

Maxing Out With The Mini

Text & Photography By Jimmy Matlosz

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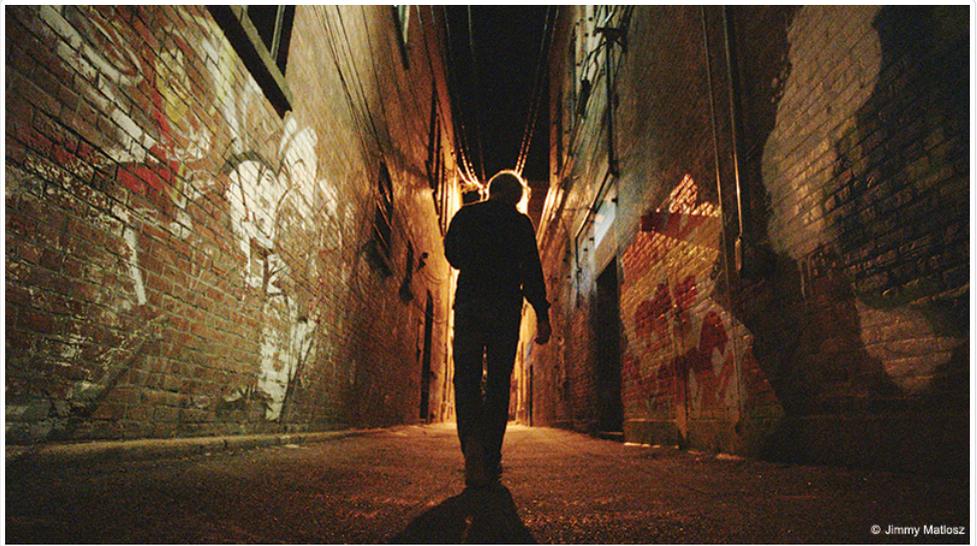
Since its rollout at NAB this year, the ALEXA Mini from ARRI has become one of the most sought-after cinema cameras on the market today. Word on the street is, “Have you seen the Mini?” or “Have you shot with the Mini?” For most cinematographers, the answer is no, and as orders are sent out to private buyers and rental houses, the ultimate question is: How will the Mini affect the ALEXA?

One only needs to look at the history of ARRI Inc. to discover the answer. Since opening almost 100 years ago, the company has always understood the filmmaker’s need for multiple body styles, as well as the importance of making their cameras compatible with each other. The ALEXA Mini is just that, an extension of the ALEXA cinema camera system. While it’s considered to be your best option as a B or C camera, it can just as easily be used as an A camera. The Mini is everything you’ll need to support a project of significant budget and can be the main camera, if need be.

The ALEXA Mini currently supports all the various flavors of ProRes, including XQ, and offers flexible recording

options in HD, 2K, 3.2K and 4K UHD. An expansion of feature sets to support the highly anticipated native 4:3 sensor mode and ARRIRAW option is slated for this year. (ARRI will update users through the arri.com (<http://www.arri.com>) website.)





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A compelling new option for filmmakers, the ALEXA Mini uses the same ALEV III sensor as all other ALEXA cameras. Its 4:3 sensor size features automatic de-squeeze mode for anamorphic productions and 0.75 to 200 fps frame rates, recording ProRes or uncompressed ARRIRAW.

REAL-WORLD RESULTS

I contacted An Tran and Stephan Ukas-Bradley of ARRI, Inc., with my intentions to fully test the ALEXA Mini and run it through the rigors of a small film shoot in northern Idaho. ARRI was very accommodating in getting the camera to me on time, and to my specs, with the ARRI Alura 15.5-45mm T2.8 zoom lens.

When the equipment arrived, I immediately grabbed the Mini—an impressively sleek, high-tech camera of minimalist design that features just a few buttons on the operator's side of the body. The carbon-fiber exoskeleton design fits easily in the palm of your hand and wields the same power as an ALEXA.

The ARRI accessories designed to support and make the Mini functional as a handheld or tripod-mounted camera were also self-explanatory, clearly marked with film plane markers and self-retaining screws. In a matter of minutes, the camera was fully assembled, with iris rods, follow focus, shoulder mount, V power battery pack, matte box and ALEXA Mini viewfinder.

I engaged the battery, hit power, and in seconds the Mini sprung to life. The viewfinder, akin to that found on the ARRI AMIRA, was user-friendly and intuitive. I set up the camera for an initial test using ProRes 444 Log, the highest quality available. The camera offers a full array of ASA settings from 160 to 3200. I chose 3200, as it was now after sunset. The native speed on the Mini is 800 ASA, the same as the ALEXA, but on my first night of testing, I had nothing to lose. Color temp settings were also readily available, offering the standard 3200K and 5600K settings, along with the ability to dial in your own flavor from 7000K down to 2000K.

