

off the WALL

In another life, wedding videographer Ray Roman answered to the austere name “Detective Roman.” In his 15-year career with the Aventura, Fla., Police Department, as a SWAT team member and more recently as a detective, not once did he shrink from action.

Someone would have to catch him and pluck off his wings before he’d ever be a “fly on the wall” in police work or in his latest calling, wedding cinematography. No, Roman’s approach to his work is far from fly-on-the-wall—it’s decidedly *off-the-wall*.

In the camaraderie of weddings and their ensuing revelry, where wallflowers wither, Roman blossoms, snaring what’s rightfully his as the night’s documentarian. As Roman said in his WEVA seminar, “You don’t want to play ‘fly-on-the-wall’ all day and then, when you need to get a shot, say, ‘uhh, excuse me.’” Ultimately, it comes down to having confidence in your role in the wedding, the respect you deserve, and the value of what you do. “You’re as entitled to that time as the photographer,” he says with a conviction in his voice that belies the tender, doe-eyed photo of him on his blog.

Anything less, his philosophy goes, and you’re basically admitting, “I’m going to show up to the office, but I’m not going to do any work.” The fly-on-the-wall tack is a lazy one, and in his mind it is to blame for the way most people still see wedding videography: as optional, to put it kindly.

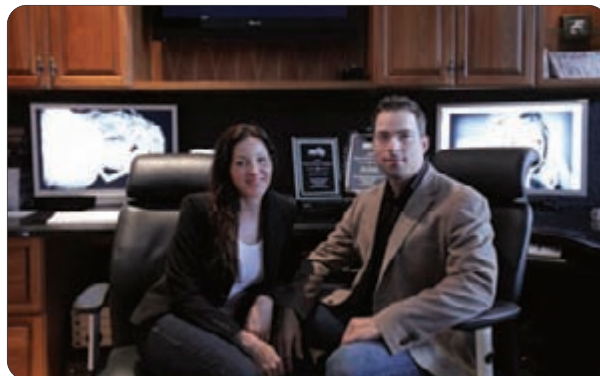
Off the wall, maybe. Crazy about videography? For sure—about the art form, and about bucking to be southern Florida’s cardinal wedding videographer. Without hesitating, when asked what inspires him, Roman answers, “Competition. The competitive nature of the business keeps my drive alive.”

But what, you may wonder (I did), jump-started it? Let’s investigate.

PICK YOUR PASSION

Roman first joined the force about a year before his twin girls came along. They’re 15 now. His son, a budding cameraman in his own right, is 13. So you could say Roman’s had more than a decade of practice behind the camera. But it wasn’t until he discovered editing that he knew he had tapped into something profound. “Before, my passion was law enforcement. But when I

RAY ROMAN FILMS



Ray and Jessica Roman in Ray Roman Films’ Miami studio
www.rayromanfilms.com
<http://rayromanblog.com>

started editing these videos, it dug up a whole new passion in me,” he says wistfully. Ironically; today he’s somewhat indifferent to the task. Luckily his wife, Jessica, is a willing—not to mention extraordinarily talented—editor.

Like a virus, this passion started slowly and innocuously. Roman started shooting weddings here and there for colleagues for free. By 2006, Detective Roman was a regular weekend warrior, dedicating Saturdays and Sundays to Ray Roman Films. In time, the frisson of making films disconnected him from his erstwhile “lifelong passion,” which had been to be a police officer. “I found myself uninterested in going to work every day.”

Complicating matters, as a SWAT team member, Roman was on call 24/7. Can you imagine having to explain to an exasperated bride that you have to leave the ceremony now to go strap on your ammo and rappel down a wall? Doing so was, of course, not an option, so he snagged a detective job instead, where he was on call a more manageable one weekend per month. But even that arrangement was prey to Murphy’s Law.

“I couldn’t find anyone to cover my shift,” and, as if he needs to go any further to reveal the ending, continues, “And I got called in an hour before I had to leave home for a wedding.” It was a “nerve-wracking” hour, but he got one get-out-of-jail-free card. “I was actually able to make enough phone calls driving into the city to clear the scene to make it to the wedding in time. That was the last time I ever gambled with a wedding.”

By then (1 year ago), business was teeming, so he joined Jessica in business full time. Six months prior she had left her career behind as an executive to become the company’s dedicated editor.



Detective Roman (left) in SWAT team gear



Off the wall, communicating, and directing: Ray Roman shooting on location

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN AWESOME

In just 3 years, Ray Roman has parlayed his passion into becoming one of the most sought-after wedding videographers in the country. WEVA and In[Focus] have tapped him to speak at conferences and bestowed accolades upon him. He's sponsored by Cinevate. His high-profile client roster boasts names such as the Cole family (as in Nat King and Natalie) and enough professional athletes to field a fantasy sports team.

"High-end?" he echoes, almost as if unfamiliar (or at least uncomfortable) with the term, when asked about whether it's his niche. "We deal with a lot of high-end clients," he allows. "But we also deal with regular people. All types. To be honest, I almost always love just dealing with regular people who appreciate our art, our work."

In between breaths you can feel him gaining momentum as he continues to talk about what makes him tick. "I'm very competitive. The thought of being second to anybody drives me crazy. I have to do what it takes to make sure we're top-tier. You have to have that competitive side. If you don't you might just lag behind."

