

making the grade

Taking the Pro814 movie camera on a test drive

Text and Photos by Chris Cottrill

When Pro8mm of Burbank, California, announced the introduction of their refurbished Canon Auto Zoom 814 cameras (sold as Pro814 models), I heard from some people who felt the \$795 price was a little steep considering used Canon 814 cameras can be had quite easily for a small percentage of that figure on the used camera market. On this point, I beg to differ. To have a Super-8 camera, as close to new as one could hope for in the 21st Century with a warranty to boot, seemed worth the money. To test my hypothesis, I recently plunked down the \$795 plus shipping to receive one. The sales clerk who took the order seemed to indicate they were selling well, although I'm not sure what "well" means these days in terms of quantities. Whatever the definition is, hopefully it is "well" enough to keep them refurbishing and selling these cameras for a few years yet.

The Pro814 differs in a few ways from the original Canon 814 models in that the exposure calibration has been completely remade. The Pro814 can now read notched Super-8 cartridges for film speeds of 40, 64, 100, 160, 250, and 400 (speeds without the 85A color correction filter). The camera's built-in 85A filter has also

been removed, because, according to the Pro8mm's camera manual, the original plastic internal filters became dirty and warped with age, which can cause sharpness issues. I have never done any test of the difference in sharpness using a typical camera's built-in plastic filter versus not using one but instead adding an equivalent screw-on glass filter to the lens, but I have run across quite a few cameras where the built-in filter was stuck so as to be either permanently in place or permanently out, which was extremely troublesome to deal with.

Since the Pro814 has no filter anymore, it is sold with a brand new screw-on Tiffen 85A filter, to be used when filming in daylight with tungsten balanced film. The camera also comes with two 1.3 volt batteries for the light meter, an instruction book, and an extremely nice Pelican brand hard carrying case complete with outside handle and inside foam padding for extra protection.

Initially, I thought the instruction book was missing, but soon realized it was placed behind some of the foam padding in the lid of the carrying

case. The instruction manual itself in nothing to brag about, merely nine single-sided 8.5"x11" Xeroxed color copies bound by a three ring folder — the kind sold at general office supply stores for school term papers or book reports. The manual also instructed loading the batteries in the handle grip as the first thing to do, and on page two mentions what button to push to lower the handle in the first place (these items should be in reverse order for anyone not familiar with Super-8 cameras). While it might have been nice to have a manual more along the lines of the smaller, more polished booklets that came with the original Canon 814, it must be said that the manual was quite easy to read, covered all the necessary functions of the camera while eliminating any suggested filming techniques (leave that to the manuals of days gone by designed for home movie makers). In addition, the manual is likely not to be referenced much at all, and what was lacking in its presentation was more than made up for with the excellent expensive-looking Pelican case which will likely be used constantly and last for many years.



When I took the camera out of the case for the first time, it appeared exactly like the old Canon 814 model, the only exception being a small Pro814 label at the top front of the unit. This leads me to my next complaint and suggestion. It seems it would have been nice to have had the camera body repainted, or at least the silver metal parts of the body. A sleek black would have been a good touch, and also would hide the one blemish on my unit, a spot where a tiny label next to the manual aperture wheel was either removed or missing, leaving a small amount of darker brown color, the residue of former glue on the silver. While the black paint suggestion is all for aesthetic reasons, of course, and doesn't affect the performance of the

camera in the slightest, it still makes sense to me to distinguish this from the common Canon 814 that might show up on eBay. Not only would it enhance the appearance of the body and leave one with the warm feeling that this is refurbished unit in every way, but would probably also help in any resale value the camera has in the future.

Another small item of note was the difficulty in screwing the external 85A filter onto the lens. This may have been due to the age of the filter rings, but in any case a couple of small drops of a lubricant helped the filter to screw on easier. Perhaps a little cleaning or grease would have prevented this problem in the first place.

Putting aesthetic suggestions aside, the only real complaint with the Pro814 is the rubber eyepiece. It is too small for my taste, which is in fact the exact same complaint that I had with an original Canon 814 I owned some years ago. And this is no surprise, as the eyepiece cup is all original Canon. But since this was a disappointment in the original 814 design, it would have been so nice to have had this corrected with a new, larger eyepiece, something that again would help distinguish it from the old 814 production model and provide a major improvement to boot.

The main question, of course, is this: How does the Pro814 perform when shooting film? Excellently in all aspects. The cartridges pop in and out with ease, the viewfinder is certainly bright enough and easy to read, and the initial design of the 814 had all the functioning buttons in the right places. The mere fact that it is so easy to run any speed film from ASA 40 to ASA 500 without worrying about compensating for misread film speed notches on the cartridges is worth the price alone! This makes the Canon 814 the ideal camera for wedding photographers who are going to change cartridges with different film speeds instantly. This is the way Super-8 filming was intended to be. Pop in the cartridge and go. No mental gymnastics required to make sure that light meter is telling you the right *f*/stop.

The Canon 814 was never the quietest of cameras, but I'm not sure that is of any importance when shooting silent film. The Pro814 is easy to carry, easy to hand hold, and easy to use. It's got just the right amount of weight to hold it steady, and a handle to carry it around from shot to shot.

The lens is a very respectable *f*/1.4 with a 7.5mm to 60mm focal length range. Nothing wrong with this! Canon lens quality was always known to be superb and the 58mm filter size makes buying filters or lens hoods easy to find and inexpensive. Filming speeds are 12, 18, or 24 frames per second. While a slow motion (maybe



Matt Naylor demonstrates on this and the preceding page the versatility and ease of use that accompanies the Pro814 Super-8 camera — making it an ideal choice for wedding videographers and other professionals that want to spice up a client's video. Picture to the right shows Matt Naylor filming his daughter, Cassie. The Pro814 can be focused to within four feet of a subject.

is that it can be easily accomplished without the need to slide a lever disengaging the power option. There is no lever, or switch at all. Simply hit the telephoto or wide angle button for power zooms, or slide the handle on the lens for smooth manual zooms at any speed, and you can go back and forth between manual or power zooming — anytime you want.

