



Shedding Light on “Brick City”

Sundance Channel series taps Sony XDCAM EX camcorders

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The Sundance Channel series 'Brick City,' which started a five-day run Sept. 21, was a demanding shoot by anyone's standard. In order to capture a fly-on-the-wall look at gang problems in Newark, NJ—nicknamed "Brick City" because of its architecture—filmmakers Mark Benjamin and Marc Levin needed small camcorders that could shoot full HD in virtually all light conditions. (Gang members don't take kindly to spotlights in their faces, so additional lights were out of the question.) "The series' aim is to inspire inter-city change," said Executive Producer (and Academy Award winning actor) Forest Whitaker.

"Given that my background is in film, I wanted something that would provide a truly filmic appearance," Benjamin said. "The equipment's footage couldn't look electronic; it had to support fluid handheld camera movement and slow-motion capabilities, and run on minimal resources for long periods of time. A 'minimally invasive production approach' was our mantra."

To do the job, Benjamin, Levin, and director of photography James Adolphus chose Sony's new PMW-EX1 and PMW-EX3 XDCAMs. The EX1 is a compact full HD camcorder with three 1/2-inch Exmor CMOS Sensors with 1920x1080 effective pixels each. Although small in size, the budget-priced EX1 is a true broadcast-quality camcorder that records to Sony's SxS Pro ExpressCard flash memory media. The EX3 shoulder-mounted camcorder sports the same features offered in the EX1 and comes with a 1/2-inch interchangeable lens system, genlock in, timecode In/Out, and can be used in studio via its 8-pin remote CCU connection. The EX3 served as Brick City's A camera, while the two EX1s served as B units.



Sundance Channel's "Brick City," produced by Forest Whitaker (right) premiered Sept. 21.

THE SHOOT

Brick City was a year-long shoot, interweaving the stories of Newark Mayor Cory Booker, Director of Police Garry McCarthy, and the lives of Blood gang member-turned-youth mentor Jayda and her gang boyfriend Creep. The unscripted nature of the project kept the production's cameras rolling for hours at a time; in fact, the EX3 logged more than 400 shooting hours all by itself. More challengingly, the camcorders were used entirely in available light conditions; requiring their gains sometimes to be boosted up to +3 and +6. "We were shooting in darkness, mercury vapor lighting, indoor offices and in bright sunlight," says Benjamin. "Whatever light there was, we worked with it."

Benjamin adds that their key goal was to capture observational video, rather than shoot reality TV style. "There are no interviews in Brick City; no points at which the camera eye intrudes into the real-life drama as a participant," he said. "The stories you see are what actually happened, without our prompting. We never asked subjects to do anything over again, ever. Yet, at the same time, we encouraged a lot of camera movement and creativity, even though we didn't know where the action was going when we were filming. This is why we needed HD cameras that were lightweight, high performance, and unobtrusive."

"We wanted to put the real back in reality TV," said Levin. "High performance HD small cameras can do that with the right shooters; Adolphus and Benjamin are those shooters. We wanted medium focal length lensing to capture intimate dramatic scenes."

Benjamin is a film guy at heart, preferring the look, flow and texture of 35mm film to broadcast video. So moving to the video-based EX1 and EX3—"We got the first ones brought into New York City," he said—was quite a leap. Benjamin is grateful to Peter Abel at Abel Cine Tech "who recommended these cameras, teched them up and got us ready for the shoot."

THE GEAR

It didn't take long for the size and performance of the EX1 and EX3 to impress Benjamin. "These are truly high-quality progressive capture camcorders that you can send out with a few batteries and 3-4 memory cards, knowing that your shooter will have enough to keep going all day," he says. "The freedom this equipment offers, combined with the film-like quality of the video in either 24, 30 or 60 fps, really impressed me; 600 hours of footage and not a glitch."

Adolphus was similarly pleased by the EX1/3 combination. "The half-inch size sensors on these camcorders allow for an inherent decreased depth-of-field," he said. "This shallow depth-of-field enhanced my ability to create cinematic compositions, which complemented the dramatic nature of the stories I was capturing on the streets of Newark."

Adolphus also applauds the use of CMOS sensors in the EX1/3. "Two important characteristics of the CMOS chip are low static power consumption and high noise immunity," he said. "On the long shooting days, sometimes stretching from the early hours of the morning through to the late hours of the evening, I was to stretch the life of the battery packs we carried, and stretch the camera's ability to capture high quality images under adverse low-light conditions."

Another important characteristic of the CMOS sensor is its ability to capture high-contrast images, according to Adolphus. "On a run-and-gun documentary like 'Brick City,' the operator is typically not afforded the luxury of having time to scout and approve locations, or even turn on a light to help balance out high-contrast situations. Whether shooting raids with available light in the pre-dawn hours with Newark SWAT or capturing a Blood Gang funeral in the heat of summer at noon, my XDCAM EX3 performed without pause."

"I particularly liked the fact that the EX1/3 could handle having their light gain boosted to +3 or +6 without compromising video quality," Benjamin said. "We did stay away from +9 or +12 because that is when the footage would start to show artifacts. We also turned the shutter off in many challenged lighting situations; for more exposure, with no major issues."