

We're back to the original style of the newsletter with only a single column. Some felt the columns of the previous issue were too formal in look and others didn't like the readability. Personally, I like the single column, because it's easier to place images than having to deal with formatting two columns. The flow of a single column also mimics the look of the old website. I guess I was trying too hard to make the newsletter look like a real newsletter instead of as an informal collection of comments and quick reviews. I'll try and keep in mind the KISS rule.

In this issue:

- Some comments about what came out of Photokina
- More ramblings about photography in the renamed Photography Bites section (a play on words that is as much about quick, bite-sized comments, as it is a sometime opinion about the state of photography)
- Usage report on the Bigma...Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens with the Canon 5D3 and 5D2

I was also going to discuss the usage of the Meade DS-2000 telescope mount for panning time-lapse photography, but I need more time with this accessory before I can write about it.

You may find that some of the articles in this issue repeat some themes and comments. I didn't sit down and write 30-plus pages all at once, with the articles spread out from September to November. Hence, some of the articles revisit various thoughts inside my head during that period.

As we are closing out 2012, I'll wish everyone a Merry Christmas, Hanukkah, Bodhi, Winter Solstice, Pancha Ganapati, Kwanzaa, and a Happy New Year...assuming the world is still here after December 21, when the Mayan calendar cycle comes to an end...

Photokinalooza

With all that's been happening in 2012, an Olympic and Photokina year, it seems that we are experiencing a tyranny of choices, especially in the mirrorless segment of the market. I prefer having more choices, but admit that the water has become muddy from the days when we had only a few options. There's a product to pretty much cover every price and feature point, including some that are as brazenly insulting as the asking price is high.

Lots of new gear and developments from this year's big show in Cologne. From the expected (new Nikon, Canon and Panasonic cameras) to the unexpected (Sony RX1), as well as pleasant (high-end lens makers developing new optics) and not so pleasant (Hasselblad) surprises.

This year's Photokina had a buzz and a vibe that previous shows didn't have. It seemed like every major brand had a significant product (or two or three) to roll out, but I think overall, Sony stole the show.

Sony-stravaganza

Sony is on a roll. What the company is doing with its SLTs (as opposed to SLRs) is worth watching to determine if Sony is ahead of its time, or still trying to find some traction against the duopoly of Nikon and Canon.

The new A99 was the obvious debutante, but then out of nowhere came probably the biggest surprise of the show, the RX1. The main Sony rumor site posted information about the RX1 mere days before Photokina and the specs seemed so good to be true that most people considered it a last minute hoax. Then came the official rollout and jaws dropped, not only for the camera itself, but also for the price of USD \$2,800.

If I overlook the specifics of any one camera offered by Sony and look at the overall picture, I cannot help but be impressed with what Sony is trying to accomplish.

For example, with the RX100, Sony has finally created the digicam so many pros and enthusiasts have long asked for, but have long been ignored by Nikon and Canon. Let's hope that Nikon and Canon are a little faster on the RX100 trend than they've been for mirrorless.



With the SLTs, Sony is pushing the leading edge of the seemingly inevitable adoption of EVFs by everyone. For what it offers, the A99 seems to be reasonably priced...or, at least reasonable compared to the overpriced Canon 5D3.

With the RX1, there is finally a compact sized camera offering a high-resolution, full frame sensor. Mated to a Zeiss-branded (but probably Sony designed) lens, there is promise of superb image quality. Not to forget the mirrorless segment, everyone and their dog seems enamoured by the NEX-7 and new NEX-6 and their ability to mount just about any lens under the sun.

When you combine all that, you finally have one brand that is making some serious products in all categories of interest to serious and even pro photographers. Looking a bit more closely at each product and maybe we can quibble here and there.

With the RX100, some users aren't convinced that the 1-inch sensor really offers 20 MP of resolution. Lloyd Chambers suggests 8 MP of true resolution, which is quite a letdown, but for a pocketable, take anywhere camera, still pretty darn good. Would you rather take 8 real MP from the RX100, or would you take 14 MP from any of the other digicams available on the market? I think the choice is easy, don't you?

My friend Oleg, pointed out the questionable resolution of the RX100 to me before Lloyd Chambers posted his comments. After some scrutinizing using the comparative image tool at DPReview, I have to agree that at pixel level, the RX100 files look softer and less detailed than other cameras. In fairness though, I was using cameras with larger sensors such as the Olympus OM-D and Canon 5D3. It's a tough comparison to make because the only other cameras using 1-inch sensors are the Nikon 1 series, but they have lowish 10 MP resolution (the 14 MP V2 being too new to have any test photos available). As Oleg has an RX100 now, I look forward to his future review (no pressure now Oleg) and see if he finally found his Goldilocks compact camera.

While the NEX bandwagon long departed before I ever knew that there was a bandwagon, I'm not chasing after it (although I do like the NEX-6). I'm not one for mounting lenses older than me onto a 21st Century digital camera...not that I have any other than the Canon 50mm f1.4 from my father's old FTb. *That said, with an evil grin on my face, I have to admit to having some intrigue in getting some use from my dusty Bronica lenses – adapters are available to mount those old Bronisaur on Canon EOS cameras.*

Being a Canon, Nikon *and* Panasonic user, I have no desire to buy into yet another system that I won't be able to afford to build out, e.g., my languishing Panasonic M4/3 kit. Rather than try to build a Sony NEX (or any other mirrorless system), why don't I spend the money on my existing Panasonic kit (rhetorical question)? Contradictions aside, if I come across a deal I cannot refuse I may just indulge my inner consumer and continue my own stimulus spending, financial consequences (wife) be damned.

For the SLTs and the use of EVFs, personally, I think EVF resolution and quality needs to increase much higher than what Sony is using for the new A99 before the pro segment will accept it over optical viewfinders (at least 2x and even maybe 4x better resolution). However, the acceptance by working pros can be hastened if focus tracking and frame rate significantly improves thanks to the use of an EVF and the elimination of the mirror box and mechanical shutter.

The way things are trending, I have to wonder at what point do we stop shooting "stills" and just shoot high-resolution video and pull frames from that video stream for stills purposes. Certainly, this isn't ideal with current video resolution, but what about with 8K video? Before you laugh, 8K video was already used at the London Olympics. We're obviously a long ways before we ever need 8K video quality, but

this is the future and as we've seen with digital still photography, the future can arrive a lot sooner than expected.

Michael Reichmann at the Luminous Landscape probably received plenty of vitriol from Sony users after he lamented Sony's decision to discard the optical viewfinders used in Sony's previous A900 and A850 SLRs, in favour of the EVF for the A99. Plenty of users claim the imminent superiority of an EVF over an OVF thanks to the ability to pre-chimp before capturing the exposure. Same benefit with tweaking the exposure.

This is a "get it right during the exposure" argument versus tweaking all parameters during postproduction in Lightroom or another RAW conversion app. But, an EVF is essentially the same as the LCD on the back of the camera, just smaller and more contained so that we don't have ambient light contaminating our view.

Can an EVF showing a signal direct from the sensor (just like an LCD in LiveView mode) really show what the RAW file will look like pre-capture? Or, is it just showing you what the embedded JPEG file in the RAW file will look like, just like what we see on the LCD when reviewing a file right after capture?

My experience with EVFs is very limited (Panasonic GF1) and I wouldn't go by what my eyes see from a relatively cheap and low resolution EVF. My take is that the A99 is a transitory camera; one that's not quite good enough to supplant OVFs, but good enough to show us the future.

Looking at the A99 more closely and largely ignoring the video features (which I have little to no use for, despite what all the gurus otherwise suggest) the A99 appears very similar to the Canon 5D3. Similar frame rate, resolution, build quality, etc.



I expect that the A99's sensor will be better than the 5D3 for shadow detail and banding when pushing an exposure (Sony sensors are being lauded mightily thanks to what Nikon has achieved with its recent SLRs, although, the sensor is not the whole story, as the ASIC is also very important, e.g. Expeed, Bionz, Digic). On the other hand, Canon's lens selection is the best available in 35mm format and there's no indication that Sony will offer more super telephoto lenses or even one tilt/shift lens.

The A99 looks like a great camera, but doesn't offer enough (at least to me) to warrant a switching of brands. For Sony to get the attention of the pros, which will trickle down to the enthusiasts and the masses, Sony has to produce products demonstrably superior to the two majors. Sony did that with the RX100, which is selling very well to meet pent-up demand for such a camera amongst many photographers, but the A99? I can't see it selling well to anyone other than existing Sony users.



Looking at the RX1 and after getting past the wow factor, I wonder about the price. The camera is going to list at \$2,800, which is significantly less than what Leica charges, but that's hardly a practical comparison (don't Leica camera straps cost more). Sony doesn't have the historical cachet of the Leica name and the (overblown) mystique even if the RX1's lens has the Zeiss name on it (I'm as dubious about this as I am about those so-called Leica lenses on Panasonic cameras).

There are some key features missing:

1. No viewfinder, but Sony is quite happy to sell you an electronic one for \$600...more than what Nikon charges for the same resolution D3200 camera...that's an entire camera...and Nikon will throw in a serviceable 18-55 lens!
2. No lens mount. Yes, I know mating a sensor directly to a purpose-made lens is ideal, but for this kind of money, a lens mount with a small collection of "classic" focal lengths could have been killer. As in Leica killer. Sony could have cleaned up if they thought about this a bit more, with the NEX series in the entry to mid level and the RX series in the high end. Separating the lens from the camera also means better entry price points for people intrigued, but put off by the cost of the RX1, its potential limitations and its expensive accessories. However, I expect that a lens interchangeable version of the RX-1 is already waiting in the wings.

That aside, I do like what Sony has accomplished and I think it's better that Sony offers the RX1, even at a high cost, than to not offer it. Like the RX100, I'm thinking of this more from the perspective of giving a slap to Nikon and Canon.