One thing notable about the Canon 814 is its simplicity in design and features. In other words, it lacks some of the more sophisticated, but seldom used features during the Super-8 camera wars of the 1970s. There is no macro feature or slow motion or even fade-in or fade-out buttons, although this can be accomplished by any camera with manual exposure override such as this one. The Canon 814

36 fps) would be wonderful to have, I can't fault Pro8 for not altering the basic construction of the original 814 to provide something the camera was never designed to do in the first place.

The camera has only one power zoom speed which is somewhat slow and noisy. But the manual zoom is very, very smooth and easy to use, and, of course, doesn't make any noise at all. In fact, this is the best manual zoom I have ever owned — it moves so effortlessly and smoothly — and I don't know why anyone would even use the power zoom buttons. Another major advantage of the manual zoom

was the perfect camera for Pro8mm to use because of its simplicity of design and especially because of its ruggedness. The all metal body is heavy-duty in every way. These cameras were built like Panzer tanks. They were made to be thrown into a backpack or duffle bag, then tossed into the trunk or back seat of a car and taken on a ride to another Super-8 adventure.

For my tests I shot Kodachrome 40, Ektachrome 64T, and Ektachrome 100D reversal. There wasn't time to make this issue's deadline to shoot negative stocks, but based upon the performance of the above reversals, there is no need to believe the

negative versions would have any problems. One of the advantages of shooting reversal film for testing and then projecting the results is to check for accurate color rendition. Telecine, unless doing this oneself, can provide varying results from lab to lab, or even technician to technician.

The film tests came out perfect in every way. Excellent color, true to each film stock's characteristics, and incredibly sharp images. And a pleasant bonus was the noticeably steady image of each frame as well — even hand-held shots looked steady, not shaky. (For the technical minded who like to know, it should



be noted that the Kodachrome 40 used was from batches made with a November 2005 expiration, the 64T was purchased earlier this year, and the Ektachrome 100D was purchased from Spectra Film and Video in North Hollywood, California. Spectra loads the Ektachrome 100D into the Super-8 cartridges themselves.)

Focusing turned out to be a simple task. The camera employs a prism screen rangefinder — a small circular grid in the center of the viewfinder.

When either the image as seen through the grid looks in sharp focus, or the image outside the area of the grid looks in focus, you have focus. I always found this to be a quicker, simpler way to manage the focusing issue than the split-image system found on the majority of movie cameras.

When shooting the first roll I questioned whether the light meter was faulty. It seemed that no matter how little light there was, the meter showed plenty. And on an overcast day with 100D, the reading was down to f/16 even at 24 frames per second! I never considered the 814 to be a

low-light or XL camera, and it wasn't advertised as such even though the f/1.4 lens is on the fast side (many silent cameras at the time the original Canon 814 was sold were equipped with f/1.8 lenses, and the later XL Super-8 cameras offered f/1.2 lenses for low or "existing light" filming.) But this Pro814 was registering plenty of light even when some of my XL cameras would have balked. This was why I questioned the light meter's accuracy. But when the film came back from Dwayne's Photo in

Kansas, every shot, and I mean every shot, was perfectly exposed. From early morning sunrises to rainy days to dusk — it just didn't seem to matter to this baby. In fact, I don't remember my Canon 814 of previous years (long sold) having this incredible low-light capability. Doesn't make sense to me, but the facts (or images) speak for themselves.

On the last page of the Pro814 manual, there is a paragraph headlined "Helpful Tips." It is actually one tip and the tip is this: the exposure can become unstable when shooting at f/16 or higher and the recommendation is to not shoot at that f/stop,

but to use a neutral density filter to make the aperture open to a lower numbered f/stop. I only had a very few shots at the f/16 range and did not notice a problem, but will take Pro8mm's word on this and would suggest not pushing one's luck, especially beyond the f/16 range.

Another amazing thing about the Pro814 is its automatic exposure system. As a general rule I have lived my life avoiding automatic exposures at all cost. It will give a film the look of an amateur production quicker than anything else. Why? The automatic exposure will try to compensate when moving from a dark area to a light

area (or vice versa) such as when panning and will nearly always overcompensate causing the image to be too bright or too dark until the sensor finds just the right spot. So the picture has that "home movie look" of being overexposed for a second, then underexposed for a second, then finally getting it right. Not so with the Pro814. The automatic exposure is incredible, adjusting smoothly and not overcompensating during significant light changes.

This fact and the facts that the images were steady and sharp while the camera was easy to use and capable of being shot at any ASA speed in almost any lighting condition make the Pro814 a natural for any wedding videographer wanting to inject some Super-8 into their client's work. Just using Ektachrome 100D for outdoor work, and a 200T, 250T, or 500T negative stock for indoor work would give anyone ample shooting opportunities for great wedding event coverage (not even mentioning the creative possibilities that could be discovered using Plus-X or Tri-X black & white stocks).

I love my Pro814 — it's just that simple, and it is fast becoming my Super-8 camera of choice, especially for filming on the run. Still, something really should be done about that annoyingly small rubber eyepiece. Even if a better eyepiece were sold as an optional accessory, I would gladly buy one. With all things considered, however, is the Pro814 worth the \$795 price? You bet it is. This is one solid, rugged, easy to use, fun camera that takes outstanding movies. ■

*The Pro814 camera is available at:
Pro8mm in Burbank, California
Phone: 818-848-5522
www.pro8mm.com*

