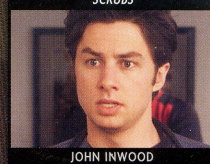
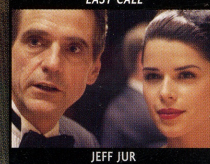
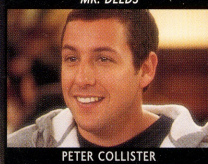


ICG

MAGAZINE



International Cinematographers Guild

June 2002



www.cameraguild.com



≡ BLOOD ≡ BROTHERS

JEFFREY KIMBALL, ASC SHEDS LIGHT ON UNCOMMON COMRADES IN *WINDTALKERS*

BRAD RUSHING SHOOTS STARS FOR *MOBY* • JOHN BAILEY, ASC – *YA-YA SISTERHOOD* • RENTAL HOUSE ROUND-UP 2

the new generation

: K E I T H S M I T H



KEITH SMITH FOCUSES ON THE FUTURE

BY DAVID HEURING

"Keith holds an unforgettable and deeply moving place in my mind and my life. His uncompromising desire to achieve a vision of beauty, and above all of originality, is to be envied by those of us who are fighting to either maintain or attain a place within the film world."

— Robert Richardson, ASC

So says Robert Richardson, ASC about cinematographer Keith Smith, who served as assistant on a number of Richardson's films. Smith is now making his own way as a director of photography, most recently on *The Wash*, an urban comedy starring Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, and Eminem. Smith has also photographed four other films slated for release later this year: *Love and a Bullet* (Screen Gems), *Gang Tapes* (Lions Gate), *Harlem Aria* (Urban Entertainment), and *Tara* (Universal Home Video).

Smith was raised in New Orleans, where he dreamed of playing professional basketball. He attended Xavier University in Louisiana on a basketball scholarship and lettered all four years. During his junior year, the team earned a slot at the NAIA championship tournament in Kansas City. When a local television reporter and news photographer came to the gym, Smith watched them orchestrate the story.

Seeing their creativity was all it took—Smith was hooked. He changed his major to mass communications. His practical education continued at a local PBS station, where he helped wire the building and install transmitters and satellite dishes. Soon he was compiling video vignettes that were used as fillers. Smith earned a resident position at the local CBS affiliate, WWL-TV.

He shot news and promotional photography for a while and then decided, almost on a whim, to reach for the next level. Smith applied to the American Film Institute.

"I sent a letter explaining my passion for photography," Smith says. "I was shocked when I got the reply saying I was accepted. In a matter of weeks I was driving out to Los Angeles."

During his first year at AFI, he won



photo courtesy of Warner Bros.

the Remy Martin Award, the first time that award was given to a cinematography fellow, and the first time the award went to a first year student.

After a year, Smith returned to New Orleans to shoot at the Jazz & Heritage Festival for his old TV station. When he heard that Richardson was in town shooting scenes for *JFK*, he faxed a letter to the production office.

"Bob invited me to the set the next day," Smith recalls. "I immediately canceled my flight back to Los Angeles. Pretty soon I was running mags and doing whatever needed to be done. I ended up staying on for the entire film. It was an incredible experience."

That was a turning point. "One day we were shooting a huge sequence in Jackson Square," recalls Smith. "I was soaking it up like a sponge. Bob was taking some

Above: Keith Smith served as an assistant to Robert Richardson, ASC on Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*. Below: As director of photography, Keith Smith gives instructions to his crew on the set of *Harlem Aria*.

Polaroids for density and exposure checks. My job was to keep the camera loaded. I took a few pictures of my own, so I could make some notes on how the set was lit. Bob noticed them and called everyone in and announced to the crew, 'From now on, Keith takes the Polaroids.' Bob really liked my initiative and respected my work."