For primarily financial reasons, other than the RX100, I'm not drawn to the new Sony offerings. However, if I were a Sony user, I'd be quite ecstatic to know that Sony is taking its photography business very seriously and willing to take risks. This is counter to the conservative approach of Nikon and Canon, where real innovations seem like once-a-decade moments.

That's not to say that Nikon and Canon aren't producing compelling products. The D800, even with its focusing issues, is a homerun product that could spell the demise of the medium format industry, as we know it. Hopefully, Nikon and Canon get a clue and wake up from their status quo as the Sony wolf is knocking on the door. Time will tell if Nikon and Canon are the two little pigs hiding in huts made from hay and sticks. If I did not already have an investment in Nikon and Canon, Sony would definitely be a candidate for me to build a new system.

Canon user angst

On odd occasions, I'll peruse the comments at various websites to see what users are saying. Reading the CanonRumors forums sees just as much angst about what Canon is or is not doing relative to Nikon or other brands, as Nikon users bitch and whine on their own forums.

Some Nikon users hate that there is no true D700 replacement, as the D800 is a new category and the D600 is too consumer for them. They want a camera that can compete head-to-head against the Canon 5D3, and now, the Sony A99.

Conversely, Canon users want a camera that can go toe-to-toe with the D800. Some complain about Canon's penchant to reiterate the same 18 MP sensor from

the Rebel T2i to the T4i to the EOS-M, to the 60D, and the 7D. Maybe it's not really the same sensor used in all these cameras, but it sure seems that way. The point is, Canon does not seem to be innovating as it once did with its sensors (remember, Canon was first with low-noise, CMOS sensors and pushing the high-resolution envelope).

Rumours abound that Canon will eventually introduce a high-resolution SLR of its own, one that will surpass the D800's 36 MP. But, the rumours are nebulous and can't pinpoint whether it will be a 1D model or a new line known as the 3D. Obviously, most users are hoping for a 3D model, which will more or less be a 5D3 with a high-resolution sensor.

They want a 3D for the obvious reason that Canon will charge an arm and a leg for a high resolution 1D series SLR. Recall that it was Canon that introduced the ridiculous \$8,000 price tag for its 1Ds line, which Nikon followed suit with the D3X and Leica dittoed with the M8 and M9. And, let's not forget that the 1Dx and 5D3 bumped up the price quite a bit over their predecessors. To be fair, Nikon did the same for the D4, but not as much as Canon's premium for the 1Dx, and Nikon very pleasantly surprised by pricing the D800 quite reasonably for what it offers.



With the D600 introduction, the rumour of a 6D with similar specs and pricing came out and Canon user angst was aghast at what is regarded as a me-too product. The rumoured and eventually confirmed 6D specs are, more or less, the old 5D2 in a 60D style body. In other words, something new, but not really new, for the sake of having something "new." And, while the D600 became available almost immediately after announcement, the 6D will barely arrive in time for the Christmas shopping season.

The naming designation also rubbed users the wrong way. Single digit EOS SLRs (5D and 7D) cater to pros and very serious enthusiasts (I really hate the term, serious amateur). Users are offended that a 60D (or, more insultingly, a Rebel-quality body) with a full frame sensor should be elevated to the exalted status of a single digit EOS.

And, you thought Nikon users can be a bitchy bunch :-)

On the lens front, many Canon users are getting sticker shock from the prices demanded from Canon for the newest lenses. The 24-70 f2.8 II looks like it's the best of the medium range zoom lenses, but it costs dearly for that performance. The recently announced 24-70 f4 is also causing heart palpitations for its high price, as are the new prime lenses with IS motors.

It certainly appears to be a trend by Canon to move upmarket with a clear class distinction to separate Rebel and kit lens users from serious enthusiasts willing (with many curses emanating from their mouths) to shell out the big bucks for overpriced SLRs and L lenses. With all that, it's intriguing to me, a Canon user by circumstance than by choice, to observe what goes on with the two brands I follow most closely.

With Nikon being a much smaller company, there was always the excuse that Nikon didn't have the money and capacity to really dominate the photographic world more than it did. Although, it does very well compared to its much larger competitors and when matched up directly to the competitors' photo divisions, Nikon isn't actually a small player. Only against the overall size of huge conglomerates like Samsung, Sony, Canon and Panasonic is Nikon a small company, because Nikon basically has two major business units, photography and steppers (precision machines used to fabricate computer chips). No TVs, no audio equipment, no phones, no appliances, no computers, etc. Nikon and Leica are probably the purest photography-centric companies amongst the major brands.

Canon, by being much bigger and by being number one for market share, you would think can afford to be more aggressive. That certainly seemed the case for most of the last decade, but not so much since about 2007 when the D3 came out and then Canon seemed to be in constant catch-up mode.

The EOS-M has little imagination, both the 7D and 60D are getting long in the tooth and the Rebel line is nothing more than just using the same sensor, in the same body, with a few minor touches (flip screen, touch screen). And, just as Nikon has been slow to update various lenses, so too is Canon.

Canon's pricing strategy also seems screwed up. I already mentioned the \$8,000 price threshold broken by Canon, but the increase in cost for the 5D3 seems like nothing more than a cash grab. *As I type these thoughts out in late November, I've*

seen postings that some US retailers are starting to sell the 5D3 for under \$3,000. About time!

Nikon offers a lot of bang for the buck in the D800 (maybe even the D600), but as I've repeated before, the D800 is not a direct competitor to the 5D3. However, the Sony A99 is and it comes in at \$2,800, compared to the current \$3,500 cost of the 5D3 in Canada. And, how about that EOS M, offering a four year old, 18 MP sensor in a stripped down Rebel shell, for \$800?

It's been said by some that Canon and Nikon only pay attention to and mimic each other, including pricing for similar types of products. Thom Hogan noted that the rumoured price of the 6D was consistently around \$2,300...until the D600 was announced. If Canon really wanted to get its mojo back and give a slap to its archrival, the 6D should be reduced in price to \$1,500. But, at \$2,100, Canon confirms that it only wants to do what is necessary to preserve the status quo.

Hmm...I seem to be griping about Canon a bit too much myself.

Nikon

The D600 looks great for those wanting a full frame SLR at a more real world price. Pricier than I'd like (Nikon should have gone for the Canon jugular by pricing it at \$1,500), but it wasn't so long ago that spending \$2,000 on a 24 MP FX camera was a pipe dream. So, what the hell happened that caused some Nikon users to bitch and whine?



First, the D600 is still not a true replacement for a D700. It's not built like a D700. It's not fast like a D700 and honestly, it's not meant to be a D700 replacement. In the same way that the D3200 surprises by offering 24 MP DX for a very low cost, we now have an equivalent FX model (without quite the bang for the buck of the D3200). But, let's not forget that the D600 comes in substantially lower than what the D700 sold for when it was still current.

That's not to say that I don't feel the pain of those who got spoiled by what the D700 is about and had expected Nikon to continue to offer a superb, fast, pro quality SLR for much less than pro prices. I hope for the same too, so that Nikon has a clear competitor to the Canon 5D3 and the Sony A99.

But, for those that have the D700, are you really hard done by in not having an obvious upgrade body yet? Is your D700 putting on that many shutter actuations that you need to consider a replacement?

For those that never bought a D700, but wanted too (me included), why didn't you buy when you wanted or needed? Never mind that I'm going through the same thing again with the D800.

Post Photokina, Nikon finally unveiled the replacement for the Nikon 1 V1, with the V2. One word...fugly!

It looks like a Sony NEX with a bulky external viewfinder mounted on top, but the V2 looks more ungainly. I would have preferred that the V1 design and style been kept but with improved ergonomics. It's good that Nikon is finally starting to flesh out the 1 system with more lenses, but it still seems like not enough.

While increasing the resolution to 14 MP is good, if rumors hold true of new Panasonic and Olympus cameras coming in 2013 with built-in EVFs, it's best for me to hold tight in what is now a buyer's market in the mirrorless segment.



Goldilocks

I mostly like what Fuji is doing with the X series, albeit, I wished the prices were lower (my constant lament). Of the three X series cameras, the newest X-E1 is the Goldilocks camera, as referred by some denizens of the online photographic community.

The X100 is too limiting while the X-Pro1 is too...*using our best Gollum voice*...precious. Size wasn't what dismayed me about the X-Pro1, it was the cost for the camera.

I think the X-E1 is still a bit too much and it's not as attractive as I'd like as far as the faux rangefinder look is concerned - I do find it weird not seeing a rangefinder window on the front of the camera. Still, it's nice to have another option from Fuji, but I'd wait on the purchase given Fuji's history with needing firmware updates to fix its cameras. I think every camera produced in the X line has had issues crop up that needed a major firmware update to resolve. No need to be an early beta tester for Fuji.

As previously mentioned, while I like what the X-E1 offers, I'm not interested in investing and trying to build out another incompatible system.

Panasonic

Panasonic surprised no one with the release of the GH-3. More solid, more beefy, more capable and more money too, but not too much more over the GH-2.



You can take your NEX cameras with its meagre selection of lenses, and, don't speak to this fella about promiscuously mounting any and all sundry lenses like a lady of the night beckoning any and all males with her wares and charm (although, you can do this with M4/3 cameras too, if you desire).

If I want to build a serious system to supplement the big Canon or Nikon kits, M4/3 is that system. The Olympus OM-D is intriguing but I must be one of the few that sees it as a somewhat ugly design, but the GH-3 is da bomb! Yah, I know the GH-3 is just a smaller SLR, but there's a reason why the current SLR gestalt has endured for almost 40 years; it's proven and it works!

Looking at some size comparisons between the GH-3 and the OM-D, the OM-D is remarkably svelte, but perhaps too much so. There has to be a reason why RRS would go to the trouble of producing an accessory grip for the OM-D, which puts the GH-3's higher price and larger size in better perspective – you don't need an accessory grip with the GH-3 (not to be confused with a vertical grip).

