via the burst from another flash unit. Just to the right of the slave control you will find the modeling-light and main



that the flash has fired and lets you know when it is safe to take the next exposure. The recycle time for the Excalibur 3200 is about four seconds at full power.

Both Excalibur units come with a seven-inch standard reflector, but you can add any of the other accessories for the Excalibur flash system as they are interchangeable. Three types of softboxes, a snoot with honeycomb attachment, a soft reflector system, or a standard 42-inch umbrella can all be used on both units. Lighting kits are available that include a mixture of the two Excalibur flash units and various stands, umbrellas, carrying bags, snoots and brackets.

Left: The Drafahls used both Excalibur flash units to make this shot of a bronze statue, as described in the text at right. Below left: The back panel of the Excalibur 1600 contains easy-to-use controls. Below right: Sliders to steplessly control flash and modeling-light power differentiate the 3200's panel from the 1600's.

In addition to the two Excaliburs we tested, BKA also sent us a new flash meter that they are marketing. The Portaflash is quite different than most flash meters we have used. The readout from each flash test appears on a special LED grid that immediately displays f-stop and film ISO combinations within an eight-stop range. It also has over/under indicators and LED arrows that show when the exposure is between f-stops, accurate to $\frac{1}{2}$ stop. The meter is lightweight, easy to use, and proved to be very accurate.

At the time the Excaliburs arrived for testing, we had just received a complex project to photograph: the first bronze statue of "Margie and the Stingrays," a limited edition by renowned artist Robert L. Straight. We decided this lighting

challenge was just what we needed to test the Excaliburs.

With the 3200 and the 42-inch umbrella the statue looked all right, but seemed to need more highlights. So we took the 1600 with a snoot and moved it around to the backside to highlight the bronze

from the side. We adjusted the 3200 so that some of the light spilled onto the black background. This gave the feeling of being underwater. We used a small portable flash on camera to trigger the two Excaliburs. They fired every time. The comforting sound of the beeper assured us that the flash units had indeed fired, and let us know just when we could execute another exposure. The lighting ratio that we saw with the modeling lights was the same as the images captured on our film.

A good studio strobe provides firepower, accuracy, durability, and flexibility. Both Excaliburs meet all these criteria. If you want to be the king of your studio and control studio lighting with a cutting edge, consider the Excalibur as your next weapon.

Suggested list prices are \$395 (3200) and \$295 (1600). BKA, 701 Corporate Woods Parkway, Vernon Hills, IL 60061; 847/821-0450. ■

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power switches. These give you the choice of selecting both lights or just the flash by itself. The last control is the test-fire button. This button will fire the flash independently of the other flash systems and can be used when you are metering your basic exposure. A small ready light on the back of the unit indicates when the flash is ready to fire. Recycle time at full power is about three seconds.

The Excalibur SP 3200 has twice the power of the 1600 and is rated at 320 watt-seconds (ISO 100 guide number 200, in feet). The physical size, methods for attachment, and the front of the unit are the same. The differences are on the back.

Power output of the modeling light and flash tube is controlled with two sliders that provide stepless control from $\frac{1}{8}$ to full power. A flash-confirmation sound switch turns a beeper off and on. This beeper signals