On *JFK*, Smith made diagrams noting every meter reading, lighting placement, scrim, gel and cutter. He did the same on *Natural Born Killers*, *Heaven and Earth* and *A Few Good Men*. "Those diagrams still prove invaluable to me," he recalls. "I'm constantly referring to them for inspiration. I saw how well prepared and focused Bob is on the set. His concentra-



photo by Juliet Lofano

photos courtesy of Lions Gate Films



Above: *The Wash*, an independent feature, stars some of the biggest names in hip hop including Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Right: Keith Smith carefully lines up a shot. Below: Smith wanted the look of *The Wash* to be fun, but still truthful and reality-based.

tion is phenomenal. When you're a cameraperson, you're put into situations where you want to bring the light from a certain direction, but for some reason you can't. But Bob always finds a way. He attacks a scene cleanly and beautifully. Bob is the master of innovation."

After *JFK*, Smith returned to AFI and graduated in 1992 with a master's in Fine Arts. Since then he has worked as an assistant, second unit cameraman-operator (*Fallen*, *Any Given Sunday*) and cinematographer on more than fifteen low-budget features, including *Sex Monster*, *Frontline*, *The Girl Gets Moe* and *Recoil*.



On *Any Given Sunday*, Smith had the chance to re-team with director Oliver Stone as an additional photographer-cameraman operator. "I was honored to be part of Oliver's camera crew, which was headed by cinematographer Salvatore Totino," says Smith. "I was responsible for shooting all the pickup shots. I shot players' wives, opposing coaches, skylines, sunsets, stadium establishing shots, clouds, cheerleaders, mascots, scoreboards, monitors—you name it, I shot it. I was even allowed to direct a few sequences with secondary cast members. Oliver trusted me and I was proud to deliver for him."

Smith also credits Tom Sigel, ASC as a mentor. Sigel met Smith on the set of *JFK* and later asked him to work as an assistant on *Meteor Man* and *Blankman*. Smith also worked as the A-camera opera-

tor on *Fallen* and second unit operator for Sigel on *Three Kings*.

"I was very impressed with Tom's demeanor on the set," says Smith. "He is very articulate in the heat of the battle. If you can't express what it is you're looking for, you'll never get it. That sounds obvious, but I learned how important it is."

Smith also learned from his mentors the importance of preparation. "Style is born out of preparation," he says. "There are so many questions that can be answered in pre-production that save time and money during production and post. When I start a film, I research different films on DVD and make video prints. I laminate these into a binder, and they serve as a kind of show-and-tell for me. I can share them with my colleagues and inspire discussions about our visual approach. I



also draw floor plans of the locations to help with blocking and camera movement. Having definite visual goals makes for a more coherent film."

The Wash is an independent feature film from Lions Gate Films. It was directed by DJ Pooh and stars some of the biggest names in hip-hop music. Smith says that one key to getting the job was his attitude in the initial interview. "I was very upbeat and enthusiastic during my initial interview," he says. "I was able to articulate a vision for the film. I had answers to their questions, like 'How do you approach a film with an all African-American cast?' I was able to convince them that I could handle it technically, and inspire their confidence. Pooh, the director, had seen more than fifty reels. I was flattered to be hired out of all those candidates."

The Wash centers on two car wash employees who get caught up in a kidnapping caper. Smith shot for two weeks at a car wash in Encino and for two weeks on a stage at the Sunset Gower Studios. Smith says that while the director didn't bring a wealth of experience to the set, he did have excellent comic instincts. "He knew comedy and what was funny," says Smith. "My

job was to execute and capture his vision."

Smith used a blend of Kodak Vision films, including 5274 (200T) for day exteriors and interiors, and 5279 (500T) for night exteriors. He differentiated a kidnapping sequence by recording it on 5277 (320T). "I tested the '74 and was happy with how heavily the stock rendered itself," Smith says. "The blacks were perfect for the stark reality I wanted to introduce. This was an urban comedy, so I wanted it to be fun, but still truthful and reality-based. Mike Mertens, our colorist at CFI, took good care of me. He was in my corner from the second I met him. He helped me deliver a beautiful answer print."


The director and stars developed a very loose, spontaneous approach to the scenes, so Smith adapted. "Every time we moved on to another scene, I was presented a new puzzle to figure out and learned to love the challenge," says Smith. "I based my lighting and camerawork on the rehearsals. When I saw how the actors moved in the space, and how they expressed their lines, it got the creative juices flowing."

