



Shoot, Cut, Upload: All in a Day's Work

Producing daily highlights at the Los Angeles Film Festival and AFI Fest

By *Ryun Hovind*

I've long been a fan and supporter of film festivals. I've had my films play at them; I've worked for them; and I often attend them. So I was ecstatic to be hired for not one but two Los Angeles-based film festivals: the Los Angeles Film Festival (LAFF) 2006, held last June, and the American Film Institute's AFI Fest Presented by Audi, in November. I served as post supervisor at the LAFF and as digital media coordinator at AFI Fest. I had worked at festivals in Chicago, Nashville, and Birmingham, but working on festivals in LA was a whole different ball game.

The events in LA included premieres of Hollywood releases such as *A Scanner Darkly*, *The Fountain*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, *Bug*, *Broken*, *Monster House*, and *Bobby*. Making appearances at the LAFF and/or the AFI Fest were Laura Dern, Emilio Estevez, Laurence Fishburne, Heather Graham, Hugh Jackman, Ashley Judd, Lindsay Lohan, Michael Rapaport, Keanu Reeves, Winona Ryder, Christian Slater, Sharon Stone, Meryl Streep, Rita Wilson, and Chow Yun-Fat, as well as behind-the-scenes talent like William Friedkin, Ed Zwick, Peter Bogdanovich, David Lynch, and George Lucas.

But I digress. My team's job at both festivals was to shoot panels, interviews, and red carpet events; edit the footage overnight; and deliver it in formats for on-air and online display. We shot four video formats, recorded with two direct-to-disk technologies, hosted video on five Web sites, and employed 12 Final Cut Pro systems. We scrambled like indie film producers-wrangling camera operators, PAs, onscreen talent, and editors in a matter of days. Our operation was built for a 12- to 24- hour turnaround. We were shorthanded, had high ambitions, and had to count on getting every piece of gear we used for free or in exchange for sponsorship support. This is our story.



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View of downtown Westwood during LAFF 2006.

LAFF-in

Film festivals are here today, gone tomorrow. The job of the events' digital video department was to create what Kerim Duran, technical director at both LAFF and AFI Fest, calls "a virtual festival experience" for non-attendees. How did we do that? We Webcast all the craziness of the festival in short, quick bursts of video.

Doing so meant shooting more than Anne Hathaway and Sharon Stone brown-nosing directors and swooning over fellow co-stars. It meant shooting a Sumo wrestling match for the film *Big Dreams Little Tokyo*; rushing to catch up to costumed girls singing "It's the Hard-Knock Life" for the documentary *Life After Tomorrow*; and filming the Comic Evangelists protesting their own movie.

With much to cover in little time before it was all over, we had to prioritize. Powers-that-be mandated that certain events be covered, but the most obvious focal points were the red carpet events and parties-whose evening time frame all but determined our workflow. Our priority list functioned like a director's storyboard to keep us focused.

For the LAFF, we produced a 1-hour highlight show called *FesTV*. It consisted of enough short (several-minute) video segments to fill the allotted hour. Because we were shooting celebrity events in the evenings, a director-editor team was hired to come in at 10 p.m. to produce the show. They would finish around 6 a.m., and I would complete the show's final QC before noon.

Three things made the on-time delivery of *FesTV* possible. The first was FCP's Broadcast Safe Filter. It kept colors at video-safe levels in a rudimentary manner, but it was quick and gave us peace of mind when we sent content to TV stations. The second was making QuickTime reference movies. Upon export, by simply clicking off Make Movie Self Contained, we created a reference QuickTime file and reduced our rendering time by half. The file looked and acted like a normal .mov file, but it was actually a series of pointers to already rendered QuickTime files. Using a reference QuickTime file avoided a complete re-render of each and every frame. The third was using FCP's Mark>Audio Peaks function to fix audio trouble spots. If you go to Mark>Audio Peaks with nothing selected in the timeline, FCP will place markers wherever your audio track has red-lined. If you already have markers on the timeline, the new markers will look identical to the other markers in the timeline, so don't get confused. Also, if you don't see any markers appear after a Mark>Audio Peaks pass, don't think you're totally good to go. Your overall volume may be too low. Normalize your levels to be sure.



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The AFI crew look on as Shining presents its Citidisk HDV.

