

Saturday Night Live Embraces DSLRs

One year ago, my column in the December 2008 issue discussed the coming convergence of stills and video photography and the need for photographers to embrace the change.

At that time I had just endured a somewhat unsatisfactory experience with the Nikon D90, which was the first DSLR to include a video mode. However, it was, as expected, just the beginning of a new trend in DSLR cameras. In the same column I also talked about the upcoming Red Scarlet digital still and movie camera that I was hoping would be on the market by now. I felt its modular design would prove to be the camera of the future.

It may still be; but in the meantime Canon and Nikon have come out with newer DSLRs with video capture capabilities and they have taken the market by storm—though it's not so much still photographers who have embraced these cameras but high-end videographers and cinematographers.

At PhotoPlus Expo in New York this past October, Alex Buono, director of photography for *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), gave a fascinating talk at the Canon booth where he described how the TV show's crew is using the Canon 5D Mark II and, more recently, the 7D to shoot skits and intros for the show.

Buono described how these cameras produce incredible quality HD video that's on par with those captured on Arriflex and Red cameras, which can cost from \$40,000 to more than \$100,000 with lenses. He described the benefits of using DSLRs including the ability to shoot unobtrusively and in tight locations. Beyond that he was



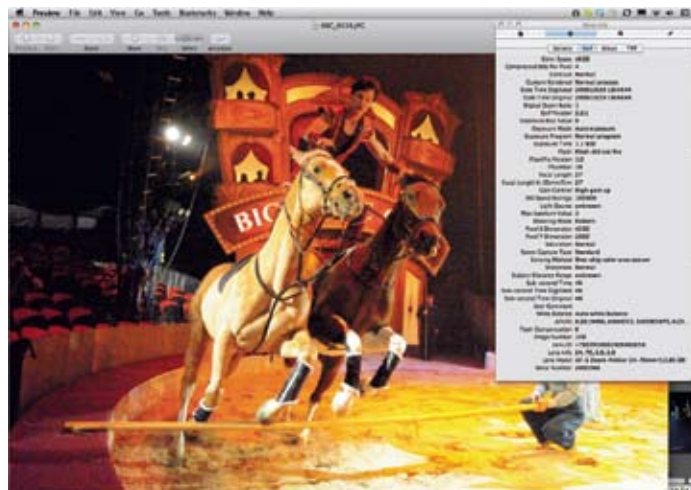
You can view Saturday Night Live clips shot on the Canon EOS 7D, including the Bladdivan skit, above, on the NBC website.

able to get shots himself without having assistants to hand-hold a camera in the back of a cab; he even got one by attaching the camera to the roof of a cab using the Delkin Devices Fat Gecko suction cup camera mount.

He said he was amazed at the low light capabilities of both cameras and pointed out that the sensor in the 7D is the same size as the one in the Red camera. He shot a time lapse of the New York skyline at night and thanks to the large image from the full-size sensor in the 5D the team was able to perform motion control clips in Final Cut Pro that would have been almost impossible any other way.

Because of the low light capabilities of the cameras the shooters were able to use available light with just a Litepanels LED light to provide some catch light in the faces of the actors being filmed during shoots.

Buono summed up his experiences with the two cameras by discussing the freeing feel the cameras give while shooting. "As the footprint of the cameras is so much smaller than a traditional high-end film or video cameras I can do things that I couldn't do before."



Left: You can confidently shoot at ISO 12,800 on the new Nikon D3s without worrying about noise. Photos were taken during a dress rehearsal for the Big Apple Circus in New York. **Right:** Even at ISO 102,400, images shot on the Nikon D3s exhibit acceptable noise levels in well lit areas.

Of course he did have some complaints about the cameras, such as the lack of time coding, poor audio capture and the inability to use an external monitor simultaneously with the camera's LCD. Because of the inadequate audio capture *SNL* has to record sound separately to obtain broadcast-quality sound.

Buono uses a Zacuto Z-finder for critical focusing and a Tactical Shooter rig for steady handholding. In the studio he uses a Red Rock microFollowFocus for follow focus.

Apart from *SNL's* high-visibility use of Canon DSLRs, there are plenty of other photographers and cinematographers using this new breed of DSLRs to produce high-end HD videos. If you're interested, it's worth checking out the Cinema5D forum (cinema5d.com) and the blogs of Vincent LaForet (blog.vincentlaforet.com) and Philip Bloom (philipbloom.co.uk/blog) to get an understanding of why so many pro shooters see DSLRs as game changers in the world of cinematography.

I think everyone, including the camera manufacturers, has been caught off-guard by the way these cameras have been embraced in the cinema world. It'll be interesting to see how they design future hybrid cameras, as it is obvious the ergonomics are making the cameras difficult to use.

