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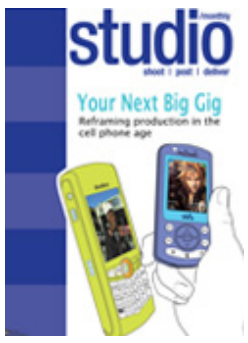

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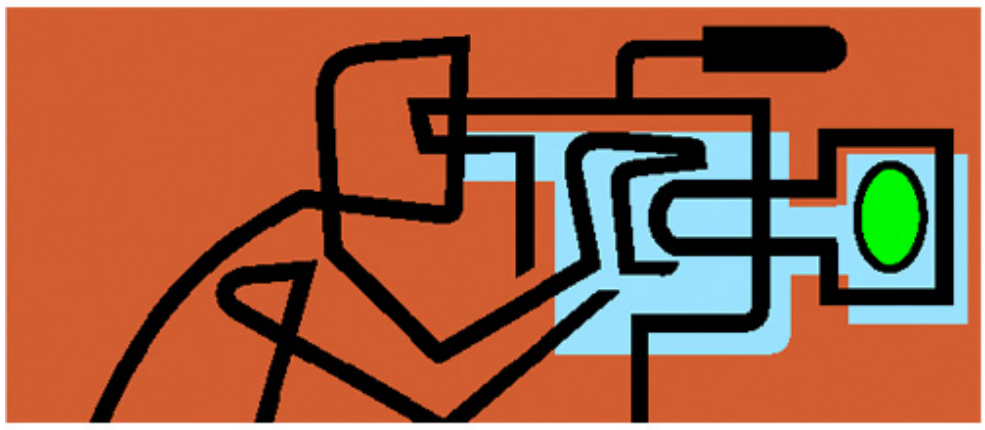
Hands-On HD: First-Person Advice

October 1, 2006 Source: Studio Monthly



This installment of "Hands-On HD" marks the latest collection of pro tips and workarounds we've gleaned from producers, directors, DPs, editors and audio post specialists working on the frontlines of high-def production and post. A lot has changed since last October, when this special feature first appeared in *Studio/monthly*. New cameras and wider support for native formats in editing software mean you've got many more choices and, hence, more tough decisions to make in the line of duty every day. Budgets and production schedules will make a lot of those decisions for you. But sometimes, as David C. Ballard of LAB 601, Inc. and LAB 601 Digital Post suggests on page 12, the best answers come from asking the right questions before you start your next HD project. Mapping out an approach will save you countless headaches and false starts. The tips on the following pages aren't just about formats and frame rates, either. Many offer ideas about how to manage the entire process, like training assistants and producers in current workflows and learning to factor in more time for output and layoff.

Don't Be Afraid of HDV, But Embrace Cloning

Joel Pilger
Executive Producer/Creative Director
!mpossible Pictures

Recent HD Project: "Mountain Town" for Aspen Ski Company (HDV), DISH Network "HD Showroom" (HD 1080i), Discovery HD Theater "Father's Day Circuit City Sweepstakes" (HD 1080i)

The HDV format is a great solution for shooting good quality images using a small form factor camera. Unfortunately, only now are vendors beginning to offer workflow tools for integrating HDV into professional post-production environments. Learning this after the fact can be quite painful, as we experienced during a recent production.

When we were invited to partner on an exciting documentary feature commissioned by the town of Aspen, Colorado, we jumped in enthusiastically. Formats would be a mixture of standard 16 mm, 16 mm Bolex and HDV. Offline editing would be done in Final Cut by the production company and we would handle finishing in Discreet Smoke. Once principal photography was complete, the resulting footage was overwhelmingly HDV, about 40 hours worth. The great challenge that eventually arose was crossing the great chasm separating the compressed, codec-dependent world of Final Cut versus the uncompressed, non-Quicktime world of Discreet Smoke.

