

MOVING PICTURE

ST. AUGUSTINE FILMMAKER
DUSTIN MILLER RIDES TOWARD
THE FUTURE ON A WAVE OF
SURF FILM SUCCESS

BY NICK MCGREGOR



Dustin Miller's St. Augustine office occupies the back bedroom of a nondescript black-and-white 1940s cottage on South Dixie Highway. The editing bay is as orderly as an operating room: Gleaming lockers full of neatly stacked cameras, a tidy mountain of portable hard drives and a large wall devoted to a meticulously arranged storyboard, composed of color-coordinated Post-It notes.

It's a hint that Miller's filmmaking style — appealingly careless, seemingly freeform — is no accident. In fact, while he's built a career filming some of the most deliberately casual professionals in the world — surfers — he's done so through an intense sense of purpose and attention to detail. Just 29, Miller is a rising star in surf film circles, working for one of the sport's biggest names, Ventura, Calif.'s Dane Reynolds. One of the world's most popular surfers, and among its most progressive, Reynolds has been breaking ground in the sport as well as the kinds of films that document it. The latter is largely due to Miller, with whom he recently collaborated on the 35-minute “Thrills, Spills And What Not.”

A departure from the traditional whitewater-and-wipeout surf movies, “Thrills” comes off more like a disjointed art-house project than a proper surf flick. Shot entirely on Super-8 and Super-16mm film stock instead of the 21st-century high-definition standard, “Thrills” features grainy clips of Reynolds wiping out and bodysurfing, along with shots of him trimming his beard, of horse races in the Caribbean, of beaches crowded with South American children playing soccer, and of his famous friends — Kelly Slater, Julian Wilson and Ben Bourgeois — kicking around on boogie boards. The whole visual collage is set against muffled middle-school recordings of Dane's girlfriend Courtney, and spliced-together snippets of Sun Ra,

Captain Beefheart and Animal Collective.

Suffice it to say, this is not the video anyone expected from the fourth-ranked surfer on the 2010 Association of Surfing Professionals World Tour. And Miller likes that. He thinks the film's quixotic, introspective tone does a better job of capturing Dane Reynolds' personality than a more traditionally packaged product. But he's quick to deflect credit for the project's unique tone. “Everything in that movie is 100

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percent Dane,” Miller says. “I don't think people realize how personal it was for him. My job was just to put him on screen — that was it. I wasn't the director.”

Miller handled all the cinematography, however, and is currently tasked with managing the video components of Reynolds' immensely popular MarineLayerProductions.com website, an intimate, offhand blog that's not so different aesthetically from “Thrills,” and which receives more than 1 million hits per month. It's a heady gig for a young photographer and filmmaker, especially one who not long ago was working full time at The Home Depot to pay the bills. But despite the

cachet of being Dane Reynolds' video voice, Miller says it's just a means to an end.

“I don't consider myself a surf filmmaker per se,” he says. “I still get excited when I get a good wave on video, but I'm way more interested in telling stories.”

Dustin Miller was born and raised in Richmond, Va., graduating from Manchester High School in 2000. He briefly attended college in Virginia Beach before transferring to Flagler College in St. Augustine to be closer to his future wife, Angela. The pair met via AOL.com's Instant Messenger — Dustin says he was “trolling” the site when he came across her profile. “She described herself as into God and surfing, which I thought was perfect,” he recalls. Angela lived some distance away, in Cocoa Beach. But after months of online communication, the budding couple set up a blind date (with her parents in tow) on the Virginia Beach boardwalk. Miller was completely taken with Angela, and when he returned to campus, a fellow surfer told him about the existence of Flagler. “Once I realized that was fairly close to Cocoa Beach,” he laughs, “I was sold.”

Miller entered the broadcast communication program at Flagler in 2001, and a year later, he and Angela were married. While in school, he produced short films for local surf shop the Surf Station, profiled backyard board-shaper Richard Prause of Grasshopper Surfboards, and shot Angela's younger brother and his friends skateboarding. Former associate professor H. James Gilmore, who recently left Flagler for the University of Michigan-Dearborn, was impressed with Miller from the start.

“Dustin is one of those great students you don’t forget,” Gilmore says. “Creative, curious, insightful — the kid loved making movies and excelled at it. Some students you just get out of the way and let them go, and Dustin was one of them.”

