You probably had no idea that when you were watching American Idol at any point over the last 14 seasons, that you were witnessing the nostalgia of Super 8. It would take a trained eye indeed to notice that all those winter evenings spent in front of the tube with your family, ready for the next Carrie Underwood or Kelly Clarkson, were actually a throwback to many family’s home videos.

Cinematographer Owen Smith, who’s been with the show since 2006, has been capturing Super 8 footage that is interspersed throughout the road show portion of the series.

“My dad shot Super 8,” the St. Augustine, Florida, native reminisces. “His dad had shot Super 8 too. More than photography, it is a history of people. When my dad was using it, it was to document the life around him. Everybody had one of those cameras, so a lot of people can identify with it as sitting around watching home movies.”

Smith had been doing a lot of travel documentary work earlier in his career, and got to work on shows like Survivor and The Deadliest Catch. When he started on American Idol, an already huge, well-oiled machine, he asked himself what he could do to make his contribution unique.

“I’d just joined the Union and was getting into bigger productions,” he explains, “and I realized that my strength could come from something that I’ve always done – Super 8.”

Smith was on a schedule that had him and his team up at 4 a.m. shooting thousands of screaming people in lines in a different city every few days. During his off time, he’d take a bike or go walking with his Canon 814 and shoot 8-roll of the cities. He’d end up using 24 to 36 rolls of Super 8, which would equal about an hour’s worth of footage.

It was never a fight for Smith to shoot the footage, but he would have to usher it through the post-production phase, making sure each editor who already had a million tasks to complete was aware that Super 8 footage was available. Smith says once the producers — namely Charles Boyd, Patrick Lynn and Megan Michaels — began to see the value it added, they asked for more Super 8 shots.

Smith has shot a variety of Super 8 negative and reversal film stocks since his first season with the FOX show. He frames it for 169, and Pro8mm in Burbank scans the film in 1920x1080 with 3:1 color correction on a Millennium 2 HD scanner. The film output is a ProRes HQ codec, downloaded to a hard drive for editing of the digital files.

“Owen wanted to create a unique look for the American Idol sequences, and he chose Super 8 because it combines a classic film look with a modern application for stunning results,” offers Rhonda Vigante, VP of Marketing at Pro8mm. “We provide a one-stop solution with KODAK Super 8mm film, lab processing and HD scanning with just a two-day turn around.”

Smith always felt his Super 8 footage would mimic a dad following his kid as they audition and make the trip across country to compete in the iconic American Idol. He never put it on a jib or a Technocrane, but lately, he has been using it in a more stylized way.

“Now,” he says, “we talk about how we’re going to compose the frame and how it fits into the bigger show. I relate to this medium through travel and a nostalgic emotion of family, friends and adventure. I’ll always use it.”