

## CAUGHT IN THE UNDERTOW

Mark Lapwood NZCS ACS shoots an award-winning, and partially underwater, music video for alternative rock band Black Smoke Trigger - by *Slade Phillips*



Mark Lapwood NZCS ACS behind the camera on 'Caught in the Undertow' - PHOTO Supplied.

**AC** How did you get first involved with the *Caught in the Undertow* video? Can you describe how the concept was initially pitched to you?

**ML** Director Anthony Plant contacted me to discuss a video which would feature a large portion of underwater filming, and asked if I'd be keen to shoot it. I jumped at the opportunity as I'd done some underwater work before but was keen to get more runs on the board.

The concept was pitched as a music video about a band who are playing in the shallows at one of Auckland's wild west coastal beaches. As they're playing, the tide comes in and eventually, they get 'caught in the undertow'. One by one they fall into the water, and we pick them up underwater, where they continue to play their instruments.

**AC** What was your collaboration like with the director and the band, in terms of the look and feel of the video?

**ML** Plant is a great collaborator. We'd worked together a couple of years earlier. He was open to hearing my ideas as cinematographer so it worked well. The thing I love about a good filmmaking collaboration is when 'the sum is greater than the total of the parts'. That

magic when the result is exponentially greater than anyone expected.

The band were great, they'd spent a few weeks practicing to hold their breath as long as possible under water at a local swimming pool, plus playing their instruments underwater, all difficult but essential skills for this clip.

We found various visual references of scenes which had been filmed underwater or shot to look like they were underwater. There was a scene from an old James Bond movie and other high-budget dramas and music videos. People have used all sorts of tricks in the past. Being a low-budget music video, we had to be creative with the little resources we had, so despite some approaches looking fantastic, they were simply beyond our means.

In terms of the look, we wanted to create a cool blue monochrome feel above the water to match the feel of the underwater environment, with a black infinity backdrop and muted tones. This would also fit with the dark grungy undertones of the song. It was important that the whole music video feels like one cohesive film in both environments, especially during the transition from above to below the surface.

**AC** What factors did you take into consideration when choosing your camera and your lenses?

**ML** I shot in exterior daylight on an ARRI Alexa Mini with Zeiss Super Speeds at 3200 degrees Kelvin, uncorrected, so the daylight would read blue. Underwater I used HMI lighting with the camera set to 3200K again to continue the theme. This blue look was helped by the fact the warm spectrum of light is the first to fall away below the surface.

In terms of lenses, I chose the Zeiss Mark II Super Speeds as they're a great vintage option for a spherical project like this, not too sharp with a gentle fall off around the edges so they were an appropriate choice to help create a grungier feel.

**AC** What were your initial thoughts on the underwater portion of the video?

**ML** Initially we thought we'd film underwater with the Alexa in an underwater housing, however it turns out that in 2015 the New Zealand the laws relating to underwater camera operating and workplace safety were changed. It's a legal requirement now that an underwater operator must have a Code of Compliance (COC) which requires certification in almost every PADI Dive training imaginable, right up to Dive Rescue. Given we were a low-budget production due to shoot within a couple of weeks, this was never going to happen in time.



A scene from 'Caught in the Undertow' - DOP Mark Lapwood NZCS ACS

I'd heard of the Boxfish Submersible through fellow cinematographers after they did a demo event through the New Zealand Cinematographers Society here in Auckland. We contacted Ben King and the team at Boxfish and they were very supportive, allowing us to come and do testing in their on-site pool to see what the Boxfish Luna could achieve.

**AC** What did the Boxfish Luna bring to your cinematography that, say, another piece of equipment could not?

**ML** It's basically like a high-quality underwater drone, which is connected by a long fibre-optic cable that allows camera control and sends a live picture to the surface during the shoot. The operator can control it using joysticks while the director and myself gave input. It's seamless in terms of communication which is a huge advantage over having an operator under 30ft of water.

It's easy to control. We were able to do smooth fairly precise repeatable moves like tracking right while counter panning to the left seamlessly. There were never any issues with air bubbles when looking up, which can be a huge challenge when scuba diving with a camera. Of course, like any motorised head, it's trickier to operate the tighter the lens, but with a gentle touch and

adjustable dampening on the controls we were able to achieve everything on the shot-list smoothly and on schedule.

Given the Boxfish Luna also has a stainless-steel rod frame we were able to lock it off using underwater C-Stands for the wide shot of the whole four-piece band. This allowed us to shoot each band member separately in a different portion of the frame, which made it achievable instead of trying to have four people holding their breath and performing underwater in sync at the same time.

**AC** How did you approach lighting in the pool?

**ML** We were able to find a sufficiently deep indoor pool with no ambient light to control. We dropped weighted blacks down three sides of the pool and lay black polythene over the entire pool floor area to achieve the infinity 'deep ocean' look. I kept the lighting simple with a single HMI back light and that worked to great effect. Thanks to Gaffer Spencer Locke-Bonney on lighting for an efficient shoot on the day.

**AC** Do you have a favourite shot or sequence in the video?

**ML** My favourite shots are of the individual band members falling into the water. I just love the way the backlight works on all the

bubbles and just the sheer peculiarity of a fully clothed musician falling into the water with his instrument works a treat. All credit to the bands guitarist Charlie Wallace for coming up with this remarkable concept and having the courage to give it a go!

**AC** Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, what might you have done differently?

**ML** Overall, I think there were several places we could have gone very wrong. Thanks to Murray Milne who's a very experienced underwater cinematographer here in New Zealand for his invaluable advice in pre-production.

The only thing I would do differently would be to have a larger sensor camera in the Boxfish Luna, which is now available. Plus of course, it would have been lovely to have more time at the pool to come up with even more unusual shots, but I guess I'm not alone in wishing I had more time on a shoot. We managed to achieve the schedule and stay within budget, everyone's happy with the look, so I think we pulled it off successfully. That's the only way, right?

Mark Lapwood NZCS ACS was awarded Silver at the ACS Award in 2021 at the NSW ACS Awards for his work on 'Caught in the Undertow'.

Slade Phillips is a writer based in Sydney.