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Journal of Motion Imaging

NOVEMBER 2013

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# Short Takes



Cinematographer Autumn Durald captured this climactic fireworks display for London Grammar's music video for "Strong."

## Fatherly Fireworks

By Peter Tonguette

A handheld camera, shakily positioned low to the ground, captures a rickety white car driving toward a seemingly abandoned industrial area. Late-afternoon sun flares the lens and backlights the dust turned up by the car's tires. In successive shots, a 30-something man with a three-day beard and a ratty T-shirt gets out and peers into the backseat, where his young daughter is fast asleep. He throws open the trunk, pulls out several bags and empties the contents on a blanket laid out hastily on the arid ground. The action is swift and the images seem to ask as many questions as they answer.

The music of British band London Grammar provides some clues to the curious viewer, but ultimately it is the work of cinematographer Autumn Durald and director Sam Brown that tells the tale in the music video for the song "Strong." The man has come to this vacant area — surrounded by tall barbed-wire fences and rows of squatty buildings — to don an armor-like "fireworks suit" that looks like something out of *RoboCop*, and light up the night sky with a dance of pyrotechnics for his daughter.

"This is a music video," Durald comments, "but it's also like a short film. You want to know what their life is before they get there, and what happens after." This speculative feeling is supported by the inquisitive, handheld camerawork. "Sam wanted the camera to have that energy," the cinematographer notes.

From the start, Durald — who studied art history at Loyola Marymount University before receiving her MFA in cinematography from the American Film Institute in 2009 — found herself on the same page as Brown. The director had prepared very specific storyboards, and he wanted to fill the video with small details, such as the moment when the daughter clutches her father's shirt as he carries her beneath a viaduct to the site where the fireworks show will take place. "The boards were brilliant," Durald enthuses. "Sam has an amazing sense of visual style, and those shots tell the story so well."

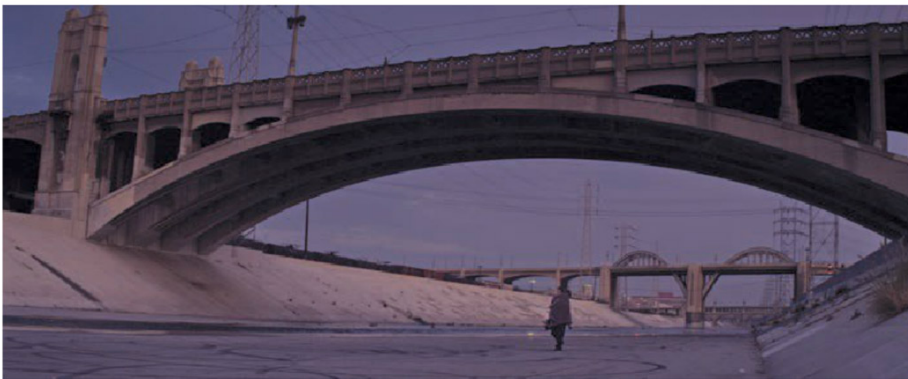
The filmmakers decided to shoot with two cameras, a Red Epic and a Vision Research Phantom Flex. The Epic was the main camera throughout the three-day production, which was primarily shot on and around Los Angeles' Fourth Street Bridge, and for the climactic fireworks display, it was operated between 96-120 fps while the Phantom Flex captured images from 560-1,000 fps.

Based in part on her admiration for Brown's previous work, Durald suggested they shoot "Strong" with anamorphic lenses. "Sam did a BMW spot that I'm just in love with, and it was shot anamorphic," the cinematographer explains. "He was obviously familiar with the format, and when I mentioned it to him, he was already thinking the same thing."

Durald turned to Panavision Hollywood for the production's optics, which included de-tuned C Series and Ultra Speed Golden Panatar lenses. Both types of lenses, Durald notes, "are lower contrast and have more falloff from top to bottom and side to side. ➤

Photos by Drew Dawson. Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.





**Top:** A young girl (Savannah Young) sleeps in the back seat of her father's car in this frame grab from the video. **Middle:** The father (Nash Edgerton) carries his daughter to a vacant area, firework supplies in tow. **Bottom:** London Grammar lead singer Hannah Reid crosses a bridge at dusk.

"I love Panavision anamorphic glass," she continues. "There's an emotional quality to the lenses, and they can really help when shooting day exteriors; the lenses smooth out harsh sunlight and give it a kind of creamy quality." Because of the inherent characteristics of the lenses, no additional filtration was required, although

Durald notes, "I used a horizontal, soft-edged grad just to take down the sky for two wide shots."

