

weddings, SUPER 8, and the BMX FACTOR

the mid-1960s saw the advent of revolutionary film format Super 8—nowadays a medium used to conjure up memories of the “old days” our parents keep cocooned in cobwebbed basements and cold attics. In the ’70s, boys racing their bikes on dirt tracks kick-started a phenomenon that became known as bicycle motocross, or BMX. And in the ’90s, Joe Simon apparently developed a thing for old-school hobbies involving damage, scratches, dirt, and dust. But his maxim—Adapt or die!—is what turned this BMX legend into a four-time Telly Award-winning artist and owner of Joe Simon Productions, an Austin, Texas-based studio specializing in cinematic high-definition and vintage wedding films.

CROSS-PURPOSES

As a pro BMX racer and freestyler in the late ’90s, Simon spent his time off the bike behind his video and film cameras, shooting friends riding and—unbeknownst to him at the time—honing skills that would later prove useful at weddings. His flair for filming got him noticed by bike manufacturers, who began hiring him to produce videos professionally. Soon, he was being called a pioneer.

In much the same way you might describe filming a frenzied wedding shoot, Simon says, “Filming BMX is a very guerrilla, run-and-gun style of filming. I quickly learned how to run around and be ready for the shots I needed to get.” And like a tender moment you can’t do a second take on, such as a father’s fleeting tear, Simon says, “A rider might not be able to pull the trick again if I miss it.”

Five years after he started making BMX videos, Simon made his first wedding video, which, he demurs, “was nothing short of horrible, I’m sure.” He made a meager \$200. But after checking out the wedding video industry online, it occurred to him that there might be a better living in this than in BMX videos (a labor of love he still makes time for today).

In a less adrenaline-charged move, Simon eased into weddings while shooting BMX without a lot of money at stake. Still, he wasn’t immune to the occasional tremors of doubt that haunt many entrepreneurs. “I had the worst dreams,” he remembers, “like those I-went-to-school-without-my-clothes-on nightmares—except they were

JOE SIMON PRODUCTIONS



What turned BMX legend Joe Simon into a Telly Award-winning producer of vintage wedding films? (Image by Walter Pieringer.)

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I-forgot-the-cameras dreams, or I-can’t-find-my-tapes-in-time-and-they’re-saying-their-vows-already dreams.”

What really began to give him nightmares 2 years later is what would become of his career if he were to be injured riding. By now he had been advertising as a wedding videographer and had made enough money to buy more equipment. It was time to hang up his racing hat and focus on the career with the longer life expectancy. He explains, “As I took on more responsibility, I had to take into account what would happen if I were to be injured. So from 2007, I have been really focused on my businesses and taking them to the next level.”

FROM BMX RACING TO F/T WEDDING

Joe Simon Productions’ specialty is cinematic wedding videos shot in high definition, with or without Super 8 footage stitched throughout. “I have always loved the look of film and have included clips of Super 8 in most of my BMX and higher-end wedding projects since Day 1,” Simon says. Last year he also began producing full-on Super 8 wedding films, shot exclusively using 10–15 rolls of film and delivered as 20–30 minute highlight films on Blu-ray Disc or DVD in HD. “And,” he says, “we have received a great response so far.”

If you haven’t been paying attention, Super 8 has become the go-to medium for wedding videographers—er, wedding filmmakers—whose clients are looking for an aesthetic that distinguishes their wedding video with warmth and nostalgia, whether or not they’re old enough to tell a film projector apart from an 8-track stereo.

It’s not ease of use, obviously, that motivates Simon to offer Super 8. Working with these little dinosaurs introduces a handful of problems you’d never encounter with DV. But, as many videographers have concluded, these are problems worth having. As Simon sees it, referring



When shooting digital, Simon swears by 24p for its fluidity. (Image by Robbie Dodd.)



Tempting as it may be to get the filmic look by applying filters and effects in post, Simon regards videographers who use these shortcuts as posers. (Image by Walter Pieringer.)

specifically to capturing audio using sync-sound Super 8 cameras, “It’s not easy to do, but it adds a whole other element to the film production. I love using natural sound, and I find it very valuable for storytelling.” (All segments are also captured by his assistant and laid down as the background audio track in post.)

GOT TO BE REEL

Tempting as it may be to get the filmic look by applying filters and effects in post, Simon regards videographers who use these shortcuts as posers. On the other hand, he swears by 24p for its fluidity. “When I went from shooting 60i to 24p, it was a night-and-day difference. The brides may not know what it is but they can tell a difference in our work, and [they] always comment about how much our stuff looks like a movie. It gives videos a more filmlike feel instead of that home-video feel.”