Direct-to-disk at AFI Fest

The LAFF had brought with it some particularly frustrating moments-so when the AFI Fest opportunity came around, it was not love at first sight. But several key differences convinced me to get on board. First, instead of delivering an hour-long highlights show filled with multicamera segments, we would produce up to 10 3-minute clips of one-camera events per day. Even though both festivals lasted 12 days, the AFI Fest footage would only add up to 6 hours, compared to the LAFF's 12 hours. Second, my assignment included 3 months of prep time to properly assemble trailers and sponsor logos, license fresh music (thank you Crash Pad), and develop delivery formats and procedures with content distributors (AOL Moviefone, Indie 103.1 FM, KLCS, MySpace, and Withoutabox.com). Another seductive element of the AFI Fest was that it was held in the AFI Village-a massive array of tents with the beautiful backdrop of downtown Hollywood.

Our plan was to shoot direct-to-disk with FireWire-equipped cameras to meet the tight deadlines. The catch was that we were shooting on four video formats, some of which were not direct-to-disk compatible. AFI provided us with three DVCAMs: a Sony PD150 and two Sony PD10s. Dalsa, our official camera sponsor, supplied us with a Sony

790WS D-Beta camera, a Sony F900, and two Sony Z1s. However, neither the F900 nor the 790WS—otherwise obvious choices for covering late-night celebrity events—have FireWire ports. Gone was my vision of shooting directly onto hard drives every night and getting some sleep. Bummer.

Of course, the PD150, PD10s, and Z1s do have FireWire on them, which made it possible to work with direct-to-disk recorders supplied by both Focus Enhancements (the FS-4 HD) and Shining Technology (Citidisk HDV). Each gave us instant editing capability in its own unique, less-than-perfect way.

Both the FS-4 and Citidisk allow you to record to disk and to tape simultaneously. Like Focus and Shining, I recommend you use them this way: if you plan on recording only to disk, your camera will likely shut off to save power when tape isn't rolling, unless you remember to override the auto-shutoff function. Each unit gives you a visual indication that it's recording, via light or running timecode. They both offer a significant amount of storage—3 hours or more of DV footage. And they both record individual clips every time you stop and start the camera, which prompted us to adjust the Poster Frames in our bin clip to stay organized. We created a one-sheet guide so camera operators and editors both could get up to speed quickly.



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One of the LAFF's many film showcasing venues in Westwood.



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AFI Fest 2006 prepares the red carpet for *Vo/ver* outside Hollywood's Arclight Theater.

All of our camera ops were volunteers, coming from various institutions: Los Angeles Film School, New York Film Academy, the Los Angeles Final Cut Pro User Group (LAFCPUG), UCLA, and Video Symphony. Duran and I held a mandatory two-night boot camp to train camera ops on their equipment. We provided some shooting basics: have colorful festival signage behind your shots; keep the camera at eye level; keep the interviewer offscreen; ask filmmakers and celebrities pre-approved questions; and don't be shy. (As the volunteers found out, zealous photographers will step in front of anyone at any time to get their shot.)

The FS-4, a 3.5-inch drive with DOS-like menus, was a bit clunky to carry, understand, and edit with. We didn't use the FS-4s as thoroughly as we did the Citidisks, because many of our camera ops were intimidated by them. (I had to keep explaining to these film students what this newfangled direct-to-disk technology was.) The FS-4s capture files and label them like digital cameras (as well as Panasonic's P2 cameras) do-e.g., "DLXK456.mov," with files in no sequential order. You have to rely on your memory and the creation date, which can be cumbersome. In terms of reliability-that is, knowing that footage shot was indeed the data that was captured-I estimate the FS-4 units worked at an 80 to 90 percent success rate.

With the benefit of experience, I decided to have Chris Wang, Shining's U.S. marketing manager, provide hands-on Citidisk training. The Citidisk HDV units were easy-to-transport, 2.5-inch drives that could be mounted onto camera shoes or worn with leather belt loops. They securely attached via FireWire to all of our DV and HDV cameras except for the Sony PD150, whose FireWire port placement caused the cable to repeatedly come loose, thus stopping recording.

One advantage of the Citidisks is that they label footage chronologically, making organization a little easier. A showstopper for some is that the Citidisk units only capture HDV as m2t files. The FS-4 HDs capture m2t files as well as Apple Intermediate codec files (my preferred HDV format with FCP).

The Citidisk HDVs were 60 to 70 percent reliable. We'd plug the hard drive into the USB port and hold our breath. Early on, a camera crew ran out of tape stock and used only the Citidisk HDV for capture. The footage was there, but unreadable; Wang came to the rescue with a PC and WinHex data recovery software. He recovered the data for us-but we didn't repeat our mistake. We came across another issue with Citidisk footage. Unless you rename your clips, you could potentially have four clips named "0100." When you move media and go to reconnect, you will very likely link to the wrong "0100." Allow for extra archival time.

