

in the *field*

Gebbs Wedding Films: Producing SDEs With the Canon 5D and 7D

Elizabeth Avery Merfeld



Michael Gebben shooting with the Canon 5D

If Gebbs Wedding Films' Michael Gebben didn't have a strict personal policy against selling clients on technology, you can bet he'd be bragging about the two most significant additions to his arsenal he's made recently: Canon's 5D Mark II and EOS 7D DSLRs.

For Gebben, a rising industry star whose demo was recently selected for use in the nationally syndicated TV show *Wedlock or Deadlock*, these so-called fusion cameras have made his already great-looking same day edits (SDEs)—his studio's specialty—even more spectacular. "SDEs became our big thing" in 2009, he says. And since he started shooting them almost exclusively with the 5D and the 7D, there's even more demand. In fact, all his bookings for 2010 and 2011 are SDE-only.

5D X 2

Until last May, Gebben would have told you that his Canon XH A1 SDE footage was just fine. But when he compared the footage with that captured by his new 5D, "It looked disgusting," he says. "It was just amazing what we could get in the same lighting conditions out of the 5D. The footage out of the A1 with the [Letus] adapter was so much grainier. And the 5D was just so clean." There was no going back.

And what's better than one 5D? Two! After doing some freebie SDEs while learning how to use the 5D, Gebben decided to use it for his first "destination" shoot last

July, 5 hours north of his St. Louis-area home base in Milwaukee. Just before the wedding, he decided he wanted another 5D. So he made a detour to Best Buy when he arrived in Milwaukee and bought his second.

This would be the first wedding in which he wouldn't be using his A1 or his Panasonic HMC150 for the SDE; it was 99% 5D. "I couldn't stand to look at anything else after that point."

ENTER THE 7D

Except, he discovered, 7D footage. That looked pretty good too. He picked up a 7D 2 months after the Milwaukee wedding and jumped right in. He didn't even have it a week before deciding to use it, untested, unmessed-with, during the photo session at a wedding. "I thought, well, that's not necessarily the most important thing. If something goes wrong, we'll figure it out later."

He shot the photo session with the 7D that day in 60p. Slowed down, the footage looked "pretty amazing"—that is, particularly in contrast to how its 60p looks at a more regular speed: "awful."

TWO OF A KIND?

The 5D and the 7D have made a handy pair for Gebben, and they complement one another nicely. Gebben has found that most people, especially nonvideographers, have trouble distinguishing between footage from the two, despite the fact that the 7D is priced significantly lower because it ostensibly lacks the 5D's full-frame edge. "Look at some of the comments in StillMotion's videos [online]," he suggests. "People are still asking them what cameras they're shooting with. Nobody can tell if it's 5D or 7D."

Aesthetically, "I don't think there's a drastic difference," besides the frame rates, of course. "People are swept away by the 24p for the 7D. Don't get me wrong, it definitely has a look. But at the end of the day, unless you're shooting in 60p and slowing it down, I just don't think there's a night-and-day difference."



The Canon 5D Mark II (left) and the EOS 7D (right)

Gun to head, between the two, Gebben would choose the 5D, just because it allows him to get wider shots. He also had a process for converting the 5D footage to 24p down in Sony Vegas—and is keeping in mind rumors that a future 5D upgrade will include 24p.

If you're in the market for one of these cameras or are trying to decide, Gebben says, "It would really come down to your budget." If it's a smaller budget, he suggests getting a 7D with a 50mm and a prime lens. "For the Nikon Nikkor 50mm f/1.4 that I have, I paid \$150 off eBay." For less than \$2,000, he says, you can get a couple of prime lenses.

That said, Gebben has learned a few key differences that he keeps in mind while shooting—such as, it is difficult to match the cameras to each other, even with every setting being exactly the same. For example, they don't have the same color temperature. "You'd hope that that would be the case, but I can't seem to get it to work that way."

Another thing is the 1.6x crop factor. A 50mm lens with the full-frame 35mm 5D will become roughly an 85mm with the APS-C-sized (advanced photo system, type C) sensor on the 7D, for example. Beyond that, if you put the

different lenses on and match the same focal length, "I don't think the average person is going to know which is which."

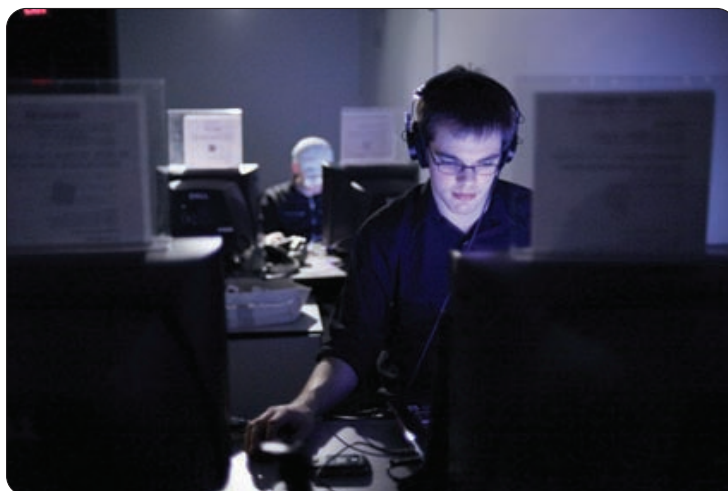
BACK IN THE DAY

The 5D and 7D combo continue to lift Gebben's SDEs up. Not just because the footage looks great but also because he feels like he's more "in the day" now,

thanks to the cameras' simplicity. In the first half of 2009, he recalls, "I felt like all we were focusing on was the toys, gizmos, and gadgets. It takes you way out of the day. I wasn't happy with where we were at the beginning of the year. My Jeep was so packed, I felt like I was moving across country."

