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# CATCAM: THE MOVIE

Imaging and Ingenuity in Seth Keal's Documentary



The irreplaceable Mr. Lee poses on the front porch of Juergen Perthold's South Carolina home.

Filmmaker Seth Keal's *CatCam: The Movie* charmed audiences at this year's SXSW Film Festival, where it received the Short Film Jury prize for documentary shorts before moving on to screenings at the Aspen Shortfest, Full Frame, Sarasota and Tribeca.

The film features Mr. Lee, an adopted stray cat who routinely disappeared from his South Carolina home for days on end. Intrigued by Mr. Lee's disappearances, his caretaker, a German engineer named Juergen Perthold, designed

and built a camera that fit around the feline's neck and captured continuous photographs of Mr. Lee's travels. Perthold hoped the camera would help him discover the mysterious life of his newest household member.

After several false starts, Mr. Lee finally returned with an intact camera and photographic evidence of his adventures. Intrigued by his findings, Perthold published the photographs online, unaware that his small engineering project would send shockwaves around the world.

Keal saw the photographs online and was struck by their beauty. "I didn't set out to make a film about a cat," he insists. "It's a story about engineering and the human need to solve mysteries. Perthold had a question he wanted to answer, and he happened to have the skill to be able to do it, so he made the camera, and what he got back was something he didn't expect."

Traveling to South Carolina to film Perthold's story, Keal and DP Charles Miller employed a Canon EOS 5D for the three-day shoot. "This

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—Seth Keal, director, *CatCam*

was our first stab at using the 5D, and it had its challenges, but the movie looks fantastic," Keal says. "We were filming Mr. Lee as he was walking around and performing for us, so focus was definitely an issue, but when he was still, the shallow depth of field allowed us to capture an amazing amount of detail."

Working with the 5D gave the small crew several advantages. "We chose the 5D because we had seen what it was capable of, and we wanted to have that extra cinematic edge," Keal comments. "We didn't use a rig or have a proper viewfinder, so it was tough for Charles. There were mosquitoes everywhere, and he was lying in the grass and walking through streams and underbrush and all that."

Working on the film in his spare time, Keal reviewed the footage captured by the 5D for nearly a year before teaming up with editor Sinead Kinnane to begin editing in Apple Final Cut Pro. "It gave us time to settle, and I don't regret not rushing it," says Keal, who was spending

his days during that time working as a producer on the 2010 documentary about comedienne Joan Rivers.

“I spent my own money on this project, so I didn’t have anyone telling me to get it done, and because it moved so slowly, I had a lot



of time to screen it for a lot of different people. We were able to go through this rigorous process of making sure it had a nice pace, making it look good, and making it make sense.”

The postproduction process for *CatCam* presented Keal with its own set of challenges. “Being a filmmaker always involves hindsight,” he says. “There were a few missing pieces in the audio and other small bits that needed to be re-recorded, but by this time Perthold had already moved back to Germany. Fortunately, a colleague from a project I was doing for *Vogue* was traveling to Germany for the holidays, and his family lived only an hour away from Perthold’s home. One of the mics had a frequency problem and he wasn’t an audio guy, but he was able to pick up the little bits of audio that we were missing to make the story complete, and the audio mixer did a great job of making it all sound good.”

Color correction was handled at Final Frame in New York City, where *CatCam* went through a full DI, but Keal insisted that the color for Mr. Lee’s photos remain untouched. “All the visual effects, the still photo sequences, were handled in Adobe After Effects,” he details. “I took the AVIs Mr. Lee shot, converted them to ProRes HQ 422 format and then processed the video in Final Cut Pro.”

Keal is pleased with the reception *CatCam* has received from audiences. “Charles and I love comedy,” he explains. “A lot of documentaries are very, very, very serious, and we thought that if we could make this movie good enough, it would be a nice palate cleanser for programmers and audiences. *CatCam* isn’t a hard-hitting story, and it’s not depressing. I’m not saying films like that are bad, but I like giving people a break.” **dv**



Top: Mr. Lee takes a brief pause during his journey through the tall South Carolina grass.

Middle: Mr. Lee crouches under a car, CatCam at the ready.

Bottom: The intrepid Mr. Lee explores the woods near Perthold’s South Carolina home.