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by Thomas Strodel



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SEE WHAT THE F23 CAN DO

Check out the final Jigsaw Soul video, "Cockroach Hotel," after reading about Executive Producer Thomas Strodel's production in this month's feature.

Color Theory

In this month's cover story on page 22, DP Jon Fordham finds a veritable kaleidoscope in the details. Tom Strodel, his producer on two recent music video shoots, chronicles Jon's stylized in-camera work with the Sony CineAlta F23, a camera the DP says holds details in the highlights better than any other HD camera he's ever used. Jon is that rare DP/DIT hybrid (he's held both jobs separately) who knows how to coax an amazing range of colors and textures from his camera and, by extension, his kit. He's not a fan of white balancing. If he wants a specific look or a color balanced in any particular way, he'll use a paintbox to color his images in camera. He's been working this way for some time and, as a result, he's been able to deliver a kind of rough-hewn magic realism on set that would cost far more, in both time and money, if conjured in the DI suite. A fully loaded F23 can be rented for about \$5,000 a day, a relative bargain when you consider what you could save in post. For Jon, the camera's nuanced capture of highlights and shadows—and everything else in between—gives him the raw materials he needs to break the color barrier.

Other hot digital cameras continue to create their own kind of magic, like the Phantom HD, that sweet ultra-slow machine so popular here in the New York production market. The latest Phantom can take a whopping 1,000,000 pictures per second. (By the way, did you spot the Phantom's on-camera cameo in *Iron Man*? Pay close attention when Stark is developing his indestructible suit and you'll notice the Phantom top-mounted to a motorized arm following and recording his progress.)

If your budget is severely limited and renting an F23, Phantom HD or even a RED ONE is out of the question, take heart: collections of beautiful and highly affordable footage shot on these cameras are now turning up at major stock footage libraries. More details on where to find them are in "Gear Up" on page 6.

— Beth Marchant, Editor-in-Chief
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"For Jon, the camera's nuanced capture of highlights and shadows—and everything else in between—gives him the raw materials he needs to break the color barrier."

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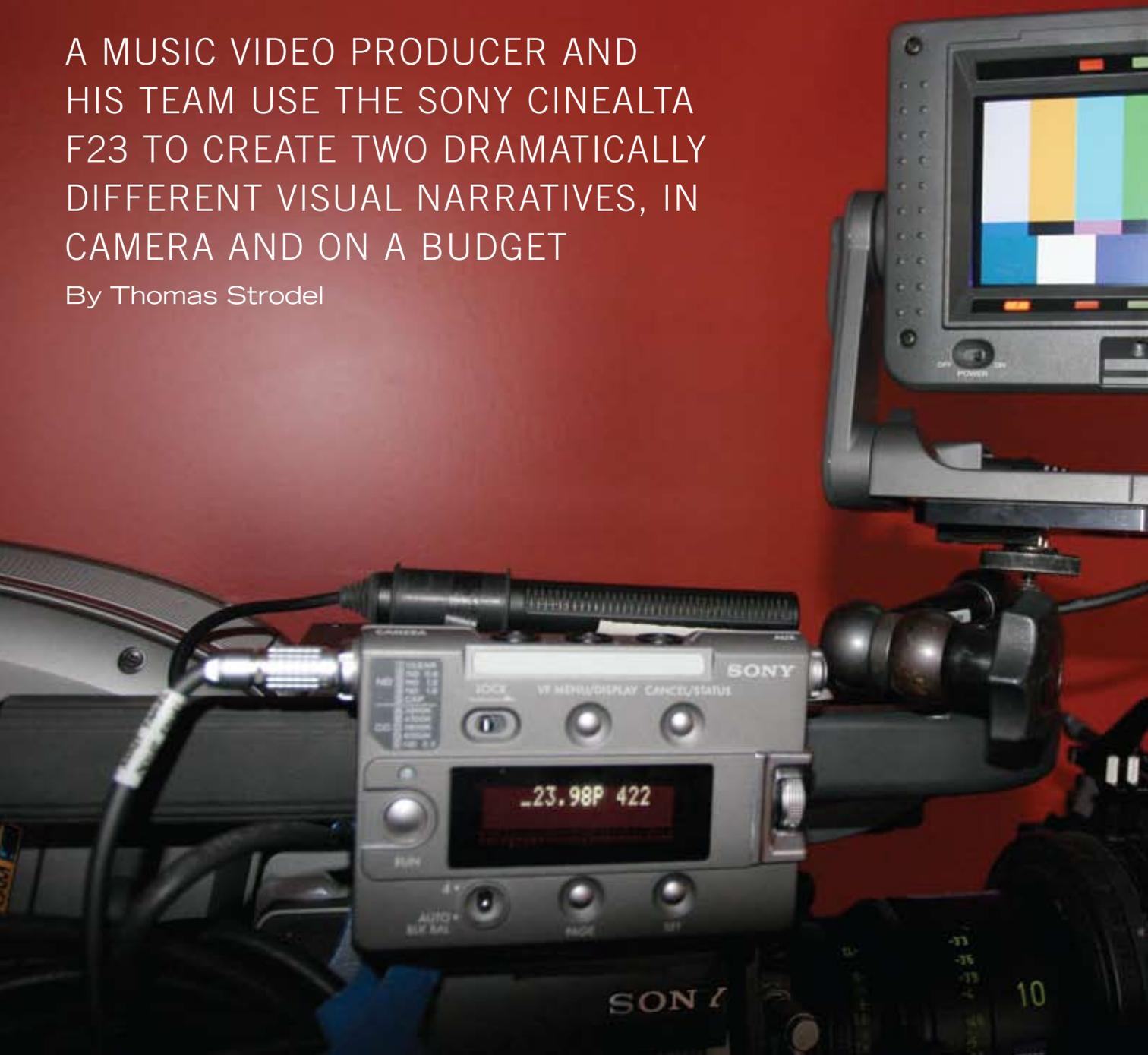
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SEEING SOUND

