The CameraHobby Newsletter **Issue 2, Fall 2012**
camerahobby@gmail.com

Introduction

A couple of readers indicated that they found the newsletter format more informative than the old website blog-style posts.

I'm not so sure that's really the case. With the blog, talking about a new camera, such as the Canon 5D3, would be done over several days or weeks with multiple posts, and that breaks up the continuity.

In the newsletter, you get almost all the pieces in one shot. It's just a different presentation, because how I write is the same, loose way I did with the website – personal use, experience and sometimes (often?) too much subjective opinion.

One reader suggested that if I'm willing to write 25-pages for a newsletter, I may as well resurrect the website again. But, I like the lack of pressure of a newsletter over a website; however, never say never. When the studying is finally over, I'll revisit whether a website is appropriate.

Shortly after sending out the first newsletter, I started jotting down thoughts and experiences as they came or happened. Before I knew it, I had 14-pages of material and the makings of another newsletter issue well before I thought I'd have one. This issue also has some updates about my other hobby, audio, as another reader wondered why the first issue had no mention of it.

You will also notice the different formatting for this issue with the use of justified columns. Let me know if you like it or if you prefer the plain-Jane formatting of issue 1.

The Milestone Photo

In the last newsletter, I discussed a milestone photo shoot for my workplace to celebrate our 25th anniversary. The shoot had been postponed many times from April to August, but we finally managed to get it done on August 1.

We had sun and we had a decent turnout from a workforce of about 250 people (about 130 people). Although we were missing many due to summer vacations, many others didn't bother to come out, such as it is in a largish organization with many personalities.

I got to the Vancouver Gallery several minutes early to setup and wait for the group to assemble. I wanted to be there early to stake out the ideal vantage point at the top of the stairs to look down at the plaza where everyone would gather.

Although we had a beautiful sunny day, for a photo, the timing was as bad as you can get. I couldn't take the photo until around 12:10 when the executives finally got out of a meeting, so the sun was nearly overhead of us.

The ideal time would have been before 11 am, when the plaza is in shade and we would have even and consistent, indirect light. Around 11:15, I peeked out the window of a co-worker's office facing the plaza and ruefully surmised that we'd be in open sun by the time the photo could be taken.

Setup was exactly as I described in the last issue. I had the primary Canon 5D2 mounted to the RRS TVC-33S/BH-55 tripod/head combo. I had the Nikon D2X mounted to the Manfrotto/Induro tripod/head combo for time-lapse photos.

Finally, I had the Panasonic GF1 mounted to a tiny Manfrotto tabletop tripod to record a video of the assembling of staff and taking of the photo. I didn't really have much planned for the GF1's video file, but just wanted some live motion as a just in case when I edit the time-lapse video (did not end up using any video).

As I wanted to be in the photo too, I needed a way to remote control the release of the shutter. I did this by connecting the 5D2 via USB to my Apple MacBook Pro. The MBP has onOne's DLR Camera Remote Server software installed, which is one-half of the solution.

The other half is the onOne iPhone app to connect to the server software and allow me to release the shutter wirelessly via the iPhone. I did this by connecting the MBP to the iPhone via the iPhone's personal hotspot feature.

The iPhone app allows me to put the camera in LiveView mode so I can see in real time what the framing looks like and then fire the shutter. After firing the shutter, it takes a couple of seconds for the file to write to a folder on the computer before I can take another photo (the camera still saves a file to the memory card).

It all worked, but I did have a tough time seeing the iPhone's screen due to being in direct sunlight. Thankfully, I could see well enough to hit the shutter release button. Earlier that day, when I was testing everything out one last time, it didn't work out so well.

First, I couldn't get the MBP to wirelessly connect to the iPhone even though it should be automatic as my iPhone is one of the saved network connections on the MBP. When I finally could get the two to connect, the MBP pops up a window requesting a WPA password.

What the f…? It's never done that before. I tried some passwords, but nada, which is no surprise since I've never seen this before, so how I could have a password setup for WPA access to the iPhone?

I ignore it and eventually got the MBP connected to the iPhone. I connect the 5D2 via USB and then opened up the onOne Server software. Unfortunately, it refused to open up, as the version installed is considered too old – I suspect a synchronization problem between the iPhone's newer version of the app and the MBP's older software.

With the MBP still connected to the iPhone, I burnt through 55 MB of my data plan to download the updated software. It took about 15 minutes through the iPhone's pedestrian 3G cellular access. Once installed, I decided that maybe a clean reboot would be a good idea to rid myself of what seemed to be some gremlins afflicting my MBP.

After restarting, I tried to log into the MBP, but no go. The keyboard would not accept any keystrokes. It was as if the keyboard didn't exist. Anyone ever heard of the Scottish fellow, Murphy, and his law?

I did a hard power down via the MBP's power button and then booted up again. Thankfully, the keyboard worked and I was able to log in. I connected everything up again for testing and everything worked as they should. Whew!

When the time came to head out the door with my gear (two co-workers helped to lug the stuff out) and setup, there were only a few people sitting on the back steps of the Art Gallery.

One of my co-workers asked if he should ask them to move in order to give me a clear shot. I said no, as we still had several minutes to wait and by the time everyone showed up, the people might be done and move along on their own. However, as more staff came out to the plaza, more people (not staff) bought lunches from nearby food trucks and sat on the steps of the Art Gallery to eat.

Hmm…this could get interesting if we have to ask 12-15 people to move out of the way. The lunch crowd seemed oblivious to the 130 or so people congregating on the plaza, which is their right, as the plaza is a public place. While we could ask, the people have no obligation to move aside for us.

Thankfully, I just recomposed for a little farther back and shot over the heads of everyone sitting on the steps. I had our group move a little farther back than I had originally planned, which was of no consequence.

My final focal length was 70mm, using f16 to ensure appropriate depth of field. Yes, diffraction is technically an issue, but I regard it as the lesser of two evils between having enough depth of field and only the first few rows in focus.

Art Wolfe, during a seminar in Vancouver, basically said the same thing. If you need immense depth of field then shoot at f16 or f22; don't get so hung up on the technicalities that you don't take the photo.

I took a few shots beside the camera before going down the steps to join my co-workers. A few people were confused as to how pictures could be taken while I was in it, not noting how I kept on playing with my phone.

In hindsight, I should have stayed by the camera and taken the shot traditionally with a cable release. With this many people, you really need a director, i.e., the photographer, to herd the cats and focus everyone's attention to looking towards the camera.

With me in it, I couldn't really see in great detail how some people were not looking ahead or others were fussing with their clothes or gabbing with others. But, I managed one "good enough" photo to work with and do some compositing of people's heads from the outtakes.

By the time I finished with the editing, I did about 30 composites (layers and masks to paint in the better-looking heads and faces). Some were easy, because the heads and bodies did not move much from shot to shot, so alignment was quick and simple.

Others, not so easy as I had to pull a Stalin on some people and remove them, but unlike poor Trotsky, I resurrected them slightly shifted from their original position. I had to recreate content in some parts where people or heads were shifted.

After each composite, I flattened the image and saved it before starting a new composite. Best practice means keeping all layers intact, but my image file is already 118 MB as a 16-bit TIFF file and adding 30 layers would have killed my computer.

Later on, I figured out that copying the entire "fix" image as a layer on top of my base layer is a stupid waste of file space. I can crop the "fix" image down to the immediate area I need for compositing and layer only that crop on the base layer.

This keeps the file size manageable and also allows for all the layer masks to be intact instead of flattened. This also makes it much easier and faster to transform the layer and rotate or skew it around, as needed.

By the time I finished, I ended up with a less mediocre photo and tried to ensure that everyone who was present is seen in the photo in some way. It amazes me that some short people, finding themselves behind taller people, never moved. But, that's my fault for not providing proper instructions and guidance to arrange the group.

Before the photos were taken, a co-worker came up to admire the gear. He remarked that I must have brought out $30,000 worth of gear. I smiled and said that while not cheap, I don't think it's close to $30,000.

Later on I did some rough calculations and while the amount didn't hit $30,000, it was not that far off either with my quick estimate of about $25,000 (based on original cost, not current market value).

That's a little frightening just how much gear was used for the shoot, although I expanded the costs greatly due to wanting to do the time lapse video and bringing a backup camera and lens. If I kept it to only what I truly needed to take the photos, maybe $7,000 of gear based on the Canon 5D2, Canon 24-105 lens, and the RRS tripod and head combo.

In the end, I was pissed at myself for getting a second rate photo that required too much post editing work. Whether I'm paid or not, I should have done better.

Time Lapse Videos

Last issue, I mentioned that I'm getting interested in time-lapse photography. I did some time-lapse sessions for two workplace events, a summer BBQ and the aforementioned 25th anniversary photo.

During the editing stage, I imported all the files into Lightroom even though I shot in JPEG mode on the Nikon D2X - I used an 8 GB card and shooting RAW would mean only 400 shots, whereas a medium sized Fine JPEG allows me well over 1500 shots.

Importing into Lightroom gives me huge benefits to crop, level, do some minor adjustments and then quickly and easily sync the edits to all the files in the time lapse sequence.

With some free templates, I can even output a video file from Lightroom's Slideshow module, but with some limitations, such as only 720P resolution and minimal choices for frame rate. For greater flexibility, Apple's Quicktime Pro provides 1080P resolution with many more frame rates beyond the standard 24 and 30 fps.

What I found is that while 24 fps may be the standard for cinema quality, unless you really want everyone in the time-lapse video to look like they're relatives of the comic book superhero, Flash, 24 fps is too fast.

I used slower frame rates available in Quicktime Pro, such as 10 or 12 fps, and that works better for showing people in motion. Obviously, frame rate should be dependent on your subject and what you, the creative director, want to convey to the audience.

Last issue, I also mentioned that I was going to use Apple's iMovie to edit the video file rendered by Lightroom or Quicktime Pro. I lied.

As I fired up iMovie (for the record, the first time I've done so in the years I've owned the MacBook Pro), I watched the intro tutorial video, because I haven't a freakin' clue about how to edit a video file. Watching the tutorial, I thought, okay, it's not too bad, but then I started thinking about what it is that I'm trying to do.

A time-lapse video is really just a variation on the traditional photo slideshow, something that I have experience with from the wedding photography days. Could I create the video using Pro Show Gold, a popular and powerful slideshow program that I first started using probably back in 2004.

