



DAY-CAM NIGHT-CAM



A review of the Panasonic AG-DVC30 Camcorder by Stuart Little

When we set up KLA back in 1996 it was considered essential that anyone with serious pretensions to offering a video production service would have to be toolled up on the day with a fully-specified full-size video camera; and if the job required two or more cameras then multiply that by the relevant number. However, times change and many small start-up companies or individuals are now perfectly comfortable turning up for shoots with cameras that, on casual inspection, look little different from higher-specced consumer cameras.

In practice these 'prosumer' cameras go a long way to meeting professional demands and can be used very successfully both as 'principal' cameras or else alongside their full size brothers in multi-camera shoots. Here at KLA towers we regularly use the two types of camera together which enables us to keep our costs down (on 'budget' jobs) yet fully satisfies the requirements of our clients.

Introducing the AG-DVC30

The Mini DV 3 x 1/4" CCD camcorder provided to us by Panasonic consisted of the camera itself together with two optional accessories - an XLR microphone and adapter, and a battery-driven infra red lighting unit. Provided as standard with

the camera is a top-fitting handle which I immediately attached and used throughout testing.

One of the things I find odd with all of the consumer/prosumer cameras that I have hitherto come across is the requirement to pass through the 'off' position when switching between 'camera' and 'VCR' mode. This is avoided on the AG-DVC30 which has an additional 'Mode' position which enables the user to toggle between the two standard modes.

Another feature which I very much liked, and which is certain to result in a considerable nationwide reduction in stress-related fury, is the ability to select 'STBY' which prevents the camera automatically switching itself off after five minutes when a tape is loaded but no filming has taken place.

In View

The AG-DVC30 has the usual two viewfinders. The standard viewfinder provides a bright colour picture and has a simple slider mounted underneath to adjust the dioptre settings. In addition to a standard rubber eyecup an extra large eyecup is also provided for working in very bright conditions. The LCD screen measures a generous 7cm x 5.2cm and opens out the usual 90 degrees. It can also be reversed round to enable filming behind the operator's back or self portrait where 'mirror' mode can optionally be selected. In its

'reversed round' state it can also be swung back flush with the camera body so that the picture is displayed side on. Brightness and colour settings can be adjusted via the menu which is accessed via a button situated on the left-hand side of the camera body just in front of the LCD panel.

The menu options are accessed in the traditional way the aforementioned button working in tandem with a push and turn wheel (described in the manual as a 'Multi dial'). Amongst the many functions available via the menu is the ability to manually set the timecode - indicative of the gradual adoption of features associated with standard full professional cameras - and 'user's bit' (e.g. date and time on the tape's sub code track).

The zoom is operated by a rocker switch situated on the top

right-hand side of the camera. Finger pressure dictates the speed of the zoom and in practice I found this to work well. In addition to a x16 optical zoom it is possible to select (via the menu) various digital zoom settings, these being x1.25 or x1.5 (the latter achieving x24) or x2, x5 and x10 (the latter achieving x160).

Into the Night

A number of recent cameras have adopted 'night-time' shooting using infra red (IR) light. For the AG-DVC30 Panasonic have gone one step further and supplemented the on-camera IR light source with a separate battery-powered add-on light panel. This is fixed onto the sliding shoe on the top of the camera (or handle). I stumbled around my house and garden in virtual pitch black and used the





camera's LCD to find my way around whilst filming. I then compared 'with panel' and 'without panel' shots. In use the IR light panel significantly improved the quality of the black and white picture produced (the panel can, of course, be used with any camera with a shoe fitting and IR capability).

Steady Control

Image stabilization is another popular feature on the latest cameras and the AG-DVC30 uses Optical Image Stabilization. I carried out a hand-held moving camera test with and without the stabiliser and observed that some of the shake caused by my footfalls was reduced with this feature on.

For accurate exposure the AG-DVC30 employs a Zebra. This is controlled via a push button on the main control panel which is accessed by swinging out the LCD panel. Pressing the button enables the user to toggle between Zebra off, Zebra on and 'Marker'. The Zebra on mode actually displays the level of Zebra applied which ranges between '80%' and '105%' and can be changed in 5% steps via the menu. The 'Marker' position activates a video 'level' monitor in the regular viewfinder or LCD screen.