A MUSIC VIDEO PRODUCER AND HIS TEAM USE THE SONY CINEALTA F23 TO CREATE TWO DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT VISUAL NARRATIVES, IN CAMERA AND ON A BUDGET

By Thomas Strodel



With the release of the Sony CineAlta F23 camera system, music video creators now have a real alternative to film-based acquisition. When I first heard of what the camera could do, I knew it would be perfect for 24fps Productions' narrative projects, which include music videos and commercial work. The camera's picture clarity, adjustability and compatibility with film camera accessories would also give us the ultimate in creative freedom.

In the past five months, I've served as producer on two music video shoots with the F23: "Cockroach Hotel," by Jigsaw Soul, and "Love Is You," by Christette Michele. From the frigid confines of an old factory building in upstate New York to the halls of a local Long Island college, the camera performed flawlessly, helping to bring the vision of these two videos to life.

The F23 vs. Film

The F23 system has a number of advantages, including its true 1080p 4:4:4 color-space recording, full paintbox control, its modular and familiar film-style body, and its ability to shoot and record overcrank/undercrank frame rates, key for shooting slow and fast-motion scenes. But perhaps the biggest advantage of the F23 is its latitude. "I've measured nearly 13 stops from pure white to pure black," says Jon Fordham, our DP for both videos. "And it holds detail in the highlights better than any previous HD camera I've used." This let our gaffers, Boris Cifuentes and Chris Aran, work alongside Jon as if he was shooting film. "We don't have to adjust our lighting designs or narrow our key to shadow ratios," Jon adds. "The F23 can handle the same lighting latitudes we're used to working with in film."

Tom D'Angelo, who heads up the rental division at All Mobile Video in New York City, put together an ideal system for us, for both videos, that included the F23, Zeiss DigiPrimes, a 20-inch Sony HD monitor, a matte-box, and a follow-focus system. At first glance, you might mistake the camera and kit for an ARRI ST & LT. The two-part Sony digital system does resemble a film camera: the F23 camera block accepts the lenses, and the SRW-1 record deck, which can be rear-mounted, can also be top-mounted like a film camera's mag. Fully decked-out with lenses, this system is valued at well over \$250,000. Depending on the lenses and accessories needed, it rents for \$4,000 to \$5,500 per day, which is comparable to renting a film camera—that is, if you don't count the cost of film stock, developing and digital transfers.

Back to that idea of creative freedom. As Tom D'Angelo pointed out to us, "This is the first commercially available HD 4:4:4 camera system that does not require a wire going to the recorder." Less advanced cameras typically use lower sample rates, like 4:2:2. But 4:4:4 records more color information, even more than the human eye can see. Aesthetically, the more color information you have, the more flexibility and adjustments you can make to your colors, both in camera and later on during post.