First of all, HDV files are small, but are heavily processor-intensive when editing. A good workflow for offline editing in HDV is to downconvert from your HDV camera/deck and digitize footage as DV right from the start. This will allow your editors to work more rapidly on an array of Macs (even laptops) by sharing a relatively small set of media files on external hard drives.

Second, uncompressed systems like Discreet Smoke expect footage from true professional broadcast formats such as Digital Betacam or HDCAM. This fact, coupled with the lack of an HDV decks offering standard serial control and HD-SDI/SD-SDI outputs, creates a frustrating scenario. How exactly does one digitize and EDL from HDV source tapes into Discreet Smoke? We evaluated numerous technical strategies to accomplish this and ultimately arrived at this answer: you don't. So be prepared in advance to clone all your HDV material to one of these professional formats prior to finishing.

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Eric Hanson
CEO
Spy Post
San Fransisco, CA

Recent HD Projects: *Valley of the Hearts Delight*, Camp Creative— Nissan, *Speed & Angels*

Spy Post has been experimenting with several techniques for tapeless workflow in the intermediate steps of film-to-HD projects. In some cases, dailies have been transferred to DVCAM and expanded to 29.97 frame rate. The filmmaker's hope is that a Final Cut sequence can be delivered and we can retransfer the footage, uncompressed directly to QuickTimes. They hope they can just re-link the new full res transfer to their sequence, avoiding any compression associated with the various HD tape formats until final delivery. This is possible given some preplanning. While Final Cut is a great editor, it does have one limitation: It cannot re-link QuickTime media based on reel numbers and timecode. It only does this when loading from tape. Instead, it re-links media based on the file name only and assumes the start frame of a given QuickTime is the same from the media used for offline and the final high-resolution media. The solution is to create a selects list for the final transfer and ensure the final transferred QuickTimes match the media used for the offline in terms of timings and names.

A similar situation exists when moving from offline to online, relative to the sequence timebase. Filmmakers anticipate that upon re-linking or recapturing their media, they can either batch digitize or re-link and keep all of the effects in their sequences. Unfortunately, in many cases, the project will deliver in HD at 23.98/24 fps, but will have been cut using standard definition dailies at 29.97 fps. Final Cut cannot translate sequences between formats/frame rates. It's important that at the beginning of each project, the editor understands the final delivery and uses the timebase of the final delivery for the off-line. Final Cut offers the ability to reverse telecine footage to remove 3:2 from the source for use in a 23.98/24fps sequence. The other option is to do digital dailies (QuickTimes) at the correct frame rate. If the edit is already at 29.97 fps and the final delivery is 23.98/24 fps, then the only other automated alternative is to generate a 29.97 fps EDL and use Cinema Tools to translate it to 24 fps. In this situation, all effects other than dissolves and time changes will have to be recreated or cut and pasted between sequences.

HD Color Correction—Da Vinci vs. Final Cut and Avid
We consult with many long-format filmmakers about the sensitivity of budgets and the most practical way to color grade their projects. Many of them hope they can do color correction in their editing programs. While programs such as Final Cut and Avid have robust tools, they're not as optimized for complex grading for long-format projects.

The first problem is talent. While there are very talented editors in the industry, they are editors first, not colorists. Colorists deal with color and color treatment of various media formats day after day. Colorists will be able to correct footage much more quickly and efficiently given their focus on color.

The second problem has to do with the toolset of these editorial programs. Many of them advertise that their color correctors are real time in HD. While this may be true depending on the configuration of the system, the tools quickly slow down as your color correction becomes more complex. Things like secondary color correction, utilizing garbage masks/power windows, noise reducers and selective defocus adjustments bring systems like the Avid and Final Cut to their knees relative to something like a da Vinci 2K Plus. At Spy Post, we've got a full range of systems, including Final Cut Pro, Avid, Discreet Smoke/Flame and the da Vinci 2K Plus. We just worked on a project that had a TRT of two minutes. There were many shots that required an initial color pass, a garbage mask/power window, and a second color pass. Each shot (approximately 4-to-8 seconds each) took 6-to-8 minutes to render for playback. The same process would require no rendering in the da Vinci. Imagine if the project had been 70-plus minutes long.

