"UNLOCKING THE POWER OF BLEND IF" BY MICHAEL SMYTH

This tutorial demonstrates the power and advantages of using Photoshop's Blend If as a way of combining images together without the need for making and applying masks.

INTRODUCTION

Combining two or more images is a common way to add creativity to our images, but sometimes the task of preparing a mask to define the areas to be combined is a really onerous task. It would be great if there was a way to do this without needing a mask.

The good news is, there is such a method available and when it works, it works very well. There are some limitations to its effectiveness, which we will explain below, but in many cases, it works very well.

WHAT IS "BLEND IF"

Blend If is a way of instructing Photoshop to combine image information based on certain criteria, the " *If*" part of " *Blend If*". In other words, we tell Photoshop to blend together images " *If*" the image information meets certain criteria. Using *Blend If* we are telling Photoshop to consider the *relative tonality* of the two images and blend If one part is lighter or darker than the underlying image.

To utilise the *Blend If* controls, we need to access the *Layer Styles* menu. You can do this by simply double clicking on the layer you want to blend, or go to the main menu and select *Layer>Layer Style>Blending Options*. The menu opens as shown below:
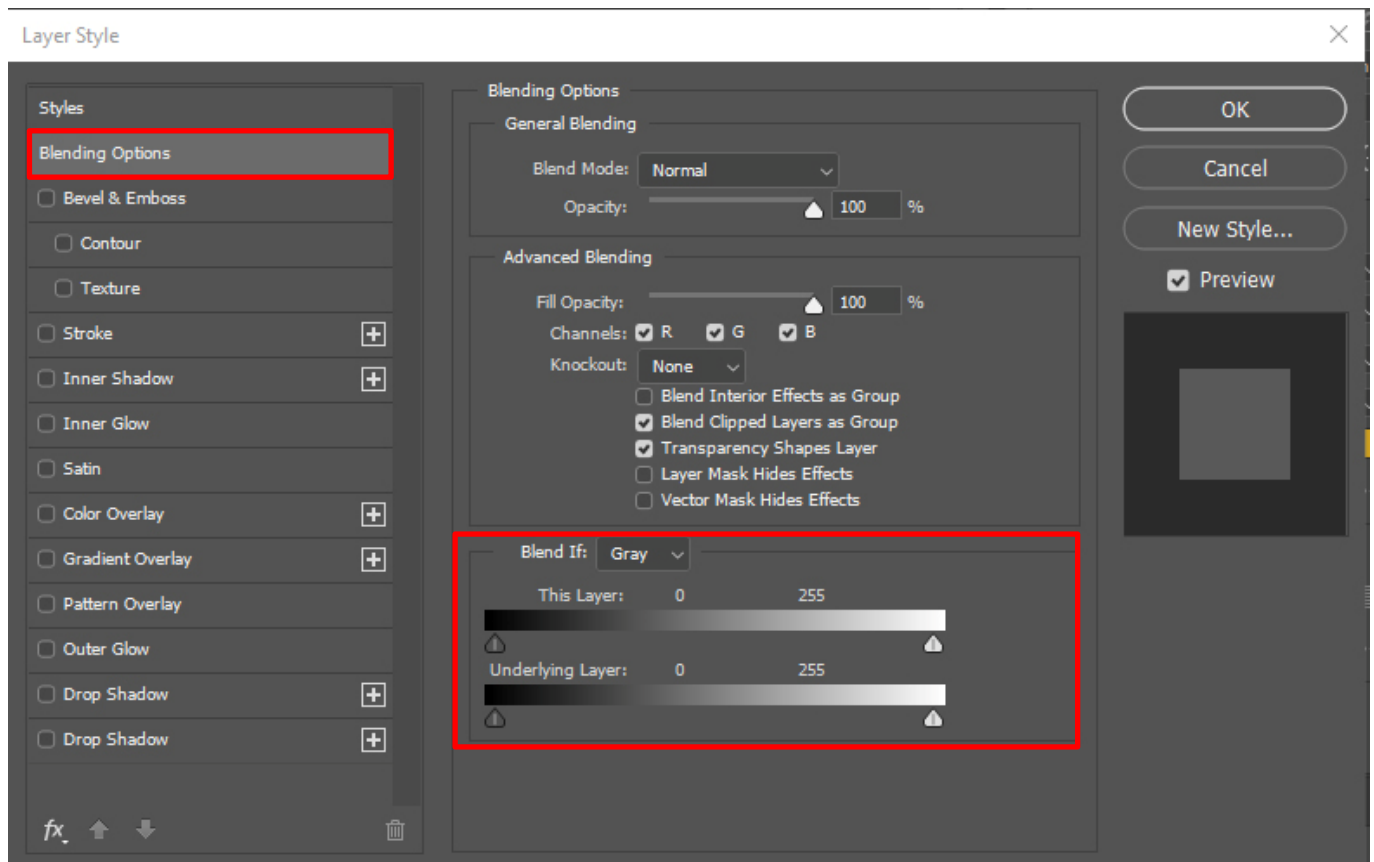
Above: The *Layer Styles* menu with the Blending Options selected.