Miller, who also studied photography and religion, graduated in 2004, the same year his daughter Salah was born (a son, Silas, followed in 2007). Video production didn’t pay the bills, so Miller got the full-time Home Depot gig to support his growing family. But Miller, an observant Christian, had faith he’d eventually catch a break. When he did, in fact, it was due at least in part to his faith. Miller had been accompanying his wife to Bible-study classes back in Cocoa Beach, which twin superstar surfers C.J. and Damien Hobgood also attended. After years of gentle prodding from the twins, Miller finally worked up the courage to submit his work to the Hobgoods’ primary sponsor, Globe Clothing and Shoes.

“C.J. won an ASP [Association of Surfing Professionals] world title in 2001, so I was always super-nervous around him,” Miller says. “But he told me to send out my reel.” Miller did, emailing the video to the most generic “contact us” address on the Globe website, info@globe.tv. He knew the group’s video director’s name was Joe G., so he wrote, “If you could pass this along to Joe G. and let me know what he thinks, I’d like to learn and get better.”

Two months later, Joe G. emailed back. He asked Miller to cover the 2006 Globe Sebastian Inlet Pro surf contest in Central Florida, and Miller jumped at the chance — his first paying gig — though he had to shoot using a borrowed Geo One camera. Once there, he was introduced to other surfers through C.J. and Damien, who were so impressed with Miller’s work ethic and positive attitude, they began talking him up to anyone who’d listen. Eventually, they enlisted him to produce a few lighthearted commercials for their hometown Indianalantic surf shop The Goods.

“I love to see young filmmakers strictly doing it for the passion, because they’re usually getting pooped on,” C.J. says. “Dustin has a lot of ideas, but he’s super chill — a person with no agenda who I enjoy being around and traveling with. From Day One, I’ve always wanted to work with him, because I’ve always known he was going to nail it.”

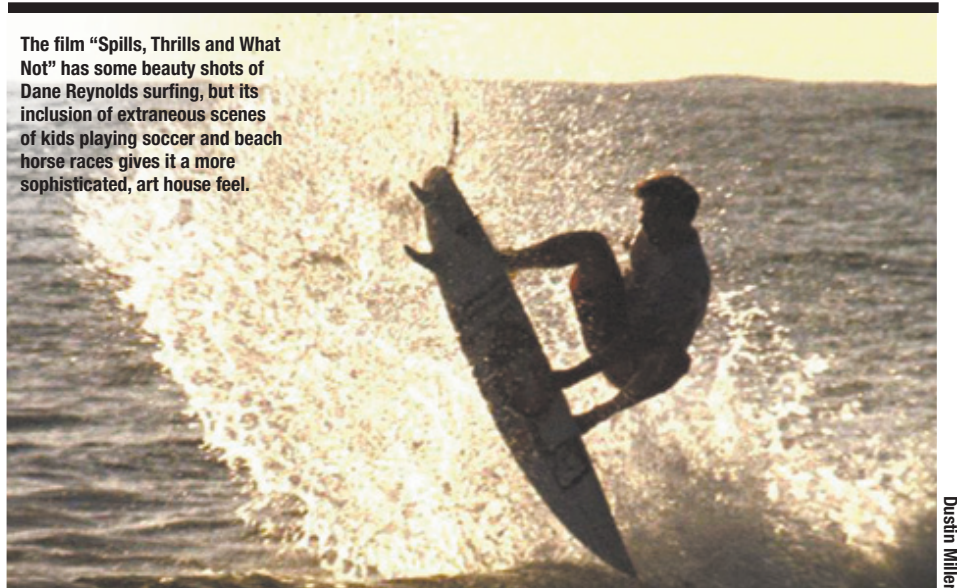
A few months after giving Miller his first paying job, Globe asked him to help at their upcoming Globe Fiji Pro stop, one of only 11 on that year’s prestigious ASP World Tour. Miller was still working full-time at Home Depot, but he realized how important

Despite the freewheeling, disjointed feel of his films, Miller uses an orderly storyboard to structure the narrative.



Walter Coker

The film “Spills, Thrills and What Not” has some beauty shots of Dane Reynolds surfing, but its inclusion of extraneous scenes of kids playing soccer and beach horse races gives it a more sophisticated, art house feel.



Dustin Miller

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the prospect was to his burgeoning career.

“I had never traveled before, and Globe wanted me to leave in two weeks,” he says. “I didn’t even have a passport! I talked to Angela and she was all for it, so I told Home Depot, ‘You can fire me if you want, but I got this amazing opportunity and I need to go.’ They were cool though, and encouraged me to go as well.”