Beyond the camera and more importantly, the lenses from Panasonic are da bomb! You got your spectacularly wide 7-14mm f4 zoom, 12-35mm f2.8 normal zoom, and now the 35-100mm f2.8 zoom. You can fit the entire package in a fanny pack. Adding in a macro lens and/or 100-300 super telephoto won't add much more to the weight and size. I can't think of a more ideal system for hiking and trekking in places where a full sized 35mm system will weigh you down with every step up a tall and steep hill.

I admit that I have difficulty accepting M4/3 as a replacement for an FX system, however what Panasonic is doing, is slowly tearing down those prejudices. To the point that like some other users, I don't have much interest in DX anymore...at least not DX in its current offerings. Sony is on the right track with the NEX series and Canon too if it prices the EOS-M more realistically and fleshes and improves the system.

Thom Hogan has recently suggested that Nikon and Canon ignore DX at their peril since the two earn the bulk of their sales and revenues from DX SLRs. However, for those of us who have migrated to FX, DX is no longer compelling. Sure, a high resolution, well-built DX SLR is still a good choice as a backup to an FX-based system, but how many of us really (I mean, **really**) need a backup to an FX-based system. Why not go with something that fills the gap elsewhere in your photo kit?

The IQ of the Olympus OM-D (and I assume with the GH-3, possibly using the same sensor) rivals that of good DX. There are also a lot more small lens options for M4/3 than there are for DX. While I wouldn't forego FX, others who don't need or want FX can build a pretty solid M4/3 kit. Say a GH-3 for the "serious" photography, an Olympus E-PL5 or Panasonic GX1 for light duty photos and an Olympus E-PM2 for compactness. All three can use the same lenses and offer the same resolution, so no fretting about which system or format to use.

Hasselblad

This has to be the biggest joke of the year for photography. Let me see if I got this right...A European camera maker, now on the fringes of the market, is going to partner up with a Japanese brand, to source OEM cameras and lenses and re-brand them after making some funky, custom mods to the body...all for a grossly huge premium to what the Japanese company sells its products for?

And, seriously, Leica is *not* actually involved in this venture? Could have fooled me since Leica does the same with Panasonic cameras; however, we're talking about Hasselblad, once the dominant player in medium format for North American photographers. Now, a company that's priced itself out of relevance given what Pentax did with the 645D and then Nikon with the D800 (not to mention closing off its cameras to third party backs).

Hasselblad will first start with a Sony NEX-7 and pimp it up with Swedish bling and sell you a \$1,200 camera and lens combo for \$5,400. What...the...f@#\$!



I don't think even Leica was ever so insulting to its users to mark up a Panasonic camera by that kind of margin (but, it's Leica, so you never know – I try not to pay attention, because my nose starts to bleed whenever Leica is mentioned).

I suppose this is something that Hasselblad feels it must do in order to remain a relevant photography brand. However, how crass is it to think that there are that many stupid people from the Far East, who will be willing to pay extravagant prices just because a Sony camera will be pimped with the Hasselblad name?

Forgive my pettiness, but if this venture flops, I'm going to enjoy the schadenfreude that comes with it.

Zeiss and Schneider

Thanks to the growing numbers of relatively affordable, higher resolution SLRs (5Dx, 6D, D600, D800, and A99), there is an understanding that you can't just use any old and cheap lens with those cameras.

While the main brands do offer excellent lenses, there's always a lingering doubt whether the Japanese companies have truly put 100% into a lens design. Not so much with the Germans though and now we have two leading companies announcing that they will start making premium optics.



German lenses also mean very high prices, but as with the Sony RX1, I'm happy to see more choices available even if I won't be able to afford any. I like seeing companies pushing the envelope for state of the art performance, which is also why I enjoy reading about \$100,000 speakers and amplifiers in Stereophile magazine (check out the Dar-T-Zeel 458 amps from Switzerland and Wilson Alexandria speakers from the USA).

What I don't enjoy is seeing companies make solidly good, not necessarily exceptional products and pricing them above where the IQ should dictate. This means the Sony NEX series, Fuji X series, Nikon 1 and Canon EOS-M. Fine products for sure, but at the end of the day and for the costs, are they really any better than good DX cameras available at lower cost?

Photography Bites

EVFs

It seems inevitable that all SLRs are going to end up using electronic viewfinders. Pro SLRs are likely to be the last to convert and this probably won't happen for several more years... I'm thinking the D6 is when Nikon will finally move to using an EVF in its flagship SLR.

Get rid of the viewfinder and now we're freed from the hump found at the middle top of SLRs. While, we're at it, how about getting rid of the mirror box...oh, yes, those are called video cameras...

The Sony A99 sets the standard for high resolution EVFs now (although some suggest the lower resolution external Olympus finder is superior due to refresh rate and contrast), but I think they need to get even better before Nikon and Canon risk the ire of their pro users. However, with popular mirrorless cameras such as the Olympus OM-D, Panasonic GH-x, and Sony NEX-7 paving the way, we are slowly accepting EVFs as commonplace.

Beyond photography, I wonder if the basic technology of EVFs could eventually benefit us generally.

You may recall my eye problems from 2009. While my eyes are now stable I'm not getting younger and the usual eye problems that come with age are cropping up. My minimum focusing distance is getting farther and farther away (presbyopia) and my night vision ain't so hot. Ever since the 2009 eye problems, I'm also much more sensitive to bright light and glare, e.g. sunlight, car headlights and reflections.

I wonder if EVF technology, or a variant of it, can help with keeping the eyes from getting saturated with bright light (like sunglasses) yet also help to amp up the light at night (like night vision goggles). Currently, EVFs, as used in the Sony cameras, are brutal for being able to cope with large dynamic range in a scene, but this should improve.

For wearing an EVF on the head, the obvious short-term solution is with something resembling glasses, or maybe the trendier sunglasses with wraparound lenses so that peripheral vision remains intact. Perhaps, something similar, but not as funky, as what Levar Burton wore as Geordi Laforge in *StarTrek, the Next Generation*.

My most recent trip to the optometrist was quite interesting, as I had my good eye scanned and profiled by a new machine. The machine spits out a paper with some figures, which the doctor then inputs into software on his PC. A minute later, a bar chart is shown on the screen showing my eye's measurement for various levels of distortion; the types that are quite familiar in photography, such as coma and different types of aberrations. My eye's coma distortion wasn't quite off the chart, but it was very high compared to the norm, as was some sort of aberration. The

cool thing about doing this type of profiling is that your optician can then take the profile and run it through more software and come up with a truly custom prescription to deal with the distortions.

As it turned out, my optician advised me that even though some distortion was high, it was not enough to make any meaningful difference to my current prescription. Since I was talking to the optician and not knowing the brand of lenses I had for my glasses, I asked about Zeiss lenses. A friend raved about the quality of his Zeiss lenses, made of glass instead of plastic.

It turns out my glasses do use Zeiss lenses, but are made of high impact plastic. When discussing the difference between glass and plastic, the optician suggested that any differences perceived may be more placebo in giving the person a better feeling with glass. Glass is more fragile and heavier, so that has to be weighed against the convenience and durability of plastic; however, plastic can and will scratch if handled roughly and over time, that may be why some people like glass better than plastic.

My eye problems have also made me wonder what might ultimately be possible with stem cell research to fix damaged eyes. With the ability to use adult cells to "create" stem cells, there is no longer an ethical or moral dilemma with using stem cells from foetuses. Need a new retina or optical nerve, use stem cells to "grow" new ones, and with the benefit of no rejection by your body, because the cells came from you in the first place. It's fascinating stuff, even if right now, most of the possibilities talked about seem like science fiction.

I typed most of this piece in late September, but by mid October, I read a news article about a UK woman, who took part in a technology experiment to help her see again. Due to a rare form of macular degeneration, the woman only had about 2-3% vision in her eyes. But, UK researchers used a set of glasses with high definition LCDs that gave her limited vision. Additionally, clinical trials are underway to use stem cells to treat people affected by macular degeneration. As Spock might say, fascinating!

Digicams

A last comment (maybe) about the RX100...The downtown Sony Store got one on the demo table and I checked it out briefly. Impressively small for it's one-inch sensor, and probably half the size of a Nikon V1.

Easily pocketable in a light, spring jacket, or the inside breast pocket of a suit, or even a pair of jeans for those of us wearing larger sizes...is that a Zeiss in your pants, or are you just happy to see me?

For a business trip to Calgary, I brought along my wife's Panasonic GH-1 and 14-140mm lens. This is quite a compact package for a camera and lens that can reach from 28mm to 280mm (35mm equivalent), but one that I still found a bit too big for

the limited space I had in my shoulder bag (carrying my documents, iPad and sundry accessories). An RX100 would have been ideal, but not that I was able to do much exploring of Calgary and get any nice photos; the city also isn't the most exciting architecturally.

I expect that by next summer, as much as I'm not keen on the class, I'll end up owning another digicam. Whether it ends up being in lieu of an RX100 or as a supplement to it, I'm not sure yet, as I hold out hope that more companies will offer digicams using the one-inch sensor.



Why am I considering a digicam? During a July camping trip to Manning Park in the southern interior of BC, I spent an afternoon canoeing with the kids. Not my first time in a canoe, but there's always trepidation of setting oneself down in what seems like a highly unstable boat. After a few minutes remembering which side to paddle to go in which direction, the comfort level rises. No pictures of us in the canoe though, as I dared not risk bringing anything of value, including the cameras and my wallet (my wife stayed on shore to watch over the gear).

My oldest daughter was in the bow helping to paddle while I was in the stern. My youngest daughter and son were in the middle enjoying the ride (my oldest son stayed with relatives to play summer hockey back in civilization). When the lake is calm, paddling a canoe is quite enjoyable. When the wind picks up, like it did for us, I exerted a lot of effort to try and get us back to the dock, but always seemed to go nowhere, or even worse, to go backwards. Like Pope John Paul II used to kiss the ground after disembarking from an airplane, I felt like kissing the dock when we finally got back on shore while cursing the wind blowing across the lake.