Traditional color-correction suites are designed to be interactive and to move through projects at a fast pace with talent that is dedicated to the art of color treatment and image enhancement. Adjustments are real time. While the hourly rates are much more expensive, we have worked with many directors who have realized, after several years of trying to do it in the editorial process, that they save time and money using the right tool for the job. This is especially true with long-form projects.

Use HD Monitors
And calibrate them. This may be stating the obvious, but it's crucial to have a true 1920 x 1080-capable broadcast monitor for all HD design, effects and finishing. Lots of facilities use cheaper LCD or plasma "prosumer" monitors in their suites, but we feel it's essential to have proper broadcast monitors for color correcting and quality assurance. The same applies for on-set monitoring HD shoots. When we provide on-set effects supervision, we request a properly set-up broadcast monitor.

(Because we know that we'll be "comping" those poorly lit greenscreens the next day!)

When Designing for HD Post and SD Broadcast, Know the Deliverables
While HD formats let a designer create stunning and complex graphics with thin crisp lines and tiny fonts, the majority of HD graphics packages will be down-converted (and compressed) for standard-def broadcast. It's important to know when you need to take advantage of the HD format, and when not to. Get the specs for the package before you start designing frames, and be prepared to create graphics that work for both 16 x 9 and 4 x 3.

Train Your Assistants (and producers)
While we get all the fun challenges of creating 3D hockey players, replacing actors' heads (and body parts) and fixing poorly lit greenscreens, it's the assistants that deal with the various HD decks, down-converters and sync generators. To be successful with HD post, assistants, up-and-comers and in-house producers must be well-versed in frame rates, aspect ratios and all the formats. Making sure that decks can pass timecode properly and learning the 900-plus sub menus on an HDCAM deck is a great way to start.

Reinvent a Workflow that Saves Time

Kimball Carr
Writer/Director/Editor
VP, Development and Production
Star Circle Pictures
Virginia Beach, VA

Recent HD Project: *Samaritan*

In early 2006 Star Circle Pictures had planned a picture to test the limits of HD and its viability as a film replacement for feature work. That film, *Samaritan*, showcases our belief in the ability of today's directors to cast aside old conventions about movie making. Contrary to old wisdom, we believe motion picture production can be quick, inexpensive and good. Here are a few techniques we used to prove our theory.

Record on P2, Back up on RAID
Star Circle Pictures was among the first companies to shoot a motion picture with the Panasonic AG-HVX200 HD camera. For *Samaritan*, Panasonic's P2 drive was a dream. Shooting in 720p mode at 24 fps we had film-like footage being shot directly onto solid-state media cards with a paired capacity of 20 minutes. We designed for *Samaritan* a lean 3:1 shooting ratio and were able to ensure that we had our footage by loading it onto a PowerBook and viewing the full HD stream on location. Knowing what I wanted in the edit, I could also check in-and-out points of shots right on site and know I could move on, secure in the knowledge that my footage was stored on the drive, backed up on a RAID array on set.

Design the Workflow Around HD's Benefits
In two nine-hour nights of shooting, our team completed 81 setups. We intentionally pushed our crew and cast to create a sense of kinetic energy around the shoot, minimize downtime for an overnight shoot and compress what would have been a six-day shoot into two. Working with HD we were able to plot a lighting scheme similar to that used for film, including high-contrast shots, knowing the format could take the dynamic range. Planning to crush the contrast of certain shots in post, I was able to light for dramatic feel unhindered by the usual "video fears." The added benefit of a detailed shooting schedule, which guided the production, let us move quickly and harness the benefits of a versatile, highly portable, handheld HD camera.