The Fiji trip was eye-opening. Miller hadn’t traveled much, and leaned on the Hobgood twins to help him navigate in new cultures.

“I didn’t know what to do traveling abroad [but] C.J. and Damien told me, ‘No sweat, just stay with us.’” (They would do the same on future trips.)

Upon returning, Miller learned that the commercials he had produced for the Hobgoods’ surf shop had attracted the attention of Jimmy O’Keefe, former editor

of the periodical Australian Surfing Life and content manager for WorldProSurfers.com, the website of World Professional Surfers, a sort of athletes’ union. O’Keefe liked the commercials, and asked if he could post them on the WPS website.

“Jimmy was like, ‘We’ll pay you,’ and I said, ‘Cool, but to be honest, I don’t care,’” Miller remembers. “I just wanted the videos to end up somewhere.”

He made another short film celebrating St. Augustine native Gabe Kling’s 2007 World Tour qualification campaign and sent it to O’Keefe, who responded to Miller, saying, “This is exactly what we want.” Soon after, WPS decided to hire a full-time video guy, and they contacted Miller first.

For the next few years — most of 2007, ’08 and ’09 — Miller traveled to every ASP World Tour stop in Australia, the South Pacific, South America, Europe, Africa and beyond.

Even then, Miller wasn't a stickler for straight high-action footage, even though he was traveling with the best surfers in the world. For him, the most enticing part of his WPS gig was the opportunity to focus more on the athletes' untold stories.

"I got to build relationships with guys that were once posters on my wall," he marvels. "I cherished that, and wanted to earn their respect and tell their story correctly."

Fortunately, Miller says, WPS gave him a lot of leeway. "To the WPS, if you shot action, great, but if you filmed the guys in their rental cars doing burnouts on the beach, or did interviews with them about their travels and their families, even better."

Miller first met Dane Reynolds in early 2008, the Californian's rookie year on the World Tour circuit. "I didn't know much about Dane, but I eventually formed a minor man-crush on him," Miller laughs. The two didn't cross paths again until later that fall in France, when Miller noticed Reynolds' unusual quiver of surfboards. "Where most guys travel with nothing but 6'0" or 5'11" [tri-fin] shortboards, Dane was traveling with this weird [twin-fin] fish and surfing every day no matter the conditions. I thought that was really interesting, so I did an interview with him about the board, and he liked the way it turned out."

As the two grew closer, they realized they shared a fascination with film stock and the "beauty and imperfections of old cameras," as Miller puts it. But even that instant connection couldn't prepare him for what Reynolds proposed next. "Out of the blue, he said, 'Hey, I'd like to talk to you about doing a surf project,'" Miller remembers. "Inwardly, I was just screaming, but outwardly, I was like, 'OK, that'd be cool.'"

Reynolds emphasized that it would be a corporate-free personal project, shot entirely on film, with no set audience in mind. "I had a really hard time believing it," recalls

Miller. "One, Dane wants to work with me, and two, he wants to shoot on film? That was like a dream."

Miller attributes his initial attraction to film stock to the 2001 skate video "Hallowed Ground," which baffled him because it didn't have the traditional "skate sound" audio tracking he expected. After researching the artistic potential of the non-digital realm, he became obsessed with what he now considers the best medium in the world. "HD is incredibly unforgiving," he explains. "With skin tones and blemishes, you see everything, while film is softer, offering so much more latitude. At the same time, it's incredibly crisp ... just like magic."

Former Flagler professor Gilmore says Miller was one of the first students he remembers pushing to shoot on what many considered antiquated equipment. Having studied film production years before, Gilmore was happy to accommodate. "In fact," he says, "because of Dustin, we started offering film production as a course at Flagler on a couple of old Bolex cameras."

Like any obsession, shooting on film can border on the unhealthy. The learning curve is much steeper than user-friendly digital technology, securing consistent supplies is next to impossible, and both pre- and post-production costs can be astronomical. But Miller believes that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

"Obviously, it's not realistic to shoot film all the time," he reasons. "But it blows my mind that there are professional cameramen and photographers who've never worked in a darkroom or sat in a film lab. The story will always matter, but in terms of image quality, it's so nice to take your time and craft



Dustin with Angela, Silas and Salah. Though Angela concedes "it's hard" at times not having him around, she adds, "without a doubt he is supposed to be doing what he does."