Now, he and his crew can go into preps with a much lighter equipment set—a monopod, a camera bag, and one lens—"and go at it."

The cameras' ability (proper lenses) to deliver shallow depth of field with pinpoint control and his use of their manual settings have helped him to just let moments happen, to "stay solid." Not being able to zoom in "does



Michael Gebben editing DSLR footage



in the Spotlight

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take some getting used to, but it forces you to think more and to be a better shooter.”

If there's one downside to using the DSLRs versus his A1, with its 20X optical zoom, it's that he can't get in as tight during the ceremony if his presence isn't welcome too close to the altar. Under these constraints, he now shoots with his 7D with a 70–200mm lens, and, hopefully, not from the back of the church.

THE HOLD STEADY

If you're new to the 5D or the 7D, one of your biggest hurdles will probably be holding it steady enough to get good footage. Coming from the A1 and Letus adapter, Gebben was accustomed to getting solid, handheld footage. But you can't really handhold the 5D, “even if you think you're super-steady,” he warns.

After trying out some spider braces, which weren't steady enough, he put his 5D on his Glidecam 2000. “I was dying to use my Glidecam,” he says. “I've been using that almost exclusively. I've been able to get the thing

balanced pretty well; it's so light.” He says people often mistake it for a Steadicam Pilot, which he prefers not to use at weddings. “I get enough looks already. And I like to go from one thing to the next, and that's difficult when you're in a full-blown Steadicam rig.”

He switches from his Glidecam to his slider to his monopod and his tripod with ease. His monopods are a godsend: “They're one of the only ways to go if you want to get stable footage with the 5D or the 7D.”

(As a tip, Gebben suggests using a 16–35mm lens with the 5D and the Glidecam to get beautiful, epic shots of churches or landscapes.)

A WRENCH IN THE WORKS

Rendering threw an entirely new wrench into Gebben's process when he started working with the fusion cameras. As a devoted and unapologetic PC user, he had to come up with an efficient way to deal with the H.264 codec.

“It was a bear on the PC,” he says. His fastest quad-core laptop (the one-time engine of his SDEs), with 6GB of RAM and a powerful graphics card, couldn't do anything with it. “We were editing in Vegas, and it would kill the program if we put any more than 20 clips in the timeline.” One project, a combination of Panasonic HMC150 and 5D footage, took 2 days to get out of the timeline. “In the end, there were too many 5D clips in the timeline. It was a nightmare.”



Bride and groom reactions to a Gebbs SDE premiered at their reception



A still from a Gebbs Wedding Films SDE



With no intentions of converting to Mac, and with his upcoming destination wedding in Milwaukee, he thought, “I have to figure this out.” Luckily, someone told him about Proxy Stream, which allowed him to render out to a different codec and then edit with that, with the ability to switch back to the source.

But even that proved “super slow,” especially for use on a SDE. “I had to worry that the stuff wouldn’t get done converting. And then on top of that, when we tried to go back to the original files, they would keep having failures.”

Not to be defeated, Gebben tracked down the person who wrote the Proxy Stream script and asked her to tweak it for his purposes. She suggested using CineForm Neo Scene, and “that thing converted in real time, so I was floored,” Gebben says. “The footage was going to something that was usable, it was full-res, and if I had a minute of footage, it took a minute to convert it.”

Now, his SDE process is as follows: He dumps cards from the 5D and the 7D every 15 minutes, all day. By the end, the only thing left to convert is the ceremony, and he has everything at his fingertips. “I can color grade it or whatever, and I have no problems with it.” That’s in contrast to a lot of Mac users who complain of problems rough cutting and then transcoding to another codec, according to Gebben. “From what I understand, that seems to be taking a lot longer than real time, thus again, hindering the SDE because you don’t have everything at your fingertips. You’re going through what you think might be the best and then if you need something else, it’s not accessible.”

THE FUTURE IN 5D

In Gebben’s SDE package, he includes all-day, one-angle coverage as well as an extended highlights piece. But his SDEs are his calling cards.

Online, his SDE views surpass 3,000, eclipsing those of his extended highlights, which peak at 100, consistently. “Attention spans are short,” he acknowledges. “But anybody will watch a 3–4-minute video if it’s well-produced.” And that’s fine with him, because the tightly edited SDE is “without a doubt what I love to do. It has been my absolute most popular thing,” he says.

But even as he credits the 5D and the 7D for helping him significantly upgrade his work, he realizes how, in some respects, these DSLRs make it tantalizingly easy for novices to produce spellbinding imagery to rival or even outdo what many pros were doing in the pre-DSLR days. So he’s bracing himself for the influx of amateurs who, with their 5Ds and 7Ds, threaten to compete with him and other professional videographers.

“In another couple years,” he predicts, “every human being on the planet who wants to get into wedding videography, or any other kind of shooting, is going to be able to.” To set himself apart, Gebben plans for his personality, editing, and shooting to be above and beyond. “That’s what’s going to set you apart from the others,” he says, in a space in which for better or worse, “everybody’s going to have beautiful footage.”

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