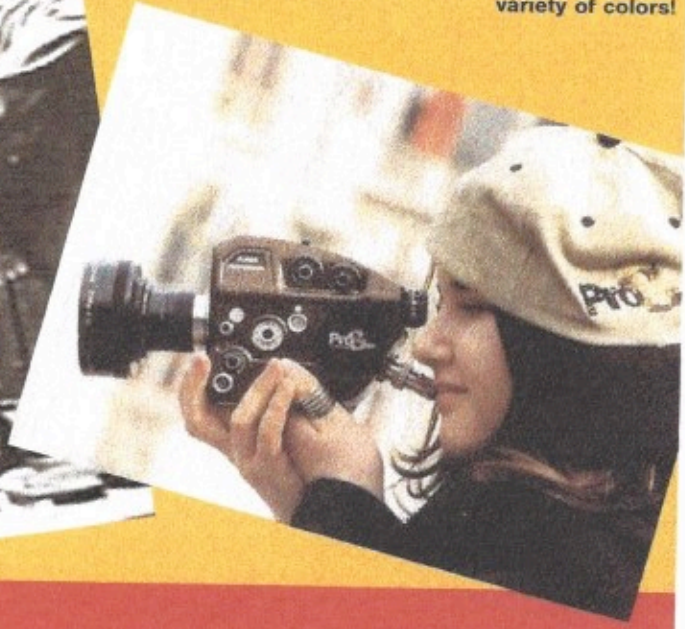


Left: Super 8 film was used extensively for home moviemaking in the late 1960s-early 1980s before home video took over. Many film geeks, like my ol' pals Jeff and Todd here, cut their cinematic teeth making movies on Super 8. Below: The Classic 8 camera. Options include an interchangeable C-mount lens capacity, variable filming speeds from 2 to 70 fps, an 8-64mm f/1.9 manual zoom...and it comes in a variety of colors!



Great 8

Think digital video is the only game in town? Think again, as Pro8mm Negative Film Stocks Bring Super 8 film--that's right, Super 8 -- into the New Millennium.

By Merle Bertrand

FILM IS DEAD, RIGHT? I MEAN, ISN'T ALL THE BUZZ THESE days about how the eye-popping picture quality of today's newfangled hi-definition video cameras looks "just as good as film?" Then there are the fancy schmancy non-linear editing systems, which long ago sent the traditional VTR-based offline suites -- not to mention the work prints, Steenbecks and sync-blocks of the film age -- off to the retirement home. Finally, if you toss in the growing interest in direct-from-satellite theatrical distribution using hi-def video projectors, maybe we should probably all just stick a

collective fork in film now. Well, don't pull that sheet over film's cold dead carcass just yet, because the venerable old format still has a pulse. And as unlikely as it might seem, part of the reason celluloid still has a future is that long-forgotten stepchild of the motion picture family, Super 8 film. That's right, Super 8, that quaint 1970s relic from back in the days when "home movies" literally meant home movies. But today's Super 8 film bears only a surface resemblance to the tiny format upon which yesterday's aspiring directors and film geeks first

learned the tricks of their trade. That's because while yesterday's memories were captured primarily on such amateur film stocks as Kodachrome or Ektachrome, with all the limitations inherent to these reversal stocks – narrow exposure latitudes, limited light and shadow detail, etc. – today's Super 8 film features all the professional 35mm negative film stocks available to cinematographers around the world...at a mere fraction of the cost. Call it "Super 8: The Next Generation."

Phil Vigeant, owner and president of Pro8mm (formerly known as Super 8 Sound) in Burbank, CA, and perhaps the world's biggest champion of all things Super 8-related, simply calls it "Pro8."

"I purchased what was left [of Super 8 Sound] in 1981 with the idea of taking a new approach," Vigeant relates. "I got a great deal because at that time, the future of film was considered shaky because the low cost of video would kill it. Sound familiar?"

"My idea was to merge what was great about Super 8 with what was great about video, rather than try to fight this war of us versus them," Vigeant continues. "Through most of the '80s, it became obvious that video was not going to replace film and, in particular, Super 8 became a growing part of new markets. Music videos...was the first major application to accept Super 8 as a professional tool (as) many of the biggest names in the music business like Madonna, Mariah Carey, and Paula Abdul made videos shot entirely on Super 8."