Later on in August, a brother-in-law took his family to Vancouver Island. He also went canoeing with his son, who wanted to help dad paddle the boat. Unfortunately, the boy's a bit small and can't reach the side without being all the way over on his seat. So, he lurches over to the side that he wants to paddle and ends up overturning the canoe. Into the drink, both went along with the cell phone and camera.

It's not a huge loss, but it reinforced in my mind that I don't have a camera suitable for the wet and wild. I don't mean being caught in the rain without a plastic cover, but fully submerged in water for many seconds or even minutes.

I don't need a camera suitable for scuba diving to great depths so, a consumer digicam rated for 10 feet is more than sufficient. About four years ago, some of the major brands introduced "tough" cameras rated to survive falls, pressure and submerging in water at some depth. They sound like they might even survive in the hands of children.

I didn't think too much about them at the time, although I did get to sample three models from Canon, Fuji and Olympus. The Canon looked like it could survive a nuclear blast, but was bulbously thick and ugly. The Fuji was the most compact, but didn't seem to have any remarkable features. The Olympus had a stylish look and seemed the best of the three I tried.



The downside to all three was the limited zoom range of the lens, which is understandable given the water sealing required, preventing any good range. I didn't feel taken with any of the three to buy one for myself, but now seems like a good time to revisit this class and see what's available. The Nikon AW100 seems to have received decent reviews, so it's a benchmark of sorts as I explore some more.



Have your eyes burnt out from the saturation of the nature photos? My apologies for my irrational exuberance for garish looking colors. I don't think the green I inflicted on the photos actually exist in nature...

Upgrading and high ISO

So much user angst seems to revolve around upgrades. Should I upgrade now or wait? More seasoned commentators suggest that upgrading is a sucker's game and that you should focus on being a better photographer with your current gear.

I haven't stopped spending money on photography, as issue one of the newsletter made clear, but I've not been in any big upgrade cycle for my Nikon gear. I haven't bought a new Nikon SLR or lens since selling the D300 and 70-200 several years ago. I'm still chugging away on the same PC built in, geez, I can't even remember now...maybe 2007.

Editing in Lightroom on my aging computer is okay for a small volume of photos, but going through hundreds of photos just reminds me of how decrepit my computer is and how slow it is in editing 22 MP files. At some point, I have to do something about the computer and either upgrade from HDD to SSD or get a completely new computer outright: something that's much harder to obtain approval from the wife now that I no longer have any "business" activities.

I haven't bought anything more to support the Panasonic M4/3 cameras from 2009, even though I should be adding more lenses, if not a new camera with better IQ. Some US retailers, such as Amazon and B&H were blowing out the Panasonic GF-3 with a 14mm lens for pretty good prices (less than USD \$300). Unfortunately, those blow-out prices never seem to materialize up in Canada.

The lowest price I found locally for the GF-3 with 14mm lens, was CAD \$479 (USD and CAD are near par as I write this). The 14mm lens is nearly \$400 on its own in Vancouver, so you could consider the kit, as paying less than \$100 for the camera. I considered it quite seriously, since it would get me a moderately wide-angle lens for my Panasonic kit. The GF-3 is also quite compact for a lens-changeable system camera, being even smaller than my old GF1.

In the end, I decided to hold off since I already spent more than what I should have on photo gear this year. And, there's the hope of more digicams to come using the new 1-inch sensor size, as Aptina, the fabricator for the sensors used in the Nikon 1 cameras, is making noises that more brands are interested in the larger sensor. This could be a revival of the moribund digicam market, which seemed to have gone into a slow death spiral thanks to smartphones supplanting the digicam.

Rumors also indicate new cameras from Olympus and Panasonic that may follow the style of the Sony NEX-6, which will finally offer a built-in EVF in an E-Px or GFx type of camera. This is the segment that my next camera will likely come from..

Some users eschew the upgrade cycle for digital, because they don't need the constant iterating of the same old thing over and over again. And, neither do they need features, such as being able to set ISO 1 million (I'm looking at you Oleg ☺). Neither do I, but I will gladly welcome the cameras that break this seemingly ludicrous ISO setting.

Currently, we are at ISO 102,400 from the best Nikon and Canon SLRs. To breach the ISO 1 million setting, we need just over three stops of improvement. What's your guess? Ten years maybe, to get true ISO 1 million instead of merely ISO 100k underexposed by a few stops then processed in-camera to look like it were actually ISO 1 million?

I've made the point a few times on the old website: desiring super high ISO is not because we want to be able to photograph a coal mine as if it were lit by the blazing noon sun. It's because the lower ISO settings will be superbly clean.

Where do I see the upper limit for my photography? ISO 25,600 is that upper limit, but I want that ISO 25k to look like ISO 100 with all the advantages that ISO 100 accrues for detail, contrast, color and dynamic range. As we bump up the ISO setting, we start to lose the fidelity in all these facets of our photos.

Why did I select ISO 25k? Based on my current settings for photographing hockey, ISO 3200 gets me a shutter speed of 1/1000 at the local rink (f2.8 aperture). ISO 25k allows me to stop down to a more optimal aperture of f5.6 while keeping the shutter speed well above 1/1000. It's not that I would always use f5.6, but it would be very nice to have that choice and extra margin for depth of field and optical quality.

The Nikon D4 offers ISO 102,400 equivalent, but based on what I've seen of test or sample photos, to my eyes, the D4 has an effective practical ISO limit of 6400. This still requires noise reduction in postproduction, just as I need to do with the 5D3 or 5D2 files in Lightroom, before I print or give the file to others. I want ISO 6400 or 12,800 that require little to no noise reduction. This is why I want sensor makers to continue pushing physics and the edge of the art to hit ISO 1 million: that doing so will result in commensurate benefits to the lower, more practical and realistic ISO settings.

It may have been discussed before (by me or by others), but how come sensor makers cannot fabricate a sensor with a native high ISO sensitivity? If most sensors have a native sensitivity between ISO 100-200, why can't we have one with a native sensitivity of ISO 1600 or 3200?

The Canon 5D3's low ISO is 100, so any ISO setting above this is amplifying that low, native sensitivity. ISO 3200 is a five-stop push – whenever I reference ISO 3200 for my hockey photos, you should also be aware of the +1 compensation I need to set to compensate for the large expanse of ice seen in all the photos. The +1 push also helps to move the histogram to the right and thanks to RAW capture, there is still more headroom available once in Lightroom. Pushing the histogram as far to the right as possible helps to keep noise as low as possible with such a high ISO setting.

After writing off DX format in favour of FX and mirrorless, let's look at where I might be headed from all the choices available, including:

- Canon EOS-M – looks like the worse of the lot even if it has an okay (aging) 18 MP DX sensor
- Fuji X-E1 – I like the classic rangefinder style and friendlier price over the X-1 Pro; would be yet another system to invest in
- Nikon 1 V2 – fugly but with the adapter, could use my existing Nikon lenses

- Olympus OM-D EM-5 – to me, not a particularly good looking camera, but not fugly like the Nikon V2; perhaps too compact though and may require expensive RRS grip and L-plate for comfortable handling
- Olympus E-PL5 – has the same sensor as the OM-D but possibly with no anti-aliasing filter; lower cost than the OM-D, but no viewfinder, which adds another \$300 for the good external EVF
- Panasonic GX-1 – getting dated now, but available for nice price as a successor camera is expected soon; no viewfinder, so another costly option to make the camera fully functional
- Panasonic GH-3 – new, state of the art M4/3 camera; traditional SLR ergonomics (good, in my view); tougher, weather sealed body; not cheap, but I think fair for all that it offers
- Sony NEX 6 or 7 – so many praises that there has to be something about the system; but would be yet another system to invest in and something nags me about the various comments describing the NEX-7's URL

With rumours of new Panasonic and Olympus cameras coming with built-in EVFs, the smart money says, wait, until sometime in 2013 for this segment to fully flesh out. As it stands now, the Olympus E-PL5 seems to be the best bang for the buck even with the expense of an external EVF.

In Canada, the Nikon V1 is finally starting to be discounted (\$400 with the kit zoom lens) to make way for the V2 and is a dark horse contender.



Photographic zero

On the old website, I wrote regularly about taking photos of my oldest playing hockey. I slowed down a little bit the last couple of years, but have picked things up again thanks to the Sigma 120-300 lens. I don't care what other people say; new gear *can* make you happy!

For my youngest, I was taking photos of only him during his practices, but that changed at the end of October, as I started to take photos of all the other kids in this first year group. What prompted this was a parents meeting led by the minor hockey coordinator for our first year players.

Our coordinator has mainly an administrative responsibility, but he also takes the lead in coaching the kids and mentoring the new parent/coaches on the ice (30 plus years of coaching experience).

During the parents meeting, the coordinator discussed parent volunteer roles and mentioned photos. For parents who are taking photos of the kids, could they please burn the photos to a disc and share the files with the rest of the parents. Maybe even create photo books...music to my ears.



Now, I'm not exactly Mr. Sports Illustrated. I think I'm competent (from an amateur's perspective) and that's about it, but throw in a little bit of knowledge about exposing for hockey photos plus editing in Lightroom, and I'm quite confident that my photos are going to look better than any of the other parents.

With the quality of equipment I'm using, that had better damn well hold true too, although I have seen a couple of parents using Canon SLRs and 70-200 zoom lenses too. A giveaway about their photographic knowledge however, is seeing them use the pop-up flash of their cameras...

Last summer, when my oldest was playing summer hockey, I overheard a couple of the fathers on the team talking about photographing hockey. I've seen one of them using a Nikon SLR and the 70-200 f2.8 lens, but always with the pop-up flash.

He was being asked by the other parent about how to take hockey photos and he replied that you need a fast lens and you "must" use flash because it's the only way to freeze motion. A little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing...