The important parts of this menu are: the *Blend Mode* (Normal) and the controls at the bottom under the heading " *Blend If Grey*".

The **Blend If** controls comprise two sets of sliders, one set for the top layer and one for the underlying layer.

Each set of sliders has a pointer to control the dark tones and one for the light tones. To demonstrate how these work, we will use an image with some text added. Note that each slider is composed of two halves which are locked together.

Above: The example image with two sets of words added and using the **Blend If** controls to modify how the words appear to "float" behind parts of the image.

To control how the word "Trees" appears, first double click on the text layer to open the **Blend If** menu. Here we want the darker areas of the foliage to be excluded from the blending of the layers, so we move the dark tones slider for the underlying layer to the right. The initial result gives a very harsh transition, so to feather the transition we split the slider by holding down the **Alt key** whilst moving the right hand part of the slider apart.
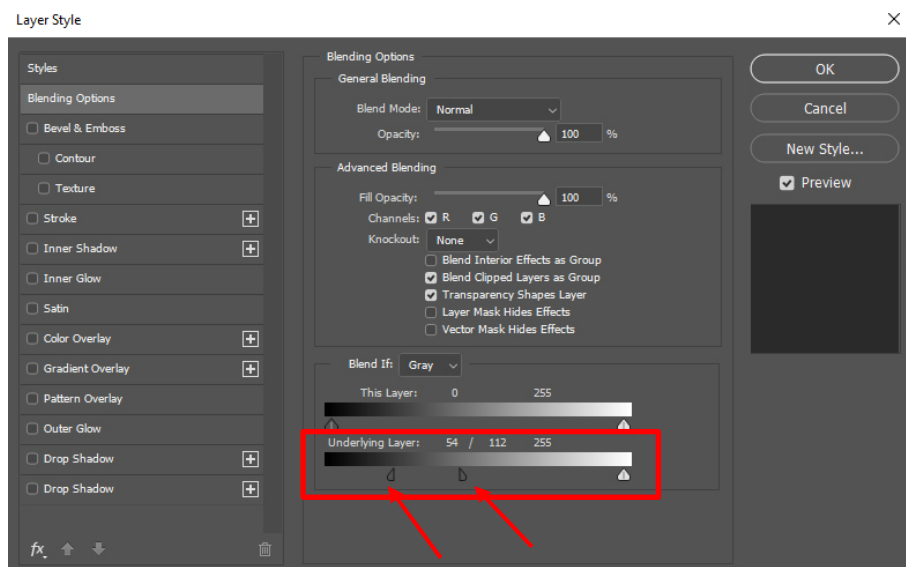

Left: The **Blend If** sliders adjusted for the underlying layer to exclude the dark tones from blending with the upper layer. This allows the darker foliage to "float" in front of the lighter text.

Note: if the text were darker than the foliage (e.g. Black) this would not work, and we would have to adjust the settings for the top layer instead.
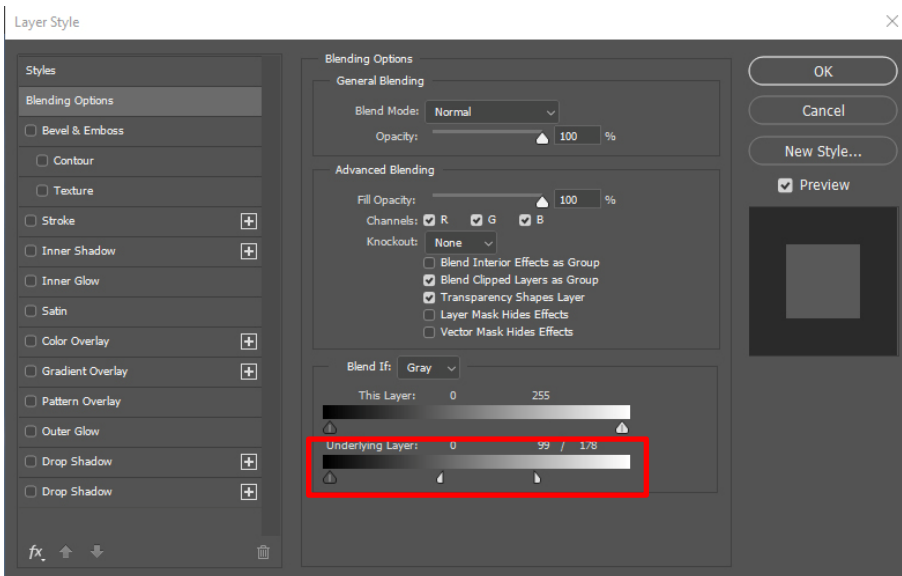
Note: The slider has been split to feather the transition.