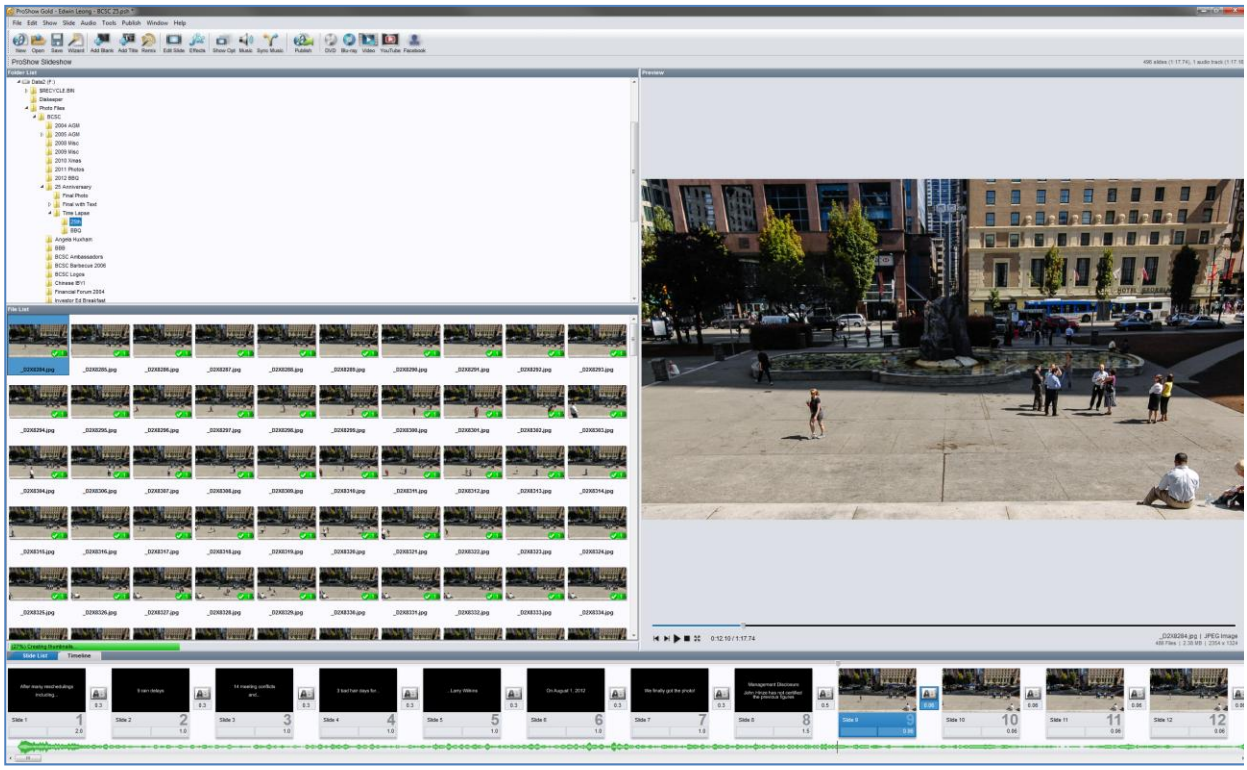
A quick Google search gave me the tip I was looking for and confirmed that Pro Show Gold allows for fast time sequences and transitions for the slideshow, i.e., fractions of a second.

The last version of Pro Show Gold I had in my downloaded software folder was from 2009 and I figure by now, the 2012 version should be much improved. I downloaded the trial version and then once I got going and realized that it could do what I wanted, I paid my USD $70 toll.

There's no doubt that a real video editor such as Adobe Premiere, Final Cut Pro, or even iMovie can do some wicked things, but video's not my thing. Maybe the new video editing capability of Photoshop CS6 would also be just what I need too, but I don't have CS6.

The first time-lapse video was of the making of my workplace's 25th anniversary photo. This was simple, as it was just the 500 or so time-lapse photos bookended by intro and ending title slides.

Instead of using the video file rendered by Quicktime Pro, I used Pro Show Gold to navigate my file folder structure and find the right set of images. Then I selected all the files and placed them in the timeline bar at the bottom of the app’s screen.



Pro Show Gold 5 - In the preview pane, you can see the plaza where we gathered

I synced the video with a short music clip, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. I was trying to have the music start when the intro title slides ended, but couldn't do it even though Pro Show Gold appears to support this.

No matter, I had the music start at the beginning and the video was at the speed needed to convey motion without being ridiculously fast.

The second video was slightly more involved even though it was just a time lapse of a rooftop BBQ.

The BBQ organizers had some portable patio awnings over top of the food. These are the types of shades you'll see in backyards or campsites during the summer. The day of the BBQ was overcast and windy...you probably know where I'm going with this.

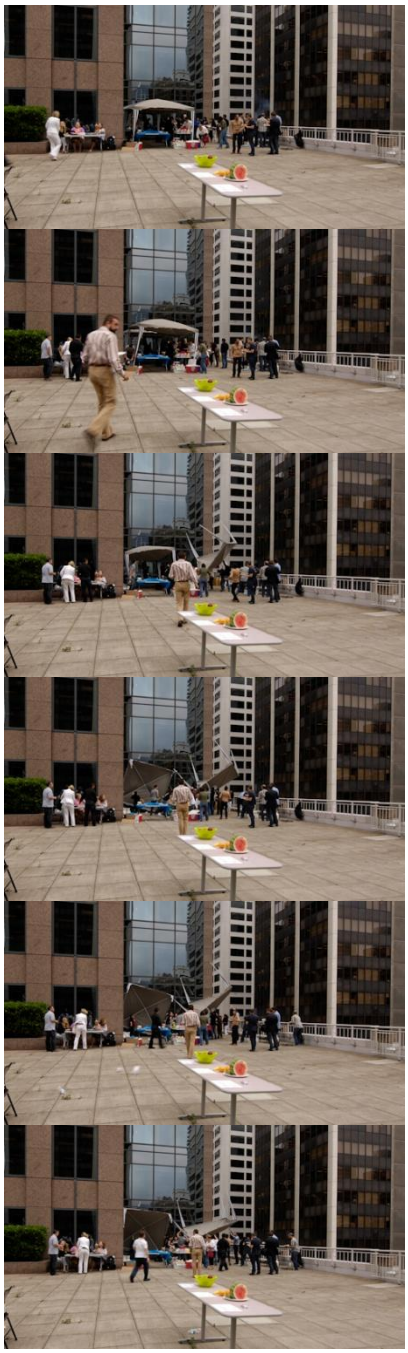
The wind gusted up several times and finally, on one good gust, the wind blew up one of the patio shades and nearly took it over the third floor rooftop we were using for the BBQ. If the shade had gone over, it would have landed on a busy downtown street and there would have been hell to pay from a liability standpoint.

The wind also blew up the second shade, but thankfully, it blew up against the adjacent office tower and had nowhere to go. The first wayward shade was grabbed and then taken apart in what was probably a very stressful moment for the organizers.

As this happened, I was at a table eating lunch and socializing with various co-workers. Everyone looked at me wondering where my camera was, because it was a real photographic moment when the wind picked up the

shades. I just looked over at the tripod mounted D2X, which had been firing a frame every 3 seconds throughout the event. I smiled and said, I think I got the shots.

Below is a six-shot sequence showing the shade blowing up:



During the editing, I synced the video with the Beach Boys, *Fun, Fun, Fun*. However, when the video got to the wind blowing moment, I wanted to slow down the sequence to about one frame per second so that people could see what happened with the patio shade. The trick is how to segue into that moment from the Beach Boys song.

I downloaded a scratching record sound file, the classic sound you've heard to indicate that a turntable has abruptly stopped playing the record. Then I downloaded the launch sequence audio file from NASA's website for the Apollo 14 launch.

The Beach Boys song stops abruptly with the scratching record sound followed by the Apollo 14 launch countdown, which I edited the timing in Pro Show Gold to start at 10 seconds, counting down to 0, with the classic, we have lift off.

I timed the audio to sync with the video so that the wind blowing up the shade coincided with 0 and we have lift off. After that sequence, I resumed the Beach Boys song where I cut it off previously then faded it away to silence when the video ends.

It took some trial and error with the timing and editing the audio, but I got it the way I want and I'm happy with the video. I output both video files as 1080P and 480P Quicktime movies and as 720P Windows Media files.

The 1080P file for playback on an HDTV; the 480P version for my iPad (the iPad and iPad 2 can’t handle HD videos very well); and the 720P WMA files for work, as we’re a Windows shop.

One nice feature of Pro Show Gold is the ability to create title slides within the program. The last time I used it, the version did not have this capability and I had to create title slides manually in Photoshop. The ability to create title slides within Pro Show Gold saves time and is very convenient to be able to edit title slides at will instead of having to go back and forth with Photoshop.

I did run into some performance issues with Pro Show Gold and the first version of the BBQ video. I started with 1,000 JPEG files and that seemed to choke Pro Show Gold and cause it to stall and ultimately crash. Thankfully, I didn't need 1,000 slides and eventually edited down to around 650, which was fine.

When it did crash, I got a message stating that Pro Show Gold has run out of memory. No other applications were running, so I wonder if I have more than 8 GB of RAM, if that will allow me to create larger time-lapse videos, or if I'll really need to move onto a real video editor.

Nikon versus Canon ad nauseum…
…or is it ad nauseous

Love 'em or hate 'em, I follow the two leading rumours websites for Nikon and Canon. Enough rumours become true to make the sites interesting reading and to get a sense of where the two leading brands are headed for new cameras and lenses. With no official roadmap, rumour sites are the best glimpse into how much and how long to save for the products that interest me.

Back in July, CanonRumors posted a link to a head-to-head review of the Nikon D4 versus the Canon 1Dx. What made it interesting for me is that the review was by two Canadian wedding photographers, something of which I knew of many years ago. One photographer has been a long-time Nikon user and the other, a long-time Canon user.

The raison d'etre for the comparison review is because the Nikon user was supremely unhappy with the D4's "green screen" issue. That is, the issue of some early D4's to show a greenish tint on the rear LCD when reviewing images.

The photographer declared that he was so unhappy with the green screen that he bought a Canon 1Dx to see if he should switch systems. This, after what sounds like at least 15 years of using Nikon gear, going back to the film days.

Since this review (text and video commentary) was posted on CanonRumors, I think you can guess at the ultimate choice of the Nikon user, but humor me anyway.

The two photographers start doing various tests to see which system would come out on top. The tests included high ISO quality, low-light focusing, focus speed and focus accuracy, and recovery from over and underexposure. There may have been other tests, but I'm writing this from memory now.

The two cameras are very close in high ISO quality, which means Canon got the message after being spanked by the Nikon D3 and failing to really meet the challenge with the previous generations of 1D cameras.

While the D4 was declared the winner by the slimmest of margins, I think the D4's tendency to brighten up the exposure relative to the 1Dx gave the

D4 the edge. The cameras were tested using the same exposure values, but the D4 biases brighter, which will usually help with subjective evaluation of high ISO noise.

Note that it's not unusual for two different cameras to produce different exposures even though the same values are used, as I've experience similar with the Canon 5D2 generally underexposing relative to other cameras I've used.

The low-light focus test was another winner for the D4, but more conclusively than the high ISO test. Nikon has long been known for producing cameras that can focus in very low light and the D4 carries that tradition beyond the dimness that the 1Dx quit focusing.

For focus speed, the 1Dx won handily when the cameras were racked from close focusing to far focusing. Can't say I was too surprised since Canon has long been known to be have the fastest focusing cameras. Rob Galbraith's reviews over the years support the view that Canon's pro cameras generally focus faster than Nikon pro cameras.

The D4 won the focus accuracy test by hitting focus on 12 out of 12 frames, whereas the 1Dx hit 9 out of 12 frames. However, what got the two photographers talking was how the 9 hits from the 1Dx look really sharp while none of the D4 shots have the same acuity. They decided that despite the D4 being the more accurate (perhaps due to the slower AF), they would both take the 1Dx's 9 super sharp shots over 12 focused, but less than stellar shots.

While not overly surprised by the results of the focus accuracy test, something seems amiss. While the Canon results with the 85mm f1.2 lens are commendable, I wonder what the results would be if they had fine-tuned the AF for the Nikon 85mm f1.4 lens. The posted comments and replies from the photographers don't indicate if they even considered the possibility of AF fine-tuning, which I find surprising from two experienced photographers.

