

Old Cameras From My Collection

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The Mercury II – Taking Pictures with a 63-Year Old “Classic”

Posted on [November 25, 2009](#) | [26 Comments](#)



The Universal Mercury II - c.1946-1952

Most of the cameras discussed thus far are not usable anymore, either because of the lack of suitable film, or simply because the cameras themselves are too decrepit to function properly. The Mercury II is one of a few exceptions; it uses standard 35mm film, has interchangeable lenses and a very durable, accurate shutter. So, this post isn't just about the history of the camera; it's about how it performs today.

The term “classic” isn't often used to describe a camera made by Universal, but in this case it is appropriate. The 1946 Mercury II is, without a doubt, the camera for which this company will be remembered. The post-war revamp of the original Mercury Model CC, the Mercury II had features that were designed to bring the camera up to date and increase its market appeal. These included:

- “Designed for color” coated Tricolor lens, built in the Universal optical shop. Pre-war lenses had been purchased, not made in-house. Coated lenses included the 35mm f/2.7 Tricolor and the 35mm f/3.5 Tricolor
- Enlarged body design and inclusion of a rewind knob to enable the camera to accept standard 35mm

film cassettes. This feature brought the Mercury into the real world of amateur photography, permitting the use of a great variety of film types and speeds

- A film reminder dial on the back
- Redesigned accessories including a clip-on extinction meter with a longer eyepiece extension to accommodate the repositioned accessory shoe, and a redesigned eveready case. The case is important because the new body design did not include strap lugs of any kind

Strangely absent from the accessories line-up were:

- A redesigned rangefinder to fit the new camera body. The rangefinder for the Mercury Model CC didn't fit, and it was left to Spiratone to market a rangefinder for the Merc II.
- Coated versions of the Univex Hexar 35mm f/2.0, the 75mm f/3.5 Ilex Telecor, and 125mm f/4.5 Wollensak telephoto lenses offered for the Mercury Model CC. It has been rumored that some pre-war Hexars were coated in the Universal optical shop, but I've never seen one. I have seen Mercury II's with Hexars, but they are uncoated.



This ad for the Mercury II appeared in 1946

(Related note: Fred Spira was one of the greatest camera collectors and photohistory enthusiasts who ever lived – be sure to check out his book, titled The History of Photography as Seen through the Spira Collection. It's pretty pricey, so I borrowed it from the local library, and both the camera photos and the historical content are fantastic. If you can afford it you should buy it, if only to encourage the continued publication of such high-quality material.)

Shooting with the Mercury II

I've owned a Mercury II for some time, as well as the aforementioned Mercury Model CC variants. This past weekend, I decided to take the Mercury II out for a spin, and to try a couple of unusual things. Sally and I headed over to Mentor Headlands State Park to take some pictures with my 63-year old classic camera. The park is on the shores of Lake Erie, and constitutes the longest contiguous stretch of public access to the lake in Ohio. The dunes along the lake are protected, but the area surrounding them presents opportunities for

nature photographers.



Shooting with the Mercury was an interesting challenge. I used a hand-held meter for exposure settings, in this case an old Walz selenium meter that still works very accurately. For focusing, I used a Kent clip-on rangefinder, transferring the distance reading to the Mercury's focusing scale. A Univex Exposure Meter served as a mounting platform to elevate the Kent rangefinder above the "hump" on the camera's back. (*I couldn't actually use the Univex extinction meter, because the translucent number slide inside is actually made of nitrocellulose-based film, and it has deteriorated severely. Later cameras like the Meteor have extinction meters that apparently used modern film, as they seem to hold up better.*)

Another issue with this camera is setting the shutter speed. It's very important to select the required shutter speed, then wind the film (which cocks the shutter). If you cock the shutter first, then realize that you haven't set the correct shutter speed, it's too late to change it. This resulted in a few lost frames as I struggled to remember NOT to wind the film until I was actually ready to set up for the next shot. Fortunately, with a half-frame camera, you can waste a few frames if necessary – I got about 46 shots on a 24-exposure roll. Having said all that, however, the rotary shutter still works beautifully. In fact, standard Mercury cameras generally retain their accuracy right up until the spring craps out. As focal plane cameras go, the Mercury exhibits less shake due to shutter motion than any camera I've used before. The circular motion of the rotary shutter comes up to speed in less than a second, stopping without any perceptible "jerk." Most horizontal-travelling focal plane shutters seem to slam the camera to one side, resulting in potential movement on the part of the user. The weight of the Mercury body, at over one pound, also helps dampen any motion.

