



IN THE TRENCHES

ONE SHOOTER'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE
WORLD OF DSLR CAPTURE

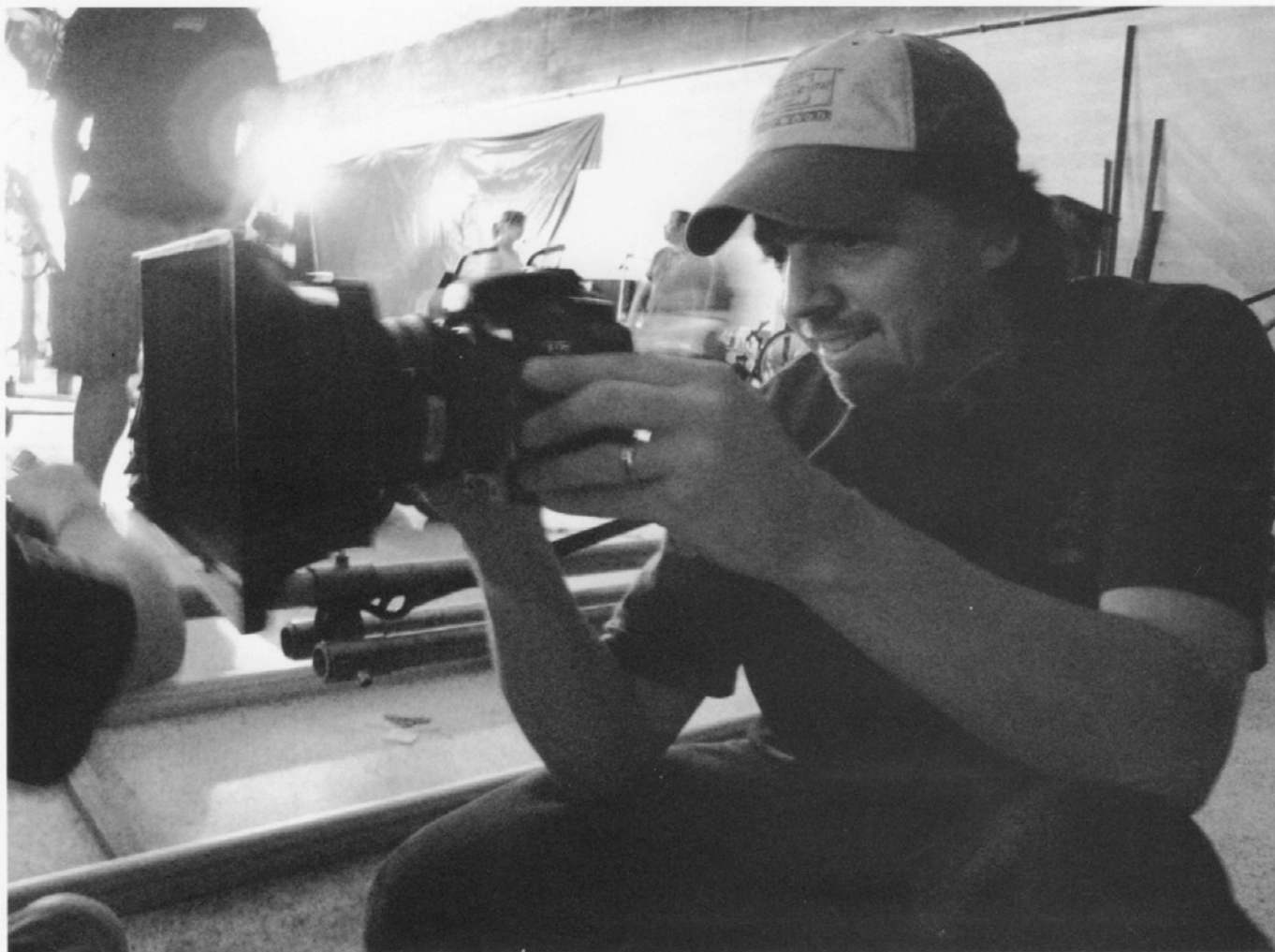
by **MATTHEW IRVING**

The first time I used the Canon 5D Mark II on a feature film was two years ago on the set of *Redemption Road*, a blues-infused journey starring Michael Clarke Duncan and Tom Skerritt. Director Mario Van Peebles likes to tell his stories with flair, and in this case he wanted the viewer to experience the disorientation of our alcoholic main character Bailey (played by Morgan Simpson), waking up in an unknown place after an all-night binge. He wanted a first person subjective camera that would place us in Bailey's eyes - challenging to pull off on our tight indie schedule. We had just 18 days of principal photography on *Redemption Road*, using two RED ONE cameras. So the mandate was clear: any style we wanted to impart would have to be done smartly and quickly.

I've always believed in the phrase, "the right tool for the task", and I knew the Canon 5D Mark II was the perfect camera for the eccentric shot Mario wanted. On-set, it took no time at all to prepare for the gag. Immediately after moving on from

the previous shot with the RED, my operator had the 5D in his hands, ready to go. We were able to tilt the camera down from the overhead ceiling fan and peer along the actor's prone body as if the feet we were seeing in the bed were our own. I slapped on the Canon 24mm f3.5 tilt-shift lens so we could create even more of a trippy disorientation effect, throwing portions of the frame in and out of focus. The results were great.

Of course new tools, like the DSLR, can't solve every problem. Which is why I always keep the camera's limitations in mind when designing a shot. On *Redemption Road*, I knew the Canon would provide a completely different look from the rest of the movie, which was fine since the DSLR footage did not need to cut seamlessly with the RED. Moreover, we were trying to capture the disoriented point-of-view of someone with a massive hangover, so I wasn't worried about vibrations inherent in handheld work, which would be intensified further by the