That's not to say that AF fine-tuning would have changed the results. Reading some comments on Lloyd Chambers' website, diglloyd, indicates that Nikon has never been particularly good at AF accuracy and precision. Canon has been better throughout the AF era.

The highlight recovery test was a wash with both cameras doing quite well to recover from overexposure. The underexposure test, to my eyes, was a clear victory for the D4. Even the Canon user said the D4 wins thanks to recovery with hardly any noise.

The 1Dx shot was blotted with color noise, but the Nikon user liked it over the D4 due to what he said is better color and contrast. Um, okay, if that's what you like, but I think I'd prefer starting with the clean D4 file and then edit the look I want. Conversely, these days, with Lightroom's excellent noise reduction, the Canon file will probably come out looking fine...still...

At the end of the comparative testing, the Nikon user declared that he's switching to the 1Dx, because the green screen issue trumps any advantages the D4 has over the 1Dx. That being the decision, it kinda made all that testing a waste of time.

I find this interesting, especially since the two photographers (who work together at the same company) shoot

RAW and edit in Adobe Lightroom. While I certainly agree that an LCD that is not accurate is not acceptable, it's not the end of the world as far as seeing the image after capture and is of no consequence if shooting and editing RAW files.

For those that didn't know, when shooting RAW, the image shown on a camera's LCD is actually an embedded JPEG file in the RAW file. That JPEG represents the in-camera shake and bake interpretation of the image. However, as we all know, shooting JPEG is like shooting slide film where utmost care is needed to get the WB, exposure, and colors correct because it becomes more difficult to do non-destructive pixel editing in post.

Not that you can't edit a JPEG, but RAW gives you more flexibility and latitude and I wouldn't want to give that up. Shooting RAW requires an additional editing and conversion step, but the benefits outweigh that negative. Therefore, while I definitely understand wedding pros shooting RAW for those postproduction benefits, I don't see how the D4's green screen issue turns into such a critical negative as to dump an expensive Nikon kit.

Even looking at the histogram and highlight blinkies on the LCD is not going to be accurate when shooting RAW, because these visual cues are still based on the embedded JPEG in the RAW file. What we see on the LCD is merely a guide and cannot be taken to be the literal rendering of the final image. To suggest otherwise is a misrepresentation.

Shooting RAW and then editing in Lightroom makes WB, which was one of the criticisms cited against the D4's green screen, pretty much an afterthought, because we can set any WB we want in post.

Now, to be fair, the Nikon shooter did mention how he's too embarrassed to show the clients the image on the rear LCD, because of the green tint. I can sympathize with that to a degree, but I still don't accept that as being an excuse to punt a $6,000 camera, especially since Nikon came out with a firmware update to address the issue.

If the guy was that anal about getting proper WB, he should shoot a reference frame with an X-Rite ColorChecker Passport and create a custom profile for every lighting condition he's in during a wedding shoot. That's not as bad or as fussy as it sounds even in a fast paced shoot.

I just think the green screen is a tempest in a teacup and is the weakest excuse to switch systems. The faster focusing and acuity from the 1Dx are more valid reasons for a switch than a green screen.

How I use the rear LCD is for guidance about whether I got the shot, whether I framed it right, whether I've blown out any of the channels or the highlights. But, I'm not overly fussed about the last two and I most definitely am not fussed by the colors I see on the LCD, because I know the moment I bring the RAW files into Lightroom, all three parameters change.

If you use Lightroom, you may have noticed that when you first import new files into the Library module, you see the previews very quickly, but as Lightroom starts generating its own previews, the colors change (my default is for Lightroom to create 1:1 sized

previews, so it may take more than a few moments when importing a large number of files).

What happens is that Lightroom first uses the embedded JPEG in the RAW to give you access to immediate previews, but Adobe has its own interpretation for rendering the RAW file. After a moment, the original previews go from what the in-camera JPEG produced, to what Adobe will produce if Lightroom is left at default settings. You can change the look of the previews in Lightroom to be faithful to the in-camera JPEG if you desire.

The different interpretation is why using different RAW converters gives you different looking image files and why some faithfully use the camera brand's software, thinking that only the original manufacturer knows all about the secret sauce that goes into the proprietary RAW file.

I don't think there's a secret sauce if Adobe can give you the same look as the in-camera JPEG. Do you really think that Adobe's smart engineers cannot figure out a RAW file from Nikon and Canon?

What sucks about this for Adobe and other third-party developers is that RAW files change slightly (often meaninglessly) with every new camera and it's tedious having to support X number of new cameras every year. Canon dropped RAW support for its earliest digital cameras (do we really need to mention Kodak or Fuji's old Nikon-based SLRs), so ironically, Adobe is doing the greater good by continuing to support orphaned RAW formats.

As for blowing out highlights and channels, RAW has extra headroom beyond what JPEG can offer. When you see blinkies on a camera's LCD, many times, you'll find that you're actually okay in Lightroom, because there's still room to spare in the histogram.

This is, again, due to the LCD showing you an embedded JPEG image, which is the in-camera interpretation of the RAW data. At this time, we don't have the ability to display true RAW data on the camera's LCD, but no doubt the manufacturer's engineers are working on this.

When photographing hockey, my default is to give the Aperture Priority based exposure +1 compensation to ensure the ice is white and not grey. If I chimp (not very often), the LCD will often show highlight blinkies in the ice, however, when I edit in Lightroom, I find that for many photos I can push the histogram even father to the right.

Again, what's shown on the rear LCD can only be used as general guidance of what's happening in the image. It won't be until you edit in Lightroom (or other converter) that you will truly see what's going on with the exposure and color.

You'd think that I'm still a huge Nikon fanboy with this defence of the D4. Maybe to a certain degree, but it's more of just finding the D4's green screen to be a wanker's excuse to switch systems.

More Nikon versus Canon, or 5D3 versus D800 redux

Continuing on a thought from the last issue: why do so many photographers insist on comparing the 5D3 to the D800? Came across another 5D3 review where the photographer insists on comparing to the D800. Just one

problem, the guy's never touched a D800, so how can he do a comparative review? He uses comparison images done by other reviewers and tries to justify his review by quoting the opinions of other reviewers and bloggers who have little to no credibility.

Seriously, when you gotta use the Chucks, one Fake and the other the Norris of Photography, to support your opinion, you've lost it right from the start. And, when you continue to diss a camera you haven't even used, well, you're getting into the same bullshit territory that the Chuck of San Diego used to roam, wherein he used to write "reviews" based on the specs and his own subjective opinion without ever having used the item.

As an aside, Fake Chuck is a conspiracy nutjob, who believes NASA faked the Apollo 11 moon landing. Fake Chuck's analysis is that NASA used fill and continuous lighting to photograph Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin on a fake moon studio. Stanley Kubrick must be rolling in his grave (Kubrick is mentioned by some conspiracy nutters as having filmed the video footage for NASA as part of the massive hoax).

All the myths have been debunked, but that doesn't stop the nutters from, well, being nuts. For me, beyond the minutiae and specifics of any so-called fake photos is a far greater inconvenience that the nutters generally don't address and that is the former Soviet Union.

Those of a certain age may recall that there was this little thing called the Cold War from the 1950s until the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union broke apart into all the constituent republics. While the USA and USSR did not fight each other directly (almost did over Cuba), they did so indirectly via proxies (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, etc.)

It was not just a military struggle, but also cultural and ideological (the West and Capitalism versus the East and Communism). Fortunately, both nations were rational and understood the concept of MAD, or mutually assured destruction, should they ever escalate into an all out nuclear war.

With that background, you can understand how competitive the two nations were and what a shock it was to the USA when the USSR launched Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin into space. The USA got motivated real fast and funnelled some $30 billion into the Apollo program to meet John F. Kennedy's challenge to land a man on the moon and return him safely to earth before the end of the 1960s.

Now, to the inconvenience for the conspiracy nutjobs. You don't think the Soviet Union wasn't paying attention to the Apollo program? You don't think they weren't monitoring the progress of Apollo 11 every step of the way to the moon? If Apollo 11 was a hoax, why would the Soviet Union keep quiet and not embarrass the USA in calling fake, what is still the greatest achievement in human space exploration?

I did find Fake Chuck entertaining in the same way that some comedians used foul language to shock their audiences (those days are long over). However, with Fake Chuck espousing on how fake the moon landing is, well, I have better things to do with my time than to bother reading Fake Chuck anymore.

Look, the D800 is certainly not a perfect camera, but it really doesn't compete in the same space as the 5D3. I just don't get the pissing contest here. We all know the D800 is not as fast as the 5D3, so if you're into action, weddings and journalism, I don't think anyone would suggest the D800 as being the best choice. It's just common sense and it's not some brilliant deduction to suggest this.

It's been a long time since I've been involved in any seriousness with wedding photography, but if I were to get into it again, at this moment, given the choices available, and based on real world budget considerations, I'd go with the Canon 5D3. Right now, Nikon does not have an equivalent camera outside of the flagship D4.

The D700 is no longer available new, but even if it were, the resolution is now on the low side of acceptable. The D7000 is a nice, fast camera, but it doesn't have a big enough buffer to go with the speed, the DX format complicates things for lenses, and most importantly, I'm not convinced of its high ISO quality (I think the same of the Canon 7D and its high ISO quality).

However, even though I'd choose a pair of 5D3 bodies to do the heavy lifting at a wedding, I would still want a D800 to shoot formals and groups. Just as Nikon has no 5D3 equivalent, Canon has no D800 equivalent, although rumors abound that there will be one announced this year. Each has its strengths, so a good photographer will utilize each where and when it's appropriate. For a photographer, who needs a 5D3 type of camera, to dump on the D800 is ignorant and vice versa.

One of the humorous aspects of these comparative reviews is the latching onto of in-camera JPEG quality to hammer the D800. Okay, I get it that journalist types will prefer the 5D3 and that these types often shoot JPEG because they have to transmit the files back to their editor. That type of photography makes perfect sense to prefer the 5D3 and JPEG shooting over the D800.

But, I don't get why a studio type photographer would shoot JPEG. I don't get why a landscape photographer would care one whit about the quality of the in-camera JPEGs from either camera. Shooting JPEG leaves quality on the table and don't tell me that you're really going to spend $3000 on a D800 just to shoot JPEGs. Only Chuck from San Diego does that.

The Canon fan boys accuse Nikon of cooking the D800 files, but DPReview accuses Canon of doing exactly that with the 5D3's in-camera JPEG. DPReview found the 5D3's in-camera JPEG overly processed and smooth to the detriment of detail. But, let's not get too carried away by this, because I don't care one farthing about in-camera JPEGs. RAW is the great equalizer and we find that the D800 is actually not far off the 5D3 when it comes to high ISO image quality.

The other amusing thing is to read the reviewer's comment back to readers posting some rebuttals, is that he doesn't care about comparing prints from the two cameras; he believes that only by pixel-peeping, can true comparisons be made.

He considers any resolution advantage the D800 has over the 5D3 to be marginal, but seems to find it hard to accept that any high ISO quality the 5D3 has over the D800 can also be marginal when you compare RAW files with equalized sizes whether on screen or on print.

And, really, a photographer who doesn't care about the end output of a print? I know we're in the digital age, but come on, why did we get into photography if we're not looking to make a great looking print from our files?

