



Illumina Lenses' Focus is Quality on a Budget

When the first prototypes of the Illumina S35 lenses from Luma Tech arrived a couple of years ago, Richard Metzker of Vancouver rental house Inspired Cinema took them for a test drive. “We tested them against some 20-year-old Zeiss Super Speeds, and they had some issues with flare and some mechanical problems, but that’s typical of pre-production sets,” he says. “But they were as sharp as the older Super Speeds.”

When the second iteration arrived, most of those issues were fixed, and he still expects improvements to continue with the Russian-made lenses which are causing many in the industry to take notice. “They changed the coating of the internal elements at the edges, reduced the geometric distortion in the demo set and cleaned up the barrel lettering,” he says. “We bought two sets of the Illuminas, which we now rent.”

There are still some minor issues, which are being retroactively fixed, he says. For instance, some binding of the focal ring when hand pulling focus if there’s any other pressure on the front of the barrel, and maybe making the iris blades less reflective. But for sharpness, speed and value, they’re tough to beat, he says.

“If you’re on a lower budget or if you’re chasing daylight, they’re half the cost of Leicas and a third of Zeiss,” he says. When resolution tested against a set of Leica or Zeiss primes at \$200,000 or \$140,000, the Illuminas punched well above their weight as noted at filmicdigital.com and reduser.net.

The price is extraordinary. For less than \$40,000 you get a set of six lenses built by LOMO optical design in St. Petersburg, Russia, ground from the same glass supplier used by Cooke, Zeiss and Leica, namely Schott of Germany.

The lens set consists of 18, 25, 35, 50, 85 and 135 mm (with a 14 mm in development) and aperture range of f1.2 for 18-85 mm, giving f1.6 in the 135 mm, giving T1.8- T22, all with a front diameter of 95 mm on a PL mount capable of 5K capture.

Other notable technology: A double-helicoid thread focus mechanism on bearing that means zero rotation of elements while the lens front and iris gear track back and forth.

Gregory Mirand, founder of Luma Tech, maker of the Illumina S35 series, says the ground-up plan was to make a set of lenses to be fast, sharp and affordable. Russian by birth and now living in Florida, Mirand is a veteran of the cinematography industry, arriving in Canada in 1975 and working as a camera and optical technician. He ended up at Kingsway Film Equipment selling Cooke lenses before moving to the United States in 1990 to design and manufacture the Illumina S16 lenses for Super 16 mm film format.

Those lenses were a hit for years. In 2008, he hooked up with LOMO in St. Petersburg to design and make the Super 35 lenses, which would also work with large sensor digital cameras. “LOMO is the anamorphic lens leader, they make the biggest telescopes, 6 metres in diameter, it’s a very good factory,” he says.

But he noted that perfection is a hard master and the real sweet spot is not to over-build or over-design the lenses.

“You can get 300 lines of resolution with a lens,” he says. “But what’s the point of that if no one is really going to see the difference? It’s like having a Ferrari that can do 300 km/h but only driving on a road where the limit is 100 km/h.”

Going from a T1.9 to T1.3 is double the precision, double the grind and design quality of the glass and double the work and cost. What he wanted with the Illumina S35s was value. To prove his point, he demonstrated in a dark hotel room with a RED camera in Las Vegas at NAB in 2009. “I had a guy say he was using a regular Zeiss T2 and he thought they were just fine,” he says. “So I said, ‘Come into the room.’ At T2 there was nothing. You can play with the buttons on the RED, and he tried, but nothing happened. I said, ‘Open to T1.3,’ and suddenly the picture came. You don’t need extra light. You don’t need to bring lights, which gets expensive.”

It’s that T1.3 at that price with the inherent sharpness that is getting attention, Metzker says. “Because they’re at a T1.3 and they’re not that expensive, \$85 a day per lens, they’re less than half the price of an Ultra Prime and a third of a Master Prime, people can use them for anything,” he says. “In terms of colour, they’re very close to Master Primes or any Zeiss lens, maybe just a little warmer even.”

They’re also in tune with the trends, he says, noting that stylistically, DOPs are edging towards shallow depths of field, shooting wide open. “No one wants to shoot at T4 anymore, though they do, but there’s stylistic choice to shoot with a much shallower depth of field,” he says. “People get hired because they shoot a shallow depth of field and can pull it off.” 🍷

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