To refine the blending of the lighter and darker tones, move the two halves of the sliders until an acceptable mix is achieved.
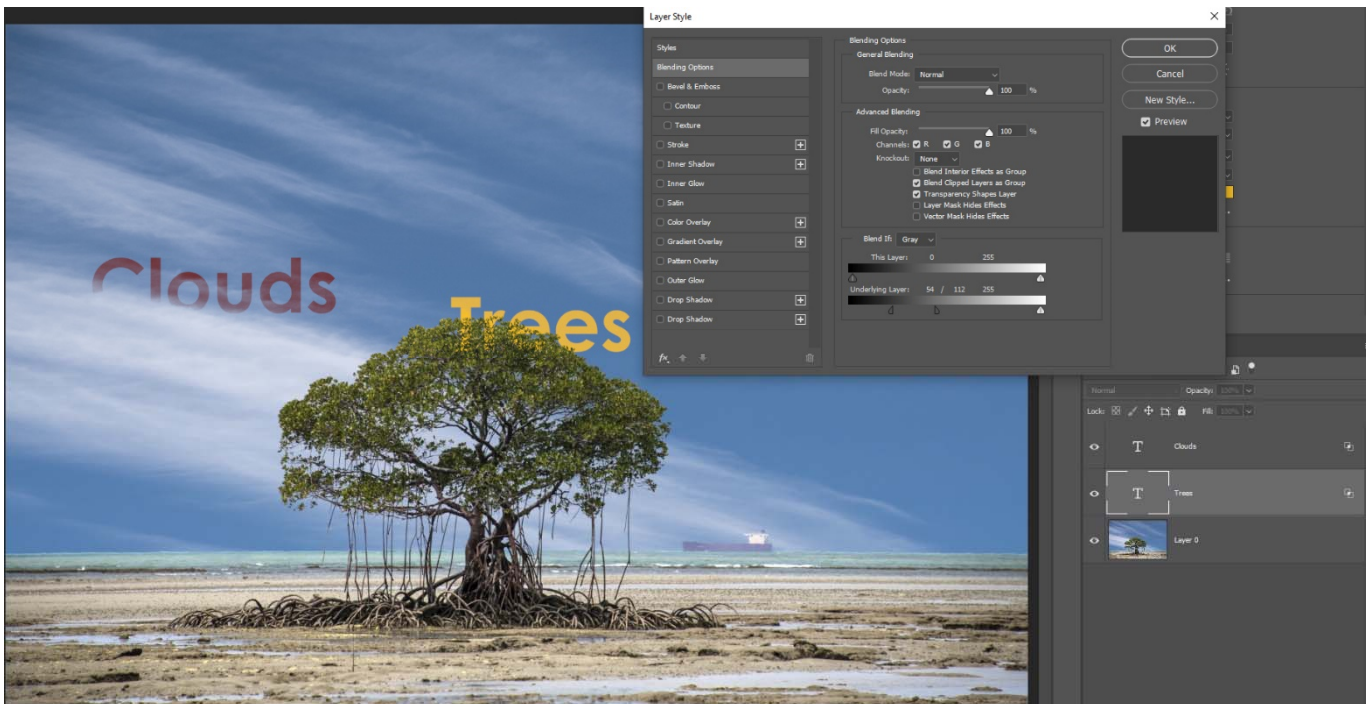
Above: The word "Trees" is now blended with the bottom layer, excluding the darker tones of the base or background layer. ***Blend If only works on Tonal values, NOT colour values.***

Next, we will repeat the same procedure, this time with the word "Clouds". This time we want to exclude the lighter tones of the clouds, so that the word appears to sit behind the clouds. Again, we are modifying how the underlying layer blends with the upper text layer.