It's also hilarious to read the downplaying of dynamic range as being a big deal.

Gee-zus! Hasn't dynamic range been a key demand of photographers for years? The D800 delivers in spades and even the Canon fan boys cannot deny this and have to grudgingly give credit to Nikon for what it is doing with its latest cameras. But, boy is it grudgingly and then quickly followed by the 5D3 is good enough for them and who needs to be able to pull shadow details from a crap exposure, because, well Canon users never f-up an exposure...just like Chuck.

I seem to be overly defensive about the D800, which I am also guilty of not having used. But, as I am familiar with both systems and appreciate what both systems offer, I'm less patient with bullshit opinions from either camp. But, less you think I'm not willing to dump on Nikon, well...

...I wish to hell Nikon would get on the ball and upgrade all of its lenses to current technology instead of mish-mashing design refugees from the 1970s and 1980s.

Where the hell are the updated 80-400 and 300 f4 lenses? Why are we still stuck with non-f1.4 20mm, 24mm and 35mm primes from the 1980s?

When will Nikon get around to producing tilt/shift lenses that are as good and as flexible as Canon's newer 17 and 24mm lenses.

Will we ever see an updated 200mm Micro lens? How about a Coolpix camera, just one, that doesn't suck and look like every other piece of crap in the market?

Finally, for both Nikon and Canon, why in the hell did I have to spend $3,000 on a Sigma 120-300 lens? Why is Sigma showing up both brands with some excellent lenses, such as the 8-16mm wide zoom for DX format or the incredible 300-800 super telephoto zoom?

Family portraits, or I'd rather fire a speedlight into my eyes all day long

No major photo projects to discuss this issue, but I was asked by a sister-in-law if I were available to do family portraits for her husband's side of the family, as he had many family coming to visit this summer.

Given that my offer to my wife's siblings to take family photos last Christmas met with no takers and was not even acknowledged, my attitude was a bit churlish: they have their own cameras and can take their own photos.

Then I started thinking about why it is that my brother-in-law had so many visitors coming to town from the US eastern seaboard and overseas. This may be the last time that his extended family is together while his mother is still healthy.

His mother has been afflicted with a mysterious infection that the doctors cannot diagnose and she's been on medication that costs $10,000 per dosage - yes, $10,000 per dose - thank you Canada for universal health care!

Yes, I feel quite small when I think about my bad attitude. We arranged a day and time but instead of doing the usual taking the photos at their home, I suggested an outdoor shoot on a local hilltop park with views of the city.

The weather was forecast to be hot and sunny on the chosen, mid-August Saturday. The three days prior were the hottest this summer with temperatures hitting the high 20s, which in Vancouver, feels like it's over 30 degrees Celsius.

I didn't quite fully understand what they wanted so I told them to come up to the park at 7 pm, when the sun would be starting to set and we'd get the golden hour of light. I thought they wanted a few big group photos, but they wanted that as well as individual family photos. If I had known then I would have started earlier to ensure that we had enough time and light.

When the day arrived, I was reminded why weathermen are universally condemned as incompetent idiots. It did not rain, but we had no sun with overcast conditions the entire day. The conditions were actually ideal for people photography thanks to the soft and even light with no harsh sunlit contrast.

I called and suggested that we could go up much earlier, but we couldn't do this, as everyone was scattered. By the time everyone arrived, it was 7 pm. Ah well.

Organizing people for photos is one reason why I try and avoid people photography. Adults are okay, but the kids kill me. Small babies don't know any better, so all I can do is wait for the right moment when they're looking towards me and take the photo. However, I could forecast quite accurately (unlike the weatherman) that I'd have some Photoshop compositing work to do.

The bigger kids, the ones who know better, annoy me. They don't listen properly and one got into a temper tantrum about having to be in so many photos. I expected that one kid to do this, because she's done this before - it's always all about her.

Taking family photos is like getting drunk and then suffering the hangover the next day. You feel so crappy that you vow never to do something so stupid, but after some time, you get talked into doing it again and suffer the consequences all over again.

Women go through a similar process with childbirth, as I've been reminded four times over*. I asked my wife if she's okay with having four kids since the number four is suppose to be unlucky in our culture and if we shouldn't have a fifth...I ducked just in time.*

The next day, interspersed with doing five loads of laundry while the rest of the family went shopping for school supplies, I edited down the 130 photos taken down to 17, which was the number of group photos taken. With some of the larger groups, I edited 3-4 samples with identical parameters in Lightroom to provide me with outtakes for compositing in Photoshop.

Some exposures hit a slow 1/20 second due to the low light and keeping the ISO no higher than 800. Thank goodness for the tripod and cable release. For most of the photos, I used some fill flash. While I like what the flash gave me generally, it did give me some headaches with reflections off of eyeglasses.

Some reflections were so big and ugly that I didn't have any good outtakes from the other shots taken. For some pictures, I ended up having to layer a "fix" image flipped horizontally and then rotated to the right angle so that I could brush in some eye whites from the other

eye without the reflection. Then I had to clone in pixels to repair some sections of the glasses themselves that also reflected back the light from the flash. Tedious!

With touch-ups, you often end up being any or all of the following:

- Dentist to clean the teeth (mostly reflections)
- Hairdresser
- Fashion dresser and dry cleaner (to fix and clean clothing)
- Plastic surgeon for skin blemishes
- Dr. Frankenstein, to move body parts from one photo to another
- Dictator, so as to remove people that you don't want in photos
- Deity, so as to place people in photos who were never present in the first place

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Photo Bites

Digicams and viewfinders

Late last year, I was fumbling around with the old 2005 vintage Sony W-5 digicam. The W-5 is one of two Sony digicams we have. Over the years, as my desire for photographic quality increased, I eschewed the compromises of digicams using tiny sensors and offering only JPEG quality.

The two Sony digicams were handed down to my daughters with my younger girl receiving the W-5. I can't recall why I was fumbling with the W-5. Might have been to change the AA batteries or to extract the image files from the memory card. Unfortunately, twinkle fingers here dropped the camera on the floor.

It was not a high drop, maybe three feet, but it was on the thin-carpeted floor of my basement home office, which means under the carpet is the foundation. The drop was enough to damage the plastic battery cover/door so that it no longer latches securely. The camera still works, but I now have to tape the battery cover shut for the batteries to make contact to power the camera.

Not very elegant, but still usable, however, my daughter became incensed when I told her about the damage and demanded that I buy her a new camera. I mumbled contritely that I'd see what I could do about it.

For her birthday this year, I bought her a Canon digicam to replace the damaged Sony. She likes it and she's been using it regularly for family birthdays and outings. There might be hope yet for one of my kids to turn into a shutterbug.

The Canon digicam was bought on a small budget. I wanted something somewhat decent, easy to use, very compact and around $200. Canon has generally made decent digicams over the years and I didn't want to mess around with Sony Memory Sticks again, given the near-universal support for SD cards in the consumer world.

It's fine for my daughter, but would be a disaster in my hands, because there's no viewfinder. As Kirk Tuck describes so apropos, using such cameras is akin to holding a baby with a stinky diaper…you have to hold the camera out at arms length to compose and take the photo. For some of us getting on in years, we have no choice but to do the stinky diaper hold with cameras lacking a viewfinder due to presbyopia.

To be fair though, even some expensive cameras come without viewfinders. My Panasonic GF1, its successor, the GX1, the various Olympus E-Px cameras, and the cheaper Sony NEX cameras come to mind as capable cameras hobbled by the lack of a viewfinder.

Whether it's optical or electronic, for me and my eyes, having a viewfinder is key, especially outdoors and even in moderate daylight. I learned that the hard way using the GF1 and an infrared converted Nikon D7000 outdoors in bright light.

Future photographers...or not

While my daughters were given the old Sony digicams, my oldest child has a "real" camera in my old Nikon D100. The old D100 is looking mighty shabby these days next to the Canon 5D3, but such should be expected for cameras a decade apart. What's shocking is how close these cameras were in price when they first came out.

The 5D3 had a price drop at the beginning of August 2012 and is now about $3500 at most stores. The D100 was priced at $3300 when it came out in 2002. Such is digital progress that the 5D3 runs circles around the D100. Even today's entry level SLRs can kick sand at the D100.

I don't hold out much hope for my oldest to become a photographer. I gave him my old Nikon D100 a year or so ago, along with the fast, normal 30mm f1.4 Sigma prime lens. A kit lens would have been better for him, but I have no such lens in my Nikon kit and the Sigma was the most appropriate lens to give him.

He doesn't seem much interested in it, or about photography in general. He's never come to me to ask me about photography and how it all works. Since we got him an iPhone, whenever he wants a photo, he snaps it with the iPhone.

Oh, the humanity and the bloody irony of one of my progeny descending to the lowest common denominator use of a cell phone as a camera.

My daughters don't seem as clueless. They have access to cameras in the iPad 2 and Nintendo DSi, but they only use them for "fun" photography. They take photos and then use the built-in tools to edit and put a Mario moustache on pictures of their baby brother. They know that these photos are one-time moments that will be quickly erased. When they want a "real" photo, they use their digicams.

Maybe an old SLR is too much for a teenager. Maybe he has to grow into photography and a digicam is probably more appropriate than an SLR that he never wants to use.

Depth of field...or not

With the D800 offering so much resolution, it places high demands on the lenses. Diffraction becomes an issue at larger aperture settings instead of creeping up at around f11 and smaller. Even with cameras having less resolution, I seem to recall reading about some photographers limiting themselves to f11 or larger apertures.

A way to work around the limitations of small apertures is to use a tilt/shift lens. Unfortunately, these are expensive lenses, usually selling for $2,000 or more. They need some technical

knowledge to use effectively, so you won't see too many in the wild, whether your wild is urban or rural.

A more cost effective way to get huge depth of field without incurring the expense of a TS lens or diffraction is to focus bracket and then merge in Photoshop or other application.

I find this curious. On one hand, many serious photographers hate using digicams because so few offer any meaningful control of the depth of field. This is due to most digicams using tiny sensors. It's common to see 6 or 7mm at the wide end of a moderate zoom range. On a FX camera, 7mm is so wide that it would be a full circle fisheye with massive depth of field - it would even be able to see behind you!

On the other hand, we have landscape photographers using 35mm based systems, trying to eke out every last bit of depth of field as possible with the sensor/lens combination. The larger the format it seems the more depth of field you want. Unfortunately, digital is more demanding than film and we don't want to give up that expensive resolution by using small apertures.

I haven't done any focus bracketing, so can't comment on the effectiveness and ease of compositing the multiple images into one. I wonder about focus shift though and the ability to align the multiple images properly due to slight differences in magnification (thinking of an example where you start at the minimum focusing distance and then work your way to infinity focus). But, then I'm just talking out of my rear end, because I haven't tried this yet.

The Sony Store, part 1

Reading the glowing reviews and comments about the Sony NEX-7 had me curious about this camera. I stopped in for a quick fondle…er…handle of the NEX-7 at the local Sony Store in downtown Vancouver.

It seems like a nice little camera when I held it in my hands. The EVF didn't seem as good as I had expected, but that may have been due to how it was set. It's definitely better than the one I use with the Panasonic GF1. The price of the NEX-7 is a bit rich for me though at some $1300 for the camera and 18-55 kit lens even if it offers a nice 24 MP of resolution.