fact that we were manhandling a tilt-shift lens during the shot! I knew these extra vibrations might cause the dreaded "jelly roll" effect that can sometimes occur due to the nature of the CMOS sensor. In this case, that sort of warping and rolling of the image would be perfect for what we were doing.

The most challenging thing about the shot was reassuring a skeptical director. This was early in the DSLR revolution, and I don't think Mario was prepared for how unusual it felt to be shooting portions of his movie with the same camera that a still-photographer would use. I remember him giving me his "I hope you know what you're doing" smile and trusting me to get the shot. Luckily, he could see the result immediately after capture and he loved it. And the producers were happy that we were already moving on to the next- set-up!

Given that experience, it didn't take much convincing to pull the 5D into service on the next feature Mario and I worked on together. *All Things Fall Apart* is the dramatic story of a college football star (played by 50 Cent) who has it all, then loses everything. Again, our A and B cameras were the RED ONE, but this time the flexible DSLR not only provided us with some uniquely stylized footage, it actually saved the day.

At the lowest point in the character's arc, Mario wanted a nighttime montage sequence with 50 Cent roaming the streets of Michigan. The budget, however, was already stretched to the limit, and there were no resources to spend on this small, but essential, one-eighth of a page. I pulled Mario aside and reminded him what we'd accomplished with the DSLR on

Redemption Road. He immediately saw the potential, while understanding how we could make it work with our indie budget. Like our earlier 5D usage, we wanted the footage to stand out: we wanted gritty and kinetic imagery that would sharply contrast with the more traditional RED capture.

We managed to convince production to give us a bare-bones crew on one of our days off (we were shooting 5-day weeks). Mario, 50 Cent, and I roamed the streets of Grand Rapids on a Saturday night with no more than our camera crew and the 5D.