Pre-Direct the Picture to Further Push the Envelope
On *Samaritan* our processes let us shoot artistically as well as fast and accurately so that actors and crew were kept moving on set. We used software-based pre-vis for the entire project, which gave us a road map of the two-night shoot. It also provided creative freedom— I could direct the picture before we even hit the location, avoiding the dreaded "coverage shoot" and saving time and money. During rehearsal I actually showed an animatic to the cast and crew, walking them through the entire movie and letting them see angles, moving shots, story beats and other details that kept us fluid on location. This step proved invaluable— the cast and crew adapted easily to impromptu changes we made on location.

Our next production will push the HD boundary even further. In an aim to further blur the line between production and post, we'll be shooting directly to hard drive and bypassing footage logging altogether. With the combined tools and technology now available to movie makers, there is no reason not to turn to HD as the storytelling medium for today's director.

(For more about Star Circle Pictures and *Samaritan*, visit www.starcirclepictures.com.)

Learn to Multi-Task On a Single Project

Craig Maniglia
Vice President
MVI Post
Falls Church, VA

Recent HD Projects: *National Geographic HD Channel launch support; PBS's Word is Bond and Cezanne*

Perhaps the most crucial element to our business here at MVI Post is the ability to multitask on a single project. If you can edit video and mix audio simultaneously, you're cutting your project time in half. Naturally, every investment we have made centers around more effective and faster workflow.

With HD, almost every project that comes through our door requires 5.1 surround sound mixing. To that end, we installed Fairlight DREAM Constellation-XT consoles with Pyxis HD nonlinear video systems in all three of our HD studios. The Pyxis system allows the audio suites to chase the uncompressed HD video while mixing, which gives clients the chance to view their picture and sound one step closer to the finished product. AV Transfer gives us an Ethernet pipeline of audio and HD video between our Discreet Smoke HD editing systems and the DREAM Constellation-XT/Pyxis HD audio rooms. We can now drag and drop audio files into Smoke without having to convert them at all. We can also send MP3 files straight from the console to a client so they can see immediate results. The HD process is so intensive that it pays off to eliminate as many steps as possible without detracting from the quality of the finished product.

The move to HD has presented us with a whole new set of variables when it comes to

post-production, any of which can severely impact the speed of a given project. We recognized the impending shift to HD early on and began outfitting our studios accordingly about a year and a half before television channels launched their HD affiliates. The core of our success is the commitment to providing complete start-to-finish solutions in the production and post-production processes. This includes production, editorial, sound design/mixing, visual effects and compositing, color enhancement and new media services, such as DVD and CD authoring. We also support both 1080i and 720p, which can only be accomplished through a highly efficient workflow.

MVI Post recently provided support for the launch of the new National Geographic HD Channel, which called for not only new content to be mixed in 5.1 surround sound, but 5.1 remixes of inventory content as well. We also recently completed a couple of programs for PBS in 5.1, including *Word is Bond*, a documentary about the African-American poetry renaissance, and *Cezanne*, a biography of the influential post-Impressionist painter.

Think Visually in Full-Frame

Beirne Lowry
Creative Director

Ross Shain
Senior Editor/Designer
Mr. Wonderful
New York, NY

Recent HD Projects: OLN Stanley Cup show open, CBS Sports promos, NHL on Versus

We've learned a lot about HD postproduction here at Mr. Wonderful by designing graphics packages for networks, handling visual effects on commercials and guiding indie features through the digital intermediate process. Our in-house, HD-capable equipment includes Discreet Flame/Smoke HD, Avid's DS/Nitris HD and Apple Final Cut Pro HD. We've worked with most of the varied HD flavors, including 24p/1080i HDCAM, 720p DVCPRO HD, VariCam and HDV. There's a lot to keep up with and usually each new project poses different challenges. Here are a few tips we'd like to pass on.

Use the Full Frame (even in standard def)
In commercial post, it's common to reposition and reframe shots in the film-to-tape transfer. It's really helpful to have an HD transfer for visual effects and finishing, even when your deliverable is SD. We just worked on a campaign in which the main character morphs from scene to scene. This required the start and end position of the overall video frame to animate in scale and position.