Though some might see these film-style, indie music video productions as ideal applications for the RED system, we felt that RED still has an unproven workflow and less-tested support infrastructure. Simply put, we felt it would create far too many variables for consideration on these tightly scheduled shoots. And in terms of image adjustment control, the F23 was the obvious choice over RED. We won't rule out RED for future projects, however.



"Cockroach Hotel"

For the "Cockroach Hotel" track of Jigsaw Soul's independently released second album, "Bound to Collide," we shot in an old hotel and factory building in Goshen, NY, about an hour north of New York City. What better environment to test a camera but in 18-degree late February weather?

Inside the Cockroach Hotel: The team took over an upstate New York hotel and factory to shoot Jigsaw Soul's first major video.

Photos by Thomas Strodel

The treatment for the video follows an old man who is literally coming apart at the seams, vowing not to die in the hotel where he's spent most of his years. As he tries to escape, he sees the hotel in its former glory, populated by ghosts from his past.

Director Christopher Piazza had a vision of slow but complete decay. "I wanted the visual aesthetic to deepen the story's narrative, with the look of aged film that degrades progressively as the plot progresses, visually mirroring the old man's journey" he says. DP Jon Fordham says he knew that regardless of how that look was achieved, it would consist of seriously compromising the clarity of the picture. "By using the F23 and the Zeiss primes," he says, "I was able to deliver a sharp picture that would stand up to the effect used to degrade the picture, without losing the clarity of the image."

That effect was largely accomplished in camera with the paintbox, which plugs into the camera to give the DP easier access to the camera's menu controls. Though most DPs normally use a paintbox to make real-time color corrections for more accurate or realistic palettes, Jon often uses the paintbox to create unique colors, creating aesthetics more appropriate to the requirements of the project. His colors may be imperfect, but they always give the the images a special character.

"Using a paintbox, I can paint in just about any look or aesthetic I want right there on set," he says. "This is a huge time and money saver. By painting in the look I want on set, I can eliminate the need for costly and time-consuming image grading later. Of course, this doesn't render the Digital Intermediate workflow obsolete. You will always have finer control in a DI suite than in camera. But on lower-budget jobs, when you know you don't have the money to do a full-blown DI, or when the job requires a fast turn-around time, the ability to color time the image in camera is a huge advantage."

As one would expect, a camera like this requires the full support crew of ACs and assistants. Between all the available lenses, accessories, dolly and heft of the camera itself (30 lbs. fully-loaded), we needed three people in the camera department alone. However, this is not much different from most typical film shoots with similarly-sized cameras; you just don't have to hire a fourth person to do your film loading.

A few scenes in the video required slow and fast motion. Off-speed frame rates in music videos

Make-up/FX artist Jessica Swarer (top left) prepares actor Martin Pfefferkorn for his greenscreen shoot, part of the video's final effects shot.



DP Jon Fordham (center) says he loved being able to use the F23 and paint box to capture and shift the scene's colors in real time. First AC Jelani Wilson is in the foreground, left.

are a pretty common trick that's as old as the format itself. Whether you want to create a unique motion signature for interesting visual effect, or just want to get that guitarist jumping into the air while he hits that one chord, off-speed rates let you capture that moment in time to fullest effect. This is another area where the F23 excelled.

In film cameras, speed adjustments are more straightforward—you simply run the film slower or faster through the gate. It's a bit more problematic with video cameras and their electronic shutter. Some HD cameras have achieved this effect by always recording a master frame-rate and using redundant or duplicate frames to write to tape the desired speed effect. Notes Fordham, "The F23 doesn't rely on this pull-down to record off-speeds to tape, and the resulting tape doesn't require any further processing through decks—or software in post. In other words, even if you shoot 48 fps, the tape will record those 48 fps to tape using a straight 24 fps. The camera uses a memory buffer system that fills up with whatever frame rate you choose and then lays it down at the proper 24 fps speed." Best of all, he adds, you can "immediately play back your off-speed shots and see it at 24 fps right there on set, in real time and in full resolution."

Greenscreen and HDCAM SR

The two-day production for Jigsaw Soul culminated with a greenscreen shoot at Context Studios in Williamsburg Brooklyn. These shots were for the final composite of the old man walking on the Coney Island boardwalk and beach, falling on the sand, then dissolving into newspapers that are blown away with the wind.