Smith believes one of his major strengths is his ability to elevate and inspire his crew. He usually works with gaffer Sydney Briscoe and lighting technician Renaldo Jackson. His camera department consists of camera operator Robin Meluish, first AC Scott Johnson, and second ACs Randy Whitlock and Greg Gayne. They have been together on more than sixteen projects, so they know each other well. The latest addition is Smith's twin brother Ken as dolly grip. "Ken is an incredible dolly grip," says Smith. "We call him the floater. He's a natural. He knows exactly what I have in my mind when it comes to designing a shot. On *The Wash*, the team averaged about 20-25 setups per day."


After *The Wash* was released, Smith had the thrill of seeing his name on a Sunset Boulevard billboard. It was a big step forward. Smith remembers Richardson telling him that it would be a long hard climb. "Bob was right," Smith concludes. "It has been a long, arduous path. However, I feel that out of this struggle, I have forged a future for myself as a cameraman. I am honored to be part of a unique breed of artist. We are all storytellers, but cinematographers feel compelled to visualize those stories and share them. We want the audience to see and feel the story we are telling. What a great job!" •

1/33 Productions • A Band Apart • A + R Group • Artist Company • Ace Entertainment • Anonymous Content • Area 51 Films • Asylum • Avalon • Bedford Falls • Backyard Productions • Believe Media • Bjoin/Powers Productions • Blind Spot • Bone Mill • Boston • Celsus • Chelsea • Concrete Productions • Copper Media • Creative Light • Crossroads • Curious Pictures • Cyclops Productions • Cylo • Dark Light Pictures • DNA • Dublin Productions • Duck • Fair • TV • Electric Ave Films • Elma Garcia Films • EUE • Extension Commercials • Fahrenheit • Fuel • Fusion • Get It Pictures • Green Dot • Harvey • Headquarters • Henson Marketing • Heavy • Jilly • Big TV • Chris and Amy • Stefan Czapsky • Pat Darrin • Luca Di Carlo • Jonathan David • Andrew Douglas • Jean Yves Escoffier • Jon Fauver • Larry Fong • Elma Garcia • Shane Hurlbut • Kevin Kerslake • Rolf Kesterman • Justin Klarenbeck • Thomas Kloss • Barton Landsman • Peter Mackay • Tony McNamara • Joe Murray • Marcus Nispel • Daniel Pearl • Herb Ritts • Dave Ramser • Matthew Rolston • John Schwartzman • Baker Smith • Dick Sittig • John Stanier • Pieter Vermeer • Pete Warrilow • Joseph Yacoe • Huge • Hungry Man • J. Walter Thompson • Johnson Burnett • Konk • La Banda • Films • La Casa Film • Level 7 • Link • Lovenger • Cohn • Mac Guffin Films • Mars Media • Mattel • Milagro • Milk Bar • Morton Jankel • Zander • Moxie Pictures • Naked Project • Nocturnal • Productions • Oil • Factory • Omaha Pictures • Onesuch • Open Films • Orbit • Original Films • Palomar Pictures • Partners Film Company • Picture Park • Pigeon Productions • Plum Productions • Ranch Exit Films • Propaganda Commercial • Reactor • Regent Films • Rhythm & Hues • Ritts/Hayden • Resolution Films • Rock Paper Scissors • RSA/USA • Rutherford Productions • Sandbank Films • Satellite Films • Serial Dreamer • Scream Productions • Screen Gems • Shelter Films • Small But Mighty Films • Steifel & Company • Strato Films • Straw Dogs • SunSpots • T minus 30 • Tate & Partners • The End • The Mine • Tool of North America • Trade Winds • Tuesday Films • Villians • Vision Crew • Vu West • Whole Brain Films • Wild Eye Productions • Wyoming Films • X-Ray • You Films • You Media • Zooma Zooma • Thank You Everyone! • From all of us at SuperDailies •

Celebrating 5 years of Great Looking Dailies



SuperDailies
800•224•1130
www.superdailies.com



That Good.