Once again we handheld the DSLR in low profile mode while manipulating that gorgeous Canon tilt-shift lens. Again, this gave us plenty of shake and shimmy into the system, which is just what we were going for at this point in the character's arc. We had no lighting other than my trusty Litepanels MiniPlus, which added just the right spark to 50 Cent's eyes. I set the ISO at 1250, which gave us a healthy exposure while leaving some dark shadows within the frame. We shot in the natural light of the urban sprawl – with some fantastic mixed color temperatures – and knocked it out in 35 minutes. Two months later, I got a call from Mario in the editing room exclaiming that the stylized street sequence was some of the film's most beautiful footage, and he wanted to shoot an entire feature on the Canon 5D!

My next meaningful DSLR experience was with director John Pogue on the franchise indie horror flick *Quarantine 2: Ter-*



mind. Once again, we used another digital system for our A and B cameras, the Sony F35. However, many key action sequences were captured on the 5D, including a climactic scene in a narrow baggage tunnel. We had just over half-a-day to shoot the 4-page sequence, and although the tunnel was built with some fly-away walls, we decided that the feeling of claustrophobia and the limited time-frame would both be better served by keeping the tunnel intact.

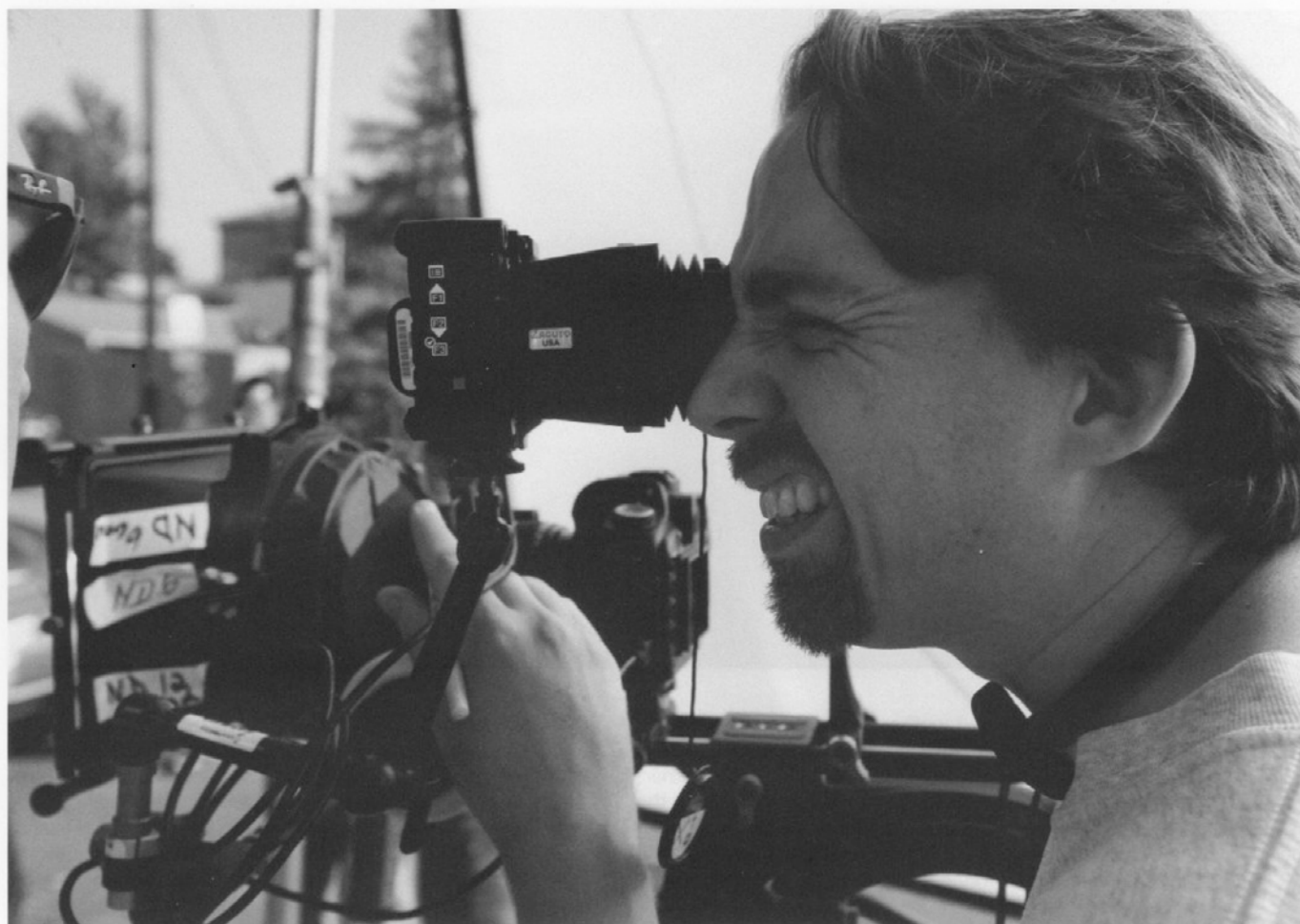
Gaffer Dave Duren placed a 5K at the far end of the tunnel, which would be blocked by the characters while still providing some definition to the glossy walls. Inside the tunnel, I went handheld with the 5D, scuttling around on a wheeled board outfitted by key grip Darryl Wilson. I shot at 1250 ISO and provided front-fill with a Litepanels MiniPlus that was screwed into