Do I need 24 MP from a handheld, portable camera? You may find it surprising for this resolution whore to say this, but probably not. However, I wouldn't turn it down if someone gave it to me.

I also wanted to see just how small the new RX100 digicam is, but the Sony Store had no demo available. I guess Sony is selling all it can make, because as of this writing (mid to late August) the RX100 is still a super hot seller.

At a hefty $700 for the RX100, that's impressive and should wake up the two sleeping majors that there is a market for a digicam that caters to the serious user and doesn't suck.

To be fair, Canon has offered its G series to prosumer users for many years, but until recently, never had the inclination to offer a sensor to go with the solid build and UI. Nikon, meanwhile, has had its corporate head shoved up its nether region since the glory days of the Coolpix 9xx series.

You would think and hope that with the success of the RX100 and Olympus OM-D, that someone at Nikon would get a head slap and realize, maybe, just maybe, that Thom Hogan fellow isn't just a whacked out Yank always wanting to shove our noses into our own petard.

Maybe, Hogan's idea of a digital FM might just fly and help Nikon build back the user goodwill developed over many decades with classics such as the FM, FE and FA cameras.

Rhetorical question: Why is it the companies with smaller market share (and hence, little to lose) innovate while the big companies are so conservative and afraid to take chances?

Speaking of Thom Hogan...

I do enjoy reading Thom Hogan's commentary on things Nikon; however, he can grate with his constant nagging towards Nikon. He's become the high profile, but grumpy old man amongst Nikon users, who will occasionally praise Nikon, but mostly criticizes. Nikon rarely seems to meet his high expectations for producing the kind of cameras and lenses he wants and let's not get started about Nikon's marketing strategy…

There are times when one gets a sense that Hogan is miffed that Nikon (or maybe, specifically, Nikon USA) won't consult with him. However, he's also written about his access and presentations made to senior people within Nikon Corp in Japan, so it's not like he's never been heard by the company. And, he seems to have sources within Nikon, who feed him tips about what's coming for future products.

While I'm sure he means well in wanting Nikon to do right by its users, he now seems to be part of the problem with the current D800 focusing issue. Hogan's continued criticism of the D800 feeds a circular beast. Plenty of internet chatter about the D800 on the forums, but how many users are really affected? How many people posting diatribes actually own a D800? How many are influenced by Hogan's postings?

There are other noted users who think the D800 left side focus issue is overblown and don't appreciate Hogan continuing to build up his mountain on this matter. However, I would agree with Hogan that Nikon should issue a notice about the issue. Something along the lines of:

We are aware of certain internet sites and personalities feeding a cycle of misinformation about the D800. Leaving aside the innuendo and speculation, here are the real facts…

The Sony Store, part 2

While in the Sony Store, I also handled the A77 SLR and hey, here's an EVF that actually looks pretty good (supposed to be the same as the NEX-7, so go figure).

Also 24 MP in a decent sized SLR with a $1400 price tag, which pegs it in the Nikon D300S and Canon 7D category. For what you get, the A77 seems fairly priced, and that high speed shooting capability of 12 fps sounds awesome...until you notice that RAW buffer size of 13 files.

Um, okay, that's one second of shooting before the camera slows down. At the regular high speed rate of 8 fps, that's 1.5 seconds of shooting time. There's

probably some logical, bean counter reason why they decided to cheap out on the in-camera memory. Like, they want to clearly differentiate the A77 from the future A99. But, seriously, the three-year old Canon 7D just got a new firmware upgrade that bumps up its RAW buffer to 25 files. At 8 fps, that gives the 7D three seconds of shooting before it slows down.

Sony gives you a hotrod, but with a gas tank only big enough to get out of the driveway.

So, that makes me curious about what might be coming with the A99 and what Sony has in store for its pro users. Not that I have any intention in switching, as it's far too late, tedious and expensive to be doing something as silly as that.

Just that it seems Sony wants to be a serious player in the photography market and try to gain market share from Nikon and Canon. If it was just about the hardware then Sony can succeed up to a point, but for the professional users in the journalism world, I don't see Sony gaining any traction.

Sony has no presence in the pro world with support and service facilities. At the recent London Olympics, both Nikon and Canon had a huge support system for all their pros capturing the glorious sporting moments. I saw one photo of Canon's service centre where dozens and dozens of super telephoto lenses were lined up on shelves, ready to be loaned out to photographers.

Did Sony have a service center on site in London to support its users? Does Sony make 600mm f4 or 800 f5.6 super telephoto lenses demanded by wildlife and sports pros? Although Sony does finally offer a 500mm f4 lens, the price is $2,000 more than Canon's new state of the art version and over $4,000 more than Nikon's.

Yes, that's an extreme example, but like it or not, the pro users, as small of a market as they are, help to drive the prestige of the brand to the prosumer and consumer market, where the real money is made.

Why bother?

Speaking of the Olympics, there was a posting at DPReview during the games about a UK photographer taking photos and live blogging using only his iPhone.

For the love of St. Ansel Adams, why?

Just because you can doesn't mean you have to.

The Sony Store, part 3

Part of the reason why I wanted to check out the latest Sony cameras is just pure camera envy. I like gear. I like reading about it, I like seeing it, and best of all, I like using it. Unfortunately, I can't afford all the gear that I desire, so I guess I live vicariously through the likes of Michael Reichmann, Thom Hogan, Michael Johnston, Kirk Tuck and others I follow.

These guys (most of them anyway, as Johnston seems to claim poverty every third post at the TOP) have the means to buy the latest, greatest and trendiest cameras.

While the Nikon D800 and Canon 5D3 generated big buzz when they came out, the sustained, hot and cool cameras continue to be the latest

mirrorless, such as the Olympus OM-D, Sony NEX-7, Panasonic G5, and Sony's seemingly excellent digicam, the RX100.

It used to be that with 35mm film cameras, we had our big rig for all the serious shoots and then we often had a smaller SLR to knock around for kicks. For example, maybe a Nikon F4 or F5 and a Nikon FM2N. To go ultra portable, maybe add an Olympus Stylus Epic and with these three types of cameras, we had it very good.

With digital, before the mirrorless revolution (and I think it really is a revolution), we might have had the big D3 (or D300 for those of us less flush) and then something like a D40x, supplemented by a Canon S95 (I can't recall if the S95 is actually contemporaneous with these examples).

Today, if we even still bother having a full sized SLR, we probably would not supplement it with another, smaller SLR from the same brand. Today, we would likely add a mirrorless system, because the package can be smaller and lighter than a DX format SLR kit. However, the mirrorless system is still larger than most of us want for a truly go-anywhere camera. This is where the better digicams from Canon, Fuji, Olympus and Panasonic filled a void. However, the RX100 is going to revolutionize that premium digicam segment.

None of these mirrorless or digicam options is cheap. I keep looking at these offerings from a value perspective using the Nikon D3200 as my benchmark.

The D3200 offers 24 MP in a DX sensor and sells, body only, for CAD $550. While not Nikon's entry level SLR, we cannot expect a huge assortment of features, but it is still an SLR and it's 24 MP. I don't know the exact numbers, but I'm pretty sure this is a higher pixel density than even the Nikon D800.

$550! The Olympus OM-D, body only, is almost twice as much. The Sony NEX-7, body only, is also almost twice as much. The Sony RX100 is $700, although it does come with a lens.

Yes, the D3200 is a bigger camera than the comparative cameras, but other than the RX100, none of the other cameras are really that compact. So, do you pay a premium to enjoy the benefits of the OM-D or NEX-7, or do you go with a D3200 that can easily use the other Nikon lenses in your kit (assuming a Nikon user).

Now, my examples are the high-end cameras from the mirrorless world and both Olympus and Sony offer cheaper alternatives. However, those cheaper alternatives don't come with viewfinders and the accessory viewfinders can be quite expensive.

Olympus has two EVFs at around $200 and $300 each, meant for different generations of the E-Px series. Sony has an EVF for the NEX-5, but it costs $400, so you may as well just buy the NEX-7 when looking at total cost.

At $1,000 body only, I'm not seeing where the value is in the premium mirrorless offerings.

I'm not quite sure I get it

The popularity of mirrorless cameras seems partly about being able to use a myriad assortment of lenses from many brands of varying vintage. Adapters abound in quality and price to allow a person using a Sony NEX or Olympus E-Px camera to mount Nikon AIS, Canon

FD, Sony Alpha, or the king of 35mm format, Leica rangefinder lenses.

It sure seems economically sensible to be able to mount your father's old lenses on one of today's state of the art mirrorless cameras, but I don't know. Maybe it makes sense to mount Leica lenses to mirrorless cameras because Leica's M lenses are more compact than normal 35mm lenses owing to the rangefinder design. And, there's is the factor of using the very best lenses 35mm format has to offer on a camera that is not stupidly expensive like a Leica M series.

But, mounting any of the traditional Nikon, Canon or Sony lenses seems silly (especially a big-ass zoom). The whole point of using a small system is because...it's small. You lose that advantage by mounting a lens with an image circle 4x the size necessary for M4/3 (or 2x for APS-C sensors).

It might make more sense if you use a mirrorless within the same brand as your primary kit, e.g. Nikon SLRs with the Nikon 1; Canon SLRs with the EOS-M; Olympus E SLRs with the E-Px or the EM-5. Then at least, with the right adapter, there is the ability to share the full sized lenses with the smaller cameras while still retaining metering and focusing benefits.

Sony RX100

I wish I didn't suffer from camera envy, but I can't help myself.

I've been eying the Sony RX100 with some serious bad intent like Jethro Tull's Aqua Lung. While the $700 cost is a sticking point, I was slowly convincing myself that it still represents good value given what the RX100 offers.

It's too bad that the RX100 doesn't have an interval timer like the Nikon 1 series, because if it did, I just might be using one by now.

Another sticking point is reading some quick comments by Lloyd Chambers (more on Chambers in the next segment). Although most of Chambers' good reviews are behind a pay-wall, he does hint at what his detailed reviews encompass on the public access part of his site.

While Chambers likes the RX100, he cautions on some caveats. One, the lens isn't so good at the long end of the zoom range. Two, construction of the lens at the Sony factory may be spotty as samples are known to produce soft left or right sides in the image files.

That placed a damper on spending $700 on the RX100. Also, this is a new category of camera, or at the least, a reinterpretation of the high end segment. Surely, there are more to come now that everyone sees how much success Sony is having with it.

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diglloyd

I started following Lloyd Chambers, aka diglloyd, more closely this year. After sampling his public access blog for a few months, I finally decided to subscribe to his pay-for articles.

Chambers has several sets of articles available for subscription at varying costs and in one or two year increments. Buying a one-year USD $50 subscription for his primary set of articles under the Digital Advanced Photography, or DAP, gets you access to the mainstream Nikon, Canon and other camera and lens reviews.

He also has sets for Zeiss lens users, Leica users, mirrorless (he calls it AllView), infrared, as well as a series of articles on how to take sharp photos.

The more you bundle, the more you save, but for me, I decided to dip my toes with just the DAP series. However, after some thought, I should have subscribed to his AllView series too, as I'm curious about his thoughts on the latest Olympus cameras and lenses, as well as the details about the Sony RX100.

The reviews and articles are only available through the diglloyd website. There's no PDFs or downloads of any sort. No internet, no access.

