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Michael Bonvillain



"I believe good cinematography sets a mood that is right for the story. Cinematography is the visual score, and should support the film without being too noticeable. Sometimes I'm tempted to go for the prettiest or most exciting shot, but that's not always the best choice. Soft, sculpted light might be flattering to someone's close-up, but a hot, top light smashing down may actually be more appropriate. You have to trust your instincts and set a tone for the story in a coherent way. For me, a big part of cinematography is collaboration. Working with the director, actors and crew is the best part of the process, with everyone focused on the same goal - to make something good, something that matters, and that hopefully affects people in a way they will always remember."

Michael Bonvillain earned an Emmy® and a second nomination for his work on *Alias*, as well as two Outstanding Achievement Award nominations from the American Society of Cinematographers. His other credits include the television series *Profiler* and *Felicity*, and such independent features as *From Dusk Till Dawn 3*, *The Last Marshal*, *Saints and Sinners*, *The Desperate Trail*, *Amongst Friends*, *When the Bough Breaks* and *A Texas Funeral*.

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Michael Bonvillain



Photo by: Douglas Kirkland

QUESTION: When did you get interested in photography?

BONVILLAIN: When I was about seven years old, my first camera was a Polaroid Swinger. I remember taking pictures at my aunt's wedding. Nobody else's pictures came out except for mine. That was my first photographic experience.

QUESTION: Was your family involved in the arts?

BONVILLAIN: Not at all. My dad was a geologist and my mom was a homemaker. It would be an understatement to say my dad didn't like rock 'n roll-he didn't like any kind of music! When I attended the University of Texas in Austin, I started to get into music. I played in a garage band. I had a friend in the radio-TV-film department who was going to make a video for us. I helped him and thought it was really fun.

QUESTION: What instrument did you play?

BONVILLAIN: I played bass, which I think was good preparation for being a cameraman, because you're kind of in the background. You can write songs and collaborate and have a lot to do with the sound, but you're not out front leading the charge.

If you go on any set, you'll find people who play music, or who used to play music or want to learn. I think there is a connection between filmmaking and music.

QUESTION: What was your major in college?

BONVILLAIN: Eventually film, but I went through Philosophy, English, Anthropology, and Geology and some other fields of study first. I'd go for a year and then take a semester off and work. I started playing with a band at little clubs. It was a pretty exciting time. I also started working with my friend on videos and really got into it. I realized that I wasn't a great bass player and not a great songwriter, but making videos was fun. I went back as a film

major and just really loved it.

QUESTION: Did you focus on cinematography in film school?

BONVILLAIN: There wasn't a specific track at the school. I just ended up shooting a lot of student films. My first experience was working with this guy named Michael Cohn who is now a good friend. I was just going to do a special effect for his movie; I wasn't shooting his film. It was about a guy whose wife has died. He's lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, and he hallucinates his wife's face pressing through the ceiling. It was really cool. We were also trying to make smoke because we thought it would look good. The problem was that we didn't know anything about making smoke, so we were frying oatmeal in a black skillet. You'd think that would fill the place with smoke but nothing came out. A few months later, Michael asked me to operate the camera on his thesis film. I said, 'What are you talking about, I've never operated in my life!' He said, 'I think you'd be really good.' I asked why, and he said, 'I can just tell.' After about the first week or so, there were problems with the cinematographer and I ended up shooting the rest of it. I had a good gaffer who helped me, but that was a really big break, and it was all based on one person's faith in me.

QUESTION: What happened next?

BONVILLAIN: I started working as an assistant cameraman on political ads and short films. I also worked as a loader on a local feature. (New York-based commercial director) Steve Horn came through town doing an insurance company ad, and I worked as a P.A. I wrote a letter to Steve when I was getting out of school and told him I was looking for work. He wrote back and said that he had four days coming up on a commercial in New York if I wanted to work on it. I hadn't decided whether to move to New York or Los Angeles after graduation. When I got Steve's letter, I decided to move to New York. I ended up working with him for a year as a P.A. At that time, I was thinking about becoming a director or an editor, but watching him work as a director-cameraman was inspiring. He was one of the first guys to do really grainy, shaky-looking commercials. He was a really big influence on me. He was a perfectionist.

QUESTION: What did you do after that year passed?

