

The Sexiest Format on the Planet

Super8 is cheap, easy and beautiful, say the experts at Pro8mm. Sounds exciting—but is it a better choice than DV? An interview with Phil Vigeant.

MIM: Phil, how did you get into this niche of the moviemaking business? What's your background?

Phil Vigeant: While at college studying accounting, I took a part-time job at a little Cambridge company run by ex-MIT teacher Bob Doyle called Super8 Sound. I found the film industry and the work he did fascinating and learned everything I could about it. When I graduated from college, nothing I did was as interesting as film. So several years later, when Super8 Sound was looking for a manager, I returned. Eventually I took over and changed the company's direction.

MIM: What year did take over? Tell me about the evolution of Pro8mm.

I took over in 1982 and embraced the future of film as one *with* video rather than in competition with it. At that time it was more cost-effective to shoot and edit on film and release on video. Through the '80s we saw the evolution of video editing, then digital editing, which by the early '90s had completely replaced film editing. Rather than see this as the demise of film I saw it as an opportunity to edit a movie shot on film more effectively. Without the need to do film editing, Super8 could evolve to use color negative Pro8mm film without the necessity of doing film printing and edge numbering. Pro8mm can only exist in a world that shoots film and edits on video or digital.

MIM: You deal with moviemakers working in other mediums who use 8mm for aesthetic reasons. Who is the typical pro who comes to Pro8mm?

The professional who comes to us enjoys working with something different than standard film or video. Smaller equipment naturally evokes a different response from actors. A smaller format creates different pictures. What makes Pro8mm great is that it's different. It's not a cheap version of 16—it has a variety of looks unto itself.

MIM: You also deal with a lot of people who have no film background whatsoever. What are some of the questions/concerns they have?

There are two ways to gain an understanding of anything. You can be taught or you figure it out by doing. If you want to learn film you can go to film school (but make sure they use film to teach it.) Or you can learn on your own. Which way is better depends on you as an individual. If you're going to figure it out on your own, you need an inexpensive way to explore—for film the best way is the 8mm format.

Our ads say "the future of film is film." I believe strongly that if you want to do film in the future you need to learn film today. You simply cannot learn film technology by shooting digital. If no one learns film there will be no more film in the future. New moviemakers are amazed at how easy, cheap and beautiful film is. Because professional filmmaking is usually done at such high standards, new moviemakers associate high production costs with film. What they learn very quickly is that it's the production that's expensive, not the film.

MIM: What's the advantage of shooting 8mm film in this "digital age?"

The advantage is you're working in a different aesthetic than the millions of people shooting digital. You're learning film stock, film technique, film technology. The best jobs in the business still shoot film. If a million kids can do digital but you're the only one who can use a light meter and knows the difference between the grain structure of 5245 and 5289 and the producer wants to use film—guess who gets the job? I've spent my career learning film and how it relates to video and digital and I'd recommend the same to anyone who wants to get into this business. That's how we get the jobs!

MIM: Pro8mm offers moviemakers "one stop shopping." Rather than chase the film down, find a lab and a telecine house, etc., with you they buy stock, process and transfer it in one place. One company is accountable, which streamlines everything. Are there other advantages at Pro8mm?

The advantages are information, service and cost. There are a lot of competitive formats, so it's more difficult for a filmmaker to get good information. The Internet is a great source of information, but much of it is wrong and directed by competitive interests. We offer the film, processing, transfer and the camera in Super8. This makes it possible to track the production's quality throughout the process—and it provides us with the motivation to fix a problem in any part of the system.

Say there's a problem with the registration of the image in your transfer. Was it your camera, the film, the processing or the transfer that caused the problem? When you're doing film with four different companies the natural state is to blame the problem on the other company and it becomes a blame game instead of a scenario where someone is helping you figure out the problem. We can also work at improving the system and sometimes solve a problem in one part of the process by adjusting a different part. And we can package the service together, making it much less expensive overall.

MIM: You say that there's no place on the planet with more information on 8mm film than Pro8mm. How do you educate a neophyte filmmaker?

What we want is for filmmakers to understand the information, not just have it. Simply having it and not knowing how to apply it can be dangerous. When I began I did a lot of reading, but nothing was clear to me until I started to do it myself. We're talking about something visual, so it's infinitely easier to understand it if you see it than if you talk or write about it. We all know what good images look like, but how to get these images takes a bit of trying, questioning and then retrying.

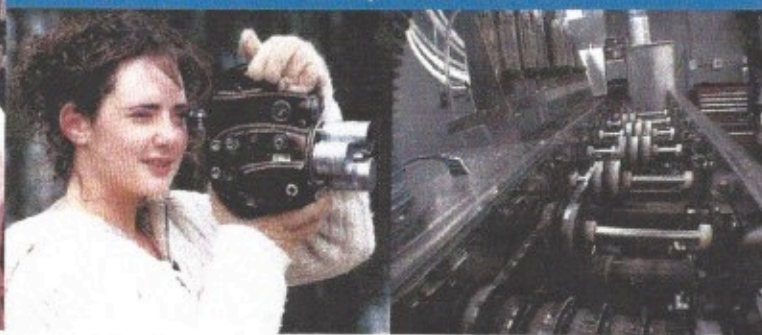
MIM: Can you give readers a brief technical rundown on the benefits of shooting with the particular 8mm stock you offer?

