EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES

John Henshall takes a look at the latest DSLR in the series which changed photography.

The FujiFilm S1 Pro DSLR was, for many of us, the camera which made our transition from film to digital image capture an affordable reality. The camera produced excellent JPEG images which needed little or no post-shoot adjustment, making it extremely well suited to power the transition of wedding and other types of photography from film to digital.

The camera wasn't built like a tank, to last a decade, because Fuji knew that it would be superseded within two or three years. But many are still going strong nearly five years later.

Two years after the introduction of the S1 Pro came the S2 Pro, with higher picture quality and some other carefully considered improvements, This camera has been the workhorse of most of my digital photography since it appeared. I haven't shot a roll of film since – except for comparative tests.

Now the third model in the FujiFilm DSLR dynasty is available. There is no headline-seeking increase in pixel count but the changes made do have a major impact on picture quality.

In a phrase, the new S3 Pro is an evolution, not a revolution. And this is as it should be.

If you've been using the S1 or S2, the handling of S3 Pro will seem familiar to you but even nicer.

Like the S2, the S3 Pro is based on the Nikon N80 film camera body. The S3 has a vertical shutter release, which the S2 did not have, though there are no command dials alongside it. The left hand side now has a 10-pin socket for remote release but the threaded shutter button, for a cable release, is

FujiFilm FinePix S3 Pro

retained. A USB socket has been added alongside the FireWire socket but, apart from these changes, everything is reassuringly as it was on the S2.

Just one set of four AA batteries now power the camera. Good riddance at last to the expensive pair of CR123As. A set of 2300mAh NiMH AAs and charger come with the body.

The biggest change with the S3 Pro is the sensor, a **Super CCD SRII** which has an additional six million smaller **R** pixels occupying the spaces between the six million regular **S** pixels. These smaller pixels record highlights which are too bright to be recorded by the regular pixels.

By mixing the signals from the **S** and **R** pixels together Fuji claims the dynamic range is extended by 400%, or two stops.

Don't worry if you don't understand how Fuji's sensor technology works, I don't either. I wish I did, but it would take a trip to Japan and some heavy discussion through an interpreter for me to understand it fully. I just take the sales and marketing explanations with a pinch of salt and judge the sensor technology by its results. And there's no doubting that the results from Fuji's sensors are very good indeed.

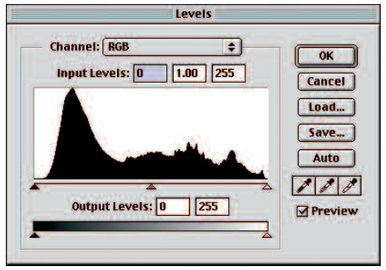
Before this dual-pixel technology the only option was to expose for the highlights and allow the shadows to block in somewhat.

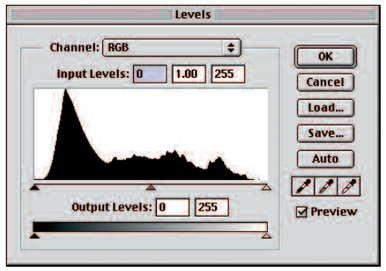
It does seem to work – though I must confess I have found it difficult to find a subject which the S3 Pro *can't* take in its stride without any of this.

My first tests were random in my studio, where – using the 'normal' dynamic range (**D-RNG** of **Auto** on the orange LCD on the back of the camera) – the windows were completely lacking in detail when the interior was exposed. When **D-RNG** was changed to **Wide2**, detail began to be recorded in the windows, while the exposure inside the studio remained the same.