In the transfer, the colorist used the Specter FS Datacine. While it's an amazing system for nonlinear color correction, it wasn't able to produce the desired quality for animating the full frame position. Our repositioning was too jagged and there is limited ability to "smooth" the key frames in the Specter. Because the Specter can store and output multiple resolutions, we were able to quickly get a beautiful 1:1 HD transfer of our shots and use our Avid DS/Nitris to mix the HD source material on our SD timeline. This let us animate the scale and reposition of our full frame in the context of the composite and create the result we were looking for. Problem solved.

Choose HD to Deliver Multi-Layer FX Spots to Cinema

Michele Morris
Senior Producer
ATTIK/LA
Los Angeles

Recent HD Projects: AOL/MovieFone "Terrence" and "Miranda" (debuting in cinemas); Scion Brand TV campaign xA "Shadow," xB "Swarm," tC "Shark;" Scion xA "Phantom" cinema ad; Scion "What Moves You" cinema ads

When working on a spot that combines live action, CGI and animation, delivering on HD is the perfect choice. It holds up on the big screen as well as the TV.

For several of our recent cinema spots, we shot the live action on 35mm and transferred it to HD. The special effects, CGI elements and animation sequences were created in HD. If the tracking provided by the edit house to the animation house is solid, then marrying the two is seamless. After all the elements are edited together, a final overall color correction was done to the HD master.

This is very important: When considering finishing in HD, factor in extra output and layoff time.

Also, when working with more than one house, have extra drives onto which the animation and effect houses can download their portion of the project to send to the edit house; the files are too large to download from an ftp site.

Create a Manageable Workflow

Laura Merians
DP
Venice, CA

Recent HD Project: *Lovespring International*

All evolving formats create new issues, but everything can be solved. In order to comply with the networks' format requirements and get a 24p project from the Canon XL H1's 24F HDV, which is 1080/59.9 fps, we ran the footage through a format converter made by Sky Micro. We were then able to online 23.98 and get a 24p master. Canon became involved and everyone worked really hard to figure this out and create a manageable workflow.

Check Your Firmware
When using a prosumer camera, it's a good idea to contact the manufacturer to make sure you have the latest firmware and, if not, get the update. For a long-term project, if I'm using multiple small cameras, I create an in-depth maintenance schedule to make sure they're calibrated and nothing's falling apart.

Keep Lighting Simple
When lighting for video, I find less is more. Keep it simple. ND and bobbinet are good things to have in abundance. I also like to use GAM's WindowGrip. It's nice and clean.

Use a Shoulder Mount
I find it's harder to operate small, lightweight cameras, so it's helpful to use a shoulder mount and add weight in addition to that. Small scuba weights work well.

Test Your Gear Before You Use It
When considering a new format, it's important to trust your instincts in knowing what's right for the project. There's so much information out there, full of persuasive opinions, and it's hard not to be influenced by someone else's conclusions. Do the tests yourself with a good monitor, capture footage and go through the post process, then make judgments. Every format looks different and should be treated not as a convenient substitute for another medium but as something with its own aesthetic properties and visual possibilities. So much of choosing a format depends on how the project will ultimately be presented.

Create a Q&A Checklist for your HD Post Workflow

David C. Ballard
President & Creative Director
LAB 601, Inc./LAB 601
Digital Post
Atlanta, GA

Recent HD Projects: *The Signal*; *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*

Production time is dirt cheap compared to post-production time, so plan ahead. These days, between camera systems, edit systems, tape and film formats, there are nearly an infinite number of choices to make. Aside from the equipment, there are just as many choices on workflow and process, especially working with HD and HDV materials.