A still from “35 Seconds,” a film Miller shot with co-director Eric Hires after the Haitian earthquake. The story is told entirely through the voices of the earthquake victims, without narration or overdubbing.

something special out of film.”

Today, Miller has also rekindled his love of photography, documenting his children Salah and Silas and shooting friends in his spare time. “There are so many photographers out there, which made me wonder, ‘How can I do it and be different?’” he says. “So everything I shoot is on film, and I process it all in my bathroom.”

Miller does is for the Florida-based nonprofit To Write Love On Her Arms, a financial and education resource for young people struggling with depression and addiction. Miller films short documentaries, interviews and benefit concerts for TWLOHA, which are screened at mental health conferences and used for fundraising purposes.

“Instead of doing a couple of things well, why not do one thing great? Learn to tell stories.”

But Miller never brings still cameras on commercial assignments, determined to maintain a separation between what he’s hired to do and what he does for personal pleasure. And he’s still passionate about learning new techniques, citing cinematographers Roger Deakins (“True Grit”) and Wally Pfister (“Inception”) as current influences.

“Thrills, Spills and What Not” is clearly Miller’s most well-known film to date, but he’s careful not to let his relationship with Reynolds overshadow his own diverse body of work. He deliberately doesn’t mention Dane when asked what he does for a living, instead emphasizing commercial jobs he lands through his local production company, Flesh Profits Nothing. And, in fact, he’s had plenty of non-surf success. He’s become the go-to cinematographer for Baron Wells, New York-based hipster clothing company for the preppy set. And he and longtime creative partner Eric Hires earned broad praise for “35 Seconds,” a short documentary they made after traveling to Haiti with a church mission in the wake of the 2010 earthquake. Miller is also working on a personal film with Flagler Beach professional surfer Will Tant, along with a more creative project updating Bible stories for the 21st century.

But some of the most rewarding work

“Dustin plays a huge part in our organization,” says TWLOHA founder Jamie Tworowski, who’s been profiled in Rolling Stone and The New York Times. “A lot of what we do is hard to put into words, and he has an incredible gift for capturing and communicating feelings and emotions in a way that is artistic and unique.”

Hobgood agrees. “Dustin’s used his talents and gifts in the right way, which people are attracted to,” C.J. says. “But he’s constantly pushing his abilities and getting out of his comfort zone.”

There’s obviously a certain cachet that comes with being Dane Reynolds’ video guy. But now that both of the Miller children are growing up, he’s a bit more hesitant to travel to the ends of the earth for top-notch surfing footage — and it’s not hurting his career one bit.

“Dustin’s rad,” Reynolds says. “He has a wonderfully unique perspective, and luckily he can capture it through the lens of a camera so it can be shared by us all. But he’s also a responsible father who apparently built an

extra room on his house with his bare hands.”

Miller's wife Angela admits that the travel schedule of an in-demand filmmaker can be tough on their family. Though the Millers were able to visit Europe together when Salah was young, now that she's in school and both kids require their own plane ticket, family travel is no longer in the cards. But Angela still says she supports her husband “110 percent.”

“Dustin definitely has a God-given gift when it comes to cameras,” she says. “He works extremely hard at what he does, and I'm thankful that he has a job that he enjoys that also pays the bills. But I'm not going to lie — it's hard not having him around at times. Yet I know without a doubt that he is supposed to be doing what he does.”

Travel may become less essential in the coming years. Miller notes that more mainstream commercial clients — Bealls, McDonalds, Men's Health, even the

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Jacksonville Jaguars — are hiring him based on his unique storytelling “look.”

“People sometimes submit their work to me for advice, and I tell them, “This is good, but you're all over the board,” he says. “Instead of doing a couple of things well, why not do one thing great? Learn to tell stories. Learn about lenses and proper exposure. Move more toward making your work a craft. You can't give away all your tricks, but I've always been encouraged by other people, so I feel like I have to help when I can — even if it's by telling people what not to do.”

Fishing for the right words, he finally adds, “It's like Francis Ford Coppola said: ‘If you don't take a risk, then how are you going to make something really beautiful that's never been seen before?’ The world needs more people who are excited about what they do.” □

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Straight to Video

Go to folioweekly.com to check out two short films by Dustin Miller: “35 Seconds,” shot in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, and “Collecting Scores and Umbrella Drinks,” a film with surfer Dane Reynolds shot in Puerto Rico.