Vigeant also had the foresight to recognize how low-budget filmmakers could achieve a relatively inexpensive "film look" by shooting their feature films on Super 8 rather than video, and, if they were lucky, could then sell those films to help satiate the burgeoning demand for home video product. Such early Super 8 features as *A POLISH VAMPIRE IN BURBANK* successfully cracked the home video market, as did films such as *KUNG FU RASCALS*, *DARKNESS* and *Alternative Cinema* founder J.R. Bookwalter's *THE DEAD NEXT DOOR*. (This author's own Super 8 saga, *QUEST FOR THE MONKEY GOD* didn't fare quite as well, although, from what I understand, it's a HUGE hit in Malaysia...)

Yet, as the 1990s unfolded, the inevitable improvements in video technology combined with a levelling off of the home video market and a less-discriminating public who no longer cared as much if what they were watching looked like film. Vigeant once again felt film in general, and Super 8 in particular, sliding towards the endangered species list.

"Kodak was cutting Super 8 down to three stocks," he recalls. "It seemed inevitable that the end for Super 8 was growing near and if someone didn't do something, it was over. We decided the only way to save Super 8 was to make it clear that even without Kodak, Super 8 could survive. To do this, we needed to make our own stock."

Vigeant's radical idea was to split reels of 35mm negative film stock into 8mm-wide spools that could then be loaded into Super 8's familiar 50' cartridges. Yet, even as the first rolls of Pro8mm

went on sale in 1993, Vigeant quickly discovered that the reality of the process was far more complicated than the theory.

"We called (the first rolls) 'Experimental Rolls' because, although they would run through the camera most of the time and we could process them, not all the results were that impressive," he admits. "Little did we know that doing it was only the first challenge. Doing it well would take us almost five years to perfect. Some of the results were amazing and the film community, regardless of the many pitfalls, kept coming for more."

As the company gradually improved the technical results of Pro8mm, Vigeant found himself fighting a two-front battle. Not only did he have to overcome the lingering stereotypes and stigmas attached to the old Super 8 format, but he had to do this while explaining the concept and benefits of Pro8mm film to a skeptical production community that was becoming increasingly seduced by digital video's ease and inexpensiveness. He did this largely by letting the results of shooting on film speak for themselves.

"To me, Pro8 has a convenience factor and a visual uniqueness," Vigeant argues. "The film and processing is...cheaper (than 16mm or 35mm) and cameras are cheaper, but the technique is the same, so I don't really think you can say that one is grossly less expensive than the other. (However), the cameras are small and interesting to use. Some of their features make for great



Full Cinemascope. Achieved by using an Anamorphic lens to shoot the original Pro8mm negative full 2.35:1 and then matting the video frame for 2.35. This has been used in several feature films that used Super8 like *FLATLINERS* and *BONE*

creative capacities unmatched by other mediums. Things like the cartridge (so) that you don't have to worry about fogging the film and some of the automatic features of the camera. The lenses act different. For anyone who has never used film, Pro8 film and a Super 8 camera are much easier to use without training."

And, Vigeant stresses, Pro8 will even work in many of the sort of off-the-shelf Super 8 cameras often relegated to a garage sale "Miscellaneous" box.

"Used Super 8 cameras are fantastic, except they tend, without any service, to go off calibration. So if the exposure system is off a bit, Pro8 will still get a good exposure because of the latitude of the stock. There is also some transport issue in many used cameras. If the take-up torque is off-adjustment, Pro8 film can smooth some c



PRO8MM NEGATIVE FILM WAS BORN, AT LEAST IN PART, AS SUPER 8 SOUND'S HEDGE AGAINST KODAK PHASING OUT SUPER 8 FILM ENTIRELY.

"WE STARTED OUT TRYING TO MAKE EKTACHROME TO REPLACE WHAT KODAK WAS DELETING, BUT WE GOT TO THINKING: WHY NOT DO SOMETHING INCREDIBLY NEW AND MAKE SUPER 8 A NEW MEDIUM RATHER THAN JUST PRESERVING THE PAST?" PRO8MM PRESIDENT PHIL VIGEANT EXPLAINS. "WE EVEN DECIDED TO CHANGE THE NAME TO 'PRO8MM' SO PEOPLE WOULD KNOW THIS IS NOT THE NOSTALGIC SUPER 8. IT'S NEW."