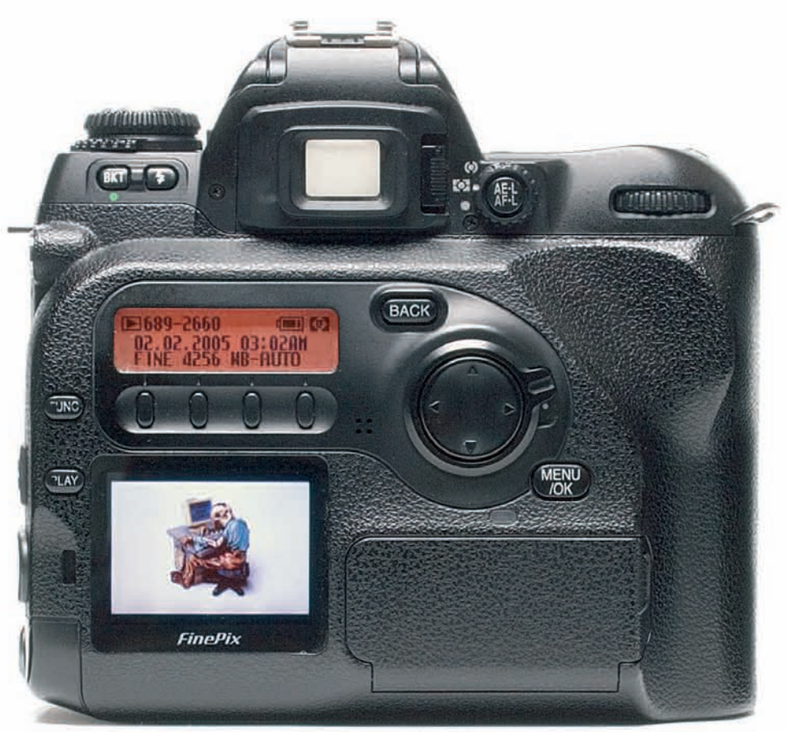
I must confess that I have found it rather difficult to reproduce this elsewhere, though I'll keep trying. A dusk shot of my 'test' house with bright sky behind was inconclusive. In fact, though, I was amazed at how large a dynamic range seemed to be captured even *without* any **D-RNG** extension. The best example I have seems to be that of a bright sky with a dark muddy field in the foreground and these shots are reproduced on the next page.

Another new feature of the S3 Pro are two film simulation modes, known





The timing wasn't right to test the S3's extended Dynamic Range capabilities at a wedding in the snow in Romania, so I had to make do with a muddy field and brightsky in the UK. Even so, a cold blue January day illustrates the camera's ability to deal with an extended dynamic range. TOP and NEAR RIGHT: With the D-RNG set to Auto, there is not enough range to show detail in both the mud and bright sky and clouds. ABOVE and FAR RIGHT: With the D-RNG set to Wide 2 the sky and clouds are brought into range. BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT: The gentle evolution of the rear controls and LCD displays of the S1, S2 and S3.



only as **F1** and **F2**. **F1** is said to be for shooting portraits with a print film look, **F2** for landscape with more vibrant colour. Maybe **F1** is **Reala**, **F2** is **Velvia**? More tests will be needed – and maybe some rare exposure on the obsolescent stuff – to determine this.

Anyway, these features are exclusive to Fuji's already exclusive 'double pixel' sensor and just as exclusive diagonal pixel structure. How they really work I'm not sure – though they certainly add up to making superb images with beautiful colour. And there seems to be no difference in resolution between the S3's 6 megapixels and the Canon EOS-20D's 8.2 megapixels.

Also new on the S3 Pro is a 'live' preview mode where the mirror flips up and a monochrome image is displayed for 30 seconds. It's the last item on page five of the camera's menu. You can zoom in on it to check focus but that's really about all.

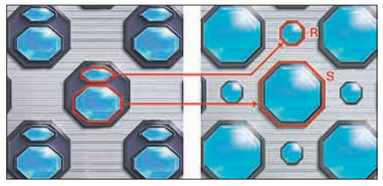
Although the S3 can capture Raw images, its most important feature is its ability to produce in-camera processed JPEG images of outstanding quality. This will make it the highly productive camera of choice for many hard-working photographers who don't want to spend their time acquiring Raw files.

The S3 Pro is a superb new generation in the FujiFilm FinePix dynasty.

When Rena Pearl phoned me towards the end of January 2005, she was keen to buy a FujiFilm FinePix S3 Pro camera body – updating from her S1. She had been unable to locate a camera in stock anywhere and one of the pro dealers was quoting a two month delivery at the full price of £1599 inc

VAT. I was able to direct her to Andy and Tony at London Camera Exchange in Reading and, less than three hours later, she had one of the first S3s in her hands. Even better news was the price… over £100 off. I learned about LCE from Keith Thompson and can recommend Andy as the single most knowledgeable and helpful High Street dealer I have met in years. Phone +44 (0)1189592149 and mention Chip Shop. They will be happy to ship to you. And no, unfortunately I don't have any financial interest in LCE.

TOP RIGHT: A section from a FujiFilm FinePix S3 Pro image enlarged to 400% (75 pixels per inch).
RIGHT: A similar section from a Canon EOS-20D image.
BELOW: How the S3's Super CCD SR II (right) differs from the original (left). The R pixels now occupy the new positions in the 'land' between the main pixels.



FujiFilm's DSLR dynasty.