I'm not sure what Chambers does for a day job. Maybe running the diglloyd site is his day job, because he seems to spend a lot of time in front of the computer processing test files to feed his pay-for reviews.

Whatever he does, he's doing very well by it, because the guy seems to own a helluva lot of high-end gear. Even after factoring in getting temporary review samples from B&H, he still owns more than most of us can dream of.

He also drives a Porsche Cayenne SUV and rides some really expensive road and mountain bicycles. Cycling is his other passion, which he takes very seriously given his ability to ride 200 miles in one outing - impressive for anyone of any age, but especially so for someone of Chamber's age (guessing in his late 40s).

As for his reviews, I don't think I've come across another photographic reviewer as meticulous as Chambers. Which is just a polite way of saying, this guy is extremely anal.

I'm only just getting started with the reviews, but there are so many sample images to go with his comments, that I need to use my desktop computer to read the reviews and view the images properly. Using the iPad, which is my principal way to digest online content, is insufficient when reading Chambers' reviews.

What I've read so far indicates that Chambers is on a whole 'nother level of pickiness. What most reviewers would call a great lens, Chambers will pick apart and dump on.

For example, the current Mark II version of Canon's 70-200 f2.8 IS lens was found to be wanting. Yes, it's a very sharp lens wide open to middle apertures, but Chambers found some weird performance at f8 and smaller. He also went through six samples before he finally found one that he considers good enough for his standards and actually buy.

It's an eye opener to find someone so relentless in pushing lenses this hard. He makes Bjorn Rorslett seem like a reasonable chap. However, on an everyday, practical basis, is it really necessary to be so demanding of optical quality?

Are we all planning to print wall size prints to be scrutinized from the minimum focusing distance of our eyes? Chambers often says that the differences he sees are obvious and will be visible in prints. I'll need to really study his comments and sample images before making any conclusions, but at this point, the differences he sees are, to my eyes, subtle. With my old Epson

printers (R2400 and 4800), I doubt such differences would even be seen in prints.

He's as picky with cameras too. He considers the Canon 5D3 to be rather pedestrian, whereas all the Canon fanboys are falling over themselves to proclaim it the best Canon ever. He also pooh-poohs the Canon 1DX and considers its noise characteristics as unacceptable for a such an expensive pro-oriented camera. Note though that Chambers, while open to using whatever system meets his needs at any given time, leans Nikon.

While he's more severe than I am, in the end, when it comes to image quality, my thoughts on the 5D3 are similar. I didn't find the 5D3 to be a dramatic improvement over the 5D2, but I do consider the body and features to be a worthwhile upgrade.

As I said, I'm just getting started with diglloyd, but it should make for an interesting year of reading.

Nikon V1

The Sony Store isn't the only store I visited to check out a new camera. I visited another store in downtown Vancouver to finally put my hands on a Nikon V1.

Wow, the V1 is indeed a chunky camera that belies the small, 1-inch sensor inside. The camera feels solid enough, but as I held it, I wondered why it was so thick. Looking at the bottom and seeing the relatively large battery cover, I remembered that the V1 uses the same battery as the D7000 and D800. Aha!

While a large battery should provide long usage time, it obviously forces the camera to be a minimum thickness to accommodate that battery. Given what the V1 is suppose to be about, I'm of the mind that Nikon should have used a smaller battery.

With the J1 already giving way to the new J2, it shouldn't be long before we see the V2 come out. It would be very nice if the V2 does not follow the same, almost meaningless upgrade path of the J1 to the J2.

How about a V2 using the same sensor as the Sony RX100? How about more quick access controls instead of burying them in the menu system?

Most importantly, how about a few more lenses, especially in the wide angle range? Having nothing wider than a 27mm equivalent does not make for a good system. Neither does having no lenses faster than f2.8. What I fear is Nikon continuing to treat the 1 series as a consumer-level product with limited lens selection.

This does not need to be the case. Nikon was wise enough to produce two variants of the camera, the J for consumers and the V, hopefully, for more serious and advanced users.

SLR or mirrorless for infrared

Thinking further about mirrorless and value, I started to think about the Canon Rebel T2i that I converted to infrared capture.

I had to buy a Hoodman loupe system in order to effectively use the Rebel T2i outdoors, because with my choice of conversion, proper infrared focusing can only be achieved in LiveView mode.

What if, instead, I had something like a Panasonic G3 and converted that to infrared? Since these types of cameras are in permanent LiveView mode, the EVF in the G3 would be perfect without needing an expensive, third party loupe system.

The G3 is also quite reasonably priced and it saves me from looking like a dork using the Rebel with the Hoodman contraption (kidding).

Of course, using a Panasonic when I'm currently using Canon as my primary system defeats the key reason why I converted the Rebel T2i in the first place: to share lenses and accessories.

Buying decisions

Over the last couple of weeks of August, I continue to flip-flop on buying choices for a lightweight camera that can do time-lapse photos.

The reason why I need a smallish, lightweight camera will be made clear in the next issue of the newsletter. However, I'll readily admit that there's also a hankering to just buy something for the sake of buying.

Here are some choices I've been mulling over (amounts, effective as of the last week of August, are in Canadian $, rounded up to the nearest dollar and rebates, if available, have been factored in):

Canon Rebel T3i (body only)
- Cost after taxes is $700
- No interval timer
- Good resolution (18 MP)
- Flip-out LCD
- Benefit of being able to use existing lenses and stick with an all-Canon kit, including normal color and infrared capable cameras
- Can experiment with Magic Lantern firmware hack (see segment further down) to allow interval timer function without needing a third-party remote control

Nikon D5100 (body only)
- Cost after taxes is $540
- Lowest cost option for the camera, but other costs may drive it very high
- Can use existing Nikon lenses, but 14-24 lens provides limited wide-angle coverage (21mm equivalent) – a dedicated, ultra wide-angle lens will add between $600 to $1000 to the cost, depending on lens chosen
- Has interval timer built-in
- Good resolution (16 MP)
- Flip-out LCD

Nikon V1 (with 10-30mm kit lens)
- Cost after taxes is $650
- Has interval timer built-in
- Low resolution, but fine for video output
- Relatively compact compared to the SLRs, but given sensor size, not smaller or lighter than M4/3 cameras
- Built-in viewfinder
- No flip-out LCD
- Limited selection of lenses and nothing currently wider than 10mm, which is a 27mm equivalent (2.7x factor)

Panasonic G1X (body only)
- Cost after taxes is $550
- Good resolution (16 MP)
- No interval timer built-in
- No flip-out LCD
- No viewfinder
- Need to buy additional wide-angle lens, which will add another $720
- Need to buy third-party remote, which will add another $125

- Need to buy accessory viewfinder, which will add another $170

No new camera #1
- Use existing Nikon D2X until it dies
- Extremely poor high ISO quality for night time exposures
- Much heavier and larger than desired for taking out into the field

No new camera #2
- Use existing Panasonic GF1 until it dies
- Still need wide-angle lens at $720
- Need to buy third-party remote, which will add another $125
- Very poor high ISO quality for night time exposures

When I start itemizing the positives and negatives of the choices I've been considering, it quickly sobers me for how expensive some of them are. For example, the Panasonic G1x appeals to me and a local store is offering it for under $500 list price, but in order for me to make it usable, I need to add in some accessories. I also need to buy a wide-angle lens for it, which will be over $700 for the Olympus 9-18mm lens (almost half the cost of the highly regarded Panasonic 7-14mm).

Overall, the Canon Rebel T3i looks to be the best choice. It's the lowest cost option, because no additional lenses or accessories are needed for me to do time-lapse photos (using the Magic Lantern firmware hack).

It allows me to stay with an all-Canon kit when hauling large amounts of gear out into the field. Lenses and accessories can be shared across three cameras: the 5D3 for regular photography; the T2i for infrared; and the T3i for time-lapse photos.

Just an old whore

Before the family shoot on top of the hill (discussed earlier this issue), as we drove up we passed by an antique car parked on the side of the road. The spot is about 2/3 of the way up to the park area and is a spot that I've used before for weddings and family photos.

There's a wooden fence that follows the road up the hill and on the other side of the fence, the vegetation is natural, with tall grasses, shrubs and trees. The overall look harkens to a rustic, rural scene.

The antique car was rented for a wedding and I saw the wedding party on the other side of the fence wrapping up a photo shoot before the reception held at the restaurant on top of the hill. I was, of course, naturally interested in what was going on, but I had other priorities that evening.

Later on, as we setup a picnic area (my wife and kids tagged along for a suppertime picnic while I worked), I saw the wedding party doing more photos outside the restaurant. From our picnic area, which was a distance from where the wedding party was, I pulled out the 70-200 and took some shots of the photographer.

Even at 200mm, the picture was too small, but at home, I increased the magnification in Lightroom to steal a look at the photographer's gear. Though pixelated, I could distinguish the familiar Nikon logo on the camera strap and the number 700.

I could also see a Pocket Wizard transmitter mounted on the flash hotshoe. Earlier on, I saw his assistant carry in two light stands into the restaurant, so no doubt some radio-

controlled strobes were used during the festivities. I also saw the assistant taking some photos of her own of the wedding party prior to everyone going into for the reception.

Once a gear whore, always an envious gear whore. Or, as former Canadian Conservative Party prime minister, Brian Mulroney, once said on his first campaign trail in 1984, there's no whore like an old whore (to describe the pork barrel tendencies of a Liberal party apparatchik).

Canon firmware hack

Came across a hack for Canon cameras that looks quite interesting. It's a firmware hack primarily meant for videographers and it sits on top of the Canon firmware instead of replacing it.

A user saves the hacked firmware to a flash card then installs it just like the regular procedure to update official firmware from Canon. However, the great thing about the hack is that it's temporary.

Once you format the card or remove the battery, the hack is gone and you're back to the regular Canon firmware…or, so goes the theory. As with any hack, there are no guarantees and you take your own risk in potentially bricking your camera (as in dead and dumb as a brick).

The hack is known as Magic Lantern, which is not to be confused with the series of camera guidebooks.

While I have no interest in the video aspects of the hack, there's one feature that caught my eye for photography: an intervalometer. Instead of having to buy a separate remote control to do time-lapse photos with a Canon SLR, I could use the hack and do it straight from the camera, as is possible with many Nikon SLRs.

Very intriguing but given the risk, I'm rather hesitant to use any Canon camera that doesn't belong to me, such as the two 5D's. I can test it with my Rebel T2i, but as that camera is infrared capture, it doesn't offer a useful long term solution for regular photos.

A cheap Rebel, say a T3i, would be just the ticket to test out and use the hack whenever I want to do time-lapse photos…

The new trend

All of a sudden, wi-fi capable cameras are the rage, as a slew of new digicams were introduced pre-Photokina, with wi-fi capability.

While digicams are generally not of interest to me (the new Panasonic FZ200 does look intriguing though), I think this is quite exciting for what it portends in higher end cameras. I'm thinking of being able to control the camera with a smartphone or tablet, with advanced features, such as an interval timer.

I can already do this using onOne software, but this is more of a studio solution and is not field-ready. Or, at least, I don't think having to connect the camera to a laptop computer, is all that field-ready.

The reason for needing a laptop is that the cameras compatible with the onOne software, have no wi-fi capability. The computer is also necessary to be able to takeover the camera, which can then be remotely controlled with an iPhone.

Within the range of the computer and iPhone's wi-fi range, I can put the camera in LiveView mode and see what the camera sees in real time before firing the shutter.

