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Riding Giants

Dave Kalama (left), and Laird Hamilton in Peshi, Hawaii
Photo by Erik Auder



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"I Bought the Shot...Now What?"

How Filmmakers Deal With Multi-Format Stock Footage — and How it Sometimes Saves Their Scenes

By Iain Blair

June 1, 2004 Source: Film & Video

Post your comments below

Stock footage has always been a reliable and cost-effective – if unsexy – go-to option for creatives in a jam or looking to save a buck. But the industry has undergone a radical makeover in the last few years, as desktop video solutions make it almost as easy to manipulate motion imagery as to Photoshop a still image.

This development has created a demand for content that can be used as elements for compositing as well as for traditional uses, such as establishing shots. "It has also created a demand for imagery that can tell a story and provide a narrative arc," says Kristy Manning of BBC Worldwide Library Sales. "Today, stock footage is becoming as much a part of a creative's toolkit as stock photography, scanning, or images taken by digital cameras."

The BBC Library, which is the exclusive global representative for CBS News Archive, has provided footage for such recent feature films as The Matrix Reloaded (BBC News footage) Adaptation (time-lapse footage of a flower growing), as well as the new Fox release The Day After Tomorrow, which used extensive natural disaster footage from CBS News. But once it's bought, how does a project— be it film, television, or commercial— seamlessly integrate this footage?



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How Do I Post All This Stuff?

War coverage is always in demand, and when award-winning documentary filmmaker Errol Morris needed help organizing the huge array of archival footage in numerous film formats he needed for his acclaimed film *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons of Robert S. McNamara* (Sony Pictures Classics), which was finished in 24p HD, he turned to PostWorks New York.

"This project presented a number of complex technical challenges, especially as it used footage from all over the world," explains Billy Baldwin, PostWorks president. In addition to Morris' interviews and dramatic recreations that were shot in 24p, there were "hours of archival footage in different formats, from film to D1 to PAL." Footage also included different frame rates and aspect ratios, including some recently declassified White House recording, all of which had to be converted, conformed and color-corrected into one technically cohesive HD-resolution master.

"Wherever possible, we tried to get the negative— but that wasn't always available—and when we did we transferred it on our Spirit," Baldwin adds. "We had a lot of 16mm and some 35mm, but some of it had already been transferred to various formats such as D1 and Digital Betacam, and that material was upconverted."

The *Fog of War* job began with senior online editor Peter Heady, who used the Quantel iQ and Teranex Star-up converter to convert and conform the archival source footage into 24p. From there, colorist Eric Alvarado performed the color-correct using the da Vinci 2K color enhancement system. After the film was output to 35mm using the Arrilaser film recorder, Matt Foglia mixed the audio in 5.1.

The documentary was built around more than 20 hours of interviews that director Morris conducted with McNamara, all shot in 24p. "We mastered the entire job in 24p, as you have to pick a common denominator to use as your platform," notes Baldwin. "We did a lot of compositing of the archival footage and used all kinds of filters and played around with it a lot. There was also a lot of clean-up done, such as dirt and scratch removal, and we used Avid's Nitris system to do most of that work. Ultimately, we hit it with every system we had."

In *Hidden Wars of Desert Storm*, documentary husband-and-wife team Gerard Ungerman and Audrey Brohy take a hard look at the first Bush administration's involvement in Iraq. With its historical perspective and archival footage from the '20s and '30s, as well as footage from the first Gulf War, it helped that Ungerman used to work in stock footage. "I worked at Film Audio Services in New York in the early '90s, before it was bought up by The Image Bank, so I knew exactly where to go," he says. "A lot of the old black-and-white material is in public domain, and we got the rest either from the Pentagon or sources like Iraqi TV, most of it in 35mm." The team digitized the material on a Media 100 system and edited it in with interviews and analysis.

Unproven Territory on Riding Giants

Directed by Stacy Peralta, *Riding Giants* is a very different kind of documentary that honors the history of big-wave surfing and traces its origins back over 1500 years to present day. The film, which recently premiered as the opening night film for the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, reunites Peralta with editor Paul Crowder and Director of Photography Peter Pilafian, the team who created the skateboarding film *Dogtown* and *Z-Boys*.

The first hurdle was deciding on a format. "We shot all the new footage in Super 16mm, but we knew right away we'd have to pull sources from every format and from all over the place," reports Crowder. He isn't exaggerating. Stock footage formats included Mini DV, DV, Beta, DigiBeta, PAL DV and Beta PAL as well as Super 8, 16mm and 35mm sources.