I spent a few weekends trying to take photos of all the kids to have enough variety and to have enough sharp, in-focus photos to give to the other parents. Over the years, my standards have gone up. What I might have accepted as being "good enough" back in the day when I used the D200, D300 and even the 5D2, I delete today. This includes photos marred by too slow of a shutter speed, marginally in focus (skates sharp, face not), and anything else that doesn't pass muster when I review in Lightroom.

After a couple of shooting sessions, I thought I had photos of every kid and confirmed the total number of kids in the group (30 kids) with the parent volunteering as the division manager. As I started editing and sorting the photos, to my chagrin, I counted only 25 kids from the hundreds of photos taken. It wouldn't be right to burn a disc and not have all the kids, so I hauled the gear out for another couple of sessions.

Luckily, three missing kids showed up at the next practice – after reviewing and editing so many photos, I was able to recognize who the missing kids are and biased my coverage for them to ensure quantity and choice. However, I think I'm still missing a couple of kids (not all kids show up to every practice like mine), but I didn't want to delay burning and distributing the discs. I provided a note on the disc that the parents of any missing child can contact me and I'll take more photos.

Parents of first-year hockey players are mostly strangers. It takes a while for people to get to know each other and while the on-ice dads coaching form an immediate bond, there's less of that for parents in the stands. I knew that it would be a weird situation for me to try and give away the discs of photos, so I asked the division manager to send out a note mentioning that I would be doing this. He did so in one of his update emails, however, it's obvious that some parents either forget or didn't pay attention based on some of the reactions I got.

One parent, when I asked if he received a disc (I had already handed out many the day before, so couldn't remember all the parents) paused and looked at the disc before awkwardly saying, ah, yes, I think I did receive a disc. Really? You needed five seconds to think about whether you received a disc while looking at me as if I was offering you some illegal drugs.

Another parent also gave me a confused look and seemed unsure of taking the disc, as in if she accepted I would demand money from her. As the title of this section implies, I felt like a zero after these two interactions even though there should be no reason for that. I did notice that both these parents sat by themselves in the

lobby of the arena instead of sitting in the stands as the other parents do, so they would have never seen me give the discs to the other parents.

I suppose in today's times, it may seem odd that someone would actually go to the trouble of hauling in expensive photo gear to take photos of their kids, then give away the photos, and want nothing in return. Thankfully, the other parents were appreciative and one even offered some money to defer the cost. Of course, I refused.

Photographic hero

I have a nephew who also plays hockey with the local association, so I got up early one Saturday to watch him play a home game, as well as to practice my hockey photography.

My brother-in-law brought along his Canon 30D and an older, non-IS Canon 70-300mm lens (consumer quality, variable aperture, maxed out at f5.6 at 300mm).

He took photos from a space between the team benches while I stayed in the stands but positioned myself in the visiting team's end so that I could take photos of the home team rushing up the ice towards me. I used the Canon 5D3 and Sigma 120-300 lens, handheld.



I took a bit less than 300 frames, most of which were of my nephew, as I tried to get a variety of photos that I could edit/crop to make him look like a superstar (not hard since he's quite a good Atom age player and is captain of the team).

Later that day, I edited the batch down to 70 shots and output them as JPEGs. I selected one shot to print a 16x20 poster and gave that and the CD to my sister-in-law when she popped by the next day for a quick visit.

Later that evening when I met the brother-in-law for a boys' night out to see the newest James Bond film, *Skyfall*, he was thanking me repeatedly for the photos and the poster. He loved the resolution available from the 5D3, as well as the sharpness and clarity that the big Sigma lens offers. His son was stoked by the poster and wants to frame it for his wall. As the title implies and unlike the previous article, I felt like a hero after this experience.

The talk about the photos led to the brother-in-law mentioning the shortcomings of the 30D and the lens he was using and we talked briefly about needing to keep the shutter speed fast to freeze the action. I didn't get technical and we didn't get into what it would cost to get the same kind of photos I took the day before. My brother-in-law isn't the type to move beyond JPEG shooting and won't be investing \$3000 on a lens, or on a camera anytime soon, if ever.

The brief conversation did get me thinking about the age-old debate about equipment and the photographer's skill. Did I get the photos because I've been trying my hand at hockey photography for several years now, or was it the equipment? Of course, it's both.

A camera that can shoot at a fast rate is very beneficial, as is one that offers clean, high ISO quality due to the need to shoot with a fast shutter speed inside a hockey rink (with no roof-mounted strobes, like pros use). In order to keep the shutter speed as fast as possible, you also need a fast lens. It's also good to know enough about exposure to add some compensation to keep the ice looking like ice instead of having it turn grey.

I only know this from trial and error experienced at the beginning of my foray into hockey photography and then from the many thousands of shots taken afterwards. That experience, with the current gear I use, helps me get some nice photos every now and then. However, give me lesser gear and I'm not sure I could get anything worthwhile.

In 2010, I tried using the Panasonic GH-1 with the 14-140 lens for some hockey shots. That experiment lasted all of 10 minutes, because it became painfully obvious that the GH-1 is not an action camera and the 14-140 lens, while having okay reach, is as slow as molasses. If I kept at it, maybe I could have eked out something, but while it would be an interesting personal challenge, it's such a waste of time and effort when better tools are immediately available.

Some people like to suffer as an expression of keeping the process or the art as pure as possible, while others accept technology and advancement to obtain or achieve the desired results as efficiently as possible. Unfortunately, technology and advancement are often not cheap.

Being a Hockey Dad

You'll have to excuse the digressions of a proud hockey dad...

Over seven years, I've watched my oldest son develop while playing minor hockey. At the age of eight and a first-time player, his skating and skills were rudimentary to the point that he was not placed on a team, but instead put into a development program (a mix of power skating and hockey skills) for the entire season. The following year, he was placed on a team and every year has seen improvement.

Before starting high school, he applied for and was accepted into the high school's hockey academy, which is a skills development program for kids wanting to or already playing at rep level hockey.



Instead of taking the regular gym class and an elective course, the hockey academy uses two blocks of class time spent on ice and dry land training. This gives him 2-3 more ice sessions on top of the weekly 2-3 minor hockey games and practice sessions.

As with anything in life, when motivated, the more you practice something, the effect becomes cumulative and you will improve. Compared to most of the other kids playing minor hockey, my son has an advantage because of the extra ice. It does cost money (about a D600 every year for the hockey academy and about a 5D3 when including the costs for minor hockey), but I enjoy seeing my son develop his skills, which produces positive results on the ice. After talking to the teacher in charge of the hockey academy and hearing his effusive praise of my son's work ethic in improving his skills, a new camera a year isn't so much to pay.

At the beginning of his grade eight year, I would only rate my son as an average house league player. By the end of the grade eight year, with a full season of hockey academy development, I considered him borderline to be a rep level player. When he tried out for the rep team this year, skill wise, I thought he had a chance

to make the second rep team. Unfortunately, he didn't make it past the first round of cuts and looking at some of the players that did, I didn't think my son gave up much for skill, but he is a smaller kid and his aggressiveness may not have been enough for the coaches.



However, while still playing house league hockey, he's now one of the better players and this year's coach appointed him captain of the team. That makes it more exciting as a parent to watch the games and more opportunistic as a photographer. As an adult, he'll be able to look back fondly of his times playing hockey as a kid.

While I spend more money than the average parent does for a house league player, it's nothing compared to what a parent will spend for a kid on an elite level rep team. Amounts of \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year (on top of the regular club membership fees) is not unheard of at a local private association that is one of the best in Canada for developing future hockey stars.

With a five-year-old also playing hockey, I spend a lot of weekend time in ice arenas. Eventually, as my oldest winds down his minor hockey playing, I'm hoping that he'll get into coaching and be able to help mentor his younger brother, especially the work ethic needed to improve year by year.

B&H Photo

Just in time for the big Christmas shopping season, I came home one day recently and found a large B&H Photo catalogue in my mail. I haven't seen one of these in years and was surprised that B&H still produces and mails these out given the power, convenience and speed of the internet.

I was also curious why all of a sudden, I'd be getting a B&H catalogue now, but then I remembered that I had bought some accessories in the summer, shortly after buying the Sigma lens. That evening, I sat down to peruse what used to be the photographer's equivalent of Playboy magazine (my wife has suggested in the past that I'm married to two spouses, her and photography).

The last printed catalogue that I kept (but eventually recycled) had to have been from over 10 years ago. It was the size of a telephone book for a small city (one-inch thick) and the reason why I kept that old catalogue for so long was for all the medium format systems and accessories sold by B&H. Hasselblad, Rollei, Bronica, Pentax, Mamiya...ah the good old days of shooting 6x6 format 120 film.

Today, a few of those names are history, but I was still expecting to see Hasselblad, Mamiya/Phase and Pentax in the current catalogue. A sign of the times, as there was no mention or listing of any medium format gear. The only mention of Hasselblad was an expensive film scanner (what used to be Imacon). Curiously, while the catalogue had the \$16,000 Hasselblad scanner and some cheap 35mm film scanners, there was no listing for a couple of relatively recent 120 format film scanners. Another sign of the times about medium format photography; however, the 120 format scanners *are* listed on the B&H website.

After perusing the catalogue just once, I recycled it.

On the topic of shopping, it's only been in the last few years that I've taken notice of the amazing shopping phenomenon known as Black Friday in the USA. Black Friday is one of the busiest shopping days in the USA, as many use the day to do some early Christmas shopping. For online retailers, Cyber Monday follows on Black Friday.

Throughout the week leading up Black Friday and Cyber Monday, many websites and blogs essentially become a storefront for the best affiliate retailers, such as B&H Photo and Amazon. Real content trickles to a crawl as blogs try to maximize affiliate revenue from the shopping frenzy. This made me pay a bit more attention to the content on some sites, which are little more than a front or an excuse to generate affiliate revenue. Some sites throw some dubious content or links, followed by a slew of affiliate links or banners that are longer than the actual content posting. Very whorish and I'm happy in my online retirement.