BONVILLAIN: I started working for a still photographer who did beauty

shoots, just freelancing as a P.A. Then, I got into the production aspect of filmmaking. I did one commercial as a production coordinator, which was really just too much hard work. I started hanging out with the electricians and the assistant cameramen. That led to freelancing on commercials as an electrician, and also low-budget films. I finally I got in the union as an electrician, working on commercials mostly. I learned a lot from that experience - a lot of tabletop work.

QUESTION: How did you make the transition to cinematography?

BONVILLAIN: I was always shooting short films and student films. One day, I was returning some equipment and saw a note on a bulletin board that said, 'Feature Needs Cinematographer ... Must Be Willing to Give 110 Percent.' I went over to the pay phone and called. It turned out to be a film called *Amongst Friends*. I was hired, and that experience was a real watershed for me because I learned you could make a decent movie with hardly any tools. We had no money, we started with merely \$40,000, but the movie was a hit at Sundance. After that, a friend, who had been my camera operator moved to Los Angeles. I moved out and slept on his couch for about a year, and occasionally shot films and commercials. I decided to go back to New York, and that's where I was when I got a phone call from NBC asking if I wanted to interview for *Profiler*.

QUESTION: What was it like suddenly being thrust into an episodic television show playing on network television?

BONVILLAIN: It was great. I was getting to shoot all the time, non-stop. I didn't really know how to pace myself, because everything I'd done before as a cameraman was three or four weeks at a time. I didn't know how to pick my battles and what mattered and what didn't, so I was just a raging maniac on the set. I've calmed down quite a bit since then. It was like sight reading. When I was in the band in junior high school, we would be given sheet music and we had like 30 seconds to look at it and start playing. That's what it's like in episodic TV sometimes - you just see pictures of the location, get there, make some quick decisions and shoot. It's really hard, but I think it's a great learning ground because you have to think on your feet.

QUESTION: Typically, what's your relationship as a cinematographer with actors?

BONVILLAIN: The relationship between cinematographers and actors is really important. They have to trust that you are going to take care of them. Besides making them look good, it is my responsibility to be fast, which is a challenge since they're so vulnerable, and really putting themselves out there. I respect that and try to make sure they feel free to let go, not have to worry how they look. Also, on a TV show, the directors come and go, so you're the constant, hopefully reassuring presence.

QUESTION: Has directing helped you as a cameraman?

BONVILLAIN: Yes, especially in terms of relationships and realizing that the crew wants to be involved and feel like they are part of the process. You want them to have as many ideas as possible and if it's a good idea, you use it. I was 2nd unit director on Snow White and I had a good Czech cinematographer working with me. It gave me a good perspective, with a different set of priorities than I was used to.

QUESTION: Why is it hard for the average person to understand what a cinematographer does?

BONVILLAIN: Probably because if the photography's good, it looks effortless. Like they just set up the camera and pointed at what was there. People have no idea about matching, shooting so it'll cut, stuff like that. It seems so obvious to me, but even some people in my family don't really know exactly what I do. My theory is that good cinematography is like a musical score ... it can help tell the story by setting the mood, making people feel on edge or comfortable or turned on, or whatever mood you need, but you shouldn't really notice it that much. I don't know how many times I've seen The Godfather... I can watch it now and pick out shots and remember things specifically - and steal them shamelessly - but the first million times I couldn't stop watching the story.

QUESTION: You have earned a couple of Emmy nominations and won for Alias. Do you approach shooting for television differently than movies?

BONVILLAIN: Yes and no. I try to give television shows I work on the same feeling of scope you get with movies, but in TV you're much more rushed, and you usually have to shoot so the producers have as many options as possible in post-production. On a film, the director might know he doesn't need the

close-up. Coverage is definitely more important in TV. It's all about listening to the director, trying to give them what they want, getting the most out of your crew and encouraging them to contribute.

QUESTION: How much of cinematography is in the shot list and the storyboards, and how much happens at the moment?

BONVILLAIN: It depends on who you are working with, and if there are a lot of effects that you need to plan out. I like to do storyboards and shot lists with the director, because you get to throw ideas around without the pressure of a crew standing by. However, some people work better just putting the actors in the room, seeing where they go and problem solving along the way. Lighting is my favorite part of the job. You're able to emphasize things and bring things out, or de-emphasize things and make part of the frame dark, so people wonder what's there. Lighting makes people prettier, scarier, etc. It's an important part of the story.

QUESTION: Do you think the role of the cinematographer is going to change?

BONVILLAIN: I don't think it's going to ever be done without us. There are directors who are going to put a digital camera on their own shoulder, but I think that most directors will want to collaborate with a cinematographer. I certainly hope so.