

K 5600 Joker-Bug 400 & 800

Whether you're shooting stills or video, this topnotch HMI lighting kit shines through.

I get to test drive a lot of high-quality gear for PDN Magazine but every once in a while I go behind the wheels of a Rolls Royce. In the case of a continuous light source for location or studio work, K 5600 Lighting is certainly in that class.

Recently, TREC Rental was kind enough to lend me a K 5600 Joker-Bug HMI lighting kit for a test shoot with the Canon EOS-1D Mark IV (reviewed here) at my friend Jason Group's <www.jasongphoto.com> studio. Though it had been a while since either Jason or I had used HMI (Hydrargyrum medium-arc iodide) lighting, a weekend with the Joker-Bug 800- and 400-watt systems was enough for us to consider saying goodbye to strobes forever (if we could afford it).

Yes, while Jokers are some of the best small HMIs around, they're not exactly cheap and, truth be told, they've made more inroads into the movie and television market than among photographers. Drive around the streets of New York or L.A. long enough and you're liable to stumble across either a film or T.V. show being made. Check out the lighting and more often than not it'll be Jokers.

Why? HMI provides gorgeous, flicker-free continuous lighting that comes very close to emulating natural daylight. (Hence, the nod to the 5600 Kelvin color temperature in the brand name.) However, even a very basic Joker-Bug set-up can cost \$5,000 and up.

Photographers have been giving these systems a second look though with the advent of pro digital SLRs that can capture high definition video. But as we learned during our test of the 1D Mark IV—which can shoot 1080p HD—the Joker-Bugs were also very sweet for still photography, providing bright but not harsh wraparound light for portraits and a powerful light source for photographing a scene.

HERE COMES THE SUN

TREC outfitted us with two Joker 400s and two Joker 800s along with a set of Profoto adapters. We also used a Softlight White Profoto reflector, a Softlight Silver Profoto Reflector and two 50-degree Magnum Profoto reflectors.

"The Profoto adapters are great," Jason noted. "You can go out and buy two Jokers and use them with your Profoto stuff to compliment your studio lighting."

Set-up was simple. Jason, who used Jokers in his former life as a food and product photographer, noted that the entire kit was a lot less cumbersome than in the past. In particular, the ballasts, which regulate the current so it does not burn out the light, have gotten a lot smaller



Once you start using HMI continuous lighting in the studio, you may never want to go back to strobes again.

and lighter. Even the 800w ballast weighed only a few pounds and everything packs up neatly into a metal trunk that's small enough to stow on an airline.

The beauty of HMIs is that you can use them seamlessly with available light as opposed to tungsten lighting which doesn't mix as easily. We worked with a model as part of a photography class Jason was leading and he positioned Jokers on either side to demonstrate his Rocker Rim lighting. Basically, it's a two light set-up to produce a dramatic halo-effect behind the subject. Because the HMI light is continuous, what you see is what you get unlike strobes which, as Jason put it, are more like "hunting and pecking."

Jason's assistant, Lindsey Thorne, was also able to use the Jokers for a portrait session and noted the difference from shooting with strobes. "There's more guesswork with strobes," she said. "[With the Jokers], the quality of the light was amazing. It was so crisp and color-balanced that no post work was necessary."

She added that the constant light source, coupled with natural light from the studio's window, allowed her to shoot at f/2.0 or faster, ISO 50, 1/500th of second to achieve beautiful fall-off of the lighting and background blur.

"They're also good for shooting in a smaller studio if, for instance, you need the subject to sit closer to the wall because of space limitations. (With the Jokers) you can still have a lower aperture and keep the background completely blurred."

QUIET ON THE SET

Since HMI lighting is so popular in the movie and TV industries, it's no surprise that the Joker-Bug lights worked great while capturing HD video with the 1D Mark IV. I was able to handhold the Mark IV and shoot video of Jason while he led the photo class with the scene lit only by the Jokers. As mentioned in the Mark IV review, the video could easily be used by Jason for educational or promotional purposes.

At the end of the class, Jason shot a video of his students discussing what they thought about incorporating both video and stills into their photography business. Lindsey then edited the video, added some background music and the clip went up on Jason's Web site. Unlike some similar promotional clips you might see on photographers' Web sites, the Jokers provided professional-looking video lighting with very little effort.

When paired with an HD-DSLR, Jokers could be used to light a variety of situations from a bride and groom talking about their wedding day to a product demo or a photography how-to video.

That's not to say that these sorts of videos couldn't be shot with other continuous lighting—or even on-camera LED lights—but with Joker HMIs they'll just look better. And who wants to drive a Datsun when you could get behind the wheel of a Rolls Royce?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Joker-Bug lighting from K 5600 many not be the cheapest continuous light source out there but for video or still photography, they're one of the best. If most of your studio work is done with strobes but you want to try something new, rent a Joker-Bug 400 or 800 set-up and see if you like it. If you're like us, you'll quickly see the benefit of being able to blend gorgeous HMI light with the natural glow from that big 5600 K ball up in the sky.

K 5600 Joker-Bug 400 & 800

www.k5600.com/crossover

Pros: Provides gorgeous HMI continuous light for video and/or still photography; easy set up; kit is compact and easy to travel with; adapters available for Profoto accessories.

Cons: Pricey.

Price: \$6,539 for 800w Joker-Bug System; \$5,260 for 400w Joker Bug system