Book Reviews

***American Photographs*, Walker Evans**

***The Americans*, Robert Frank**

Growing up in very close proximity to the USA, I was exposed to many of the things Americans cherish. Mom, apple pie and the flag. Small town USA, Main Street, the Heartland and any other cliché you can come up with from exposure to American pop culture. I didn't and don't mind at all, because I admire what the USA has accomplished as a nation, people and culture – though that may be a minority view amongst Canadians due to so many years of past federal governments trying their damndest to ignore or counteract the American juggernaut to the south.

Back in my high school years, our football team visited a small town in Washington State, an hour south of Seattle. We spent a day at our host high school and in my mind, I recall the cool fall day, with equal amounts of colourful leaves on the trees and on the ground. I picture the high school having classic brick architecture, but after so many years I cannot recall this with any accuracy and by this point, it may be more of what my mind wants to remember than the actual truth of what the school is built of. I do remember all the school buses lined up on the street to release the students for classes, since that is how my billet and I arrived at the school. The scene from my memory is right out of Hoosiers or any other movie about small town USA.

Memories like this trigger a saccharine sentimentality about the past, a nostalgia for a simpler way of life and of a hometown where everyone knew each other and you didn't lock the door at night. Main Street in town is it; no up or middle town. No suburban enclaves with monster homes, super-sized shopping malls and warehouse stores. No commuting for an hour each way just to get to work, unless you lived on a farm, which was the case for many students in that small Washington town I visited so many years ago.

Walt Disney cherished and championed this type of view of Small Town, USA. Visit Disneyland in California and the old style town is what you encounter when you walk through the main gate. These towns still exist in the USA (and in Canada too) but I expect that these towns are getting smaller and older, as the young need to move to the cities to go to school and find work.

Looking at the photos by Walker Evans and Robert Frank evokes these thoughts, but only after many days of trying to think about what they mean to me. These two books are considered classics in American photography, with Walker Evans depression era photographs paving the way for Robert Frank's 1950s era street photography style.

Unlike other commentators, I'm going to come out state that I did not find either to be terribly meaningful after first review. Both left me relatively cold and unmoved and more than a few photographs had me wonder about the banality and why so

many American photographers wax poetically about them. As I said, it took some time before the overall body of work got my mind thinking.

I started thinking that maybe I didn't understand the photographs, because I'm not an American, who can appreciate the historical photos of cross slices of the USA, including the bigger cities. Maybe in the same way that I like Fred Herzog's photos, because these are historical slices of Vancouver, an American may not appreciate Herzog's work because there is not the same personal connection.

As social and historical commentary, certainly the photos are important snapshot views of a time long past. As photographic art, I have a harder time accepting that. What this may be telling me is that I'm not one who appreciates this style of photography and I need to think more carefully before buying on the advice of self-styled gurus and photographic commentariat on the web.

There's a similar situation in the audiophile world. In the mid 1990s, I indulged in some so-called "classic" audiophile recordings, because so many praised them for the great recording quality, the singer's chops or the instrumentalist's skill. Few seemed to mention the music itself, which, to be blunt, is akin to the mess you deposit in the toilet after a night out swilling cheap beer and pigging out on hot wings, nachos and spicy salsa.

Using the Sigma 120-300mm lens with some more comments about the Canon 5D3 and 5D2

Before I dive into how the big lens fares in my hands, I need to get a mini rant out of the way...I've had a rant in every issue thus far, so gotta keep the tradition going and at least this rant is directly related to photography ☺

So, Photokina gets going and of all the lens announcements that came out from the big show, the release from Sigma announcing three new lenses is the one that perked me up the most. The 17-70mm f2.8-4 is a yawner, as I'm not terribly interested in DX format lenses anymore. The 35mm f1.4 is intriguing if this lens follows in the same footsteps as the Sigma 50 and 85 f1.4 lenses, which have received very good reviews (initial reports indicate the 35mm lens is a winner). However, the third lens is the one that greatly annoyed me.

After only a year and half, Sigma is updating the 120-300 lens, the same lens that I bought at the end of June this year. It's déjà vu for me. Back in 2006, I bought the Nikon D2X only to have Nikon replace it a couple of months later with the D2Xs. Now, the difference between the D2X and D2Xs are minor, but it was still very annoying to have paid (close to) full price for a camera on its way out of the line-up.

The same feeling applies to the Sigma lens. Optically, the new and old lenses are the same, but Sigma has apparently improved the mechanics of the lens, which, from what little information I could glean, is to improve the reliability of the HSM and OS motors.

According to a study by LensRental.com, the repair issues for its rental pool of Sigma 120-300 lenses is for the HSM and OS motors. Now, rental lenses are going to see a lot of mileage and probably a fair share of abuse by the renters, so we cannot extrapolate my mild and gentle usage to ones that are used hard on a regular basis.

The new lens also gets a metal lens hood instead of the plastic one my version comes with. If I hear the new version also has a smoother and easier to turn zoom ring, I think I'm gonna turn green with Hulk-like rage (as well as green with envy).

My small comfort in buying the Sigma lens is that Sigma offers the longest warranty in the business with 10 years to registered owners. If anything happens, I should be fine and I'm heartened by LensRental.com's report that says Sigma is making a solid effort in improving its lenses. This desire by Sigma to improve its products and reputation (and perhaps to reduce the amount it has to spend on repairing lenses) is very much a good thing and looked at objectively, it is better that Sigma regularly improves its lenses instead of just keeping a problematic lens in the lineup.

With that off my chest, let's talk about using the lens.

The first time I took the lens out for its intended duty was for my youngest son's hockey practice. As a five year old, he's in the very first year of minor hockey, so there are no official games this first year, as it's all about development. The kids have to learn basic stuff such as setting a good hockey stance, backwards skating, edge stopping, falling down then getting back up, and rudimentary stick handling skills. *Leaving aside the cuteness of seeing 30 five-year-olds on the ice, there's a wide divergence of skill with some kids already being good skaters with the ability to do edge stopping while others can barely skate. My kid is in the middle, not great, but not bad...when he's paying attention.*

On this first session, I tried handholding the lens mounted to the Canon 5D3. Not something, I'd want to do for hours on end, but not as bad as I expected given the size and weight. What helps me is that I shoot with my left eye, which combined with the 5D3's vertical grip, allows me to be steadier handholding in landscape mode than a person shooting with the right eye.

This is a Joe McNally tip: hold the camera and lens combo normally with elbows tight into the body, but allow the camera with a vertical grip attached (or a full sized pro SLR) to rest in the space between your left chest and shoulder muscles. This only works for those of us shooting with the left eye, because the extra couple of inches needed to shift the camera and lens

combo to the left are just enough to allow the bottom, left corner of the camera to rest in the shoulder/chest area for extra stability.

When following the movements of a little, three-foot tall kid, the 120-300 at 300mm, offered nearly the right amount of magnification when he was on the same side of the rink where I was located. By right amount of magnification, I mean filling most of the frame to minimize dead space around the subject.

However, as the practice drills took my kid to the other side of the rink, 300mm is not long enough magnification for such a small player. To get the extra reach, I mounted the Canon 1.4x TC to get a 420mm f4 equivalent and create a poor man's 200-400mm f4. Poor is relative and while not inexpensive, the Sigma combined with the Canon 1.4x TC is still about half the cost of a Nikon 200-400mm f4 (and God knows how much the Canon 200-400 f4 is going to cost when it finally arrives; I'm hearing \$10,000).

When I mounted the Canon TC, I also mounted the rig onto a beefy Manfrotto 434 monopod (same as the 681 in the USA). I have a cheap Manfrotto 234RC monopod head, which uses Manfrotto's small, quick release plate. To that, I added an Acra Swiss style clamp bought many years ago from Kirk Enterprises.



I was a bit leery of mounting a modestly heavy 10 lb camera and lens combo on a monopod head only rated for 6 lbs. However, nothing came apart and nothing came loose although I did make sure that the camera's strap was around my right arm in case things did come apart. I also kept my left hand around the lens' tripod mount in the early going until I was satisfied of the integrity of the rig. Eventually, I moved my left hand to over top of the lens where the zoom ring is located to facilitate zooming. When not zooming, I rested the hand on top of the lens to provide some dampening per Moose Peterson's shooting technique with long lenses.



The Manfrotto 234RC is an up/down swivel head, but I didn't use this feature, preferring to lean the monopod down or up as needed to follow my son on the ice. I've owned the Manfrotto 434 monopod for many years, but rarely used it; the number of times I actually used it can be counted on one hand. It ended up being one of those purchases that seemed like a great idea at the time, but never did amount to any practical use. The 234RC head was bought shortly after I bought the Sigma lens, foreseeing the need to use the 434 monopod.

If shooting landscapes, a tripod is essential. If shooting on the street or for an event, nothing can beat the speed and flexibility of a handheld camera. I just never had any shoots or projects where a monopod made sense until now.

Once I started using the monopod to support the Sigma and Canon combo, I was like, YES! Finally, I could understand why so many sports photographers use a monopod to support their big-ass, super telephoto lenses. I did have the idea of using a tripod, but with the head somewhat loose to allow for ease of tracking a moving subject. But, a tripod's size and footprint is unwieldy and can sometimes lock you into one place. Aside from the obvious mobility that a monopod offers over a tripod, it is also a better mix of stability and flexibility. That said, if I have enough light to obtain a fast shutter speed, I still prefer handholding the camera and Sigma lens combo for best flexibility.

Photographing a five year old learning to play hockey is one thing. Photographing 13-14 year-old Bantams actually playing hockey is another. The players are twice the size and move significantly faster with more erratic movement.

With the larger size of the players, I figure that I would not need the 1.4x TC to fill the frame. With the five year olds, I hardly touched the zoom ring, because I'm

trying to squeeze out as much focal length as I can, but with the 14 year olds, I'm also thinking that I'll be zooming much more as they skate up and down the rink.