Results

The results of shooting with the Mercury II were somewhat inconsistent at first, although the camera seemed to “warm up” and perform correctly by the second half of the roll. It’s also true that I became more accustomed to working with the camera by that time, so maybe it was all my fault to begin with. In any case, the lens seemed reasonably sharp for a triplet, and the coating was pretty effective at reducing lens flare. The obvious exception was when shooting toward the sun, but that’s normal for any camera lens even today. Note, however, the off-axis flare in the photo below. That is not a common situation, and it could mean some separation of the cemented elements – I’ll try to address this in the future.



Ultimate lens flare test shows some weird stuff happening



Trail to the dunes area

Shots around the beach area seem to be reasonably contrasty and the shutter speeds and apertures are obviously close to perfect, based on the negative density achieved. Not bad at all for a camera that's over 60 years old! Shutter speeds right up to 1/1000 second were used, with no obvious over- or underexposure problems. All in all, the Mercury II is a very capable 35mm camera, and even today performs well enough for amateur use. Now all I need to do is try out the flash attachment – I have a few old Press 25B's around here somewhere!

This entry was posted in [Camera Collecting](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

26 RESPONSES TO “THE MERCURY II – TAKING PICTURES WITH A 63-YEAR OLD “CLASSIC””

[Jim Eckberg](#) | December 7, 2009 at 11:34 am | [Reply](#)



Enjoy your posts very much. There are growing numbers of those of us who collect vintage cameras as an engaging, enjoyable hobby. Even a larger group of folk are out here who use old instruments to take new images. It seems film may not be quite as dead as predicted, but rather “developing” as a fun alternative to the main digital reality. I look forward to reading more of your re-adventures in photography!

[Brian](#) | December 27, 2009 at 11:30 pm | [Reply](#)



Fascinating! Are you processing the film similar to how it would have been originally processed — or are you getting that vintage look in post-processing?

Look forward to exploring your site. Thanks for putting it together and sharing your experience with these beautiful cameras.

danakennedy | [December 28, 2009 at 9:12 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Brian, the Mercury II negatives were scanned and printed pretty much as-is. I tried not to alter the images. The single-coated lenses, coupled with less-than-perfect lighting conditions, probably contributed some flare to the already soft focus. Also, the half-frame format does result in reduced resolution due to having to greater enlargement of the original. Definitely a fun project which I'll be trying with some other cameras soon!



Bek | [July 31, 2010 at 6:33 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

very cool!! I was helping clean out my late grandparents house and came across my Pop's Mercury II...trying to find out some stuff about it now. Amazing looking little camera. I can't for the life of me figure out the "calculator" for exposure on the back. It gives me much more of an admiration and appreciation for the photographers of old!! Man, we have it easy now. Glad to know this camera is still "functional" 😊 and also that I have such a piece of history!



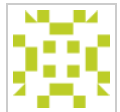
Andre Futrell | [September 4, 2010 at 6:04 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

My father past some years ago and I was home on a visit,I asked my moms about some of his old cameras and at last she handed me his mercury2 .I remember as a boy my dad would take pictures with it, and now I have this funky camera in which I have no idea on how to use it so hopefully someone,anyone can tell me how to use it.



Chris | [September 9, 2010 at 3:36 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Does anyone know if this was a one-off proprietary lens mount? Or are there other lenses somewhere in the world that would fit the Mercury II?



I know a few are listed above but I mean lenses that someone may have held in their hands in the last 50 years. Or, failing that, the thread of the lens mount?

danakennedy | [September 12, 2010 at 9:05 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Apart from Universal, there were a few lenses imported by Spiratone in the 50's & 60's. They do show up on occasion at camera shows and swap meets.



Dave Huffman | [February 20, 2011 at 7:04 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I was in the 6th grade at the end of WWII, 1946 when we visited my grandmother in Ft.Lauderdale for a few weeks. Mom was an ardent family movie photographer (Kodak 8mm Brownie) so I got to visit the camera shop with her. There I hungered for one of these. I think the shop owner allowed me to handle one, hoping Mom would spring for it. But, alas, she did not. This was a USA-made camera, folks. We had to do things like that during WWII.



M. L. Mayne | [August 13, 2011 at 1:46 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I have a Mercury II that I'd like to sell. Can you tell me what it's worth? Thanks,
cmrychn2@yahoo.com



Horace | [September 24, 2011 at 11:10 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



love it. found my granddads and I've been using it successfully. testing out its depth of focus guide right now

S | [January 10, 2012 at 10:19 am](#) | [Reply](#)



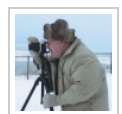
I would really like to purchase a Mercury Univex II but I have no idea where to look.. do you have any suggestions?