VIGEANT'S SOLUTION SEEMED TO BE SIMPLICITY ITSELF...IN THEORY. THE IDEA WAS TO SIMPLY SPLIT A SPOOL OF ANY 35MM NEGATIVE FILM STOCK INTO 8MM-WIDE SPOOLS, "PERF" THEM (I.E. RUN THE NEWLY CREATED 8MM SPOOLS THROUGH A PERFORATING MACHINE WHICH PUNCHED THE SPROCKET HOLES IN THE FILM), THEN LOAD THE FILM INTO SUPER 8'S FAMILIAR 50' CARTRIDGES, AND VOILAI! ONE CAMERA-READY REEL OF PRO8MM NEGATIVE FILM STOCK, HOT OFF THE PRESSES.

THE REALITY OF THE OPERATION PROVED TO BE FAR MORE DAUNTING, HOWEVER. VIGEANT EMPTIED OUT THE COMPANY'S SHIPPING AND STORAGE ROOM, CONVERTING IT INTO A STERILE DARKROOM, INTO WHICH HE JAMMED ALL THE HEAVY MACHINERY – SPLITTER, PERFORATOR, LOADER, PROCESSING EQUIPMENT, ETC. – NECESSARY TO CONVERT 35MM FILM INTO CARTRIDGES OF PRO8MM. IN ORDER TO KEEP THE OPERATION AS TURNKEY AS POSSIBLE, PRO8 ALSO HAD TO MAKE A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT IN THE HIGH-END TELECINE EQUIPMENT USED TO TRANSFER THE PROCESSED FILM INTO VIDEO FOR EDITING. WHEN ASKED WHAT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT OBSTACLE TO OVERCOME WHEN DEVELOPING THIS PROCESS, VIGEANT HAD AN IMMEDIATE RESPONSE.

"DIRT ON THE NEGATIVE WAS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE, AND FRANKLY STILL IS," HE ADMITS. "BECAUSE IT'S A SMALLER NEGATIVE AND YOU ARE ESSENTIALLY BLOWING IT UP FOUR TIMES AS MUCH AS YOU WOULD 16MM WHEN YOU TRANSFER PRO8 TO VIDEO, THE SAME SPECK OF DIRT IS FOUR TIMES AS LARGE. SO TO HAVE PRO8 BE AS CLEAN AS 16MM, YOU HAVE TO BE FOUR TIMES AS CLEAN IN PROCESSING, PREP-HANDLING, AND IN THE TRANSFER. A SPECK YOU MIGHT NOT EVEN NOTICE ON 16MM IS A BASEBALL-SIZED WHITE BLEMISH ON A FRAME OF 8MM."

AS DEVELOPING PRO8MM INTO A VIABLE FORMAT HAS BEEN ALL ABOUT PROBLEM SOLVING, IT SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE THAT A SOLUTION – IN THIS CASE, A DIGITAL CLEANING SYSTEM WHICH HAS BECOME COMMONPLACE IN BROADCAST TELEVISION – WILL ULTIMATELY BE THE ANSWER TO THIS PROBLEM ONCE THE PRICES COME DOWN.

Vigeant's idea was to split reels of 35mm negative film stock into 8mm wide spools that could then be loaded into Super 8's familiar 50's cartridges.



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Vigeant notes that Pro8mm has replaced Super 8 in almost all professional Super 8 applications in the U.S. and the company has recently opened up an office in London to introduce Pro8mm to the European markets. Pro8's biggest

application appears to be in such documentary/dramatic shows as HISTORY'S MYSTERIES, RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT, WORLD'S SCARIEST PLACES, or VH-1's BEHIND THE MUSIC; all shows which primarily use Pro8mm to shoot re-enactments. Yet, filmmakers are also using the reincarnated format in music videos, commercials, video games, short films, low-budget features, DVD bonus materials, and more.

"The greatest strength of film is that it can look so different, given different cameras, techniques, lighting, film stocks, lenses and, most critically, individuals who create with these tools," Vigeant stresses. "Video or digital does not have a fraction of this kind of diversity in picture taking."

"Amateurs gravitate to one tool to do everything because of limited funds and experience. People who make film their living like to explore the possibilities and Pro8 gives them a new tool box to play in."