Great stuff except for the necessity of the computer. Do away with the computer and now we open the door to a wider range of portable capabilities. Wildlife photographers can setup a camera by a sensitive area, leave the site and then be able to see the subject in a blind via a phone or tablet.

The photographer can choose when to take the photo instead of relying on motion sensors. Or, depending on the internet access available (4G cell network?) maybe a scientist hundreds or thousands of miles away from the site, can control the camera and take the photos.

While on this thought process about what we can do with smart phones and tablets, I started thinking about the Meade DS-2000 telescope mount I purchased for panning time-lapse photos.

The DS-2000 comes with a hand controller to input settings to control the mount. The interface looks like something from the 1980s and probably has a logic that only an engineer could love and truly understand.

I was thinking, it sure would be nice if I could control the DS-2000 via my iPhone when out in the field. Well, turns out I'm behind the times, because this capability already exists. But, I'll get into more about the DS-2000 in the next issue of the newsletter.

Thinking about this concept reminds me of the robot built by UK engineers for the London Olympics. A Nikon D4 with 70-200 lens was mounted to the robot, allowing the operator to manipulate the camera into different positions before rattling off a series of shots.

Audio

With the recent splurge on photography gear, there's nothing left to upgrade the audio system. Not that buying anymore gear would actually be advisable or useful.

At the start of this summer, I finally gave into my wife's nagging about not having space for her own office. I had the luxury of having two home offices, the photo editing office in the basement man-cave, and an upstairs room where I keep all my books and had setup my speaker-based hi-fi.

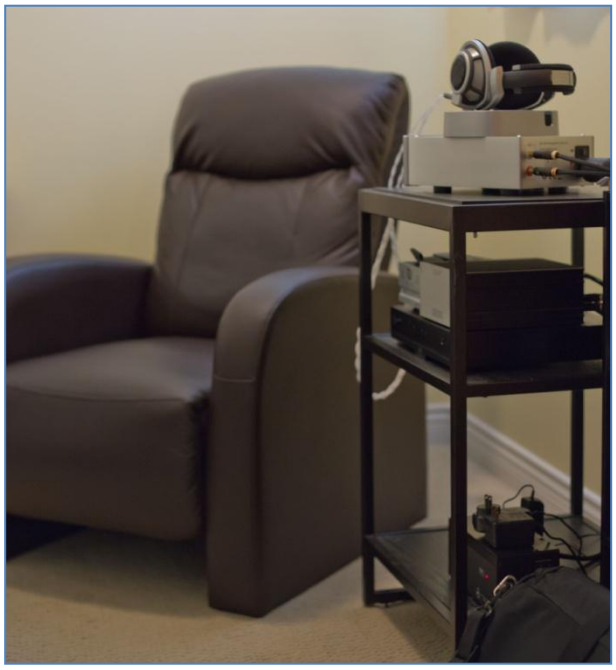
I gave up the upstairs room and put my hi-fi into storage, yet again. I moved my wife's large and heavy desk into the room. She was kind enough to allow me to keep my large bookshelf and books in her new office.

What used to be my wife's old office, a cubby space in our bedroom, became my headphone-based listening room. The cubby space was used as a baby's nursery by the original owners of the house.

It's about the size of a modest walk-in closet and frankly, it's probably best served by becoming a closet so that my wife can have hers and I can have mine.

This leaves me left wanting for a quality speaker-based system. I shuffled some gear around and moved the cheap Behringer powered speakers upstairs to

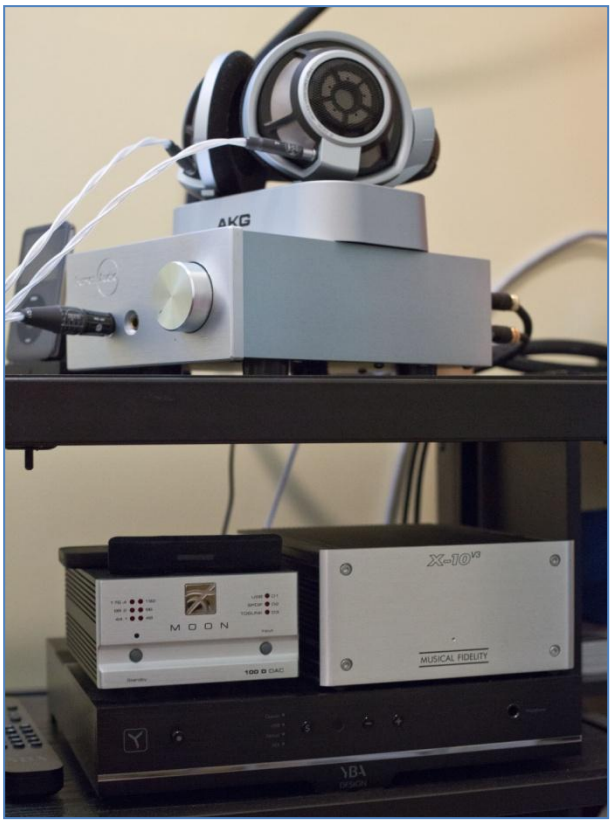
my new and now much more intimate digs. I can fit a small desk, a stool for the desk, my audio equipment rack, and a smallish recliner in the space. The Behringer speakers provide background music when I'm reading.



On the equipment rack are the following:

- Sennheiser HD800 headphones
- Burson HD-160 headphone amp
- Musical Fidelity X-10 tube buffer
- SimAudio Moon 100D DAC
- YBA WD100 DAC
- Cambridge Audio iPad/iPod dock

The Sennheiser HD800 headphones have been written about me before on the old website. To recap, these are probably the finest dynamic headphones available now, but they have a high frequency emphasis in the 5-6 kHz region that can make bad or hot recordings difficult to listen to. The HD800 is a microscope on the recording and are unforgiving of the peaked-up quality afflicting many pop records.



InnerFidelity.com has posted a modification top that tames the HD800's treble peak, but I'm a little queasy about doing anything to headphones that cost as much as the HD800. What I did is try and tame the treble through hardware.

First, I purchased a better after-market cable from ALO. I found a Canadian vendor selling off his last set of ALO cables at a nice discount, which makes a great deal for me and avoids the hassle of cross-border shopping. Avoiding the border is not just about getting ripped off for S&H charges, but also avoiding the bank and its larcenous currency exchange whenever I make a cross border purchase.

Second, I have the Musical Fidelity X-10 to insert in the audio chain. The X-10 is a holdover from the short time I owned the Musical Fidelity X-Can v3 headphone

amp. The X-10 makes it easier for the source component to send the signal to the amp and it also adds a bit tube lushness.

Third, I bought the Burson HD-160 headphone amp, which has a warmer tonality to mate with the HD800's coolness. All three help, but as I said before, with poorly recorded music, there's only so much you can do. That said, the benefits of the HD800 outweigh the one negative I have about the treble peak.

The Burson amp is from Australia and I purchased it through the Parts ConneXion in Ontario. The owner of the Parts ConneXion is one of the founders of the former Sonic Frontiers audio company, whose SFL-1 preamp, I still own. *Sonic Frontiers made a name for itself by making solid tube-based components with excellent parts quality without the extravagant price tag. Certainly not cheap, but not crazy priced like some audio jewellery, although the company did attempt to make an assault on the highest end strata around the turn of the century. Shortly after trying to reach the really high end, Sonic Frontiers and its sister company, Anthem, were sold to speaker manufacturer Paradigm. While Anthem is still around and specializes in home theatre components, Sonic Frontiers was killed off.*

Burson eschews ICs for discrete components, which Burson and others believe provides a superior sound. The Burson is very well made and the thick aluminium case also acts as the amp's heat sink, so it can get warm, but I've never felt it get hot.

The HD-160 is the most basic model and is available new for USD $800. You can get versions with a DAC built-in, or a DAC and preamp built-in. The price increase for each upgraded version is reasonable and won't top USD $1300.

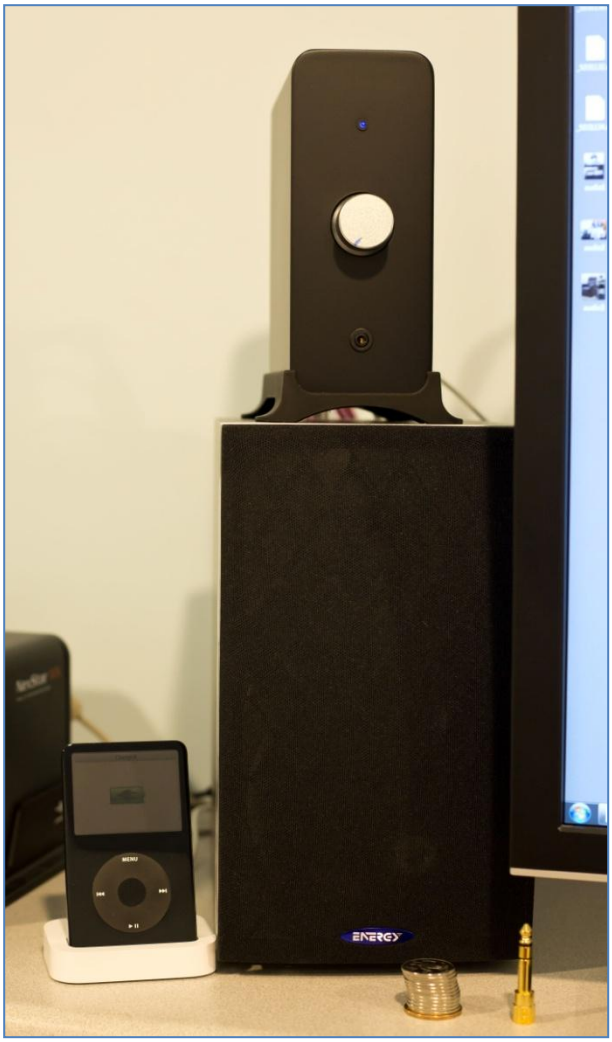
Burson now makes another series of headphone amps under the Composer name and the first amp in the series is getting great reviews and is considered better than the HD series. The 6Moons review indicates that the new amp helps tame the HD800 even more, so my interest in piqued, but I'm not rushing into anything just yet.

The reason for buying another DAC, the SimAudio 100D, when I already have the YBA DAC, was a desire to avoid complexity by sharing components between headphone and speaker-base systems. I decided to build a standalone headphone system that could be placed right beside my listening chair – a necessity since my ALO cable for the HD800 is only four feet long.

Without a standalone system, I'd need to run very long cables from the YBC DAC to the headphone amp. I'd also have sound coming from both headphones and speakers using the YBA unless I turn off the speaker amp.

A small matter, but important for those of us who believe in leaving components on all the time for best audio quality anytime I want to listen to music – not something I actually follow in the summer when the heat becomes unbearable.

Now, with the speaker based system in storage, the headphone system is the only entry I have into high quality audio playback and listening. Not such a bad thing given what the system offers sonically and certainly less disturbing to the rest of the family in not having to hear the speakers from the upstairs room.



In the digital darkroom, where I used to have the Behringer monitors, I have a set of Energy bookshelf speakers. I bought the Energy speakers probably a decade ago by now. Cheap and decidedly consumer in its sonic presentation, but fine for the background listening I do when I'm working in the office.