Gladden Corbin | [April 2, 2012 at 6:20 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



In 1947 I was stationed at the AFWESPAC Printing Plant in Manila, Philippines. Cameras were almost impossible to find then, but I finally found a Mercury II and one Roll of film. Made my only pictures from the Philippines with it. Good ones, too'

danakennedy | [April 2, 2012 at 7:43 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



Always an honor to hear from the greatest generation – thank you for your service to our country! I've taken quite a few shots with my Mercury II, and I'm pretty impressed with the quality myself.

Cheers,
Dana

clplaya | [April 21, 2012 at 5:15 am](#) | [Reply](#)



I have one of these for sale... Make an offer. Jwnewman42@hotmail.com

Ralph Lamoureux | [August 5, 2013 at 6:54 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



Hello Dana,

Great posts ! Many thanks for your blog.

I did buy a CX in very good shape after reading your presentation. I was going to test the shutter speeds, but instead managed to jam it...(@@#%!!). I was playing with it and did not pay attention, turned the speed lever after having cocked... And this jammed it (the speed lever still turns, the shutter button would go full down but would not trigger, the cocking lever is jammed)... Would you have any recommendation, before I try and open it to unlock the situation? I would prefer to stop torturing it any longer... Thx!

Ralph, NY.

Don Beamish | [January 13, 2014 at 6:01 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I purchased one of these in London around 1948, it was my first 'serious' camera and I loved it. After a couple of years the bevel gear on the winder stripped its teeth, in desperation I wrote to the manufacturers and to my amazement they sent a replacement free of charge and I became a 'Yankophile' straight away. The camera lasted until the late 1960's – harry days!

Larry Yungk | [January 18, 2015 at 11:13 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I think from what you wrote above you have the order for winding and setting the speed reversed. The instructions for the camera say it should be wound first, then set the speed after that. You must push in the speed dial to turn it to the correct speed setting. See page 14 of the directions.

http://www.cameramanuals.org/pdf_files/mercury_ii.pdf

Otherwise, I thought the article was interesting, nice pictures, and always glad to see folks using these old cameras.

Bobbi | [October 17, 2015 at 5:35 am](#) | [Reply](#)



I sure wish I could meet you for real so you could show me how to use my Mercury II CX, I am sure I am doing something wrong even though I downloaded and printed out the manual for it. I had bought a roll of 36 exposure asa 400 film loaded it according to the manual but after that I am doing something wrong and am totally confused/lost.

I have so many questions but no one around here have zero knowledge of the camera.....HELP

Bob Davenport | [April 2, 2016 at 1:26 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I still have a Univex Mercury 2, and have had it since about 1951. Stores can't print from half-frame negatives anymore, but there is a work-around. Have your film store develop the film only, then use the old slide mounts that were available for the cameras, or just fashion a simple mask of cardboard, and scan the images into your computer. I started doing that years ago, when I sold my enlarger-printer, and it worked very well.

Bill | [May 6, 2017 at 11:31 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



Blue Moon camera & Machine will develop 1/2frame prints. They also develop and sell 120mm, 620, 127, & 110mm film, plus sheet film. They are in Portland, Or.

glen herrmannsfeldt | [July 18, 2016 at 3:32 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I thought the Mercury II was more than half frame, maybe 5/8 or so. If you measure the width with the back open, it shouldn't be hard to tell.

Bobbi | [July 18, 2016 at 4:51 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I have the Mercury CC and the Mercury II now the Mercury CC used film that was made for it and the Mercury II used 35mm film as you pointed out. My Mercury II is supposed to work but I have never tried to use it. I bought my Mercury CC my Mercury II and my GE DW58 exposure meter as collector items only, but lately I am seriously thinking about selling all three together so I can buy a Minolta srT 101 35mm camera because I am wanting to go back to the basics. One ironic thing is the year that the Universal camera company went out of business (1952) is the year I was born which proves that I am very very bad luck, like the song says "if it wasn't for my bad luck I wouldn't have any luck at all"

Pingback: [Universal Mercury II \(1946-48\) – mike eckman dot com](#)

Robert j. Noll | [March 9, 2017 at 10:22 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



I now have my Papa'sMercury II....I remember how he used to love taking photos and having slides made from them.

Bud Hamblen | [January 9, 2018 at 1:30 pm](#) | [Reply](#)



The picture size on a Mercury II is 19mm (or 3/4 inch) by 24mm. When you advance the film twice you move it by nine sprocket holes, giving you 1.78 Mercury II pictures per regular 35mm picture.

The instruction booklet says that you have to wind the shutter before you can change the shutter speed, and that is the way my Mercury II works. You can find a PDF of the instructions at http://www.cameramanuals.org/pdf_files/mercury_ii.pdf

Pingback: [Universal Univex Mercury Model CC \(1938\) - mike eckman dot com](#)