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# SHOOTER'S RAG

The Practical Gazette for Silver & Digital Photographers

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Number 6

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# Paul C. Buff, Inc.

## Light for the Millions

Interview with Dale Klaus  
by Michael Havelin



All photos by Michael Havelin

*John Sandman, 7 years with the company, assembling Ultra units.*

*After driving all night, I arrived at the Nashville, Tennessee home offices of Paul C. Buff, Inc. before they opened for the day. I loitered out front for a while, then decided to head on in. Entering, I was greeted like lost kin, asked to have some coffee, invited to look around, and told that Dale Klaus, the General Manager, would soon arrive. No problem.*

*What did I find? Not at all what I thought. What would you expect in a lab and manufacturing facility for studio flash equipment? I expected a gang of wild-eyed crazies with their hair all standing on end, staring out through cartoon-vortex eyeballs and working in a strobing environment sure to set off the incipient epileptic in anyone. Wrong! The place was a model of calm efficiency, clean and orderly, with a group of mature and competent people who I would later learn had all been with the company for years. I had some pleasant surprises.*

*Dale Klaus arrived looking rested and casual yet energetic. He swept into his office with me in his wake, offered me more morning fluid and then got right to a discussion of the future of photography and then to the company he manages, Paul C. Buff, Inc. This is what he told me...*

**MFH:** Are you a shooter yourself?

**DK:** Yes, but since starting to manufacture equipment I've found myself shooting fewer and fewer photographs. I find myself in the studio more now than ever because I shoot product shots and

we do all of our own brochures and literature.

In terms of traditional photography, Nashville's not exactly a center. We've got two camera shops and you can get just about anything you want... eventually. But the digital stuff has come in incredibly fast and just bypassed what's available for traditional photography. You can now do anything digitally here. One of the services now has digital cameras. In fact, they did a digital imaging show at the convention center here.

**MFH:** How long has Paul C. Buff, Inc. been in the lighting equipment business?

**DK:** This is our tenth year. We really started in '83. Paul Buff was a recording engineer in California. He's an electronic design genius and had built his own recording studio. He's brilliant when it comes to designing for production. He cuts through all the stuff and can create a product that's very inexpensive to get out and into the market place. Signal processing devices that he developed, manufactured and sold for many years are in recording studios all over the world. He moved here to

Nashville and got fed up with recording because the industry refused to see the writing on the wall as to what was happening in Japan and Europe in professional audio. He thought the industry in this country would go down the tube unless some changes were made. So he got out of it and got into photography.

Paul had never used any kind of studio lighting but he started shooting models. He bought a piece of state-of-the-art power pack equipment, boat anchor type stuff, and of course, before he ever took a picture with it, he took it apart. Analyzing it, he said "If this is state-of-the-art, then we can make a niche in this industry." He started reading all the magazines and discovered that there was a vacuum in the market for the high-end amateur and the professional who was just starting out and didn't have big bucks to put into studio lighting. So, that's what he designed for... he designed the first lights, bought a hundred sets of parts and put an ad in *Shutterbug*. They went like hotcakes.

**MFH:** How did you get involved?

**DK:** I'm what you might call a comprehensivist. My degree from



*Testing Ultra brains to be sure everything is up to spec.*

Carbondale is in Anticipatory Design and after that I worked with Buckminster Fuller for six years. That's when I really got my education. All of us in the design program felt "What the hell are we going to do with this degree?" We didn't know anything specifically. Now I look back and think, "Boy, am I'm glad I had that." That's the way education should be because they teach you comprehensive thinking and problem solving. It's generic, and you can go into any area and solve problems.

Anyway, I had a sound company in Farmingdale doing concert sound and having a great time, not paying much attention to business. It went down the tubes but we had lot of fun... late sixties, early seventies. Great times, wasn't it?

I use to see Paul's ads in audio magazines. The copy was well-written but they had funky marketing. I called him one Saturday, and he answered the phone and said "Nobody's here but come on over and I'll show you around." It was total mess. Somebody else was building the product, then they'd bring it in, do the final testing, take the orders and ship it out from there. Everything was piled on everything else and it was just... but I liked what I saw there, I liked the way he thought. I told him, "If you ever have anything that I can do for you, here's my resume." He called me several months later and said, "We want to set up production in-house. Are you interested in doing something like that?" I came down and gave it a shot. And that's where it all started. I was his production manager in the audio equipment. That was my first involvement in manufacturing. When the lighting company got off ground, I got involved with that. That was ten years ago.