The home rink where my 14 year old plays out of is an old rink. One of the father's from last year's team remarked that the old arena is pretty much the same as when he was a kid growing up in the city. That's four-plus decades.

As an old rink, it's also somewhat small and not NHL sized, with a short rise of stands for viewers, which means less focal length is needed than the larger arena we played out of last year. While an old rink, it's quite bright, which is great for keeping the shutter speeds high (in the brightest sections of the rink, 1/1000 at f2.8 and ISO 3200 with +1 compensation). I've been in some very dark arenas over the years, where it seems like the rink officials are trying to keep electricity costs down by skimping on the lighting.

During a Bantam practice session at our home rink, I hauled out the 5D3 and the Bigma to see what kind of reach I could get with and without a 1.4x TC. As I thought, when I'm standing at centre ice, I can do pretty well with 300mm. At either end of the rink, where the goal nets are, I'll need the 1.4x TC if I want to get in tight on the goalie. When a player skates by me at centre ice, I have to zoom out wider if I want the full body while in landscape mode. This is where the stiff zoom ring on the lens is an annoyance, because I'd like less tension so as to zoom in or out quickly.

When I swapped out the Sigma lens for the Canon 70-200 f2.8 lens, wow, what a difference in weight and size. Some people complain about the size and weight of the 70-200 lens, but obviously, they've never used a larger lens. I felt like I could handhold the 5D3 and 70-200 combo all night long compared to using the Sigma lens, even on a monopod.

Using the 5D3 for action is a bit frenetic watching the AF points light up and move all over the active AF area in the viewfinder. I had the 5D3's AF set to track erratic moving subjects. The centre AF point is the default, starting active point, which I place on the subject to start tracking. As the subject moves around, so long as the subject is within the active AF area, the 5D3 should be able to follow and keep focus on the subject. Or, so goes the theory...

With the current AF settings, I'd say the 5D3 accurately follows a moving subject between 2/3 to 3/4 of the time. No matter which lens is mounted, there are times when the subject is moving one way and the camera, for whatever reason, is tracking the opposite direction. If something, like another player, comes between the camera and the subject, tracking is either lost or the camera starts tracking the other player. I have plenty of photos where the subject player is out of focus, but the backboards of the rink are in focus due to the, at times, bizarre behaviour of the 5D3's focus tracking.

Another weak point of the 5D3 is trying to start tracking a subject while it's already moving. The 5D3 seems to miss as many times as it locks focus if I happen to see something develop out of the corner of my eye and then move the camera onto a new subject. Technology is wonderful, but it's not foolproof, but the 5D3 seems good enough for most situations, which some might consider damning with faint praise.

I'll need to experiment more with the 5D3's focusing modes. Unfortunately, as I was finalizing this newsletter, I lost use of the 5D3 for the remainder of this year and could not do more testing for this update.

Photographing my 14 year old, I'm astonished that when he's really moving, I truly need 1/1000 shutter speed to freeze his motion. Mounting the 1.4x TC should normally lose a stop of speed, but I found that I was still able to get 1/640 shutter speed in the brighter parts of the rink. In the darker sections, I was down to 1/500, but neither seems suitable to completely freeze motion for 13 and 14 year old players in top flight.

Using a monopod, while a relief for my arms, doesn't help as much as I had expected for taking sharp photos. With a shutter speed of 1/1000 and spot-on focus tracking by the 5D3, my handheld shots look as sharp as the ones taken with the monopod.

With shutter speeds beyond 1/500, setting IS/OS on the lens doesn't seem to matter, as there have been sessions where I set the OS on and sessions where I had it off. From one session where OS was off, I found myself shooting at fairly slow speeds at 300mm (around 1/125 or so) due to wanting more depth of field from the scene. I didn't do too badly given that I was handholding the camera and lens.



The big lens seems to focus quick enough with the 5D3, so at this early stage, I'm going to attribute most of the soft and out of focus shots on the 5D3's erratic mis-tracking of the moving players. However, that's not to absolve me of fault either, as I may be slow in starting focus on a player. I had a sequence of 6-7 shots that had the first 3 shots out of focus and only the last half of the sequence had the player in focus, which I attribute to not engaging the AF soon enough as the player skated down the rink.

When the 5D3 departed from my greedy hands, I dusted off the old 5D2 and used that to finish off a little project (discussed in the Photographic Zero article) for my five-year-old's hockey group.

Seems I got more in-focus shots with the 5D2, but that's because I have to use the centre focus spot, as the 5D2's outside focus spots are not good enough to track moving subjects. While more shots are in focus, having all centered shots can create some issues with cropping, as I can't always get the right crop.

My last and very petty annoyance with using the Sigma lens: I need to use a larger camera bag. With the 70-200 lens, I use a moderately sized shoulder bag (Lowepro Street and Field Reporter 400, which is no longer available).

Now, I have to use the much larger Lowepro Commercial case (also no longer available, but similar to the current large version of the Lowepro Magnum case).



Pixel-peeping the Sigma lens

Reviewing the photos taken during practices and games, I'm very pleased with the image quality of the Sigma lens. The acuity, compared to the 70-200 with the 1.4x TC, is noticeable even at less than 100% magnification. The color is close to the Canon 70-200 lens, but with more saturation.

Over two separate shooting days, I took several hundred photos of the five year olds. On one day, I used the 120-300 lens and on the other, I used the Canon 70-200 with 1.4x TC to get a similar zoom range as the Sigma lens.

I edited the shots taken with the 70-200 plus TC first and was bothered by a consistent lack of acuity and contrast for the photos where there were no focus tracking issues. Then I edited the shots taken with the 120-300 lens and was surprised by the clearly superior quality.

Even though I shot mostly at 300mm and at f2.8 with the 120-300 lens, it seemed like the Sigma offered better depth of field than the 70-200 plus TC at 280mm, which would be an f4 combination. Now, of course, there can't be more depth of field, so the sharpness from the Sigma lens is probably leading to that subjective effect.

The difference in quality makes clear that I can no longer consider the 70-200 plus 1.4x TC as a practical option anymore. But, then that's exactly why I invested in the big Sigma lens in the first place, to get myself quality at a longer reach with a faster

aperture. Like Hannibal Smith from the A-Team, I love it when a plan comes together.



The handheld shot above and below are from a practice session. Sigma lens at left and Canon with 1.4x TC at right. The above shot is the full frame view while below is a 2x magnified comparison in Lightroom (default settings). Even with the less than ideal presentation of an image copied to a Word document then converted to PDF, the superiority of the Sigma lens over the Canon lens and TC is obvious.



After seeing sharper, crisper looking photos from the Sigma 120-300 lens, I decided to do some tests to quantify what I saw. I figure that eventually, I'd do some of sort of tripod-based tests of the Sigma lens, but I wasn't in any hurry and since I own the damn thing, I could take all the time I want. Seeing the real world results in mid October prompted me to set aside some time to determine where the Sigma does well and where it might fall short.

There are some photographers, such as Kirk Tuck, who eschew the lab-style testing using charts and favour practical, ad hoc, real world subjects to determine the qualities of a lens and camera system. Others, such as Brooks Jensen, go through tests to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a lens, so that they can make proper choices when out photographing with those lenses. As is often the case, both approaches have merit and it's not a zero sum game where one is right and the other is wrong.

I'm getting old, so I don't really enjoy doing this kind of stuff anymore. Testing at home, on your own, using what you think is good subject material is fraught with challenges that are easily criticized by others, who will never bother putting themselves through the same exercise.

- Is the tripod and head of sufficient quality to silence the critics? I think my RRS gear is up to that challenge, although it falls short of a rebar supported, concrete column rising directly from the foundation of my house.
- Does the subject have sufficient detail to make comparisons meaningful? I don't have a 1950s US Air Force test target, but I haven't found anything better than paper currency for being able to reveal the qualities of a lens or sensor.
- Is the test environment consistent and stable? Of my basement office where I do this stuff, yes, I believe it is, but on the downside, the low light level does mean having to use very slow shutter speeds if I'm doing a full aperture range test.

Another negative with doing indoor testing is that there is not a lot of room to allow longer lenses to breathe much beyond the minimum focusing distance. The subject matter is quite small, which creates a big challenge to figure out how to test wide-angle lenses.

Gripes (or grapes) aside, here's what I found comparing the Sigma 120-300 against the Canon 70-200 (with a bias towards the long end of the zoom range, since that's what I bought the big Sigma for).

