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Dispatch: Life on the Road with Holders and a Speed

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by David Burnett

Let's just say this may not have been the most well thought out idea I've had recently.



Cover photo by David Burnett/Contact Press Images

Even as I happily enter the world of digital photography, parts of me want to look back on our photographic heritage, and see if it's possible to use the old techniques in a world of Compact Flash cards. Like most magazine photographers, I was able to enter the digital world at, more or less, my own pace, starting with a Canon G-1 and G-2 (mainly for using to check lighting, and later on, doing infrared) and progressing to the 10D which I'm now using. The joys of new aren't completely unbridled however. The excitement of seeing my pictures immediately is slightly skewed by the fact that when I'm really working, and sending images to clients, I never get to bed before 1 or 2 a.m. Like all reportage photography, it's no place for the weary or uninspired. Last spring, having chosen not to go to Iraq for the war, I made an attempt to tell some of the

Washington side of the story. I have long been a fan of the wonderful Peruvian photographer Martin Chambi, who lived a century ago, documenting life in Cuzco with his big view cameras, and taking pictures which continue to inspire me everyday. So, with a digital camera on one shoulder, and a Rolleiflex on the other, I put an old Speed Graphic (is that redundant? aren't they ALL old?) on a tripod, and grabbed a few holders of tri-x and made an attempt to capture some of the Washington players of the war (Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and President Bush). Some of the images intrigued me, and while they were not totally successful, the idea was born. To see if I could somehow match our photographic ancestors and bring this different LOOK to politics.

By the mere physics involved (on my Speed my 7" lens has the same angle of view as a 60mm on a 35mm camera, but is much more narrowly focused,) you have pictures that look different. It enables you to focus and concentrate on your subject and view it, in a way that is different than all the 35mm or digital cameras which are already out there. When Howard Dean did his ten city Sleepless Tour in August, I took the Speed Graphic and a decades old 4x5" Super D (the reflex version of the press camera.) It was fun, but most of all it gave me a whole new appreciation of what photographers had to go through. Even on a tripod the cameras can be unwieldy, and the bigger the camera the more unstable it wants to be.

I persevered however, and made some images I quite liked, mainly shooting Tri x in film holders. Sadly, none of the film makers currently makes a 400 speed b/w in a Ready Load format. So, with a tummy pack loaded with 8 holders, and a camera on the small Velbon tripod, I now go after the candidates with a whole new eye. I had to have the rangefinder on the camera synched to the lens (a 7" Aero Ektar f/2.5, built in 1943) in order to be able to shoot 'on the fly,' that is, to make a picture without having to compose and focus on the groundglass.



David Burnett with his 4x5 speed graphic: the lens is a 1942 Aero Ektar, older than everyone on the plane, including Kerry

Photo by M. Spencer Green/AP

When people move you need to be able to refocus quickly. When I get a frame that I like, it helps make the annoying bits go away. But the system is not for the faint hearted. Schleppling is the word which most comes to mind when using a big camera like this. You are inherently a little less nimble than the digital shooters, but when you press the cable release, and the shutter raps through the camera, you can almost SEE what you're getting. One by one, I would send a picture to my friends at TIME, who responded very positively about the photographs, and eventually we made an agreement to have me cover the political campaigns of the 2004 Primaries. The project has not only been enormous fun, but immensely productive. For the first time in 20 years, I have been in TIME for 6 weeks in a row, the latest of which is this week's cover story and layout on John Kerry. Black and white lives on, happily.



Sen. John Edwards speaks to a crowd in Fairfield, IA just days before the Iowa Caucus.

Photo by David Burnett/Contact Press Images

With film of course, several issues arise. Which film? For me, mainly Tri x, with some VC160 color neg when color is a must. Choosing is easy. The hard part is managing the 4x5" film on the road. I suppose I could have a changing bag, but that seems like the easy way out. Loading and unloading film from the holders remains a challenge. Close the curtains in the motel room, turn all the lights off, head to the bathroom, using the bathmat to close the light leaks under the door. Some motels in northern New Hampshire forgot to put curtains up, and they are the ones where I must have used 15 towels to keep that pesky midnight light off my film. But there is a zen like magic, feeling the bumps in the right/top side of the film, sliding it into the holder, then hoping that by the time you're ready to shoot that holder, the dark slide hasn't accidentally come out, ruining that piece of film.

I never shot 4x5 in high school, as we had already gone on to the Rollei twin lens. Later, I was a student of 35mm for several decades, and now that its not really fashionable, I'm really enjoying being the "guy with the big camera." People wonder what it is youre bringing in on the tripod, and it can be a pain, but when

you look at the ground glass, and see it in a way that no one else will, it gives you strength to keep schlepping. My favorite "4x5" story involved Francis "Nig" Miller, a LIFE photographer in the 50s and 60s, who I met when he came to Salt Lake City for a day, following Lady Bird Johnson. Miller was complaining about his chestful of Nikons, and said, in a poetic moment "The trouble with these damn Nikons is, you hit someone with it, they go down but they get right back up." He paused for a minute, then almost smiled and allowed "Now, with a Speed Graphic, you hit somebody, they're gonna stay DOWN!" I haven't had to whack anyone with mine yet, but it's reassuring to know that if I have to, at least the guy won't be getting up soon.

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