You know those flash-in-the-pan videographers who were, once upon a time, the most popular in the industry—until a few years went by and you never heard from them again? The fear of being one of those guys keeps Roman on his toes, always learning and evolving. "I want to keep it going," he says. "There are other guys who have kept it going year in and year out. I look up to them. I want to follow that course."

To do that, it's not enough to compete with the local talent. Roman benchmarks against international videographers. "In our minds we're in competition with people all over the world. I think it's good to have that. Because it will definitely keep you above the rest, locally."

Self-taught, Roman takes an almost guilty pleasure in "trying to learn as much as I can in the shortest amount

of time possible." In honing your craft as a videographer, of course, your challenge is to learn not just one skill set, but many—and this excites him. "You're forced to be a jack-of-all-trades in this industry," he says, as if he doesn't relish the challenge. "There are so many different areas of this business. There's marketing, lighting, audio, camera work, color grading. You can't specialize in one thing. You have to know five or six jobs."

UNOBTRUSIVE NO MORE

One of those jobs, he believes, is having the command presence to work a room and nail your job as videographer. It sounds obvious, but "could you imagine if the photographer showed up and he had a fly-on-the-wall approach?"

If proponents of the fly-on-the-wall approach would just "work on their communication, their command presence, and begin to interact with these couples, I think it would elevate their work, the product, and in the end, elevate the overall perception of video."

"Sure," he concedes, "sometimes you're documenting events you really can't interrupt—the ceremony, the first dance. But after it's over, that's your time too. And that time is huge. That's when you're really going to see the couples' personalities and love for each other come out."

Even though he says he "directs" couples, that doesn't mean he's blocking shots or calling "cut." He really means that he directs them to be themselves. "These couples, for the most part, don't know what to do in front of the camera. So a lot of times, just giving them a nudge to let them know that it's OK to be themselves" is the surest way to get that natural, raw emotion he's after.

Couples unwilling to let their true colors show in their wedding video best hire another studio. If you're as lifelike as a mannequin, it's going to create a boring video. "I'm not really looking for those kind of couples. I'm looking for couples whose personalities are screaming to come out."



Out in the field, with Lamborghini, shooting a 30-second spot for Cinevate to promote the company's Brevis 35mm adapter and Pegasus slider; the ad debuted at NAB 2009.



A movie poster from the Ray Roman Films blog

The collective personalities of each couple are what steer the particular style for their video. “I try not to be stuck in only one style. The couples have different personalities. What works for one—a cinematic movie trailer, MTV-style, alternative-rock style—might not work for the other.” A more mature couple renewing their vows, for example, might not want a fast-cut, edgy film. “More than anything,” Roman says, “we pride ourselves on being fundamentally sound and producing something that is very clean and professional-looking.”

FUNDAMENTALS FIRST

If that’s your goal too and you’re new in the industry, heed his advice: Forget about Steadicams and other toys until you master cinematography fundamentals first—concepts such as composition and lighting. You wouldn’t give a firearm to a police officer who has no knowledge of state laws or civil rights. It would discredit the entire police force.

But that’s what rudimentary-lacking newbies do to the videography industry when they take shortcuts—they cheapen the power of these tools and the industry as a whole.

“I see all these new guys, and the first thing they want to do is get a hold of a Steadicam, 35mm camera, or a slider. These are tools to enhance your productions,” Roman says firmly. “But they’re skipping over the basic fundamentals of videography, and it’s not a good thing for the industry. Some guys don’t know what they’re doing with these tools. It’s the worst mistake you can make. At some point, if you don’t understand basics, you’re doing yourself and the rest of the industry a disservice.”

Compounding the problem is that, for the most part, he says, brides are more interested in whether a videographer uses these tools and less interested in whether he or she actually knows how to use them.

“In fact,” he offers as an example, “I read about a bride who hired a studio that told her that by the time

her wedding comes out, they’ll be using a Steadicam.” Hopefully she doesn’t mind shaky and sloppy footage.

COMPLETE CONTROL

One great point that Roman made in his “Killer Shots” seminar at WEVA Expo in September concerned taking control of your shots. Often, videographers will see his work online, see how well-framed they are and how clear the backgrounds are, and assume that he set them up. But rarely, if ever, are his shots set up—he’s not directing the groom, say, in how to react when he first sees the bride.” As far as the main action is concerned, he’s capturing what actually happened.

The difference is his control of other elements of the shot. “If I don’t want something in the background, it’s not there.”

Again, establishing command presence rather than a wallflowerish, lurk-behind-the-photographer approach is crucial here. “Don’t ask them what to do; *tell* them what to do. They want the video to look like what they’ve seen” when they saw your clips online or visited your studio. “If they know your work, they’ll respect your work, and they’ll listen to what you tell them.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

For all his command presence, Roman is quick to point out that he’s a slave to his instincts. Just as suddenly as he pursued wedding videography, “I don’t know what’s going to happen next year, or the following,” he says. Pausing to reflect on the future, he ventures, “I may not even be doing weddings anymore,” adding, “I don’t have any intentions of leaving. But if something comes along that drums up a new passion, I might just pursue that.”

Should he choose a new industry, the competition best brace themselves for the new guy and his off-the-wall ways.

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