

A Perfect Storm

Contributed by Paul Gero

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The groom (left) speaks with his future father-in-law prior to the start of the rehearsal dinner.

Images made with a Leica m6ttl, 50mm, and Neopan 400 film.

Scans by Richard Photo Lab, Los Angeles.

Try as I might and as good as digital continues to get, I've never quite been able to shake film from my line up completely, or to get rid of all my film cameras.

While there have been times that I have backed off on film and shot 100% digital, there's some strange siren's call that I get from the use of film. And I answer it, much to the chagrin and the eye rolling of my patient wife Nicki. She probably wishes she could just lash me to the mast so I wouldn't be tempted again and to prevent my annual teeth-gnashing and film reassessment.

It doesn't help when I look at the work online of friends and colleagues (and notorious film shooters) like Jonathan Canlas, Jose Villa, and Dan Milnor that makes me long for the look of the film. I can tell — even on line — the look is from film and of course nostalgia then draws me to want to use it again.

It also comes from looking at my own images from previous assignments made on film that simply compounds the frustration.

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For example, I was preparing an album for a client from one of my favorite weddings last summer in Canada. I photographed both the rehearsal and the wedding and for the rehearsal I shot a lot of film, but on the wedding day, I opted for more digital with only a tiny bit of film. What I noticed in looking back over that work was how much I was attracted to the look of the film images, and especially the real silver-based b & w images from both days. Not that I didn't like the digital or think it looked great, that wasn't the issue. I simply preferred the look of the film.

A view of the scene of the rehearsal dinner. Image was made after dusk, handheld with a Leica m6 ttl and a 35mm lens.

Estimated shutter 1/4 second, at f1.4

Some of that b & w was shot on an old Leica with a 35mm lens – a camera that I happen to love working with. Again, it keeps coming back to the look. Simply put, many of my favorite images from the weekend happened to be made on film.

The trick I have discovered is to remember this and to project on that delayed gratification I know I’ll receive when looking at the film. There’s almost an immediate sense of comfort, I realize, when working with digital (and for some aspects of the coverage it’s the right choice, for me (more on that later)).

Now this is not going to be yet another film vs. digital debate because frankly those are getting way too old and they don’t really go anywhere. It’s tired and I certainly don’t want to go down that road.

Digital is here, and it’s here to stay. And that’s okay.

I feel there’s a big part of our industry that wants us to choose sides and basically say that one basically rules and the other should be relegated to the Smithsonian Museum (and not soon enough).

In my opinion, that thinking is just plain wrong.

The bride and groom (second and third from right) walk hand in hand along the dock to a waiting boat, following their ceremony. Image made with a Canon 1v, 35mm f1.4L lens and Fuji 400 H film and available light.

I believe that these two aspects of photography can mutually coexist and hopefully will for a very long time because they are both useful and viable tools. And thankfully they do exist for us now. Plus they both keep getting better – how cool is that and how can that be seen as a bad thing for photographers and the industry?

Digital of course, brings the burden of capture cost way down, with the trade off being time in front of the computer to work over files (for me to “work it over” = make it look like film. There I said it.)

Digital allows for a lot of experimentation and that can be hugely liberating. The work I do on digital from the receptions is some of the best work that I’ve done from this portion of the wedding coverage, and I have found that digital often wins in these situations. It just does so well in low light and really helps when I am trying to bounce light off walls all over

the room at f1.6 apertures in order to make an interesting photograph. Having the cushion of being able to make a lot of exposures on these dodgy conditions is a great benefit to digital.

Sharpness is certainly not an issue with it either. The stuff is so sharp it bleeds and it's sometimes almost too sharp (especially if I use any filtration to bring back some of the sharpness that is lost at capture).

Much of these thoughts about the two worlds of photography have been ruminating in my brain for a long time, and stirred up with frequent talks with the aforementioned Mr. Milnor about the whole "film thing" as former President George H. W. Bush might say.

A lot of my most recent clarity has come from the interesting voice of a photographer and artist named Stephen Schaub from Vermont. He publishes a blog called the figitalrevolution.com. Good friends and I have been thinking along these lines for a while and his work has synthesized it in such a reasoned and thoughtful way. Check out his site and see if you don't agree.

A situation that could be used to illustrate this notion would be from the world of professional football.