If you don't know much about film, shoot Pro8mm. Because it's negative, it'll take a better picture than traditional Super8 stock. Once you





Phil Vigeant does what he loves at Pro8mm; 2003 will mark the release of Pro8mm's new Classic 16mm cameras; the VNF processing machine offers same day service for Ektachrome Super8 and 16mm.



get the basics you'll quickly learn that it's how the film is exposed and particularly the grain, color saturation and contrast of the images—not the stock you shoot—that determines the look. Poorly shot Pro8mm 45 in bad light will be grainier than 800 ASA film in good light. It's all in the exposure, not in the stock, which is why it is so important to learn.

MM: You also work with 16mm and Super16mm moviemakers?

Yes, for several years now. All our equipment was designed for 16mm, to which we did special modification to do 8mm. Since there were hundreds of people who did 16mm we focused on 8mm, but times are changing. In many ways to do 8 well you need more precision than 16. Most of the major labs focus on 35mm and 16mm is something that's harder and harder to find good service for. What we offer in 16 is better than many of the small 16mm labs because we have a complete understanding of the process. In 2003 we will introduce rebuilt 16mm cameras—the Classic 16. I think over the next 10 years we can do for 16mm what we have already done for 8mm and keep both mediums well supported with services and information.

MM: Describe your LA facility for me.

The Pro8mm facility is like a microcosm of the film industry. There's a constant flow of people who are talking about cameras, shooting, processing and transferring. There might be a first-year student dropping off a roll of B&W who's sharing a story with an ASC cinematographer who's working on a 35mm feature picking up a rental.

Often customers leave with people they meet, like the time I was transferring film for Jim Jarmusch and Forest Whitaker came in to get his camera fixed. They got talking and left for lunch together. Nine months later they made the film *Ghost Dog*. There's a bond between people who love film. I think people feel connected to the process when they come to Pro8mm. I have a lot of celebrity customers, and I know they can afford the best digital that money can buy. So why do they do small format film? It's a bit more than just liking the look—it gets them closer, on a personal level, to what they love.

MM: Do you pull much business from New York?

Oh, yeah, we have lots of NYC customers. We have accounts that work every week for television, like VH1 and Nick News. It's a little too close to have our own store there, though, as film people travel to LA so often.

MM: You've had a successful London office for two years. Why London?

We had lots of London customers even before having an office. They were shipping their rolls individually to us and paying a fortune in freight charges. The London office was a way to save them money with one weekly shipment. By offering them free shipping and customs clearance, we made it possible to grow the use of film. It's gone so well in London that we're expanding the service to the rest of Europe. Our quality is the best in the

world, and we make it cost-effective for moviemakers. A filmmaker in London is paying the same for Super8 processing as one in LA.

MM: Pro8mm is so successful partly because of the way you've specialized—you're a "niche within a niche." But you tested the digital waters last year when you started burning DVDs for clients. Is this going to be the extent of your involvement with that medium, or do you have plans to expand the services you offer independent moviemakers?

Whenever you mix mediums you have to master both. Bad telecine will make film look like crap on video, just as cheap encoding will make film look like crap on DVD. Many companies are offering cheap DVD burning of video. If you transfer your Hi8 to DVD it will look like any dub does—worse than the original. Just because it's on DVD does not make it better. We can run video through the same scene-by-scene transfer process that we do with Super8 and make lots of improvements to the image before burning to DVD. We look at DVD just like everything we work with—you *have to work the images to get the best they can offer*. We've always been into anything that can make films more accessible, and we want to give our customers the best their master can offer.

MM: Tell me why someone becomes a client of Pro8mm that may not occur to readers right away. For instance, a DP needs a demo reel on DVD to take to a tradeshow. You can help with that, right?

Yes—we offer both photochemical and digital services. We focus on the needs of independent filmmakers in small format because that group has special needs. As they need other services we expand to offer them.

DVD is a good example because the technology has happened so fast. To burn one copy of your reel costs about \$75, where two years ago you would have to do 1,000 to be cost effective. But in six months you'll have your own DVD drive in your computer, so you can do it yourself. What you won't be able to do yourself is improve your image to the degree that we can with hundreds of thousands of dollars in equipment.

MM: What are your favorite uses of 8mm film in movies we all know?

I like being part of the process myself, so my favorites are the ones I had a hand in, like *Why do Fools Fall in Love*, *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbor*, *JFK*, *Zoolander* and *For Love of the Game*, to name a few. I get attached to my customers' careers when transferring their first films. I'm lucky to be one of the few people in the world who has an opportunity to share such a personal side of some of the biggest names in the business. I worked on transferring all of Sam Raimi's first films, for instance. So when I went to see *Spider-Man* it was to see the continued growth of a Pro8 customer, not just a great movie. —*Tim Rhys*

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