

# THE FX OF CHANGE

2009 means more space and more films for Digital FX

BY JEFF ROEDEL



**G**reg Milneck is a gadget freak, and it hardly matters what gadget, either. His Digital FX employees guess their 47-year-old founder owns close to a thousand vintage still cameras. Some of them occupy the walls of the company's Perkins Road studio alongside generations of obsolete technology on display like electronic breadcrumbs reminding Milneck of where he's been. And then there's evidence of where Digital FX is going: two new mint-condition REDs, the most high-tech professional video camera on the market.

So, there's the gadget thing. Which is just one of several facts you'll need to know about Milneck, because when his company nearly runs the table on the Baton Rouge chapter of the American Advertising Federation by winning 22 out of a possible 24 categories like it did at the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual ADDY Awards back in February, people can start to look at Milneck the same way Spike Lee used to look at Michael Jordan in his iconic Nike commercials. "It's gotta be the shoes," Lee would say, trying to shade not only the heart of a Knicks fan but a brain twisted pretzel-like by the physics of an "Air" Jordan slam dunk.

As Digital FX continues to produce the most lauded commercials in the city and steps further into the world of feature films, two questions emerge. Can

this smallish company that is so dominant in the commercial field pull off similar success with movies? And as for explaining Milneck's success, what would Spike Lee say it's gotta be? The gadgets? The staff? The green screen? The RED camera?

The first camera to inspire Milneck was his father's. "I grew up in his darkroom," Milneck says. He was raised in Lake Tahoe, Calif., his youth highlighted by visits from music royalty whom his father photographed for magazines and album covers. Among them were Sammy Davis Jr., Isaac Hayes, and Little Richard.

His family relocated to Baton Rouge in 1976—the same year director Steven Soderbergh moved here—and Milneck enrolled in Baton Rouge High. After graduation his first gig in television was as a cameraman for TigerVision. In the early 1980s he filmed LSU football games for the local cable network and freelanced for ESPN.

"That was my day job," Milneck says. "There was a lot of off time, because football was all I did. So I started the core of [Digital FX] for local

commercials in the off-season." Twenty-five years later, Digital FX is dominating the ADDY Awards with a staff of 10 employees that includes editors, graphic designers and an animator.

It's obvious Milneck loves his job more than the awards. Walking through the studio and bopping into different edit suites for informal status updates, he is easily excited by the footage. The way he gleefully asks animator Aaron Michel to articulate the claws and eyelids of a computer-generated crawfish is more like a child at play than a judgmental boss.

"This is a very fun industry," Milneck says. "The most challenging thing is the timing of the technology and infrastructure. That's really critical to the success of a company, especially one like this. Technology drives what you do, and if you make the wrong choice you're going to be stuck with it for a while."

Milneck worked this cautious approach by holding steadfast to film while bypassing the HD video bandwagon all together. With the RED cameras now offering about 10 times the resolution of HD, his patience seems to have paid off. Milneck's next technological leap should happen before the end of the year, when he'll finish construction on a new large visual effects studio, three additional edit suites and a color-grading suite at Digital FX.

It's all part of Milneck's vision to see more of his company's work on the big screen.

"We need room to grow, and we want to go after more of the feature film work that is coming into the state," he says. "We definitely have the talent and the facilities to do visual effects and animation work for feature films, so we want to capture that as much as we can."

Milneck's recently promoted studio manager Dave Coner will oversee the new space. As studio manager, the 30-year-old supervises the gear and orchestrates the complex shooting schedules for each client, everything from political ads to spots for *Our Lady of the Lake*.

Coner was bitten by the movie bug in high school when he used an assignment to video a weekend documentary on local punk bands. "I remember sitting in my room with two VCRs hitting pause, record, pause, record," Coner says, recalling the rudimentary editing system. "I need to transfer it over to DVD before I totally ruin it on VHS." Much as Milneck surrounds himself with his old equipment, Coner watches his first video project a few times a year for inspiration. And to carry out that inspiration, he can't wait to use the new visual effects studio.

"We have been gearing up to do post work for movies, but we love the commercial world, and won't be leaving that," Coner says. "We have so much fun with these 30-second movies—that's how we treat them."

As for the company's success, Coner says it is because of the attitude of his "chief and commander." If Coner directed the commercial, Spike Lee might say, "It's gotta be the Milneck."

"Greg is the best boss I've had, mostly because he can be goofy," Coner says. "He's serious and gets the job done, but it's all exciting and fun. No matter what the stress level is, he can pull a joke out of somewhere, and that's what makes it great." [225]

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