FireStore FS-100

Portable Direct To Edit Recorder

Review by Mark Brindle

The FS-100 Hard disk recorder has been designed specifically to work with the Panasonic AG-HVX200 P2 camcorder and comes supplied with a 100GB hard disk and 'standard' battery – sufficient to record about 90 minutes of DVCPRO HD footage at 1080i/50. Most of the Panasonic-supported formats are covered including DVCPRO HD 720p, DVCPRO50, DVCPRO and DV recording. There are a few caveats, however.

The main benefit of the Hard disk recorder is the 'Direct to Edit' design – just plug it into your edit system via FireWire and transfer the recorded files across. For the HVX200 in particular this removes the need for any P2 solid state memory cards – nearly, but not quite. The FS100 does not support the variable frame rate 720pN (native) mode – for undercranked or overcranked shooting at native frame rate. Time-lapse recording is supported on the FS100 in DV mode only.

It's Juicy and Hot

Like any product which has an optional high capacity battery, you know your going to need it. The stated 90-minutes of operation for the standard capacity battery may be true under very ideal circumstances indeed. A optional cradle is available to allow the FS100 to attach to the hot shoe of the camcorder – however this will only fit using the standard capacity battery. The cradle is well made and uses a Manfrotto ball-joint with vents to align with the vents on the FS100 body. Aside from making your own mount, the cradle is the only option really – although a belt connector is supplied if you're willing to risk using it. I ended up with two standard capacity batteries to allow the use of the cradle. These are the same batteries used by the FS-4, I believe.

For a full length continuous recording I would recommend plugging in an external psu if possible or using the high capacity battery. The battery will re-charge when connected to a computer over FireWire or you can use the supplied power supply or an optional external charger.

Neat and logical

The FS100 is fairly neat at only 4cm (1.5") thick but does tend to get in the way a bit when mounted on the hot shoe – especially when hand holding the camera. You really want to see the display to make sure you are recording – seeing the timecode roll along – especially when this is your only recording. So you will need to experiment with mounting the unit to find the ideal position for you.

Users of other FireStore products will be familiar with similar screen and button control layouts – these are fairly logical and it didn't take long to get used to the menu system. Under normal operation, with the camera and recorder setup correctly you can press the record button on the camera to start/stop recording – that's it. In the latest firmware, the FS100 will auto detect the video stream and start recording (or not). You really do need to read the manual and the supplied workflow documents to setup both the camera and FS100 recorder correctly.

You can play out and view the recording on the HVX200 using the Play/Stop/Fwd/Rew buttons. Just put the HVX200 into VTR mode and make sure you press the 'hide thumbnails' button. This is very handy for instant playback on location – same as when using P2 cards in the camera.

Recording formats vary based on the video stream type – for DVCPRO HD and DVCPRO50 you have the option of RAW or P2 MXF format. My MAC just couldn't understand RAW format and I was glad of the playback feature to be able to record RAW format video back onto a P2 card to recover it.

For DV/DVCPRO you have options of QuickTime, AVI (many options), AVID OMF - to name a few from the list. Transferring P2 MXF format video from the FS100 is virtually identical to transferring from a P2 card itself – you see the clip thumbnails and can select individual clips or all clips. It is a very good idea to read the HVX200 /FS100 workflow documentation though (have I said that already?!).

Outstanding Issues?

The latest firmware v2.0 really should have been v1.0. Drop outs, duplicate frames and freeze-ups are thankfully a thing of the past. It's proved to finally be a reliable bit of kit with v2.0 installed. I still have an edit nightmare to contend with for some footage shot on the initial shipping firmware – something I have been trying to delay as much as possible..

The only other issue is the FireWire connection itself. Standard FireWire is not particularly rugged and its 'fairly' easy to unseat a cable. Focus supplies a right angled 6-pin FireWire cable to help keep the cable seated properly into the FS100, but the HVX200 has a small 4-pin FireWire connection. Ideally, I would like to see a much more rugged connection – possibly through some proprietary connection/cable combo. Gaffa Tape and tie-wraps seem to be the only current solutions. ■

Mark Brindle M.M.Inst.V.
Maniac Films Ltd