

Silverprint – news & views

Agfa's Apocalypse



The collapse of AgfaPhoto and its distributors globally was the most significant event of October '05. Full explanations of a strange scenario are yet to emerge, but the main fact is that all Agfa material

distribution has come to a grinding halt. Although some residual materials may be wrung out of the system, manufacturing has ceased, and Agfa's sophisticated range of traditional materials now belongs to the past.

Although AgfaPhoto had been in administration since May, there was no warning of the sudden crisis, and no chance to stockpile; so we sold out of all the main materials such as Classic paper within a week. Also gone was Rodinal developer....

A Military Solution



Patented on January 27, 1891. Rodinal has always been associated with Agfa, and even now the copyrighted name resides with Agfa-Gevaert, although the general formula has been long out of copyright. The most authentic recipe has to be the one printed in 'Agfa Film Factory Wolfen', the notes taken when the Combined Intelligence Objectives Committee spent 12 days interrogating Agfa personnel at the Wolfen plant in June 1945. This investigation got off to a slow start, as the Americans had rounded up some of the key Agfa scientists and put them in Wiesbaden town jail, in the mistaken belief that they were V2 rocket experts. Once this situation had been clarified, the American party took no further interest in the Agfa personnel, and the British contingent were free to analyse the factory operations. The results were made available to the British photo industry shortly afterwards, and through a circuitous route, involving a transaction at a camera fair and the exchange of £2.00, eventually fell into my hands.

Home-made 'Rodinal'

There are some photographers whose lives have no value without Rodinal on tap, so this was an attempt to see if the developer, or a close equivalent, can be made on a small scale.. The yield of the original Agfa recipe might be a little on the large side (340 litres) for most workers, so scaling it down, and adapting it for the more commonly available sodium salts gives this formula;

Para-aminophenol	17g
Sodium sulphite	112g
Sodium hydroxide	10.5g
Potassium bromide	3g



Mix in 500ml water at 55° C. This is considerably hotter than normal mixing, and needs a wide scale or cooking thermometer. I did not use either, but took a good guess, which did not seem to cause any problems. During mixing, which I carried out over half an hour, I topped up a water jacket around the mixing beaker with more hot water. The aminophenol does not dissolve easily, and you will probably be left with a small amount of residue which refuses to dissolve. Don't worry, carry on dissolving the other ingredients in order, taking great care when mixing the sodium hydroxide, which as well as being corrosive to the skin will cause a further small rise in the solution temperature as it dissolves. Finally, let it cool, and filter the solution to get the insoluble traces out - a coffee filter in a plastic funnel does it.

Does it work?

It works a treat. The concentrate was somewhat darker than commercial Rodinal, and in colour more towards violet than straw colour. In use, the characteristics were identical, giving the same clean result with good gradation, and sharp edge detail. Slightly lower contrast from the clone, probably due to the lower pH of sodium hydroxide. The material cost was about £2.70 for the 500ml, which at 1+25 dilution would process over 40 35mm films.

Side by side

Direct comparison with original Rodinal, shot on the same FP4 roll and processed in each developer simultaneously.



Original Rodinal & blowup



'Cloned' Rodinal & blowup

In conclusion, I have satisfied at least myself that it is possible to make one's requirements of this developer type on a small scale. It is definitely more involved, however than mixing, say, ID11, and it would probably be best to make up 6 months supply at a time, as the keeping properties of aminophenol developers are extremely good.

Rodinal references

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodinal>

Raw chemicals: from Silverprint, details below.

An in-depth article on Rodinal was originally published in Ag magazine, and a PDF of this is on the Silverprint website.

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Silverprint Ltd
12 Valentine Place, London
SE1 8QH

tel 020 7620 0844
fax 020 7620 0129