Left: The ***Blend If*** sliders adjusted to exclude the lighter tones of the base image from the mix.

Here the Lighter tones slider has been moved to the left to exclude the lighter tones and then split to feather the transition.

An important note here is that once the Blend If sliders have been set for each text layer, you can use the Move Tool to move the text around anywhere on the image and the blending selection will be maintained.

The above simple example shows how the principle of ***Blend If*** works, but how does this apply to a real world situation ? One of the most common applications is where you want to replace a bland or over exposed sky with something more appropriate.
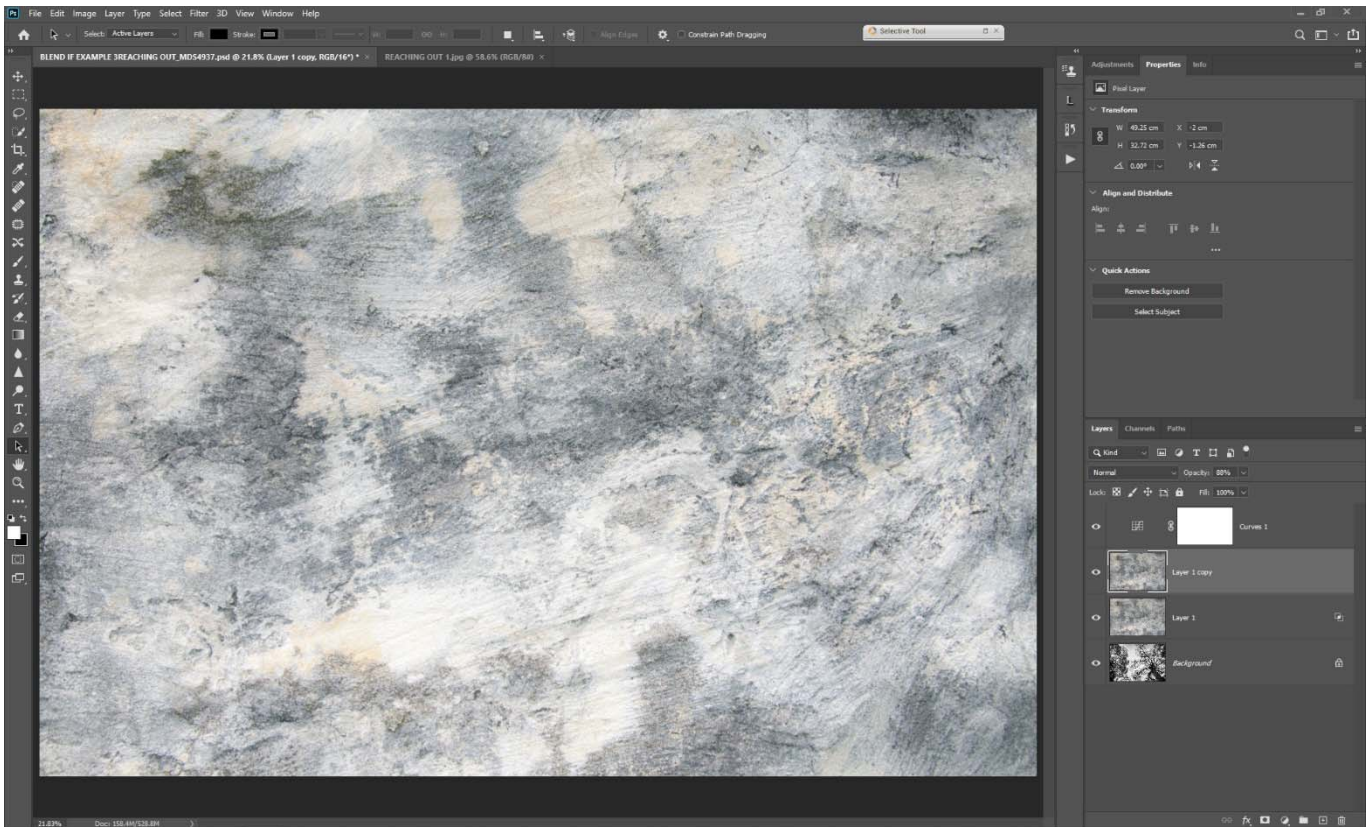
Over the page we will look at a more realistic example.

REPLACING SKIES USING BLEND IF

Using the *Blend If* controls only on an image with a blown out sky we can blend two images together without needing to make a selection.

Above: An image where the sky has blown out to virtually pure white. We are going to add a texture overlay for creative effect.


