

### ***I Melt With You: The Darkest Days***

Straight up you should know Mark Pellington's new drama, *I Melt With You*, is a tough film to watch. The story of four college chums (Thomas Jane, Rob Lowe, Christian McKay, and Jeremy Piven) reuniting, as they have for the last 20 years, begins in a wash of good-time nostalgia. Their weekend celebrating McKay's character's birthday, in a rented Big Sur house on the edge of the Pacific, is fueled by drugs and booze and the soundtrack of the lads' best and brightest days – mid-to-late 1980s rock – like a missile shedding its boosters as it climbs ever higher toward the sun. But flying near that much heat risks flaming out. And its not long before *I Melt With You* takes a turn toward darkness, veering for the deepest of black holes from which none of the men, now middle-aged and beset by failures, regrets, and in one example, a pending criminal indictment, will escape.



### ***I Melt With You***

Cinematographer Eric Schmidt had just come off the \$42-million studio flick, *The Mechanic*, so taking on an 18-day, sub-million-dollar indie, with a crew of 10 and a handful of Canon 5Ds, was challenging, to say the least. In many ways, it was a testament to Schmidt's long-standing creative partnership with Pellington; the men have been tooling with new formats and workflow processes for nearly two decades. But, as the following conversation reveals, *I Melt With You* took their collaboration to a new level. Schmidt says the HDSLR shoot inspired an unparalleled sense of freedom, not unlike what the characters in the film long to rekindle. That may account for the daring use of color, which Schmidt says was dialed in on-set to a near final grade status (before tweaking with colorist Beau Leon at New Hat, in Santa Monica, CA) Guild members Bryan Haigh (1st AC) and John Pingry (B-camera operator) helped maximize the 5D workflow, which was done all-handheld on a variety of rigs – some tricked-out

with wireless focus systems and mini-HD monitors, others as stripped down as a single pistolgrip and eyepiece.

Few will argue that *I Melt With You* isn't a sad and disturbing film. But it also brims with reckless joy and abandon. No other filmmakers (or technology) could have better married capture and content.

**ICG Magazine:** We saw this film at a Sundance press screening in a 220-seat theatre.

**Eric Schmidt:** I heard a lot of people walked out.

**ICG:** Yes, there were some. How did it play at its public premiere, at the Eccles? There's never been an HDSLR feature screened in a theater that size as far as I know.

**Schmidt:** Stunning. Thirteen hundred people sat in rapt silence and then stayed for the Q & A. I think there was some fear before the deal was made [Magnolia Pictures will distribute *I Melt With You* this summer], given how the reviews going out over social media were polarizing. Then on Friday [after the Eccles screening], we got a great review in *The Hollywood Reporter*. The lesson is, never let the press see your movie at Sundance before the public! [Laughs]

**ICG:** What was the lead-in to this project that gave you and Mark the courage, or confidence, to shoot entirely with the Canon 5D for theatrical release?

**Schmidt:** I met Mark in 1989 when I was the PA sweeping the floors on his Pearl Jam video. I kept bugging him to let me shoot, and later did the title sequence for his first movie, and some helicopter footage. I shot 2nd unit on *Arlington Road*, and then a compendium video for *The Mothman Prophecies* that went on the DVD release. Mark then got me in for the pilot re-shoot on *Cold Case*, and I shot the first 12 episodes. That's when we started moving toward narrative. I shot his last film, *Henry Poole is Here*, and another recent pilot that didn't get picked up called *Back*, which was very dark and interesting. When I agreed to do *I Melt With You*, I had a day-and-a-half scout and prep before jumping in.

**ICG:** So it was always designed for the 5D?

**Schmidt:** Up until three months before, we were pretty sure it was going to be shot on RED. We had done a music video last winter, on 35mm in a studio with a large crew, lights the whole deal, and our energy just went bust, so we were looking for something fresh. A month later Mark sent me a song by Alpha Rev, and I told him we should shoot that video in black and white with these little hybrids everyone's talking about. We used the Canon 7D, and were blown away. A few months later we did another music video, in color, on the 5D and that's when it just fell off the cliff. The originality of the framing, the spontaneous workflow, and the light sensitivity – all of it just clicked.



*I Melt With You / Photo courtesy of Eric Schmidt*

**ICG:** How many cameras did you use?

**Schmidt:** Four 5Ds, and then two 7Ds, which were used sparingly for slow motion. The sensor on the 5D is bigger than a 35mm motion picture film camera, so the depth of field is cut way back, which makes things really tough for the assistants as far as focus. But that sensor has so much resolution! And I could completely control the color temperature on-set.

**ICG:** The color palette is what really jumps out, both in the wild drug-taking party scenes, and in the more subdued moments later on.

**Schmidt:** We knew, depending on the scene, which way we were going to go – imbuing the shot with blue for twilight, or orange for firelight was fairly obvious. But there wasn't any designed color arc for the movie. Those choices came out of the spontaneity of using [the 5D]. I mean, a great deal of this movie was Mark and I, with Bryan pulling focus, and that's it. I'd hit 3200 Kelvin and say, "Hey, Mark, it's twilight, but if we shoot in tungsten it'll look sort of blue." And he'd say, "Will it look like that?" And I'd say, "Yes, it will look exactly like that." You can't put colors together immediately like that shooting film.

