

Ask the Colorist: by Randy Starnes

Every day I find myself interpreting someone else's work. That's what I do. In fact, the heart of my job lies in understanding the design and overall vision of the DP. For me, the daVinci 2K Plus is the most effective way for me to create a desirable picture and save my client's production time and dollars. I use some aspect of the da Vinci on nearly every project I work on, be it SD or HD transfers, tape to tape, feature films, documentaries, television shows, reality programming, or commercials.

Challenge: Making the most out of the real-time we have

One of the biggest challenges I face in the studio is time. The artistic side of the equation demands the time to do the job correctly, but on the business side, time is of the essence and speed is essential. Additionally, I need to be able to alter images and affect changes before the brain becomes convinced that what the eye is receiving is correct, and do so using the immediate contrast of "before and after." Therefore, the ability to provide clients with real-time, high precision color enhancement is crucial. The faster I can make a correction and compare it, cut to cut with small changes, the better. For me, the most efficient way to do this is using the da Vinci 2K Plus.

Because it is hardware-based, the da Vinci can process huge quantities of information in real-time. When I'm transferring film with our new Spirit 2k in combination with the daVinci, I can color balance, area isolate, pan and scan, create dynamic event changes and track ball adjustments while the images roll and with only one or two previews. The last DI job I worked on was "Blind Guy Driving" for Catfish Productions and Theta Films. The film's color timing was done in real-time, allowing Julio Macat (DP) to see changes immediately. This is a major advantage, I believe, of using the da Vinci. I can achieve high-resolution image and separate and increase the contrast range, adjusting highlights and shadows as necessary. I start with a 2k scan, apply an appropriate LUT, and work with an HD proxy at 24 fps while balancing, enhancing, windowing and panning as I go.

Having da Vinci's multiple PowerTiers also accelerates the enhancement process. Each tier consists of two processing channels called PowerWindows. Because the da Vinci offers more than one PowerWindow per frame, I can isolate multiple areas within a particular frame, regardless of whether the project originated on film or tape.

With PowerWindows, DPs can complete a day of shooting at a much quicker pace. Often DPs will call me from the set and ask about postproduction assistance, for instance, when natural light is not as ideal as hoped. Later in the suite, we can work together to fine-tune these specific scenes with PowerWindows or other daVinci tools.

Westwind currently has two daVinci 2K's. We've added multiple PowerTiers and Defocus Plus, as well as the Palette option. With eight PowerWindows, I can offer the most advanced color processing to my client and deliver a high-quality, real-time color enhancement within extremely tight deadlines. DPs can work confidently knowing that the necessity of re-shooting a scene is greatly reduced with a daVinci in the post-production studio.

Challenge: Creating perfection from imperfection

Besides meeting deadlines, our clients count on us to supply them with the highest levels of creative artistry available. Yet imperfections are a part of life. It's my job to make these flaws, flawless, using the best techniques and tools available. In these cases, da Vinci's DeFocus board helps me visually enhance specific scenes. The DeFocus incorporates a Gaussian blur that I use to independently soften or sharpen an area as well as apply light and glow effects. I'll often use a luminance key in tandem with a Defocus blur to put a glow on the highlights.

Often, I am in a situation where I need to smooth out an imperfection, create a narrow depth of field, or enhance an actor's complexion. I've done this for many projects including the reality-based television show "Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County" as well as ABC's "Desperate Housewives." A Defocus PowerWindow is used together with a kilovector to raise the luminance of the actor's skin and create a smooth, perfect complexion.

Consistency is also important in ensuring my clients receive the finest end product possible. Using da Vinci's Image Gallery, I can compare previously recorded images and scenes and quickly recall the enhancements done from one part of the show to the next. The Gallery also allows me to match scenes shot on different days to ensure consistency in color and lighting. The Palette option allows us to import stills that have been manipulated in Photoshop, for example, to use for reference during color timing sessions. The Palette will export JPEG files of stills timed and captured during sessions.

The daVinci 2K Plus saves critical time in the color enhancement process, provides greater flexibility on the creative front, and gives the freedom to use more visual and special effects. As a colorist, I have two primary responsibilities: To ensure I achieve seamless color enhancements as quickly as possible and to interpret the overall vision of the Cinematographer in a creative way. No matter the size or the scope of the project, the da Vinci 2K Plus allows me to accomplish both in real-time and with more precision than ever before.

Randy Starnes served as Director of Telecine at Westwind Media from 2000 to 2003, left to launch an artist's association known as AAIR, and was asked to return as General Manager and Supervising Colorist in June of 2005. Based in Burbank, CA, Westwind is a high-end postproduction house equipped with a full audio facility specializing in television and feature films. Randy can be reached at: 818-972-9000 or by email at: randy@wwm.tv.