

Digital Film Central Cuts Through The Noise To Make Beautiful Pictures

James Tocher opened Digital Film Group in 1998 as a video-to-film mastering studio, and in 2007, with new partner Curtis Staples, launched Digital Film Central with a focus on digital intermediate work.

"We kept waiting to see what was going to happen on the DI front in Vancouver and no one was making a major move into this area of the business," explains Staples, whose post career spans 25 years in the Vancouver and Los Angeles markets.

What separates "Central" from the other high-end facilities in Vancouver is its Kinkos mentality, says Staples, one in which the studio operates in a supporting role, rather than as that of a competitor.

"All of the big players that have high-end, uncompressed HD or 2K capabilities in Vancouver are also in the business of creating visual effects," he notes. "And in addition to those companies, there are at least another 12 to 15 standalone visual effects companies. What was missing in Vancouver was a complementary facility that could scan, record, offer color management, [and] ingest from SR to create file sequences that wasn't competing with them on the creative side."

According to Staples, Central is a data-centric service provider for digital filmmakers, regardless of whether images are captured digitally or on film. "It's all file based," he notes. "Video, data or film in and video, film or data back out again. Usually it's all three."

Central is home to an ArriScan scanner, which can scan up to 6K from 35mm and up to 3K on Super 16. An ArriLaser is used for film recording. And color grading takes place in a Baselight suite using Truelight color management. Christie projectors display large-format imagery.

On a more secretive note, Staples says the studio also has 10 powerful imaging workstations, but will not reveal specifics, noting that the studio takes advantage of black box and white box technology, as well as off-the-shelf software and its own proprietary tools to provide image optimization.

"We don't talk about it," he says of the imaging workstations. "We only sell services, we don't sell equipment. In terms of how we do de-grain, de-noise, sharpen, resizing, up-rezing, we don't talk about that at all. When we started, our job was to put standard definition onto 35mm so that it didn't look like it was shot on standard def. And when that's your starting point, if you are going to survive, you learn some really clever ways of optimizing images for theatrical presentation."

If Staples seems guarded, it's because of the immediate threat of nearby competitors, including big guys such as Technicolor and Deluxe. "We have these two 800-pound gorillas within a five-minute drive from us, and we are like this little chimpanzee, so we don't talk about how we do what we do."

Central's clients include low-budget independent features and documentaries. Documentaries are often shot over the course of several years and incorporate footage from a number of different cameras, as well as stock footage. "These are the sort of things that we specialize in," says Staples, "bringing the best possible picture quality to the color suite for the final DI or a film-out. Maybe they never expected it to go to film and now it needs to. They have something that is 60i in HD and now they need to make a really good 24 frames-per-second version of their film. That's the kind of thing we specialize in."

The studio is seeing growth in work that's been shot on Red and Phantom cameras. At press time, Central had worked on approximately 15 Red projects. And that work comes from all over the world.

"A large percentage of our work comes from outside Vancouver," says Staples, "and of that percentage, a good amount is coming from outside North America. As a brand-new facility, we are doing relatively well, and the main reason for that is that we didn't open this facility to try to survive on Vancouver business."

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Segment of Super 16mm Raw Scan from ALIEN TRESPASS – Magnified 2000X



Same segment AFTER Digital Film Central processing and color grading