Aspect ratio is controlled via the menu. In addition to the standard 4:3 setting ('NORMAL') the operator can set 'LETTERBOX', which adds black at the top and bottom of the screen providing a 16:9 ratio, or 'SQUEEZE' which stretches the non-black part of the 'LETTERBOX' frame to fill the 4:3 area. The operator is cautioned in the manual that using the

SQUEEZE setting may cause image quality to deteriorate and this setting should not be considered as a viable alternative to full-specification professional-quality widescreen shooting.

Manual Man

As with any camera with pretensions to professional use the AG-DVC30 can be switched from AUTO to MANUAL operation, in this case using a switch located below the LCD panel. Focusing, shutter speed and aperture settings can all be fixed in MANUAL mode. But auto-focus can be deployed in MANUAL mode by pressing the FOCUS button at the side of the camera.

In MANUAL mode focusing is carried out using the ring on the lens barrel. Shutter speed and aperture settings can be set by the 'Multi dial' wheel. Press once and the shutter speed appears in the viewfinder or LCD panel; this can be altered by then turning the wheel. Press again and the aperture and gain settings also appear and can likewise be altered. Switching back to AUTO cancels the settings made. The shutter speed is variable between 1/50 and 1/8000sec.

Additionally, once 'SLOW' is selected a further range of slow speeds are available - 1/3, 1/6, 1/12 and 1/25sec. Aperture varies between F16 and F1.7 and Gain values range from 0 to 18db in 3db steps. But wait - there's more. The AG-DVC30 also has synchro scan which can be selected via the menu and varies between 1/50.2 and 1/248sec. This is not only essential for filming computer screens but also for telecine.

With AUTO selected the AG-DVC30 employs auto white

balance (WB) but with MANUAL selected WB can be set using indoor, outdoor or 'Set' (fluorescent lamps, etc.) mode. Additionally, with AUTO selected, one of the three USER buttons can be used to lock the current WB setting.

Various functions can be allocated to these USER buttons e.g. AF+ ZOOM, whereby on pressing the relevant button the camera will zoom in from the current focal length whilst automatically correcting focus, and BACKLIGHT, where pressing the relevant button will employ the...uh...backlight.

Meanwhile Panasonic also provide a wireless remote control unit. The functions this offers include menu access, VCR operation, recording and zoom operation.

The Audio End

The standard microphone is built into the top front of the camera and an external mic can be plugged into the 3.5mm jack on the right hand side front panel, which also has S-video and A/V in/out connectors. But Panasonic do provide an optional XLR microphone and adapter.

The adapter fits underneath the front of the camera's handle (i.e. between the handle and the camera body) and plugs into a further connector on the front right-hand side panel using a special (and sturdy) 8-pin plug. The mic itself has a short standard 3-pin XLR cable which plugs into one of the two XLR inputs on the adapter. The operator can then choose the recording configuration, i.e. CH1 only (Input 1 select CH2), CH2 only (Input 2 select CH2) or CH1 & 2 (Input 2 select CH1 & 2).

Alternatively two external mics can be plugged in for stereo

recording (phantom mic power is available on both channels), or one or both inputs can be switched from 'MIC' to 'LINE' for input via an external amplifier (the recording level of each channel is individually controllable via two small wheels mounted at the back of the unit). A volume meter is usefully placed at the bottom of the viewfinder or LCD and operates in both AUTO and MANUAL mode.

The Things I Liked

I much appreciated the 'STBY' setting which enables unlimited time for setting up a shot prior to recording without having to race against time lest the camera gets bored waiting and shuts itself down. I also liked the large LCD, the cassette side loading and the easy manual operation whereby the focus, aperture and shutter settings were all easy to alter. And, of course, the provision of an optional XLR adapter kit allows a 'budget' purchase with the possibility of an upgrade to professional sound at a later date.

Overall the camera performed very well giving an excellent quality picture via its Leica lens, in keeping with its 3-chip status. Even with the handle, XLR adapter and XLR mic the camera was light to hold and sat well in the hand. It also operates well as a VCR and my Adobe Premiere edit system had no trouble in recognising and controlling its VCR functions. It is packed with useful features and I have no hesitation in recommending it. **b**

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