Here are a few questions I ask when designing a post workflow for a project:

1. What is the acquisition format and what camera is being used?
2. What frame rates and camera settings are being used?
3. How is the audio being captured?
4. Do you plan a theatrical run and, if so, what is the final deliverable? Film print? HD?
5. Are there mixed formats that need to be combined or converted?
6. Are there visual effects that need to be designed and executed?
7. What type and version of edit system will be used? *...and most important*,
8. What is the budget?

Each of these simple questions springs open a Pandora's Box of choices and decisions that must be made before the production and post roadmap is drawn. This is where options can be presented based on the desired artistic direction and (more often) budget of the project.

When working with HD and HDV, knowing the formats and deliverable is key to planning a workflow. Currently most NLEs (we use AVID systems exclusively) "support" HDV; however the reality of using HDV natively is still pretty clunky and time consuming. What has proven to be the most effective way of using HDV sources in our film and TV series projects has been to use an external HDV-to-HD-SDI converter like Convergent Designs HD Connect LE. This lets us skip the whole long-GOP media thing and capture our HDV sources straight to uncompressed HD or DNxHD resolutions that are fully supported by all of our edit systems. This also lets us readily mix the HDV originated material with other HD and SD formats without time-consuming software-based transcoding.

Much of our business involves independent film. Many of the filmmakers shoot with the popular small-format HD/HDV cameras from Panasonic, Sony, Canon and JVC.

In a recent film we just finished, *The Signal*, which was shot with the Canon HC1 camera, we employed the use of Convergent's conversion box to capture all the camera footage straight to Avid DNxHD media. This was mostly because the camera used was a rental and would not be available for a later conform. This allowed the filmmakers to edit in HD, kick out shots for special effects, do color correction during the edit, then output without having to rebatch the timeline. Working from the start with DNxHD-quality media saved time and money without breaking the bank with massive storage costs.

Test, Test and Test Again

Dan Schmit
Founder
Engine Room VFX
West Hollywood, CA

Recent HD Projects: Promo shoot for new Disney film *JUMP*; ABC promo shoot for new show *Help You Help Me*; promo shoot for GSN show *Chain Reaction*

For DPs or producers looking to rent HD camera packages for small shoots where you don't have the most advanced on-set video village setup, I highly recommend spending the additional $400 to $500 per day fee for an on-board monitor with waveform and vectorscope functions. HD packages don't automatically come with this option. I'm a specialty DP and here at Engine Room, we do a ton of greenscreen HD shooting for effects work. I'm constantly considering how HD footage completes its journey, anticipating the impact on what is traditionally the "post" realm.

While there are several products out that let us take advantage of on-board signal monitoring, I have found that the Astro is a good choice. With HD, it's easy to unintentionally blow out sky or highlight detail, conversely underexposing can make you loose the shadows. Often when using a large CRT or flat screen monitor on set to judge exposure, you can make misjudgments if your viewing situation is not ideal. The other option is to rely on the camera's Auto Iris controls, but that often splits the exposure in the way you may not want. This recently became an issue for me when shooting a package of HGTV promos where we were running around LA for a week, going indoors and out, shooting home and garden imagery. Also, when shooting talent on greenscreen, it's essential to favor the exposure to the subject over the green quality, essentially overriding what the Auto Iris would otherwise have chosen. An onboard waveform monitor provides the shooter with an accurate way to set the exposure for his or her specific use. Using this technology as a highly accurate digital light meter will greatly increase the quality of the images.

Use Variable Framerates to Get Rid of Handheld Shake

Jeffrey Nagel
Director
4th Street Films
Los Angeles, CA

Recent HD Projects: Acura GLS Model Rollout

The Panasonic AG-HVX200 benefits those who need to shoot HD, yet do not have the budget for the VariCam. The most amazing thing about the HVX200 is its ability to shoot 60 fps in the DVCPRO HD 30pn mode for a great slow-motion effect.

