

higher definition media: measure for measure

bakersfield, Calif., may be known as “Nashville West,” the country music capital of the West Coast, for honky-tonk legends such as Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, and Dwight Yoakam, but you could just as easily call Bakersfield and its home in Kern County “Hollywood North” (that is, if Vancouver and Toronto hadn’t already earned that title) for the region’s thriving film community and its use as a backdrop in an untold number of blockbuster sci-fi movies, *Planet of the Apes* and *Jurassic Park* among them.

It’s an attractive locale to nearby feature film producers, with its free film permits and varying terrain. In a 30-minute drive from Kern County, you can find yourself smack dab in the middle of a desert among rock formations, at the edge of a mountain range, in a forest of Sequoias, throwing snowballs, wading in a river, or sneezing in a verdant valley.

J.J. Abrams shot the opening scene of *Star Trek* just outside Andrew Waite’s kitchen window (not in Iowa—the shock, the horror!). “I could throw a rock and hit the production trucks,” swears Waite, whose dual careers as an independent feature filmmaker and a videography studio owner have been boosted by Kern County’s popularity with filmmakers.

Waite runs Higher Definition Media (HDM) out of Bakersfield and just this June launched its wedding-focused spinoff, Lovestruck Films. In addition, he is an indie filmmaker, with three self-produced features under his belt. Registered with the film commission, Waite often gets to crew on blockbuster films and even rent out his gear.

Friends often ask when he’ll finally move to Los Angeles, about a 90-minute drive over the hill. “Never” is his quick reply. A native, he says, “Bakersfield is home. And I think it always will be.” Waite can do what he loves here, just as well as (and probably better than) he could in congested Los Angeles, he points out. At such a young age (speaking of over the hill, Waite is nowhere close), he knows he’s lucky to have found that already.



Andrew Waite of Higher Definition Media

But the road here was often treacherous, filled with grueling Saturday nights playing song after Top 40 song as a wedding DJ. Not mincing words, Waite says that the creative outlet that being a DJ lacked was beyond frustrating. “It got to the point where if I had to listen to ‘Butterfly Kisses’ one more time, I was going to blow my brains out.”

Luckily, to quote an equally kitschy country song, “God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you”: Being a wedding DJ introduced him to wedding videography. While being a DJ, Waite viewed his fair share of wedding videos, willingly or unwillingly. Having grown up with his dad’s Betacam and VHS cameras almost superglued to his hands, he figured he could do better. In 2003 he booked his first gig and shot a few weddings on the side.

When someone offered to buy out his DJ business, Waite recognized the opportunity to return to his first love. In 2008 he officially launched HDM. “Oddly enough,” he remembers, it started out focusing on TV commercials, with weddings as supplementary. “We thought TV commercials were more glamorous at the time,” he says. He was certainly not alone in that assessment. But no matter how hard he resisted, his wedding work really drove the business.

MEASURE OF THE MAN

Now he’s juggling corporate work, wedding work, and indie films and somehow finding balance among them. It’s not an uncommon story, but when he explains how two of his businesses come to a screeching halt for 7 weeks out of each year to accommodate the production of a feature film, it’s clear Waite is accomplishing something extraordinary.



Andrew Waite's
*The Measure of
a Man*

His latest feature, *The Measure of a Man*, premiered in March at the historic Fox Theatre to a 1200-strong audience. To make it, Waite and his crew worked 12 hour days, 6 or 7 days a week, for 7 weeks, leaving no time for other projects. “You have to say no to some pretty awesome weddings,” Waite says, the pain almost lingering in his voice.

And that means no income for 7 weeks, while paying out-of-pocket to produce the film. With a wife, two kids, and six employees, that’s an act of faith if you ever saw one, especially considering that he strives to have a hand in every one of his projects for fear of ever turning into a “video factory.” He explains, “The last thing I want to do is get out of touch with clients. I love working directly with brides and grooms, making friends, and creating this art piece that they will treasure for the rest of their lives.”

Heading in three different directions with separate companies might take its toll on some, but Andrew Waite’s experience has proved the contrary—he’s been able to apply practical lessons from one type of filmmaking to the others. For example, being a run-and-gun wedding filmmaker has definitely rubbed off on his approach to feature filmmaking. Back in the day, Waite would use the industry-standard expensive, clunky cameras and gear that everyone else did. To pull off a shot he would drive to Hollywood to rent so much equipment you’d think a tractor pull had come to town. But on his last film, rather than rent a mammoth J.L. Fisher dolly, “We didn’t bother, and instead used a Cinevate Atlas 30” and got the exact same results. “We wouldn’t have done that if it weren’t for our wedding films.”

Waite knows he’s not the only one catching on. Wedding and event filmmaking has imitated the film world in many ways, something that’s obvious to anyone who has paid attention at NAB the last 5 years. Take, for another example, the Canon 5D, which Waite owns along with every other Canon DSLR. Once used only for his wedding work, Waite and his crew now use the 5D for corporate jobs and on features. In fact, they shot 99% of *The Measure of a Man* on DSLRs. He calls using them a “no-brainer” and has zero regrets. “Seeing the



Andrew Waite
shooting with
the Canon 5D

film premiere on a 50-foot screen, it looked absolutely amazing. People were flabbergasted during the post-screening Q&A session to discover that it was shot with DSLRs,” he says.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM

Event filmmakers are some of the most efficient filmmakers there are, he points out. “We don’t have a second chance to get the shot.” Contrast that with the “normal” film world, where it’s quite common to shoot just two pages of script in a day. Applying wedding filmmaking’s urgency to traditional moviemaking has been tremendous. Waite and his crew are so accustomed to working fast that they can get through three times as many script pages (they’ve even done as many as 20 in a day, which is virtually unheard of).

