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COVER STORY: POSTING 'MAD MEN'

By: [Ken McGorry](#)

"We had a fantastic time. It's a pretty heady experience," says "Mad Men" producer in charge of post production, Blake McCormick. He and his "obsessive-compulsive" coworkers had a huge night after the 60th Emmy Awards named "Mad Men," after only one season on AMC, "best dramatic series." But, whether a series garners industry recognition or not, "they're all really, really hard" to produce, says the TV veteran.

A big part of the effort that goes into "Mad Men," a "period" show set in a retro, pre-Beatles New York in 1962, is a relentless focus on getting the details right rather than allowing a single glaring anachronism to get in the frame. Things that may need to be removed or replaced might include an errant ketchup bottle; too-modern ceiling sprinkler-system heads; or a background tree that should be foliage-free in a New York winter. All aspects of the show, McCormick says, from production design meetings all the way to compositing and final color correction at Laser Pacific, "are very, very coordinated."

"Mad Men," true to its milieu, is shot on film -- three-perf Super 35. Chris Manley is the second season's DP and former "Sopranos" DP, Phil Abraham, just received an Emmy for his work on the "Mad Men" pilot. McCormick cites film as key to the look of "Mad Men." "For certain projects, I would never want to forego what you get on film." Each 48-minute episode is produced on a seven-day schedule - and then there's the post.

Dailies pass through Laser's Thomson Spirit 2K and get a one-light on a da Vinci 2K by Mace Johnson. DP Manley provides still photos from his shots - enhanced in Photoshop - to give a visual of the look he has in mind. Dailies metadata is tracked within MTI Film's Control Dailies system (www.mtifilm.com) which makes the colorist's job more efficient and generates Flex files for use in Avid editorial. While TV episodics once generated about 45 minutes of dailies, McCormick recalls, today's shows create two hours or more per day.

Dailies are mastered to HDCam SR and backed up to DVCam. For editing, the same dailies pass generates Avid MST media files on Fire Wire hard drives.

Since AMC has offices in both Hollywood and New York, "Mad Men" dailies will go cross-country via Sample Digital's (www.sampledigital.com) secure content delivery network and also, a day later, as over-nighted DVDs.

OFFLINE

The series employs three editors - Malcolm Jamieson, Christopher Nelson and Cindy Mollo -- working in episodic rotation with three assistants. The team works on new Mac-based Avid Adrenalines using version 2.8.3 and the episodes are stored on and shared from an Avid Unity Server with 1.6TB of storage.

The editors' cut is given three production days and the director then gets four. Creator/writer/executive producer Matthew Weiner's time with a cut could span a 10-day period while he keeps other episodes running.

VISUAL EFFECTS

Background replacements and major matte paintings - adding a Manhattan skyline for instance - count as big, traditional effects on "Mad Men." However, McCormick says, "All shows are visual effects shows now. Whether it's removing a non-period detail; painting something out [like] a smoke detector; stabilizing a camera bump; to me, that constitutes a visual effect." McCormick also focuses on that which is not focused on in a two-shot: if the performance is good in an over-the-shoulder, but something is amiss in the foreground, that distraction is dealt with. "Sometimes elements of the frame are replaced to ensure that people are watching what we want people to watch."

Large-scale matte painting is done at Stargate Digital (www.stargatefilms.com). Laser Pacific tackles the many smaller "production enhancement" shots, such as vintage-1962 analog TV picture burn-ins, using its connection to Kodak's VFX services at Cinesite. Flame, Smoke or Shake may be used and McCormick sometimes calls such stitched-back-together shots "Frankenediting." Such VFX may be created during the online where the production hands off an HDCam SR and receives back magically altered shots which are then integrated back into the master - all at Laser Pacific. "The advantage of having your visual effects team directly associated with your post facility makes integrating materials much smoother," McCormick says. Carlo Hume and Mike Pryor are VFX producers on "Mad Men."

The Laser "supercomputer" handles the online assembly including traditional dissolves, etc., and more challenging VFX take place in the DS Nitris, in 4:2:2, translating offline effects work done in Adrenaline.

AUDIO

Final sound is done at Todd AO Hollywood with supervising sound editor Jason George and Ken Teaney and Geoff Rubay. All the show's sounds - including background ambience - receive the same "obsessive attention to detail" right up to the last moment the episode is delivered.

COLOR

Matthew Weiner "will use every single tool at his disposal to enhance storytelling," McCormick says. That includes "small tweaks and adjustments in the color of a scene to enhance what's going on in the lives of our characters." Tim Vincent performs "Mad Men's" final color correction on Lustre at Laser Pacific. McCormick describes Lustre's nonlinear color correction as "pretty remarkable. It's Photoshop on steroids; it has kind of unlimited window opportunities, unlimited layers. If you do make changes, you can take apart those changes more readily. It's all the things you'd associate with the nonlinear workflow added to the color correction process. What blows me away about the Lustre is its ability to kind of organically manipulate light and images. It almost looks as if someone went back in time and added a light on a set; it has such a dimensionalized quality to it." McCormick adds that the most important aspect is who's driving the machine: "Tim Vincent does an extraordinary job of taking advantage of that tool set and delivering what we want."

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