The Energy speakers are standard, passive units, so they need an amp. I wanted to use a Rotel integrated amp, but the Rotel is a normal sized component, which is too big to accommodate comfortably on my computer desk with everything else I have on it (backup hard drives).

I bought an Audio Engine N22 amp, which is very compact and has enough power output to drive the Energy

speakers (22 watts, class A/B). Cheap too at CAD $200.

No specific comments to make about the Audio Engine and Energy combination, as I'm not looking for audio nirvana at this price point. They do the job that I ask of them, which is to break up the silence when I'm working on photos in my man-cave.

The Audio Engine amp has a 1/8 inch headphone jack on the front panel and two inputs at the rear. One is a standard set of RCA jacks and the second is a 1/8 inch mini jack. There is no source selector switch, so both inputs are active and yes, that means you can have two sources outputting sound at the same time. I have an iPod connected to one input and my PC connected to the other.

A nice feature of the amp is a USB port at the rear meant for recharging an iPod or other portable device. This allows me to keep the iPod close to the amp instead of stretched apart due to needing to plug the iPod's dock to its own AC power.

That's pretty much it on the audio side.

Definitely not as much largesse shelled out as with the photography gear discussed in the last issue. For the future, I still have my eye on some Magnepan 1.7 ribbon speakers (with a subwoofer) and am still on the look out for the ideal set of in-ear-monitors (IEMs).

I currently use two IEMs, one from Etymotic and another from Klipsch. I tossed out the two Shure IEMs I used previously, because both became defective from use and abuse (not that much).

I think I finally figured out why I have a love/hate relationship with IEMs. I love the isolation and ability to keep the volume at a sane level relative to the ambient noise in the world. I hate the lack of comfort required to get the best from IEMs.

I didn't quite appreciate that comfort is key when I bought my first Shure IEM. That set used foam inserts, which you squeeze small then insert in the ear for the foam to expand and seal the ear canal. The better the seal, the more isolation and the better the bass response.

Unfortunately, the foam inserts for that first set of Shure IEMs were too big for long term comfort. My second Shure IEM, used smaller and softer foam and those were comfortable, but that IEM uses pretty thin signal cables, which eventually led to one side cutting out from a loose connection.

Both sets of Shures developed connection problems that led to me tossing $500 in the garbage. This is the big reason why I have no plans to ever buy a high-end set of IEMs and why I

stuck to the $100 range when buying the Etymotic and Klipsch IEMs.

For the Etymotic MC-3, I use a soft rubber flange type of insert; however, the flange insert is a bit bigger than I'd like for comfort. The rubber also quickly becomes yellow from constant contact with ear wax.

The Klipsch Image S4 IEMs come with a small assortment of soft rubber inserts and after trying all of them, I settled on using the smallest set. They fit inside my ears without discomfort (finally), but they don't insert as deep as the Etymotic or Shure inserts. The seal is not as good and I find myself pushing them into my ears every so often. They do have better bass response than the other IEMs I've tried over the years.

The quirk about the Klipsch S4 is their design does not feel right in my ears if I insert them the way you normally expect. I experimented and found a better fit by reversing the left and right channels - right insert in my left ear and vice versa. However, the best fit is to orient the cable upwards and then wrap the cable around my ears just like I did with the Shures.

My conundrum with IEMs seems to be that my ear openings are very small, which requires small diameter inserts. But, the smallest inserts may not seal as well for best quality. Thus, my search for the right combination of sonically good IEMs with the right sized inserts.

Almost as important is the ability to buy more of the right sized inserts, so that I'm not left wanting when the original inserts eventually wear out or become too grungy from ear wax to use anymore.

Rant du Jour

This won't be of interest to those outside of Western Canada, as it has nothing to do with photography or audio, and is only peripherally related to computers (internet access).

For the last two years, one company, Telus, has provided my telephone, TV and internet services. Telus is Western Canada's largest telecommunications company. Its origins is as a telephone utility with a monopoly in British Columbia and was known formerly as BC Tel.

When the government started to relax the rules around telcoms, BC Tel merged with Alberta's telephone utility and adopted the latter's name, Telus. Although a merger, it was more of a takeover by BC Tel, as the former company's head office in Vancouver, became the head office of the new company.

With telcom rules relaxed, Telus branched beyond telephone and cellular service and into internet access and eventually television. Unlike traditional cable companies offering TV service via coaxial cable network, Telus offers TV through the internet. This is known as IPTV, which Telus brands as Optik TV, because the signal comes through fibre optic cables. As this is TV via an internet pipe, Telus' internet service also comes through the fibre optic pipe.

Prior to the fibre optic pipe, telcom internet access was known as DSL, which purports to have an advantage over a cable company's internet service.

Internet access from a cable company comes through a shared connection, meaning TV and internet bandwidth is

shared with your neighbours, but the two services come through the pipe on different frequencies, so they don't conflict.

What can happen with cable though, is during peak usage times, the performance of the internet service can degrade from too many users accessing the internet at the same time. Cable companies have to monitor the usage and then amp up the signal (bandwidth) during peak usage.

DSL is claimed to be its own pipe, individual to each house, so there is no sharing of the pipe with the neighbours. The performance available from DSL is generally lower than cable, but advocates of DSL claim that it will outperform cable during peak usage times. With fibre optic, you would think that speeds should be stellar no matter when you access the internet, but there's a fly in the ointment that not too many people know about with IPTV and internet access.

Because IPTV and internet access come through the same pipe and because Telus places a limit on the bandwidth available, when a TV is on, there is less bandwidth available for internet access. The more TVs on and/or if you watch HD channels, the less bandwidth available for internet access.

Telus markets internet download speeds of 25 megabits per second, but most times, I'm lucky if I can achieve 6 megabits per second. That's with two TVs turned onto standard definition channels.

I can still live with 6 Mbits performance if the internet access is reliable. Unfortunately, Telus uses a near-universally condemned Cisco modem and (wireless) router box. As far as wireless performance is concerned, the Cisco box is a piece of junk.

Prior to switching to Telus, I had the cable modem and wireless router located in my basement home office because I had my computer hard wired to the router. This was back when I was busy running two websites with almost daily surfing and updating of NikonLinks.

Although located in the basement, my wife could still access the internet with her computer located two floors above (my house has three levels: basement, main floor and bedroom floor). Not the strongest signal, but generally reliable for my wife's use.

When we switched to Telus, the serviceman suggested locating the single box modem/router on the main floor.

We have a den on the main floor that has a service closet where all the wiring in the house is centralized, so it makes sense to locate the modem/router here. Even better would be to connect the router to the built-in switch inside the closet and utilize the network connections located throughout the house.

Just one problem, the rooms where I need network access are the ones the builder, for some unfathomable reason, did not install network jacks. This includes my basement office and the upstairs room used by my wife as her office.

Although the Telus box is located more centrally than my old cable modem and Linksys router, the signal is weaker and suffers from constant dropouts. I can be

surfing the internet one minute with a strong signal and then the next, the signal is gone.

When I'm downstairs using the big PC, I can see the signal bars for my wireless is strong, but can't connect because the PC cannot get an IP address from the Telus box. The weak signal led me to get a wireless amplifier for the upstairs, which mostly works, but still drops out every now and then.

The TV service is a separate beef of its own. During the first six months of having Optik TV, the service was crap. During the worse period, I'd have more service problems in one week than in all the years I used Shaw Cable.

I was regularly rebooting the set top boxes and the modem/router to get the signal back. The service is flaky enough that just tightening the coaxial cable from the wall to the set top box made a difference between stuttering and pixelated TV, to clear TV.

When rebooting the set top boxes, the wait is long, often lasting several minutes before the TV service resumes. Sometimes, the delay is so disturbingly long, you have to reboot everything in a particular sequence by powering down, disconnecting the power cable, wait at least a minute, then plug everything back in and then powering up in a particular sequence.

The only good thing about my Telus service is the telephone, which I do consider as being better than Shaw's VOIP. My wife also believes that a traditional telephone service is useful for power failures.

If the power goes down, Shaw's VOIP also goes down after the battery in the Shaw box runs out (about an hour). However, we live in a time when most everyone in the world has a cell phone. A power failure taking down the telephone system will not cut us off from the rest of the world.

The frustration and bad experience with Optik TV and Internet built up to the point that with our two-year contract at an end, we were planning to switch back to Shaw. We'd have to pay a bit more for Shaw and Shaw is certainly not perfect, but it would be a relief to get back to a service that you rarely, if ever, had to monitor and massage into working the way it should.

Service wise, calling up Shaw usually requires a long wait on the telephone, but once connected, you only deal with one person who can look after all the services.

With Telus, you call a different number for each service. If you end talking about TV with an internet person, he transfers you to that department. Even within departments, you end up being transferred to different people. You need help with your additional TV channel packs, oh, please wait on the line while I transfer you. You want HD channels, sorry, not me, let me transfer you.

Telus also charges you for service calls that aren't repairs to the service line. At my old house, I used to rent out my basement, but as my family grew more and more, we took back the basement. The telephone service was separate and if I wanted to combine the two back to one account again, so that the basement telephone jacks are on the same line as the main floor, Telus would charge at least $100.

Fair is fair and I don't have an issue for paying for a non-repair type service, but based on past experience, I don't believe that Shaw would charge for this kind of call.

The final straw with Telus that had me determined to boot the company, was in July of this year when my mother complained about her Chinese channels being inaccessible. Rebooting did nothing, which I expected as much because the text message on the channel indicated the need to call Telus to subscribe to the channel.

Subscribe? I'm already subscribed and I pay for the service in advance. What the f?

I contact Telus and get it sorted out and the person tells me that the channels were disconnected due to a billing issue. Could be as my two-year anniversary came up right around the time the channels were disconnected. It seemed plausible that maybe something got flagged when the anniversary date hit. However, if that were the case, the next bill should be much lower to reflect the cancellation of the channels.

When the Telus bill arrived a couple of days later, there I see Telus charging me again in advance for the channels that were disconnected. Given how long it takes for bills to be processed and mailed out, there's no way my service call had anything to do with the bill. The bastards cut my service while still intending to charge me for it, so I think the billing excuse was bullshit.

Why did I switch and then stay with Telus for two-years? Switching to Telus was all about cost. Telus was aggressively promoting Optik TV in 2010 and offered 50% off regular pricing for the first year of service. However, I had to sign a two-year contract in order to enjoy that first year discount. Cancelling early would result in cancellation fees, but as that first year of inconsistent service went on, I gave some serious thought to paying those cancellation fees.

The second year of service finally saw Optik TV stabilize so that I no longer felt like I was a beta tester, but in the back of my mind was a desire to go back to Shaw.

So, as we got into mid-August 2012, I was planning to make the switch back to Shaw, but then I got the Telus bill for that month. To my shock, the bill was quite a bit lower than expected due to some service changes. I don't know if this a one-time thing, so I'm waiting another month to see what Telus is charging me.

The difference in cost is very material compared to Shaw and as much as I'm not enthused with Telus, it wouldn't be worth $600 a year to return to Shaw.

Next Issue

A look at the Meade DS-2000 telescope mount for time lapse photography. And, if I ever make a purchasing decision, maybe a look at the camera I'll use with the DS-2000.

If that purchase turns out to be another Canon, then a look at how the Magic Lantern firmware hack works for time-lapse photos.

Reminder to let me know how you like the formatting of this issue of the newsletter.