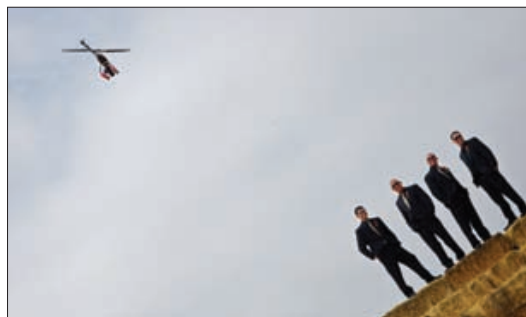
“But that’s what happens when you’re working with a bunch of event filmmakers who are used to getting it done—boom, boom, boom, boom!” A small crew is another plus. “As event filmmakers, we really are filling every single crew position, from DP to camera operator to first assistant camera to gaffer to grip to director. We’re used to getting things done instead of waiting for someone else to do it.”

RED ZONE

But Waite will also be the first to point out that heavier duty specialized cameras certainly have their uses. He owns a RED ONE digital cinema camera, which he calls “fantastic—capable of amazing imagery” and which he uses sparingly, where appropriate on



Andrew Waite on the Measure of a Man set



An aerial shot from an HDM film

corporate jobs and in movies (in select scenes where he says the Canon codec falls apart, such as high-speed, high-detail scenes).

For weddings though, the RED ONE is impractical. “It’s big, heavy, and hot,” and weddings don’t require the RED’s extra resolution or RAW capabilities. He’s a firm believer in using the right tool for the right job. That’s why he owns every Canon DSLR. “Each one has one advantage over the others,” he says, whether you’re using the 1D in low light, the 5D for its full-size sensor, the 7D to shoot in high-speed 60p, the 60D for its flip-out screen to capture low angle or slider shots, the T30i for its crop capability (to get digital zoom), or the featherweight T2i when you want to put it on a remote control helicopter to get aerial shots.

His bird’s-eye-view shots are fast becoming one of Waite’s signature and most sought-after offerings. To pull them off, he has brought in the actual world champion of 3D aerial helicopter flying. This was after purchasing his first helicopter for almost \$20,000 and quickly realizing that hiring a skilled operator would be a prudent idea, considering it takes years to learn how to fly one. “I thought, there’s no way I’m going to fly that myself and crash it.” In a stunning stroke of luck, one of his employees attended church with Curtis Youngblood—his YouTube videos show him doing “insane” maneuvers, “flying so low to the ground he’s literally cutting grass”—and introduced them. Now couples are flying Waite and his chopper operator around the world specifically to have those shots included in their wedding videos.

Always upping the ante, Andrew Waite just purchased an Iconoscope, a custom-built, handmade camera from Stockholm, to use for aerial filming (he will have full control of the camera while it’s in the air). It is similar to the RED in that it shoots raw, uncompressed, hi-def video. “It’s kind of a filmmaker’s dream come true,” Waite says. He adds that it has a global shutter, as opposed to a rolling one like the Canon DSLRs.

But never mind his camera name-dropping, he says, a strong believer in “the monkey, not the wrench.” People do get excited when they hear, for

example, that Waite sometimes shoots with a RED camera, and he’s very excited himself about RED’s forthcoming Epic, but he admits to having less and less use for RED. “Very little of what we have available to the public to see is not shot on RED. People look at RED like it’s this mythical beast, like a unicorn,” he says, “But here in California, everyone and their dog has one.”

BETTER WED THAN ...

Gone are the days when a corporate client would view you as more credible if you had a RED. It is using the appropriate tool that is important and what you do with it, according to Waite. Finding new ways to be creative, with each new project, he asks himself, “What are we going to do this time to take it to the next level?” That he wakes up every morning excited for the day is where all this work has landed him. “Every day I’m excited to look through footage shot over the weekend, to post a new video, and so on.” He laughs thinking of a time, not long ago, when he would have flinched introducing himself as a wedding videographer. “I was kind of ashamed of weddings,” he admits, pointing to the fading perception of wedding videos as merely AFV fodder. “I wanted to be known as a commercial director or a music director. But now I don’t even hesitate,” he says. “I’m a filmmaker. I shoot wedding films.”

And he plans to shoot them for a long while. “I can’t see myself doing anything other than filmmaking.” Details will change, he suspects. “I think it’s going to start to be more like film production is now. Everybody’s getting into these concept videos that Kevin Shahanian and Loyd Calomay are known for—basically short film productions that rival some of the productions that are coming out of Hollywood these days.”

And Waite is glad to be a part of it. Where does he see himself in 5 or 10 years? Once again, without hesitation, he says, “Spending my Saturday shooting weddings and loving every minute of it.”

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