A sure sign that Pro8mm was a legitimate production format came when Kodak decided to enter the marketplace with their own line of 8mm negative stocks. This was, according to Vigeant, a

A 16:9 original Pro8mm frame reproduced from the Pro8mm DVD demo. Note the detail in the bright and dark regions, which would be missing from old Reversal Super 8 film stocks. Originating in 16:9 allows for the correct aspect ratio for HD or a home version of "Enhanced for Widescreen," just like major motion pictures.



double-edged sword.

"When they first came out with their stock, I was a little nervous that, because they were Kodak, filmmakers would switch. But after three years now, this has not happened. All my career, I've had to contend with what Kodak is doing. It's like sailing a small sailboat next to the Titanic. You have to learn to stay out of their wake and put some distance between you and them.

"I think [Kodak] saw that what we were doing was good for the future of film and they have been very supportive of the process," Vigeant continues. "We began by loading the film into a Russian reloadable cartridge, and it was kind that Kodak offered to let us load our film in their cartridge. We stopped loading Fuji and Ilford as a return gesture to them for giving us this support. Now that they're selling their own Super 8 negative, we might have to re-think this," he adds.

So how does this rebirth of Super 8 fit into a contemporary production mindset that's so totally obsessed with all things digital? According to Vigeant, it all gets back to his original idea to combine the benefits of 8mm film with what was great about video.

"Digital is more of an evolution to video than a revolution in film. It makes everything that was being done in video cleaner and easier, but it is still just video in a digital form. You can't beat film for taking an image and you can't beat digital for manipulation of that image, so why choose? Use both.

"The looks you can achieve (with Pro 8mm) are unique," he continues. "When you see it, you know it's not digital. Pro8mm gives a filmmaker a new way to show the Hollywood sign or a group of girls washing a car or an old cowboy hanging on a fence at sunset. There are lots of classic images that are constantly being redefined for the next generation. Every generation wants their own style in pictures, just like the fashion business, otherwise we would all just watch reruns."

The "experts" have been predicting the demise of film for almost as long as the Cubs have gone without a trip to the World Series. And while it's entirely possible that some of today's young "filmmakers" may never expose a single frame of celluloid to daylight, it's equally probable that good ol'-fashioned movie film will

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Vintage Regular 8 film from the 1940s. Pro8mm currently loads Regular 8 in both B&W and VNF Ektachrome stocks.

be around in some capacity for years and even decades to come. If so, Phil Vigeant's stubborn quest to develop the next generation of Super 8 movie film will deserve at least some of the credit.

"Film will never be dead because image makers will always want to use diversified tools to make diversified images and film's ability to record an image is tremendous," Vigeant argues. "It may, at some point, not dominate production as Super 8 no longer dominates home movies, but that doesn't mean it won't be used.

"I have sold over 10,000 Super 8 cameras and everyone I know, knows me through Super 8. I think I would have regretted it the rest of my life if I had just sat back and watched it die."

That hasn't happened yet. And thanks in part to Pro8mm, the forever-predicted demise of film has probably been put on indefinite hold.



SADLY, MANY OF TODAY'S YOUNG "FILMMAKERS" WILL NEVER EXPERIENCE THE THRILL OF ACTUALLY SHOOTING A FILM ON FILM; AN UNFORTUNATE FACT WHICH VIGEANT ALSO LAMENTS.

"I THINK THE EXPERIENCE OF MAKING A FILM ON FILM HAS GREATER VALUE TO THE FILMMAKER THAN THE MARKETING OF YOUR FIRST-EVER ATTEMPT AT MOVIE MAKING," HE POSITS. "MANY CELEBRITY DIRECTORS LIKE SAM RAIMI, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE SUPER 8 FEATURES TUCKED AWAY THAT GENERAL AUDIENCES WILL NEVER SEE. HIS SUPER 8 FILM *WITHIN THE WOODS* IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE BEST I HAVE SEEN.

"SUPER 8 FILMS ARE OFTEN VERY PERSONAL AND EVEN THOUGH THEY REPRESENT THE CORNERSTONE OF A LOT OF VERY SUCCESSFUL FILM CAREERS, THEY ARE ALSO RAW, BEGINNING OF THINGS AND NOT SOMETHING ACCOMPLISHED FILMMAKERS ARE OFTEN WILLING TO SHARE ABOUT THEIR PAST."

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