Above: A texture overlay to be added to the above tree image.

To blend the texture image with the tree image, first open the texture image as a separate image. Select the Move tool (The topmost tool in the left hand tools palette.

Click on the texture image anywhere and keeping the left hand mouse button pressed, drag the image up to the top of the image and onto the tree image in the tabs at the top of the workspace.
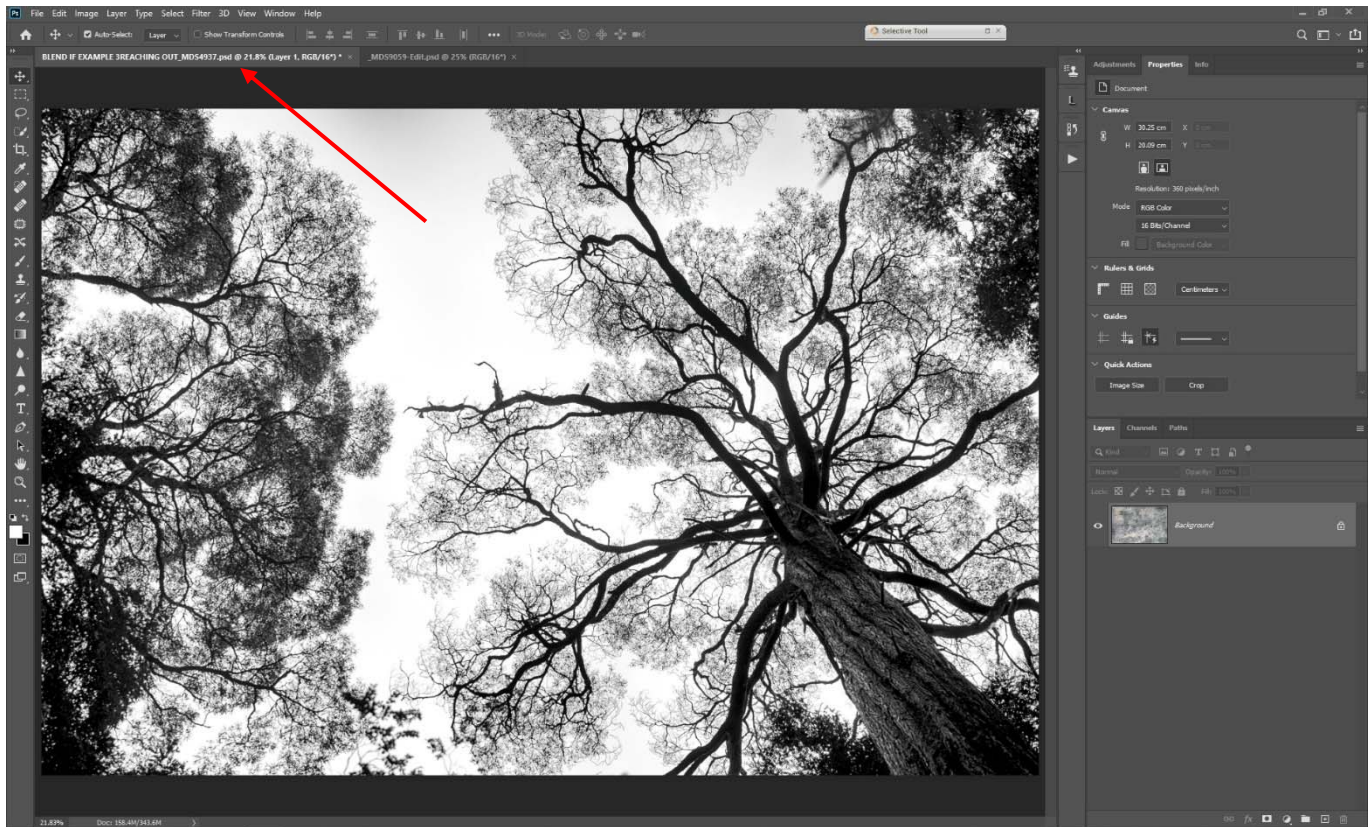

Above: to add the texture layer to the tree image, drag (using the Move Tool and holding down the Left mouse button) to the image tab for the tree image. The image will change to the tree image. DO NOT release the mouse button yet !. Still holding the mouse button, move onto the tree image, then hold down the **Alt** key before releasing the button. The **Alt** key will centre the texture image on the Tree image.