On television the HD images from the Super Bowl and other NFL events are nothing short of extraordinary. The multiple angles, the super long lenses, the super slow motion all bring immediacy and capture the explosiveness of the game. And you can see those controversial calls immediately after they happen. High Definition video has totally changed the viewing experience (as have large screen televisions).

As cool as that is, I still find the images captured by the folks at NFL Films equally amazing. It's simply a different look at the game. And because it takes a couple of days to see those NFL Films highlights on TV (by then we've seen the video highlights numerous times), they immediately feel different because of the look, and the artistry of their cinematographers. It's all done on film because nothing quite looks like that.

One's not better than the other. They're just different. And they're both valid.

So that's where I am at today in my still photography and I feel more and more comfortable than ever saying: I use both film and digital and will use both for different reasons and sometimes at the same event.

I no longer feel the luddite because I want to use film. I no longer feel behind the times or antiquated because I photograph with a Leica on occasion. I think because I use film, the look creates a point of distinction from other photographers, most of whom use digital 100% (and don't plan to change).

Will most clients know the difference or even care? Perhaps not but they seem to have a sense that something is a little different with the film. It's all about creating a look that is commercially viable and it's also about finding a way to do work that appeals to your soul as a photographer and artist. I've been renewed by this recent getting in touch with "my inner film photographer" and am embracing it. It works for me and perhaps it will work for you too?

A portrait of Eva using a Canon EOS 1v with Neopan 400 and a long lens.

Great films

One of the great things that has happened over the past ten years is that, strangely enough, film has evolved. As digital capture has consumed still photography like a desert fire in an Arizona summer, improved manufacturing capabilities, continued innovation in the emulsions and a demand from the movie industry have continued to create what I might call a bit of a "quiet renaissance" in film.

Sure some emulsions have gone away (like the recent announcement to retire Kodachrome after 75 years (but I could argue that that film had died a long time ago when E6 films, C41 films and faster processing became the norm).

Ironically it was the movie business that gave us modern still photography (Oskar Barnack the inventor of the Leica actually came up with the 35mm camera while creating a machine used to test movie films back in the 20s.

And now it's the movie industry and their continued pursuit of excellence in film emulsions, and coupled with improved scanning technology that has given us some of the best films from both Kodak and Fuji have ever produced. They are optimized for digital and scanning.

Plus the good ole silver-based staples like Neopan 400, Acros, Tri-X, and Tmax are still on the shelves and reinforce the strong entries in the C41 process.

Great processing and scanning

As computers have gotten faster, so have those computers driving the machinery that scans the image from film like a Fuji Frontier or a Noritsu. Now high resolution scans are the norm and the quality has improved in the dynamic range of those scans. I have made absolutely beautiful 20 x 30 inch photographs from 35mm film scans and while they may not look quite as sharp as their digital equivalents (say a 5d file — and I've got a 40 x 60 print on the wall) they simply look fantastic.

Processing is accurate with computer controlled machines using chemistry made in computer-controlled factories.

The scanner and software that analyze the film is sophisticated and, with a solid exposure and a well-trained scanner operator, you can get really fine images that need little post production work. In fact, for proofing purposes, those "right out of scanner" scans would be pretty darn good. Sure you are paying for film, processing and scanning, but think of how much time can be saved if all you had to do was edit the keepers and post them online.

But the coup de grace is when you have a lab like Richard Photo Lab in Los Angeles that realized that there is a niche for film shooters (especially in the portrait and wedding world when deadlines are less of a concern) and they've taken that and run with it. With many labs bailing on film, they were one of the smart ones that said: maybe there's still a place for the sophisticated film user — and we'll cater to them.

Now there's a place (at least in the States) that gives you a true option if you want to shoot film (or at least add some to your line up) and get great scans too to utilize a digital workflow.

The lab offers FTP service so I can download the high resolution scans from Richard Photo overnight and then view those high resolution files in the morning in editing software like Photo Mechanic.

The good thing about the C41 films is that there is Digital Ice technology on the scanners that minimizes dust; with the silver films you'll find that occasionally you'll get some but that's very very minimal if the lab is good (trust me, Richards is). And scanning silver films is tricky but somehow they've really got it dialed in.