the bottom thread of the camera!

The main headache we encountered with the DSLR was sending a signal to video village. The Canon viewfinder shuts off whenever an HDMI cable is plugged in, necessitating a splitter so that the operator and village can both receive an image. This makes the whole rig instantly bigger. The other monitoring issue is the low-resolution signal output from the camera, even though capture onto the CF card is 1920x1080.

As many DSLR users can attest, focus is difficult to judge in standard def on the small operator's monitor, especially with the 5D's narrow depth of field. So, I always plan my shots with this limitation in mind. For the particularly kinetic *Quarantine 2*, I knew that a little "hunt and find" focusing would fit with our overall aesthetic.





"Inside the tunnel I went handheld with the 5D ... The front-fill coming from my [Litepanels] Mini Plus screwed into the bottom thread of the camera!"

After two years of using the Canon 5D Mark II as a C-camera on bigger projects, I called it into service as my A and B cameras on the micro-budget indie feature *Odd Brodsky*, directed by my talented wife, Cindy Baer. Two deciding factors made the DSLR the right tool for the job: we had no budget for a larger camera system, and the 5D's VistaVision-sized sensor takes the best image of any comparable system.

Hammering a square peg into a round hole, we turned our little 5D into a full-fledged studio camera by building it onto a Redrock Micro shoulder rig, fully equipped with 2-stage matte-box, follow focus, and counter-weight. This rig became our extended camera body even when we were on sticks. We further attached the Zacuto EVF with HDMI pass-thru to get our signal out to video village while helping the operators judge focus with the EVF's excellent "peaking" feature. Each DSLR we used was fully staffed with operators and camera assistants, and at least one crewmember laughed out loud at how big we'd made our little camera.

Now that the DSLR was taking a lead role, the issues with cabling and focus were more pronounced. That same VistaVision-sized sensor that we counted among our greatest assets

also meant there'd be subtleties of focus going on well beyond what the electronic peaking and standard-def monitoring could reveal. Only upon playback in full 1920 x 1080 could we see exactly where our limited depth-of-field was landing in any given take, and we did not have time to check playback on our lean indie schedule. At our working stop of T2.8, sometimes the bridge of an actor's nose would be in focus but the eyes would be out. My dedicated crew hunkered down, took a few more marks than usual, and developed a very nuanced touch on the focus wheel. The proof is always in the capture and I was excited with the high level of production values we achieved.

As technology continues to progress, I like to have as many tools in my creative toolbox as I can, as long as I know their strengths and weaknesses. The DSLR has proven to be a dependable ally that has gotten me out of a lot of tight spaces – both literally and budget-wise. It has its share of challenges, as every camera system does... but for me, it's proven to be an invaluable tool in the demanding world of independent filmmaking. 🍷