If there is a difference in size between the two images, select the texture layer in the layers panel, then go to **Image>Transform>Scale** and using the corner handles, drag to resize the image to match the underlying tree image. Note: It doesn't matter if the texture layer is a bit larger than the tree image. When done, click on the Tick symbol in the top contextual menu to lock in the changes.

With the texture layer above the tree layer we are now ready to blend the two together. Firstly, make sure the texture image is set to "Normal" blend Mode. Some other Blend modes will work for this treatment, but mostly "Normal" is the preferred Blend Mode.

In this example, the dark branches of the tree image are the parts we don't want to blend with the top layer, so we will move the dark tones slider (the left hand one) for the underlying layer to the right until the dark branches start to appear. Next position your mouse on the right hand part of the slider and holding down the Alt key, split the slider to feather the transition. Move each of the halves of the slider to achieve the best result.
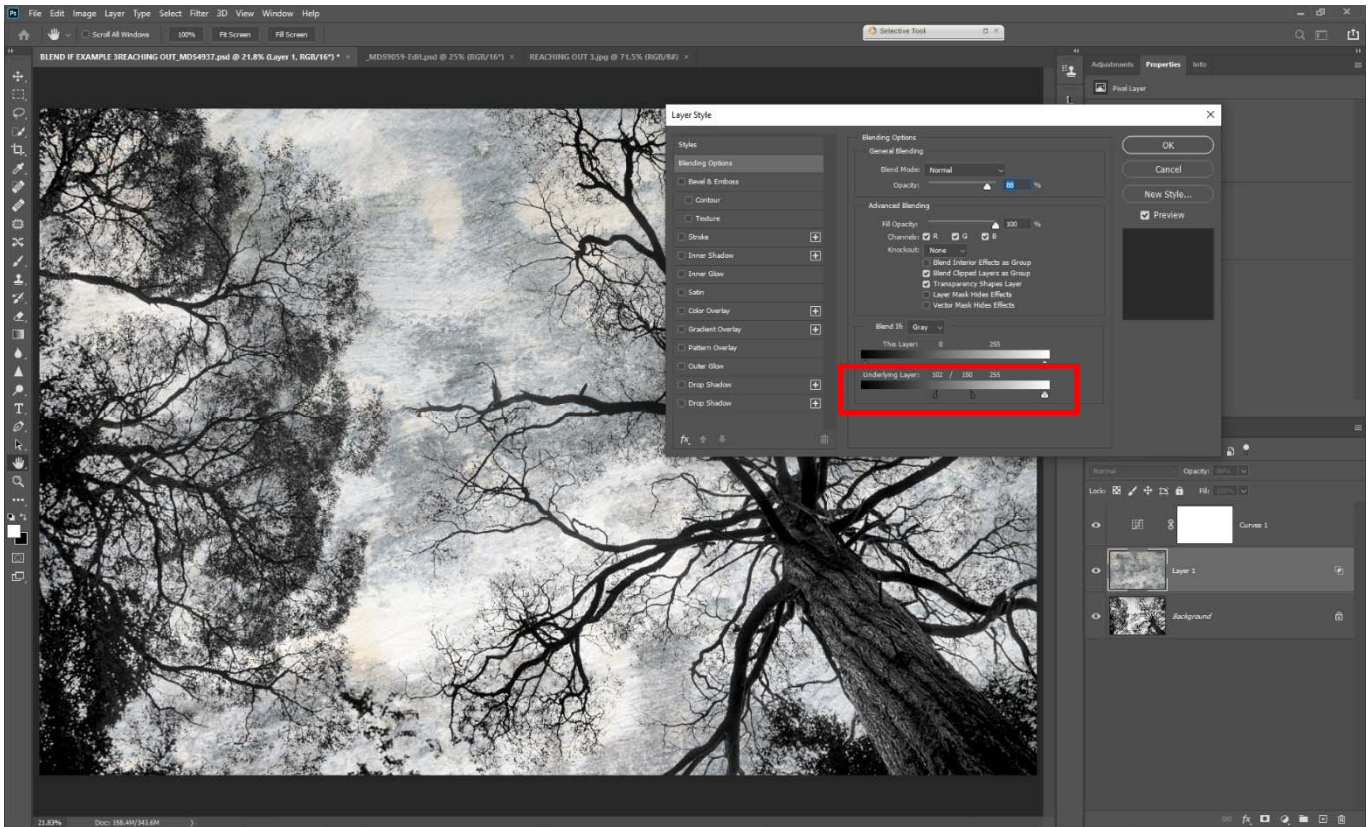
Above: The **Blend If** sliders adjusted to give the best blend result. Each image type and overlay will require different blending adjustments.