"So we discussed it with Technicolor, Complete Post and Andy Lichstein, the telecine operator there who'd done such a great job on post for *Dogtown*, and decided to put all the material on HD 24p. That way we could bump up any stock footage we used to the same format, and for our final online, we'd have HD 24p as our masters and could do a one-to-one film out instead of having to do any down or upconversion."

Crowder says the filmmakers learned a hard lesson with *Dogtown*, which they finished in NTSC. "That's 30 fps, but it's 24 when you go to film, and it was a total nightmare," he recalls. "So this method would solve that problem and give us a very clean, beautiful-looking result. Telecineing all the film stock to HD was fine; getting Super 8 was a bit harder."

Then Crowder ran into trouble. "I was cutting a 24fps job on an Avid, which works at 30fps, so I was doing Beta dubs of the HDs and I'd use the Betas to cut with and all my offline was done with Beta sources," he says. "What we didn't spot was the massive interpolation problems going from video, like a VHS or DV. And upconverting to HD created this problem on the HD that didn't show up on the Beta. So when I was cutting, it all looked fine, but when we went on line, Stacy found that everything shot on video and bumped up with Teranex was getting destroyed on HD."

The team had to find another way to transfer all the video sources and ultimately used Alchemy to solve the problem. "But it was at the very last minute, and all the video footage had gone back to the owners," he recalls. "So to get the online finished, it was a mad dash to get all the footage back and retransfer to fix it."

Going HD 24p was "unproven territory for a lot of us," he adds, "but we learned a lot from doing *Dogtown*, which I had cut on my own Avid AVBV system. I later upgraded it



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to the new Adrenaline, and what's brilliant is that I didn't have to redigitize any sources. The new system can read old media digitized in the old format, and you can digitize media in the new format, and then it'll play the two together in the timeline, which is unprecedented. So I could still work with the same footage, but on new equipment, and the last two weeks of cutting Riding I was on Adrenaline and it was a seamless transition."

Using stock footage for TV shows is "pretty different," reports Crowder, a veteran who's edited more than 100 shows for VH1's Behind the Music. "I did one for a 1975 show, and all the stock footage came in from the top houses, and it's all on NTSC, so it's not a technical issue but a budgetary one as it all costs a fortune. But then you're editing at 30fps and even though all the sources are film, it's been transferred to video, so you're on a video format from start to finish." Crowder used an Avid AVBV 7.2 Media Composer at the network's offices.

When Stock Footage Saves the Day

Stock footage can save the day for a commercial, notes Jerry Spivack, creative director/partner at Ring of Fire, which worked on the popular comedic Whiskas campaign. "We couldn't fly to Africa to shoot plates, so we used a ton of stock footage and scoured every source, as it drove the whole edit," he reports. "Editor Avi Orion at Bikini Editorial then narrowed it all down, and we shot live cat elements against green screen and on location in California. We then composited the cat into the stock footage with Inferno and Henry, and it looked great."

For a Honey Nut Cheerios cereal spot, Spivack also relied on stock footage, this time from the horror classic Frankenstein. "Instead of trying to recreate the scenes the client wanted, we were able to use some original film scenes and then paint out the blind violinist and other elements," he reports. "Then we replaced those with our own elements and the cereal product, and they were thrilled."

At Hi-wire in Minneapolis, compositor Tony Mills also uses stock footage for a long-running comedic campaign for the Minnesota Twins. "The spots have a great Monty Python look, and we do a lot of compositing of heads onto different bodies using Fire and Inferno," he explains. "We also use a lot of stock footage for sky and cloud replacement in high-end compositing work for commercials."

"We couldn't have done the spot without stock footage," says Lost Planet editor Charlie Johnston of the recent Motorola "Motonext" spot. "It spanned Motorola's innovations from 1937 to the present, and we were able to augment the director's footage with a lot of stock footage, and we lucked out as Motorola already had all their historical clips on DigiBeta."

Johnston added two clips— one of an aircraft carrier obtained directly from the Navy on DVD, another of a California firefighter from Getty Images— and cut all the elements together on Avid and then conformed on Henry.

To sum up, whether you're creating a documentary about surfing or Vietnam, or whether you need some hard-to-get shots of a jungle or savannah, stock footage can be an invaluable resource. As Manning puts it, "Today, stock footage is becoming as much a part of a creative's toolkit as stock photography, scanning, or images taken by digital cameras."



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- 1. Thanks. This was useful.
Posted by Kristin on Friday, March 5, 2010 @ 10:11 AM



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