

Short Takes

Touring the World for Death Cab for Cutie

by Iain Stasukevich

The music video for Death Cab for Cutie's "I Will Possess Your Heart" was co-directed and co-photographed by Aaron Stewart-Ahn and Shawn Kim. Stewart-Ahn traveled the globe to capture a young woman's solo journey from New York to Tokyo.



Director Aaron Stewart-Ahn became good friends with the members of the indie rock band Death Cab for Cutie after years of documenting their live performances. This led to an opportunity to direct a music video for Death Cab's "Stable Song" in 2006, and on the strength of that job, Stewart-Ahn landed another of the band's videos, "I Will Possess Your Heart."

The concept for "I Will Possess Your Heart" is twofold. In one scenario, we follow a young woman as she embarks on a solo journey from New York to Tokyo, stopping at many places in between. In the other scenario, the band performs the song in a frozen cave — actually an industrial cold-storage unit in Los Angeles. "The idea is that the band is performing in an incredibly cold environment while this woman is traveling around the world, moving toward progressively warmer climes," says the director. "The farther she gets from the song's obsessive protagonist, the more her world opens up, and the less reliable his memories of her become."

It was clear Stewart-Ahn could not direct both the travelogue and the band, given the group's hectic schedule,

so he had to come up with a way to capture the performance aspect of the video. His first choice was director/cinematographer Shawn Kim. "I feel Shawn is simply the best shooter working in music videos," he says. "His lighting and camera moves are gorgeous without overpowering his subjects, and I imagined his work in my head when I wrote the treatment."

He and Kim have not yet met in person, and despite the distance between them — Stewart-Ahn is based in New York and Kim in Los Angeles — they sustained a clear line of communication throughout the production. Early on, they established some unifying visual motifs, including colors, patterns of light and lens flares.

As Kim began location scouting, Stewart-Ahn flew to Europe with the actress, a production coordinator and a producer, taking only a couple of camcorders and an Apple MacBook Pro. Their first stops were London and Paris. "I wanted to capture the texture of solo travel," says the director. "The goal was absolute realism; nothing was staged."

That meant being inconspicuous, which isn't exactly synonymous with

making a music video. Stewart-Ahn chose to capture most of the trip at 24p using Panasonic's AG-HVX200 "P2" camera. "I captured to P2 cards, having put them through their paces while shooting behind-the-scenes material for the feature *Be Kind Rewind*. I took six cards, which always seemed to be enough in a given day; I was shooting 48 fps constantly. I chose the HVX because of the image quality in ratio to the camera's size and profile. One thing I learned on this shoot was to always slightly underexpose; as often as possible, I exposed for skies. It's a very compressed format, and although we didn't do much in the grade, we could see [that compression], especially in highlights or blown-out skies when we tried to pull information from it."

He also used a 1080i-capable Canon HV30, a consumer-grade HDV "palmcorder," for an even lower profile. "It worked out well for this project because no matter what situation we were in, I wanted us to look like tourists," he explains. The ruse appeared to work wherever they went. From lighting prayer candles at the Notre Dame cathedral to touring Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the team rarely ran afoul of local authorities or camera-wary citizens. "In the cellphone-camera age, nobody seems to mind cameras being everywhere," muses the director.

The crew spent much of their two-week jaunt traveling from one location to the next. Tunisia doubled for Africa and the Middle East. They went to Frankfurt twice but never left the airport. They visited Bangkok, but only for a few hours, on their way to Cambodia. "Cambodia leaves me at a loss for words," says the director. "There are colors in the sky that you just don't see



Above: Shooting with Panavision E-Series anamorphic lenses, Kim strove to capture wide anamorphic flares as the band performed in Los Angeles' National Cold Storage, where temperatures never topped 30°F. Below: Stewart-Ahn shoots with a handheld Panasonic HVX200 on location in Cambodia. "No matter what situation we were in," he says, "I wanted us to look like tourists."

anywhere else. It's a beautiful environment, but there's also a weird sadness to the place. With all the decay, everything looks like it's held together with thread."

The next stop was Japan, where the plan was to shoot in and around Tokyo. On a whim, the crew took a train to Hokkaido, the country's northernmost island. "We didn't research anything about it beforehand," Stewart-Ahn admits. "I wanted us to be as lost as our character was." During the journey, the train broke out into an area where it ran along the edge of a cliff above the ocean. It was magic hour, and everyone realized that by the time they reached their destination, daylight would be gone. They stopped at Asari, and the final shot of the video was taken there, at the ocean. "It was an exciting, pure moment," says the director.

Back in Los Angeles, Kim was

making final preparations for his portion of the video. He booked a single day of shooting at National Cold Storage, just east of downtown; there were two sets at the location, and the one Kim describes as "slightly warmer" was 30°F. "The band had never really done a pure performance video before," notes Kim, who also shot Death Cab's "Title & Registration" video. "It was important for them to get that on film, and this was a good environment to do it in."

Kim was shooting 35mm — Kodak Vision3 500T 5219 — and he and Stewart-Ahn initially considered making their footage look as similar as possible. Eventually, they decided it would be better to remain true to each medium. "We didn't try to meet halfway," says Kim. He shot anamorphic 2.40:1 with an Arri 435 and protected for 1.78:1.

The band was keen to see wide anamorphic flares in their performance

footage. Kim chose Panavision E-Series lenses because he felt they lent an additional sense of coldness to the image. Special preparations had to be made to acclimate the lenses to different room temperatures. Kim had one set of primes that he split into two smaller sets. "It was a matter of deciding which shots we wanted in which space," he explains. "We didn't have a huge budget, so we didn't have all the lenses I wanted. We ended up using the 35mm, 75mm and 180mm in one room and the 28mm, 50mm and 100mm in the other."

Once the lenses have been in a given temperature for about an hour, they have to be kept there. "Panavision anamorphics are so big that they tend to hold their temperatures a lot longer, but if you make the mistake of taking your lenses out of a 10-degree room into the hallway, you'll have condensation the rest of the day, and those lenses will be worthless," warns Kim. He advised Panavision that the lenses would be used in cold temperatures, allowing the camera techs to prep the gear accordingly.

The 35mm footage was transferred to 1080p HD masters for editing and color-correction. With a final running time of over eight minutes, "I Will Possess Your Heart" makes extensive use of both filmmakers' work.

Stewart-Ahn says the unusual project taught him at least one lesson: "Next time, I'm hiring a camera assistant because I missed being able to confer with someone about the cinematography. I kind of wish I'd brought a cinematographer, too. That was the least amount of sleep I've ever gotten in my life." ■

To view "I Will Possess Your Heart" in standard definition, visit <http://otaku-house.com/forac.mov>.