Once ready, we went into town to capture challenging night shots using the camera's full dynamic range of more than 14 stops, available over the entire range of ASA settings. My goal was to stay mostly handheld, and also to secure the camera to various spots to assure of steadier footage. The first shot down the town's Main Street captured the vintage theater marquee, representing the brightest exposure available at the time against the dark shadows of now closed storefronts.

I positioned myself in front of the theater with an off-camber angle, shooting while allowing the headlights of passing cars to flare the lens and challenge the image. I set up the camera for handheld with the ARRI handgrips, quickly adjustable and easy to reposition, allowing me to set up a nice low-angle shot on a makeshift tripod.



The ALEXA Mini is a versatile tool, a compact-sized camera with extremely quiet operation that was light enough to be handheld in any shooting situation. It's an ideal choice for run-and-gun productions or where tight spaces inhibit the use of larger-sized cameras.

Performing close by, inside the vintage Panida Theater, was the colorful theatrical band MarchFourth. The lighting for the show was minimalist, what one might see in an indie film, while the texture and design of the theater made for a nice backdrop. I shot various angles of the band performing and moved on, ending the night shooting a passing freight train at the local station. All told, I shot 240 GB of footage on my first night.

In terms of feel, the camera was easily adaptable to my body and eye throughout the night, its menus easy to navigate and understand. Downloading the cards is as easy as a DSLR. ARRI supplied a high-speed CFast 2.0 USB 3.0 card reader that opened up on my laptop. All I had to do was drag/drop and wait. Download times are relative to computers and processors, but I found that a basic 2013 13-inch MacBook Pro was sufficient for simple transfer of data. I was running the computer off of battery only, and I managed to transfer and back up as many as eight 120 GB cards per day for the following two days of shooting, with time and battery life to spare.

Sunrise on Saturday saw a busy day ahead, covering a gritty, intense motocross race—a dirt track with bikes flying past endless obstacles, acres of dust, steel, aluminum and carbon fiber. Now in daylight, I set the camera to 160 ASA, knowing that I would retain those same 14+ stops of latitude. I also set color temp to 5600K and recording to ProRes 444 Log C, allowing me to shoot up to 60 fps.

Within the same menu as the ASA setting are the built-in ND filters with values of 0.6, 1.2 and 2.1. Setup is done through the viewfinder and flip-out onboard monitor. Once shooting parameters are done, you can set the display and viewfinder to show a variety of user information, everything from the essentials of frame rate, shutter angle and ASA, color temperature, battery life and more.

The heads-up display on the flip-out monitor shows evenly spaced information on both top and bottom for a quick understanding of status. There are also options for peaking, false color, zebra bars, zoom for focus check and gamma change—the same information featured on all ARRI cinema cameras. There's also a record start/stop button located just above the eyecup, as well as the menu button that's essential for making changes to your current camera settings.

I spent the remainder of the day running from one place to another to get as many shots as required during a 2½-mile race. I'm guessing the camera fully built came in at around 20 to 25 pounds, a nice weight giving just enough resistance to steady my shots, but light enough to carry around and operate easily from a multitude of different angles.



The form factor of the Mini is rather nice in a few regards. There are only five functional buttons on the body: one for record/start/stop, three more for user-programmable functions (like waveform monitor display), and the fifth is FN. I will say that it was refreshing to manhandle the camera from one setup to the next without concern of pressing a button that would change functionality. It was seamless to land quickly and easily, to frame and shoot.

The camera worked flawlessly collecting over 1 TB of data over two days. It certainly outlasted me! Battery life for our 95 mAh ikan batteries gave us a solid 1½ hours of use, with the viewfinder monitor working and running the camera at a variety of frame rates from 0.75 fps (for time-lapse and under-cranked stylized footage) to 60 fps at full resolution, and resetting for 2K at 200 fps.

When rebooting the camera for battery change, it was fast and efficient, with full confidence that personal settings were retained. To change cards, one just needs to open the sealed door on the back of the camera, push the card in to engage the spring release, remove the card and insert a new one. For deleting and reformatting, the menu has quick access and lets you know in a clear, concise dialogue box that the card is ready.

My weekend with the ALEXA Mini was flawless and fun-filled. I really pushed the image as much as I could, shooting plenty of flares and backlit action. The thick dust that kicked up during the motocross race also added another element for overexposure to see how well the highlights rolled off. I also shot in forest areas against strong backlight with fast action, creating a worst-case scenario. On the last day, I pushed the ASA to 3200, shooting until it was a good 30 to 40 minutes past sunset. Through all these scenarios, the camera held up exceptionally well.

Learn more about the ARRI ALEXA Mini at [arri.com](http://www.arri.com) (<http://www.arri.com>).



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