Finally, to adjust the overall tonality of the blended image, apply a **Curves Layer** above the texture and adjust to provide the tonal range required.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE THAT REQUIRES SOME MASKING
In the example above, because the tree branches were quite dark, we didn't need to do any masking, but in some cases, it isn't possible to blend completely with the **Blend If** sliders alone.

Above: This tree needs a more dramatic backdrop, but will **Blend If** alone do the job ?
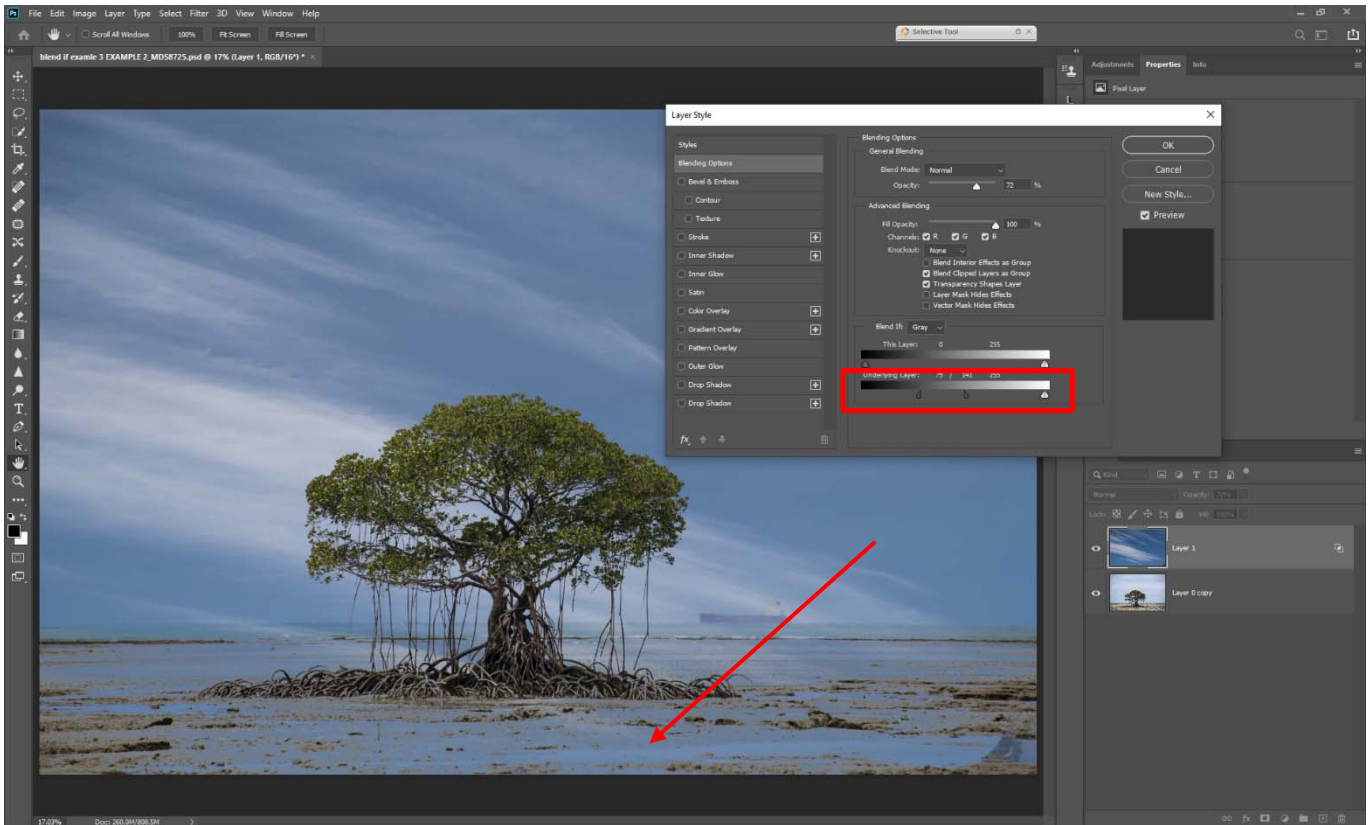
Above: Adding a new sky and using the **Blend If** sliders gives a good mix with the tree foliage, but the sand in the foreground has also been masked.

The foreground is dark in areas that match the tonality of the tree being blended, so **Blend If** alone will not completely solve the problem.