**ICG:** You must have done some image tests or prep.

**Schmidt:** We flew up to the house location in Big Sur for one day and tested the Zeiss CP.2 primes wide open, the Canon USM zoom at 50mm, a Canon 1.4, all trying to figure out what focus and lens rigs we would use. At that same time, we did bracketed exposure tests. If we let the outside go to an 80 percent value on our Marshall monitor

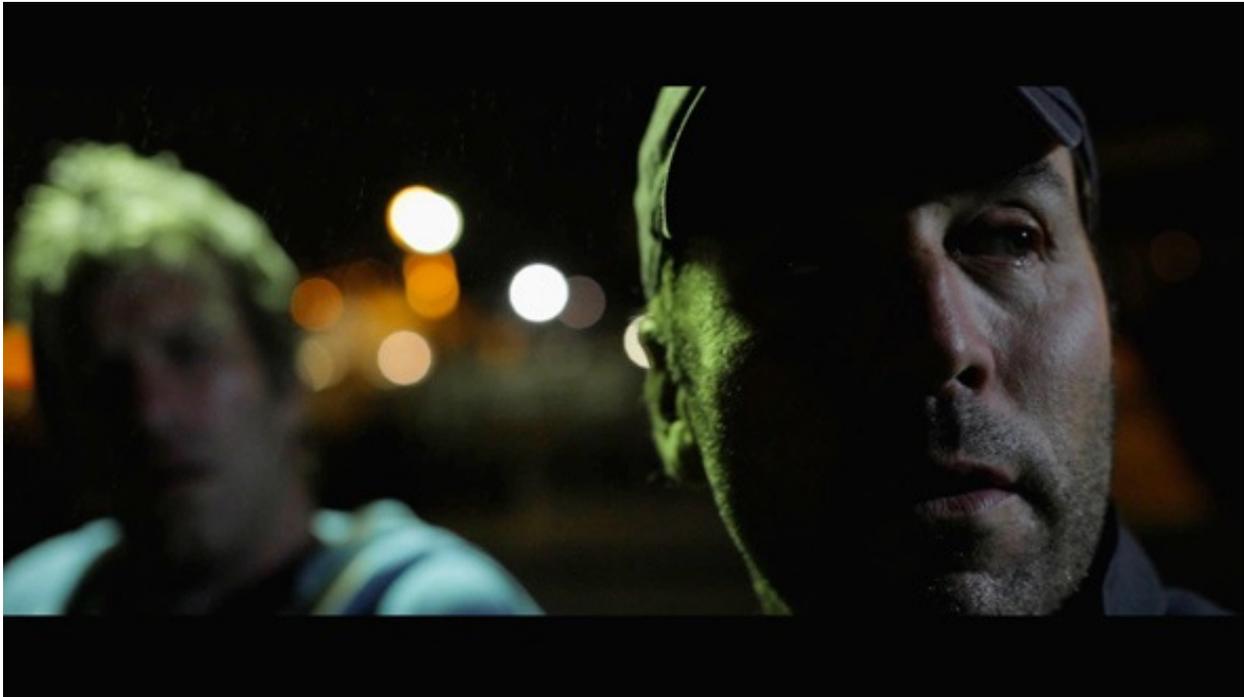
what does the inside retain if we don't light it? If we shoot at night at 1250 ASA what happens if it's three stops under-exposed? When we saw the test footage projected at New Hat, particularly the night and very dark end-of-day stuff, it gave us the confidence to dive in, even though at that point, we were already too far down the road to shoot with anything else. [Laughs]

**ICG:** Music plays a big part. It's virtually inseparable from the narrative.

**Schmidt:** I have worked on 170 music videos, both as a gaffer and in camera, and Mark has done tons of videos, as well as the *U2 3D* feature. We both come from this place where emotional imagemaking is put to music. This movie had specific songs in the script, which would change depending on how much it cost to obtain them. [Laughs] But we had music on-set, and the party scenes are just that, minus the alcohol and drugs, of course. I had two 150-watt Dedolights where I normally would have used 5Ks or 10Ks. We had no generator or truck. Just a covered wagon – light bulbs covered with chicken wire and muslin cloth. Really low-fi.

**ICG:** Why do you think more people haven't jumped in with the 5D on features?

**Schmidt:** Because there's not a lot of latitude. You can shoot at high sensitivities, but there's not much room to dig information out. The general complaint [about the 5D] has been that it's like shooting Ektachrome. But that's the whole point for Mark and I. We love Ektachrome!



#### *I Melt With You*

**ICG:** Given that you controlled the color space on-set, how much was left at the final grade?

**Schmidt:** Well, this goes back to the emotionality of images and how they relate to music. Mark does final color grades of all the dailies when we do a music video, because you make editing decisions based on your emotional reaction to that image. There was no time to do dailies on *I Melt With You*, so while we applied all those years of telecine experience while shooting, we still needed four or five nights at New Hat

tweaking the film. They use Baselight, so you can correct in P3 digital cinema, which has a wider gamma range than Rec. 709 that the 5D outputs. The P3 can emulate a LUT for Kodak Vision stock. The results are creamier and more like film, although it doesn't really have any grain, per se. We were all blithely following that P3 channel, until Mark said: "No way. It takes away that digital rawness." So we colored the entire movie in Rec. 709, which, again, is like shooting with Ektachrome; much tighter color space and contrast range. We absolutely did get close to color on set. But working with Beau at New Hat, and the ability to add ND vignette power windows for depth and character to the image was invaluable. Ultimately, this film is all about faces. Standing in front of someone at 50mm with minimum focus, watching them, those small emotions could really be seen with that digital clarity.

**ICG:** It sounds like this movie was a breakthrough, of sorts.

**Schmidt:** Mark and I have been striving to get rid of the artifice, and be much more real and raw in our moviemaking, and this film allowed us to do that. The workflow was so incredibly simple on the set it was almost bizarre. We would have 30-minute takes with the actors and then run into the ocean with them. It was a case of a new tool, a new emulsion really, that was perfectly matched to the material. It definitely changed our process for making movies.