- Using standard focusing (the AF button on the back of the camera), at 200mm f2.8, the Sigma lens is better than the Canon lens – the difference is not huge, but the Sigma wins out

- At 300mm f2.8, the Sigma is not as good as it is at 200mm, but it is still better than the Canon 70-200 lens with a Canon 1.4x TC at f4 (wide open with this combo)
- Stopped down to f4 at 300mm, the Sigma lens is much better than the Canon lens and TC combo at f4
- At or near minimum focusing distance, the 120-300mm specs are optimistic at best as the Canon lens magnifies more at every common focal length
 - the Canon lens with the 1.4x TC is 280mm, but offers more actual magnification than what the Sigma provides at 300mm – the loss of magnification is such that the Canon at 200mm looks pretty close to the Sigma at 300mm
 - The behaviour of the Sigma lens is the same as the Nikon 70-200 VR II, which at minimum focusing distances, also loses focal length
 - At longer distances, the Sigma lens at 300mm offers more magnification than the 70-200 with the 1.4x TC (280mm) – I didn't test at what distance this occurs, but focusing down the length of an ice rink (circa 150 feet), the Sigma definitely magnifies more (example shot below with Sigma at left and Canon at right)



- Curiously, even though the tripod and head are static, when switching from the Canon to the Sigma lens, the view is different with the Sigma lens needing to be shifted a small amount to the right to centre the subject (or vice versa if going from the Sigma to the Canon lens)
 - You would think that there should only be a vertical difference in centering the subject to account for the relative height of the two lenses instead of a lateral shift
 - This is not criticism of either the Sigma or Canon lens, as I have seen this kind of difference with other lenses

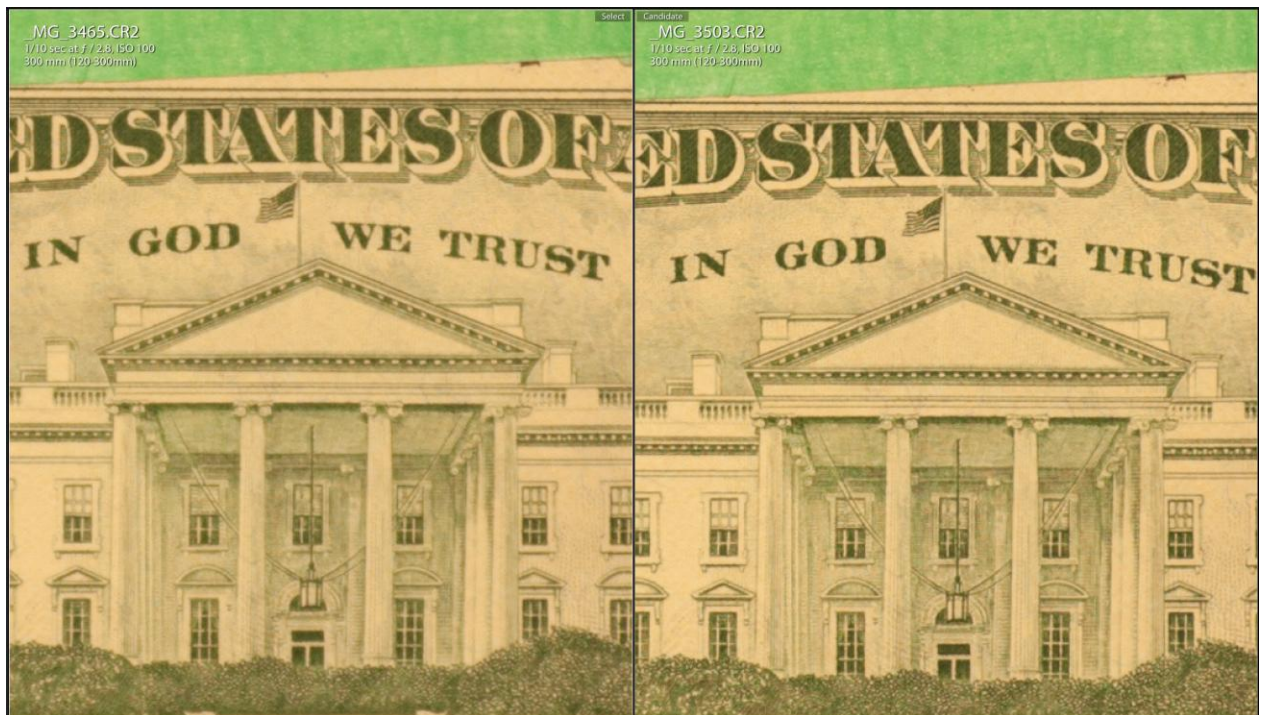
Out of a lark, I did some tests using LiveView on the Canon 5D3 and the results indicate some focusing issues using the traditional method (shutter release or rear AF button). I also did the same test with the Canon 5D2.

Using the traditional focusing method, the Sigma lens at f2.8 is noticeably soft but sharpens up very nicely at f4.

Using LiveView, the difference between f2.8 and f4 is still there, but not to the same degree using the AF button to focus.

With LiveView, you can magnify the subject greatly and nail critical focus where you want it. Unfortunately, LiveView is impractical for shooting hockey, which is my primary photography during our long and cold winter months.

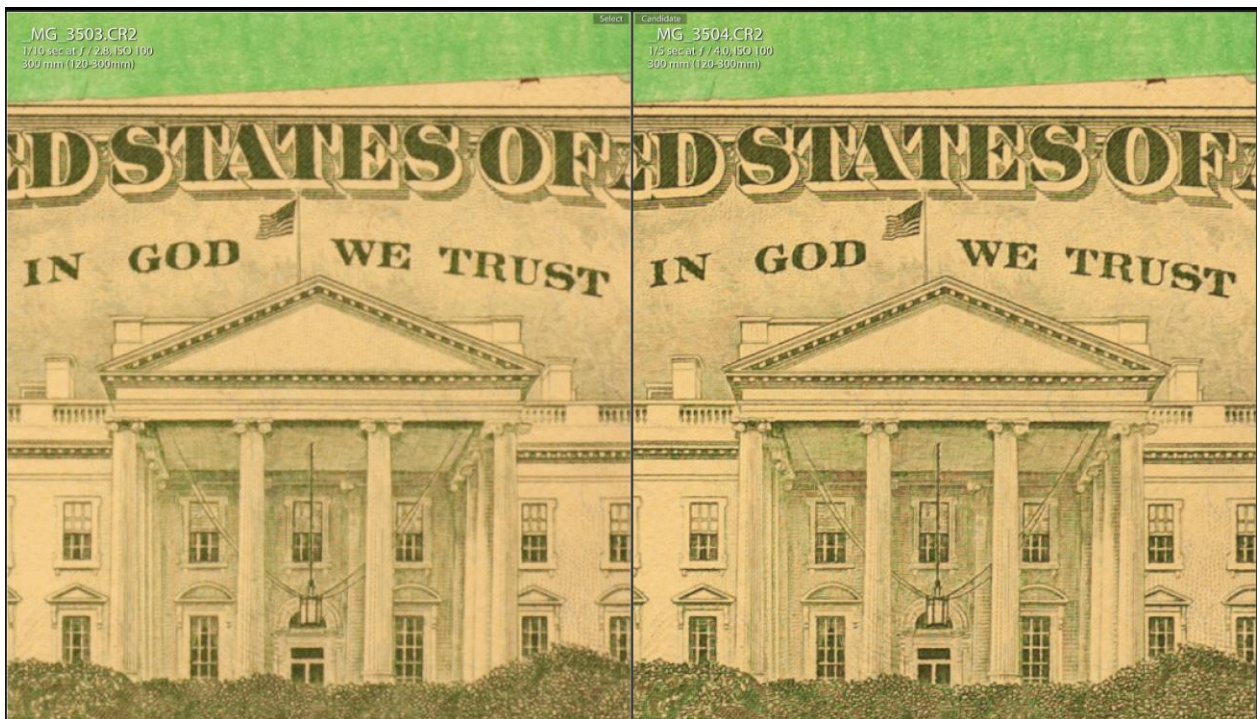
Other than for testing, I haven't used the Sigma lens for tripod-based photography, for which I now have a better sense of what this lens can do. For my intended purpose of the Sigma lens (handheld hockey photography), I'm very much enjoying the quality offered by the Sigma 120-300 lens.



*At left, the Sigma lens at f2.8 focused using the AF button
At right, the lens at f2.8 but focused using LiveView*



*At left the Sigma lens at f2.8 and at right, the lens stopped down to f4
Both focused using the AF button on the Canon 5D2*



*At left the Sigma lens at f2.8 and at right, the lens stopped down to f4
Both focused using LiveView with the Canon 5D2*

Canon 24-70mm f2.8 Mk II

As consolation for losing the use of the 5D3 for a while, I was left with trying out the new Canon mid-range, pro zoom lens.

I never used the Mk I version of the lens, but I have used the even older Canon 28-70mm f2.8 lens (with a Canon EOS-1v film camera). I also owned the Nikon 28-70mm f2.8 lens, which is very similar in size and operation to the old Canon 28-70.

If I recall correctly, the Mk I 24-70 is also similar in operation as the predecessor 28-70 lens. What I mean by operation is that the older lenses would extend and become physically longer when set to 24/28mm and be at their shortest at 70mm.

All the old lenses used very large lens hoods, which combined with the way the lenses extended, ensured that the lens always had the optimum shading. With the lenses set to 70mm, the full size of the lens hood was utilized, but when the barrel extended out at 24/28mm, that effectively shortened the lens hood.

The current Nikon 24-70mm lens still operates this way, which I like and unlike other users, I have no complaints about the large lens hood. The new Canon 24-70 Mk II, no longer operates this way. The new lens extends out at longer focal lengths and is shortest at 24mm. The lens hood is now quite compact and would seem only effective at 24mm.

The size of the new 24-70 is beefy, but not uncomfortably so and my memory tells me that it's not much different in size and weight than the old 28-70 lens, despite the new 24-70 having a larger 82mm filter size. Having a larger filter size is a bitch since you'll need to get a new polarizer if your largest maxes out at 77mm, which was the previous pro-zoom standard.

Quality-wise, the new 24-70 is getting a lot of praise for perhaps being the best 24-xx lens from any brand and certainly, the best that Canon has ever produced. Cost-wise, this new Canon lens is up there and has given some users sticker shock given the price of the predecessor lens. However, pro zoom lenses, when newly available, have always seem to be over \$2,000, so I was not so surprised by the initial high cost of this lens.



The lens balances nicely on the 5D2 (used without its vertical grip). It's as well built as any L lens I've used over the years. Since I've been using the Canon 24-105mm f4 for a few years, this would be the obvious comparison lens to test against the new 24-70. Unfortunately, the 24-105 departed along with the 5D3, so it may not be until the New Year before I get to do some comparative testing. I do have some other lenses to test against, but I'll likely wait until I get my hands on the 24-105 again and do everything at once. More to come...

Next issue

- Lens adapters - yes, I know my comments in this issue dismissed lens adapters, but curiosity got the better of me
- The Meade DS-2000 telescope mount - I'm hopeful I'll get some good or interesting weather to do some more time-lapse photos
- The aforementioned Canon 24-70mm f2.8 Mk II lens
- Other misc thoughts and comments that spring to mind from now until the next issue

All the best for the holidays and a Happy New Year!

Edwin