To solve the issue and because the sand is a clearly defined area, we can simply add a layer mask to this layer and paint in with Black using a few brush strokes.

Above: The image with a simple mask painted onto the sandy foreground.

Using the power of **Blend If** we have eliminated the need for making a tricky mask around the tree. To complete the image a Curves layer has been added to increase brightness and contrast.
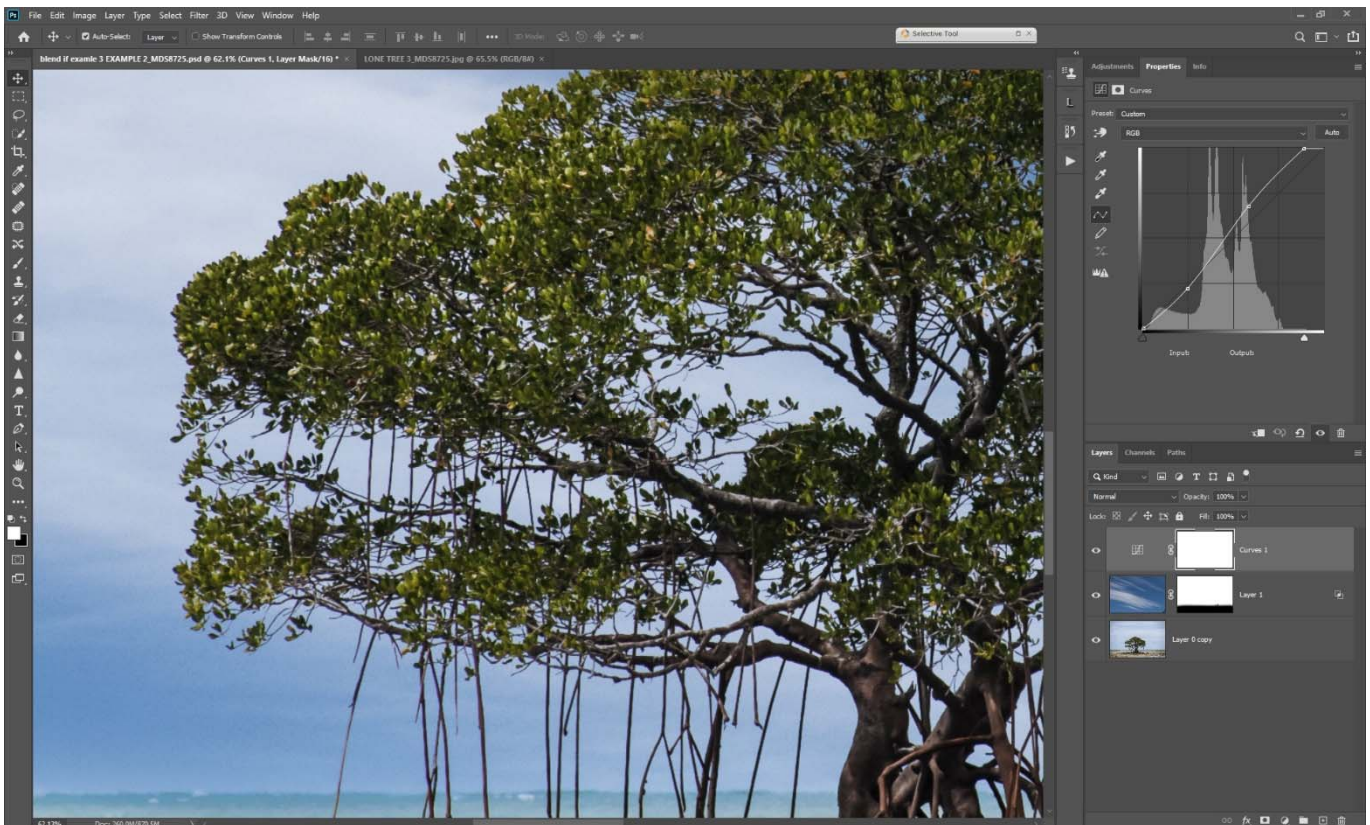
Above: Blend If has done the hard work in selecting the tree foliage, without any halos, colour fringing or other issues often associated with making effective selections.

SUMMARY

Using **Blend If** can give some quick and simple blends of images, especially where there is a distinct difference between the tonality of the base image and the overlay. Where it is not possible to completely resolve the image with **Blend If** alone, often a simple and quick Layer Mask painted on with a soft brush can resolve any remaining issues.

Blend If is an important tool in the Photographer's toolkit. Use it and save time and frustration.

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