Third party companies have taken up the cause and are supplying workarounds to make the cameras more usable. Eventually a modular camera will be the answer as it can be adapted to different requirements. That's the way Red is designing its cameras, which are aimed at high-end consumers. I suspect a modular camera around the \$2000 mark will likely come from a camera manufacturer such as Nikon or Olympus that does not have a video division to worry about. One can only imagine the anguish at Canon, Panasonic and Sony as high-end cinematographers embrace low cost (for them) DSLRs.

PhotoPlus Expo Thoughts

The buzz at the annual PhotoPlus Expo was certainly centered around the latest DSLRs with Nikon showing off its new D3s for the first time. The ability to capture images at up to ISO 102,400 has caught the imagination of photographers everywhere. It was no surprise that Canon, with no advance notice, announced the upcoming ESO-1D Mark IV with similar high ISO

capabilities and video capture. The Canon does not go on sale until later in December and images captured with it were few and far between at the time of going to press.

Nikon, on the other hand, had a few early production examples of the 3Ds for people to play with at PhotoPlus. I was one of 15 photo editors who spent a couple of hours trying the camera while photographing the final dress rehearsal for the Big Apple Circus. Although the stage lighting

was bright enough to shoot at reasonable ISO settings, the D3s allowed us to shoot at high shutter speeds. A quick look at photos showed clean images with virtually no noise up to ISO 12,800. I took some photos at higher ISOs but was perfectly happy to shoot mostly at 12,800, as I did not need to worry about noise even in dark shadows. It seems ISO 12,800 is the new ISO 400! I'm looking forward to trying the camera for an extended period of time soon.



You can see amazing detail, despite the enormous blow-up, when capturing images on the new Leica S2 medium format DSLR.

At the other end of the spectrum I also spent a few minutes trying the new Leica S2 medium format camera. This has a high ISO rating of just 1250. However, the 37.5-megapixel Kodak CCD sensor (45mmx30mm) and the incredibly sharp Summarit 70mm lens produces stunning photos. Details are so good that you can zoom into the eye of a model and see the ribs of the flash umbrella. While it may be overkill for the vast majority of photographers, it certainly demonstrates the capability of a high-end camera that produces 7500x5000 pixel images. Overall I was impressed by this camera—it is lighter and more manageable as a handheld camera than I expected.

Wraptivo and Skinit

Anyone interested in hot-rodding and modifying cars knows about the annual SEMA (Specialty Equipment Market Association) trade show held in Las Vegas each year. It's a cornucopia of wild and wonderful cars, trucks and accessories. I have been attending on and off for over 30 years and I am still amazed at the eye candy one sees each year. Not surprisingly this year's show was down in attendance and there were fewer exhibitors and less flash. Despite this, it was reported to be the biggest trade show in Vegas during 2009, even surpassing CES.

Normally one would not expect to see anything of direct business interest to photographers but as in so many areas there are many convergences of technologies that potentially offer benefits. For example, there were at least two companies exhibiting small HD camcorders that are used by race drivers to record their races from inside the cockpit or even outside attached to a bumper. GoPro was one such company and its small \$300 ruggedized camcorders are now used by broadcast TV producers to improve coverage of races.

However, there was one new product/service that could potentially provide a new revenue stream for photographers—vehicle wraps. We've all seen vehicles and buildings carrying advertising



Left: Wraptivo employees wrapped a Mustang in a different custom finish each day at the SEMA show in Las Vegas. **Right:** Skinit allows anyone to produce a custom wrap for different items, using this innovative image editing interface on its website.

printed on vinyl wraps. Some readers have probably even provided photographs to advertising companies producing these wraps.

For sometime I have been contemplating using a wrap to cover a rear panel on my car that was damaged in an accident. It's a nine-year old car with metallic paint and it will cost a fair bit to have the bodywork straightened and re-sprayed. I have thought of doing a rough patch and then covering it with a photograph that would cover the blemishes and make them far less visible. However I have not found a local company that does wraps, and service providers all seem geared to doing work for big business rather than individuals.

Meguiar's, a well known car care company, has started a new service called Wraptivo (www.wraptivo.com) in conjunction with Skinit (www.skinit.com). The plan allows anyone to go online and create their own artwork on a graphic outline of their car and then the custom wrap will be delivered to a local company that specializes in installing wraps. Although it might be relatively easy to place a wrap on a simple flat surface it requires considerable skill and experience to place one on the complex curves and cutouts of a car.

The service is only just getting off the ground so many details have yet to be ironed out and the number of cars featured—as well as the number of installation centers—is extremely limited. However, it is something that might be good to get in on the ground floor and provide as a service for customers looking to drive around in unique-looking vehicles. Wraptivo claims that the cost of wrapping a vehicle will be far less than a custom paint job and will last for three years. It can also be removed without damaging the underlying paintwork.

Incidentally, Skinit already provides a service for customers to create their own wraps for use on cell phones or laptop computers. It also does vinyl prints for placing on walls. It's worth checking out



the website as it is another venue using photographs for different purposes. The Skinit website also demonstrates one of the best uses of Flash for creating customized artwork that I have encountered. It's almost like using Photoshop online.

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