Mastering a technique with a Super 8 camera may not call for ice packs or crutches, but still, Simon does see it as “a bit of a pain” to get the hang of perfecting a shot without having a monitor to, well, monitor what he’s shooting. “It’s scary that I don’t have a monitor to see what my image will really look like!”

This means he has to be spot on with his lighting and shot composition—techniques he regrets not having studied as a novice because, as he puts it, “Knowing how to properly compose shots is huge! And you have to know how to meter your light to make sure your image will come out right.” Simon shares his solution for illuminating low-light wedding receptions using an on-camera light with Kodak 500t film stock—“It looks great,” he says.

“I like to have a good mix of films to work with,” he says, while naming other choice stocks, including Velvia 50D, Kodak 64t, 200t, 100D, and Tri-X B/W. According to Simon, Velvia 50D, and Kodak 200t, specifically, “produce small, smooth grain. It looks awesome!”

Complicating matters further is film’s shallow depth of field, which requires focusing precision—“or you’ll have a soft image,” Simon points out. “Working with a small eyepiece of a 30-year-old camera, it isn’t always easy to tell you are in focus. It’s practice makes perfect, but practicing ain’t cheap.”

Nor is getting film developed and transferred, unnecessary steps for the DV shooter. Not to mention, he adds, “If it gets lost, or there is a problem in developing, you’re SOL!”

IT’S ALL IN THE TRANSFER

Fortunately, Simon hasn’t found himself in that situation, thanks to the reliability of his vendors. Cinelicious

(www.cinelicious.tv), which offers a unique service allowing you to sit in on the color-correction session via the web, transfers Simon’s Super 8 footage to HD. “You go shot-by-shot with them as they do the color correction during transfer, and you let them know how you would like each shot to look. It’s really great to be able to do that over the internet and make sure you get the look you want!”

Then there’s the much-touted Spectra Film and Video (www.spectrafilmandvideo.com), through which he develops and transfers film as well. “They are awesome and always deliver great results. The guys there are very helpful, and they also buy and fix cameras.”

OR IS IT ALL IN THE CAMERAS?

eBay, on the other hand, has not been so awesome to him. Those familiar with the auction website’s beginnings (the very first item sold on eBay was a broken laser pointer) may not be surprised to hear that out of the five cameras Simon bid on and purchased, three turned out to be lemons. Avoid that situation, he advises, by purchasing from a reputable dealer such as Spectra or Du-All Camera (www.duallcamera.com). “They are great because you know you’ll be getting a great working camera. It might be a bit more expensive, but you’ll have peace of mind.” As a plus, you can send in your cameras for cleaning and repair too.

Simon’s cache of Super 8 cameras includes three Canon 814XLS units, a Canon 814 Auto Zoom, and a Canon 518, each of which has a specific function at weddings. As if referring to a family dog, he says endearingly, “My 518 is a little guy that’s great for different and unique shots. One time,” he remembers, “I paddled out on a lake with it on a tube! One hand on the camera, one hand paddling. I just had to get the shot.”

MAKING TIME FOR BMX (AND OTHER EVENTS)

Still moonlighting as a BMX filmmaker, Simon is tickled by the similarities involved in shooting brides and bikers. “It’s interesting,” he says, “going from shooting an elegant bride throwing her bouquet to rowdy BMX kids throwing their bikes around and getting chased by security guards.”

But the pool of events he has shot goes beyond BMX and weddings, and it keeps growing as his business ages. With the help of two additional shooters and an editor, Joe Simon Productions shoots about 25 weddings each year while tackling other projects including music videos, memorial videos,



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corporate videos, commercials, a few short films, and even a feature film.

He cites finally opening himself up to outside help as a precursor to his success. "If you want to grow, you have to let go and let other people help you. At the beginning, I didn't want to give up control of anything, but working like that will take you to an early grave!"

It was his regret, which he still holds, in neglecting to hire a professional designer to do his logo and website that's prompting him to improve upon his business in 2009. The longer he's been in business, the more he's realized that "image is everything. When a client comes to your website and it looks bad, they probably won't stay and look around. First impressions are big, and you need to play on that."

Look for a redesign of his logo and website later this year—and for the launch of a new sister video company where, Simon says, "I can put my knowledge of making high-end cinematic wedding videos into more budget-friendly productions."

If he can get away with it, he says, he'd also like to use this year to start doing more DP work on films. Judging by what he's gotten away with so far, we think he'll be golden—scratched, dirty, dusty, and golden, that is.

Elizabeth Avery Merfeld (www.lizwelsh.com) is a freelance writer based in Madison, Wis. Comments? Email us at eventdv@infotoday.com, or check the masthead for other ways to contact us.

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