

# GETTING A GRIP

VIDEOGRAPHER SAM GRIFFIN AIMS HIGH BUT KEEPS HIS FEET ON THE GROUND **BY DAVID SPERANZA**

YOU MAY NOT KNOW IT, BUT YOU'VE PROBABLY seen Sam Griffin's work. The quintessential TV cameraman, he's ubiquitous and yet completely below the radar. He's roamed the southeast for 17 years—12 as a DP—shooting everything from local ads to the nation's largest news and sporting events. Recently, his camera was one of several documenting the daily lives of TLC's *Jon & Kate Plus Eight*. His client list includes a Who's Who of broadcast and cable television, from the Big Three networks to ESPN, HBO, CNN, and Discovery. Griffin has successfully pitched and produced shows for Fox, NBC, and CBS.

Along with a solid work ethic and an instinctive eye for framing shots, the biggest contributor to his success is an ability to look forward—whether on set, in his career, or within the greater industry.

"You've got to really think on your feet and be a step ahead at all times," he says. "It's not like a normal job. You don't come in and have coffee—you've already had it by the time you get to work."

Such an attitude was instrumental to his early success. After four years of high school video production and two years shooting sports for a local TV station as a college intern, he went on to spend two more years "waiting tables while trying to get freelance gigs." His big break finally came in the form of a LaToya Jackson club tour. Charged with hiring a crew, Griffin sought out the very professionals he'd been trying to work for since graduating from East Carolina University. It was a shrewd move. When the job was over, his stock had risen considerably. "I'd done enough jobs and started to get my name out before that," he says, "but that was the one that put things into high gear."

But as jobs grew larger and more regular, he discovered he had to raise his game. "Being able to adjust and move quickly as things

change wasn't something I was prepared for at first," he says. While working as a grip on a low-budget commercial he learned something important. "The gaffer was having me grab stuff," says Griffin, "and I grabbed exactly the item he asked for. But then he needed a second one. He said, 'If I asked for one item, there's a good chance I might need two. And if I need one of these, what else attaches to it that I might also need?' So I started looking at things in a whole other way. If somebody asks for one thing, what else might they need? That's how I approach most productions now."

According to Griffin, staying current with today's technology via industry magazines and the Web is the biggest challenge facing today's videographer. "I find myself reading so much more than I had to even two years ago. I'll constantly get phone calls asking, 'Do you have this camera? Can you shoot on this one?' And I've got to know how it operates when I get to the set."

"Things are changing every six months," he continues. "When I bought my [Sony betacam] SD400A—at least six or seven years ago—for the longest time that was it, that's what you shot on. And now there are so many small cameras, so many new HD formats." As a result, betacam—and tape in general—are slowly fading into the sunset. Taking their place are his "workhorse" Panasonic HDX900, a Sony Z1U, and his camera of choice, the HVX200. "I like the colors and adjustability of the Panasonic, and I really enjoy the P2 work flow."

Griffin believes solid-state capture to be "the most significant advance right now. The imagery systems are getting so much better on these smaller cameras, and being able to just hand stuff off on a card or a hard drive, that's pretty impressive." He likes what he's seeing in LED lighting, adding the Zyl-



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ight Z90 to his kit, an on-camera light with daylight and tungsten settings and the full range of color temperatures. "Some of the LED lighting is getting pretty amazing," he says. "We recently lit an entire scene with three people holding little LED light panels and it looked great."

With the majority of his shoots handheld, Griffin usually avoids on-set monitoring, camera stabilizers, and even zebra stripes in favor of a solid shoulder and a sharp view-



**GRIFFIN'S WILD RIDE:**  
On the set of *Good Morning America* at the Hard Rock, Universal Studios, in Orlando

finder. “You don’t have to have an elaborate setup,” he says. “If you can figure out a frame with just one light and a window, or use whatever natural light is in the room, you can still do some beautiful shots.” The key, he adds, is “knowing your camera and knowing what you can do with it—knowing where to push the edges.” The filmmaker, not the gear, makes the difference. At the same time, “So much of it is communicating with the client and finding out what

they’re hoping to have at the end of the day.” And the number of those clients may be the biggest advantage for today’s aspiring filmmaker. Unlike the old days, when there were only three networks generating most of the content, today “there are so many more shows that need a good production assistant, a good runner. You can get on a high-profile show a little more easily.” Just be sure to have the right frame of mind. “When you’re starting out,” he says,

“nothing should be beneath you. Get into any nooks and crannies you can to help out. If you go in with the attitude of, ‘I want to do anything, I want to learn a bunch,’ you’ll move up very quickly.” And always keep one eye on whatever lies ahead. ■  
A Temple University film program graduate, David Speranza has been writing and making short films since the days of Super-8.