As this was an effects-heavy video, the most efficient and cost-effective workflow involved ingesting key effects scenes into a 10-bit uncompressed HDCAM SR codec on our Final Cut Pro-based edit system, then handing these over to effects artist Jayel Draco to complete the special effects and compositing. The remainder of the video was ingested in the DVCPRO HD codec and given to editor Andrew Giles for assembly of the rough edit. The final picture-locked edit and effects were then brought together and Erik Rasmussen added the final gloss of a film-deteriorated look and feel. We output the completed piece back to HDCAM SR and DigiBeta in our studio.

Director Christopher Piazza loved the result. "I was really happy with the F23, mostly because the picture quality was great right away. With other video cameras, you can't really grasp how good the images are on-set, but with this camera, you can." You can see the completed video at www.jigsawsoul.com and at www.studiomonthly.com.



Photos by Thomas Strodel



Love Is You

Fast-forward a few months and to Dix Hills, Long Island, where we used the F23 system again for a video of Island Def Jam's R&B recording artist Chrisette Michele's "Love Is You" track from her debut album, "I Am." The video, which was directed both by Chrisette herself and Mildred Delamota, is a love story set against an homage to her performing arts alma mater, Five Towns College. Though it was a less physically-demanding environment than the freezing hotel, we only had one day to shoot the entire video, which consists of several scenes that take place throughout the small campus. As a performing arts college, the staff were especially accommodating to our production needs.

The vision that Chrisette Michele and Mildred Delamota had for the video included a specific color palette and tonality that would lend itself a softer, classic look and feel that matched the song's lyrics. The paintbox was used here again, but to a lesser degree.



Photo by Carolina Mendez Sampayo

Straight Shooting

There were virtually no special effects required for this video, making the editing much more straight-

From left: DP Jon Fordham, Gaffer Chris Aran and Executive Producer Tom Strodel discuss the lighting of an exterior scene.



Photo by Carolina Mendez Sampayo

Chrisette Michele performs a song from her debut album before the camera at her alma mater, Five Towns College, in Dix Hills, Long Island. The entire video was shot in one day on the campus.

forward compared with our earlier production. Once back in New York City, we ingested the HDCAM SR footage into our system using the DVCPRO HD codec. Editor Jarek Zabczynski, from Perhaps Media, then took the footage and put together a rough off-site. We posted these roughs on our Website for the recording label to review, making any changes as requested. Once we had picture lock, the edit was brought back to New York where, in a one-day session, we conformed the video back to HDCAM SR. This involved retargeting the DVCPRO HD Final Cut Pro project file to HDCAM SR and reingesting the footage in the HDCAM SR format. Once all the footage was brought back in, we began to make final tweaks. But thanks to Jon's deft work with the paintbox, no color correction was needed. The final cut was then output to a HDCAM SR master tape. "Love Is You" premiered on VH1 Soul on June 9, 2008. You can also see the video at <http://www.vh1.com/video/play.jhtml?artist=2488038&vid=238703>. Find out more about Chrisette Michele at <http://chrisettemichele.com>.

No More Film?

After using the F23 on two music videos, I can say that it's a perfect blend of art and science—the science of the digital camera and the art of its ability (with a skilled DP, of course) to customize the look and feel of the picture. But will it replace film? All Mobile Video's Tom D'Angelo has a few ideas on that. "Though I'm not saying film is dead, we're at a point in the evolution of electronic capture cameras where we can begin to make comparisons between the two." Jon Fordham thinks it's a bit more complicated. "Comparing the F23 to film is a bit like comparing apples to oranges. I love film and I love HD. Both are different and separate tools that have their own strengths and weaknesses. From a technical standpoint, the F23's 2/3-inch imager is more closely matched to the target size of Super16. However, the clarity of the image combined with its clean, grain-free picture quality make the F23 is more on par with 35 mm-quality images."

As the producer of these two projects, I wouldn't necessarily consider the F23 for use on run-and-gun, EFP-type productions. Its size and the support crew needed make it too much of a good thing for those kinds of shoots. But for narrative projects, especially those that have a tight deadline and a limited budget for post, we'll definitely be using it again. ■

Thomas Strodel is an independent producer and director. His NYC-based company, 24fps Productions, specializes in creating original television programming, music videos, and commercial productions. You can contact him at tom@24fpsproductions.com or visit his Web site at www.24fpsproductions.com.

DP Jon Fordham is represented by Innovative Artists for all his commercial and music video work. View his portfolio at www.jonfordham.com.

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