The video incorporates three distinct times of day, each of which required a different approach: late afternoon, when the father and daughter arrive and prepare for the evening's festivities; dusk, when

non-narrative shots of London Grammar's lead singer, Hannah Reid, were shot along the bridge; and night, when the man suits up in the L.A. River basin and fireworks fly off his body. For smaller setups within the first time period, the crew took pains to maintain the late-afternoon feel over the course of an all-day shoot. Accordingly, Durald says, they "diffused the harsh sunlight with a 12-by Half Soft Frost overhead and backlit the scene with two M40 HMI's through ¼ Straw."

For the close-ups of Reid — who seems to be clandestinely trailing the video's protagonists — Brown and Durald were initially hoping for a bright, intense sunset, but an overcast day turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the cinematographer explains: "We ended up with a beautiful, soft pink and purple sunset, which looked amazing on the lead singer." Shot in shallow focus, Reid's light blond hair is complemented by out-of-focus splotches of pastel colors that frame her from the background.

The video reaches its climax when darkness falls and the man, having put on his armored suit, reveals himself as a living, breathing fireworks display. (For the fireworks sequences, lead actor Nash Edgerton was replaced onscreen by Wally Glenn, a.k.a. Pyro Boy, the inventor of the fireworks suit.) "It was so unique to be shooting down there [in the basin] with approval to have someone wearing a fireworks suit," says Durald.

The cinematographer adds that she





Top: Under the Fourth Street Bridge, crewmembers prepare for the scene in which the daughter lights the fuse to her father's fireworks suit. Bottom: Durald readies a Red Epic for the fireworks scene.



sought to underscore the event by adding "a unique touch to the fireworks sequence." Inspired in part by the recipe that Panavision optical engineer Dan Sasaki implemented for Greig Fraser, ACS on *Killing Them Softly* (AC Oct. '12), Durald asked Rik DeLisle and Guy McVicker at Panavision Hollywood to provide a modified HS50 lens. The cinematographer explains, "Using part of Dan's recipe, Guy gave the lens an intentional anamorphic twist, misaligning the elements and giving it higher-order spherical aberrations, which affect the out-of-focus bokeh and cause the highlights to bleed." In the resultant images from the music video, the fireworks emanating from Glenn pop in stunning fashion, with each burst creating its own

unique flare.

Durald operated the Epic during the shoot, and she captured spontaneous moments in Glenn's performance, which he performed a total of seven times over two nights. "There's about a 30 to 45 minute reset in between [Glenn's performances], because he has to remove everything, hydrate and take a break," she says. The Phantom Flex, operated by Jeff Bierman, was fitted with a modified Cooke 10:1 rear-anamorphic zoom lens to get close-up detail from a safe distance, where the camera was kept on a dolly. "Sam really wanted those little bursts and beautiful little moments within the big explosion," says Durald.

Particular attention had to be paid to

exposure during Glenn's performance. "We didn't want to expose the hottest point of the blast at key and then allow the smaller, surrounding explosions to get lost in darkness," the cinematographer explains. "I chose to balance the two exposures, letting the hottest points overexpose by around 5 stops, and allowing the surrounding pops to be exposed closer to key to maintain detail and color. The smaller blasts were so poetic, and Sam wanted to make sure we were getting all of that texture."

Color correction was done at The Mill in London with colorist Seamus O'Kane, who worked with transcoded 2K files on a Pandora Revolution using YoYo Data I/O, for final HD delivery in Rec 709. Live grading was also available on location in a DIT tent, where a feed from the camera was viewable on a 17" OLED monitor. "I worked with my DITs, Mike and Tom Kowalczyk, over the headset so I could dial in the look without leaving the set," Durald says. "At the end of the day, we tweaked the LUT we established on set for our dailies, which we output through [Blackmagic Design's DaVinci] Resolve."

Durald proudly notes that "Strong" represented the first time Glenn's performance had been captured professionally, rather than with an iPhone or similar device. "We were doing it with expensive cameras and lenses, so Wally was obviously really happy." And so was Durald. The modified HS50 lens was hand delivered in the nick of time, just before it was needed on location, and since "Strong," the cinematographer says, "it's gone out on three other jobs, and it's out right now. People are really interested in using it." She tips her hat to DeLisle and McVicker for their enthusiasm in helping to lend the video's finale such a striking look, commenting, "Rik and Guy are great to work with, especially on a project like this, where I've got a unique vision of what I want to create. It's always an inspiring project when you can tailor the optics to make your ideas come to life." ●