If you want to scan your own images, you can find scanners ranging from relatively inexpensive to big time expensive. Inexpensive flat beds often have holders for negs though they are typically not heavy duty. The Nikon film scanners such as the LS 5000 and the LS 9000 (which scans 35mm and 2 1/4 respectively) are still out there and do a great job and are priced starting at around \$1k to \$3k. More high end scanners such as the Imacon and larger and expensive flatbeds rival drum scanners though they'll set you back much more \$\$ than the Nikon scanners.

Stephen Schaub of the digital revolution scans his work on an Imacon and then outputs his work to sophisticated 12 ink printer. Again, be sure and check out his extensive and information blog at <http://figitalrevolution.com>.

Inexpensive used film cameras

If you ever check out used film cameras on Ebay and a store like KEH.com you'll find that prices are surprisingly low for most types of gear.

On KEH.com, as I write this article I see a Canon EOS-1VHS (probably the best film camera ever made by Canon) with a High Speed booster (single frame this puppy or you'll be shooting film like it's an 8 gig card on a 1d m3) for around \$725 — and that's for one listed in excellent + shape. They also list a bargain EOS 1V HS for \$449! KEH is known to be incredibly conservative about their assessments and all the gear I have purchased from them has been superb. (Be sure and check for yourself at KEH.com or on ebay to check prices as prices might have changed from the time this was written.)

You can find an EOS 3 (the baby brother of the 1v) for about \$379 in LN- condition and one for \$179 in Bargain condition. Keep an eye out too for the Elan 7E. That is a very small, light and quiet camera that should go for around \$150 if you find it at keh.com. As I write this they have an Elan 7 which is the Japanese equivalent of the Elan 7E and that's going for \$133. These three cameras are good choices since they are all ETTL II compatible cameras and would play nicely with your 580 EX and 580 EX II.

Of course with film you've got the incredible latitude of it so even using one of the older strobes would probably be fine too. You could even pick up an older, non E-TTL II camera such as the A2 for a song.

Folks, those are some seriously screaming deals on cameras many that I would suspect have been used sparingly over the past few years. Cameras such as the 1v tend to be overbuilt and made to last for years. Since they don't have

to be upgraded every 12-18 months to make room for the latest and greatest digital sensor, the lifespan on these cameras is typically longer than most digitals. I'm using a 1v that I have had since 2003 and I'm the third owner. And it's still going strong. I added a small grip called the BP E1 that runs on 4 AA batteries (or the lithium 2CR5) and makes the camera much lighter than the bigger booster that runs on 8 AAs.

It's kind of nice to know that these cameras can still be used and still depended upon to produce beautiful images even though they may actually be older than 2 years old!!

If you're a medium format photographer or are thinking about using one, there are also some smoking deals on used cameras in this category too.

Check out the above sources or even your local camera store in the used department and you may be surprised at what is out there and how low the prices have gotten.

One film camera brand though that has held value are Leica rangefinder cameras. Using a rangefinder is a unique experience, especially if you've only worked with digital SLRs. Once you get used to them, they're positively addicting (but they do take some time, trust me). And they're super quiet, super small and very non-threatening. They don't look like a "serious" camera and most people just don't know what they are. This can be great in situations where you want to be discreet and since they're small and light, it makes carrying them for a day rather easy.

But the results and the look really make it worth doing

For all the reasons above I can make a strong case for the addition of film to the mix. I've brought it back in and I couldn't be happier. But it may not be for everyone. It does slow down the workflow a bit and it may cramp the shooting style of someone really used to the virtually unlimited supply of images by way of CF cards. But I still think it's worth a huge look.

For me, I realize those inherent limitations and all those things that digital proponents say that makes digital so much better. For example there is the ability to change ISO on the fly, the low light performance, the ability to shoot lots of images with relatively minimal cost. Sure, all of those things are true and are advantages.

There's the look of film that is still unique, there's the inherent latitude that allows you to hold detail in highlights, but it's also about using tools that I still love and can't see tossing aside just to keep reinvesting in digital cameras. There comes a point when you wonder, just how much better will the next latest and greatest camera make me?

So grab an old film camera, pop in a roll of color neg or black and white film and see what the new technology has done for the "old school" film.

My clients hug (foreground) as they watch their children during a bar/bat mitzvah in their backyard recently.

This image was made with a Leica m6ttl, 35mm lens and Fuji Neopan 400 film.

An available light portrait of Garret using a Leica m6 ttl with a 50mm f1.4 lens on Fuji Acros 100.

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