I was hoping one of these direct-to-disk technologies was going to be our magic bullet. Getting footage cut and online fast was of utmost importance. Even if we were losing 30 percent of our files before they got into our timelines, we still had 70 percent of what we shot ready to go within 10 minutes of plugging in the hard drive. If we really needed something that didn't capture properly-like our interview of Michael Rapaport for *Special*-we simply captured it in real time from the tape backup and were no worse off.

Incidentally, Robby Stambler, the post supervisor at AFI Fest, has continued using tapeless instant capture in production after his experiences with the festivals. "I've moved on and am using the same process with the Panasonic P2 card on independent feature films," Stambler elaborates. "We create MXF masters of the DVCPRO HD 720p media on location. By lunch, it's possible to have all of the morning's scenes rough-cut and assembled for screening with a client."



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Tapes had strict labeling and red tagging conventions, but there was always an exception.

Post

Stambler and technical director Duran decided shooting multiple formats shouldn't mean editing multiple formats, so they selected two: uncompressed HD and 16:9 SD. Handling uncompressed HD wasn't an issue. Runway and the Post Group hooked us up with six Power Macs decked out with dual monitors and AJA Kona cards to run FCP, as well as several HD decks and a 9.5 TB Xsan server. We kept Hugh Jackman and friends in full, uncompressed glory until the last possible moment before we squished them down for Internet viewing. The machines worked flawlessly. Our biggest time-sucker was encoding the footage for the Web and NTSC dubs.

We primarily used Compressor and QuickTime conversion for our transcoding and DVD Studio Pro for our DVD encoding. Intel, which was showcasing software at its AFI pavilion, wanted all of our footage submitted in a Windows Media Video (WMV) format. This proved impossible: an hour-long show could take up to 12 hours to encode using Telestream Flip4Mac. Standard MPEG-2 DVDs became the quickest, most universal solution for Intel and most of our other content distributors, including the Audi pavilion, the festival shuttle buses, and Target's Red Room. For most of our Webcasting outlets we created H.264 300 Kbps streaming files using VBR encoding (AOL Moviefone required a different workflow). Our sponsors offered browser or HTTP streaming of these files-i.e., progressive downloads-rather than dedicated server-based streaming.

The majority of the clips (that is, the ones without celebrities) were edited in SD, since they were mainly going online. We converted the D-Beta and HDV camera footage to DV25 to match the footage from our three DVCAMs. The only real drawback to shooting anamorphic 16:9 SD was that television media covering the festival-including *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*, PBS affiliate KLCS, and local stations Santa Monica Channel 75 and LA36-had to crop or letterbox our footage.

Submissions

LAFF and AFI Fest, both international in scope, showcased nearly 400 films combined. Despite the programs' strict submission guidelines, my teams received trailers in some very unique formats. We were sent DVDs encoded in MPEG-2 NTSC, PAL, and even SECAM. Some sent data DVDs with Web promo files. One such disc included a 3 MB WMV master. Our job was to wrangle trailers for display on shuttle buses, in sponsor booths, and for area television stations, as well as on partner Web sites. Filmmakers who sent low-res Web trailers were treated to seeing their footage-which looked great online-display as fuzzy and blocky on 32-inch plasma screens, compared to properly formatted footage submitted by their peers.

To process the MPEG-2 DVDs, I tried multiple freeware solutions-Mac The Ripper (www.mactheripper.org), MPEG Streamclip (www.squared5.com), and ffmpegX (www.ffmpegx.com). Nine times out of ten, ripping created more headaches than simply recapturing. MPEG Streamclip is very fast, but ultimately it created audio sync problems. And ffmpegX created audio noise and digital ripping in the video. After trying various techniques, doing a straight capture proved to be the quickest, highest-quality solution.

We used AFI's Sony Media Center to dub all our formats except for PAL and D-Beta. We had access to a PAL DVD player, so we could play the PAL format submissions. And for that 3 MB WMV master, I brought in my Toshiba Satellite PC laptop with 1 GB RAM and Autodesk Cleaner XL.

Once we had gotten all the trailers and our own content onto the Xsan server, it was time to spit it back out for the world to see. AFI Fest's premier sponsor was Moviefone; we also had arrangements with Indie 103.1 FM, MySpace, and Withoutabox.com to run clips from the festival online.

AOL Moviefone needed DV/DVCPRO NTSC 720 x 480 files for its system to encode for the Web. In FCP, you have to use QuickTime conversion to create an NTSC DV file that isn't intrinsically linked to FCP, so we couldn't export with a straight Make Movie. While it seems rather straightforward, using Export Using Quicktime Conversion has some pitfalls. Audio settings can be changed accidentally. If the last person on a machine was encoding for the Web, and you're in a hurry, you can miss altered video settings. You also want to be careful not to adjust cropping and letterboxing if your material is already in an anamorphic sequence.