While I was shooting the most recent press footage for the soon-to-be-released 2007 Acura TL-S, I needed to get some handheld car-to-car running footage. In order to keep the handheld shake out of the footage, I shot at 60 fps in the 30pn mode. It's a little tricky making sure you have the settings correct, but the results are pure cinema. This feature alone is worth the price of the two 8 GB P2 cards one needs, that run about three grand. I wouldn't shoot this camera with anything else. You can also choose to shoot in the 24pn mode for a 3-2 pulldown effect, but I thought the 30pn mode was the right ticket for this job.

Look for Versatility When Choosing Cameras and Accessories

James Mathers
DP
President, Digital Cinema Society
Los Angeles, CA

Recent HD Projects: *The US vs. John Lennon*

As a DP, I shoot a wide variety of projects, and with all the choices of format available today, I end up shooting with many different camera systems. It can make good business sense to invest in some of this gear, but it's frustrating when some pieces of equipment sit in the closet growing ever more obsolete, while you are out working with others. The owner/operator needs to be careful in selecting cameras and accessories for purchase that will let them amortize their investment on many different types of production. Versatility is key.

When selecting an HD camera package for a recent underwater documentary, a P2 or HDV recording system seemed to make the most sense. I wanted to look beyond this one job and take into account which model would have the most potential to use on future work that might come my way.

The ability to record uncompressed to an outboard hard drive means you could use the camera on higher-end projects, while genlock and timecode features make it more suitable for multicamera productions. Interchangeable lenses are, of course, also make a camera more versatile. Although the Canon XL H1 was not the least expensive, all of these attributes seemed to make it the logical choice, and I have not been disappointed.

The accessories you choose are also critical for versatility. For example, stripped down, the XL H1 made for a very manageable system in the underwater housing, but for topside photography, I needed the control of a full production camera. The Zacuto Universal Support System, which has a great interface with all of the other accessories I already own, such as Chrosziel matte boxes, follow focus systems, and Anton/Bauer batteries, really helped in this regard. Even those who love the Canon XL line will admit they are difficult to hand hold for very long. That's the only downside of the high-quality lens: it makes the camera front heavy. This balance plate system solves the problem by letting the battery brick be mounted so that it rests over the operator's shoulder. And it not only solves the balance issue: an Anton Baurer will usually run an H1 camera all day long.

Use On-Board Signal Monitoring

Arthur Klein
Director/Writer/ Producer/Editor
Santa Monica, CA

Recent HD Projects: *"Y" Yoga*

Over the last six years I have shot over 250 hours of footage for the documentary *"Y" Yoga*, combining DV25 BetaSP, DigiBeta, HDV and VeriCam HD.

With so many different formats, it's important to figure out the work flow to combine it all in a single timeline.

HDV is better to deal with in post if it's converted to Avid's DNX145-TR. The TR stands for thin raster and is specially optimized for the 1080 x 1440 (HDV) if you stay in HDV; otherwise use DNX145 if you are mixing with other HD 1080 material.

Also think about the aesthetic of how to use 4 x 3 in a 1080 16 x 9 format. Column Box, blowing up, or fat & wide... So, before you are under deadline, do you testing first.

Complementing the family of HDV products is Sony's highest-quality 6mm videotape, DigitalMaster™, the recommended professional media for HDV applications. These 63-minute cassettes (model PHDVM63DM) use Sony's AME (Advanced Metal Evaporated) II Technology and its dual-active magnetic layers. By improving on an already successful product, the new AME II manufacturing process employs Hyper Evaticle IV magnetic grains, improved lubricants, and a refined Diamond-Like Carbon (DLC) layer.

DigitalMaster tape exhibits greater packing density of magnetic grains, higher retentivity, higher output and lower noise. The result is a more robust tape with 65% fewer dropouts and 90% fewer errors.

With such an extensive line of HDV components and media, Sony has a complete line of HD solutions which can be used in a variety of applications, from extreme sports, to independent movies and documentaries. And thanks to the HDV format, the content can be captured on tape at the same time as a hard disc so clips can be ready to edit, and editing won't destroy your master.

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