**MFH:** So you've been with the lighting company from the beginning of it?

**DK:** Right. And I really feel we're in the process of creating a legend in the photo studio by filling a niche in the market for these photographers who don't have big bucks. They needed a quality product.

There's an awful lot of photographers who wouldn't even have our 10,000 in their studio because it doesn't look like a professional light. That's right, but that doesn't mean anything to a lot of other people. Photographers have told us, "I can't take that light into a client that's paying me big bucks to shoot this job. I've got to have equipment that looks like it's worth \$50,000." Okay, you're not in our market. There are very few guys out there that need and want that image compared to the rest of the industry where there's an awful lot of people who want lighting.

The White Lightning 5,000 and 10,000 are relatively simple basic flash circuits. That's why they're so wonderful. They'll take a beating and will work forever. They're not hi-tech. We consider this lo-tech design and lo-tech manufacturing.

If we had our druthers, we'd just sell lights, but we really have to provide the photographer with a package. If we sell the lights, we have to provide the light modifiers also. It just make sense.

**MFH:** Have the company's goals changed since the beginning?

**DK:** It's pretty much the same: to provide a quality piece of studio lighting equipment to a market that was not being served... the beginning professional. But now we're thinking in terms of a much broader market. The products that we have right now are good for the Western Hemisphere, primarily North America. It's 120 volt, 50-60 amps. Canada, Mexico, and a lot of South America also use the same circuitry, so we sell quite a bit in the West-

ern Hemisphere. We even sell in Europe and Asia but they have a transformer they lug around which ends up making it a power pack system. But they still buy them. We sell a lot in the Middle East, in Israel and Arab countries. I still haven't figured that out. But when you get into the European products, which is where most of the studio units come from, they're much more expensive than our lights.

NAFTA will help us get stuff back and forth across borders much more easily in terms of customs and duties. We had to open a repair station in Canada because it was a total mess dealing with repairs going back and forth across border. Customs wanted to charge for the full price of the unit. And we don't let go of our customer service very easily.

I should also say that another one of our goals is to provide the best customer service available in the industry. We're now doing that, but we need to keep that up. It's going to be very difficult to do that when we spread into an international market because right now we get everything back in-house here. We never keep a repair in-house for over 48 hours. There's a three-year warranty on the Ultras and a two-year warranty on the White Lightning, no questions asked.

Why can't any company in this country provide that kind of customer service? Well, they don't understand and I don't necessarily want them to understand that it's the best public relations you can buy. It costs you something, but if you've got a good product that holds up and is not going to crap out quickly, you can provide that kind of customer service and you'll have customers for life.

**MFH:** How seasonal is the lighting products business?

**DK:** There are several factors why early winter's become the busy season. Right after school starts in the fall, photographers are taking seniors and continuing that through Christmas, little pictures for the wallet that every grade school kid trades with everybody else. This is a big part of the business for our



*Testing, testing... always testing.*

product. These are the workhorse photographers out there. They're working eight hours a day, every day, shooting pictures and relying on our product.

And the second factor is that we always have a special at the end of the year, usually in August. That's when people want to increase their capital equipment.

A lot of people also give these things as Christmas presents to their photographer spouses. Many people call and say they don't know anything about this stuff but want to get this for Christmas, so we help them out.

Our people take pictures themselves and are very knowledgeable about setting up studios, about lighting. Many of them are working with a local photographer who is teaching them lighting and tricks of the trade.

So that's the reason for the busy time at the end of the year. We find we have a slump in the summertime. People are not in the studio or don't want to be in the studio for whatever reason, and they're not spending money for capital equipment. We usually find a surge around March or April when people are getting ready for weddings and they've got their income tax refunds back. And then there's a little bump in June when corporations' fiscal years break, when they get their budgets. Newspapers apparently get their budgets in June and we have a lot of newspaper photographers using us.

**MFH:** How many employees do you have now?

**DK:** We have 20 employees. In fact, most of the people who are here have been with us quite a while. We've got an excellent crew. It's a good company to work for, so they stay. We have no turnover whatsoever.

We've got three people up front answering the phones. They are the sales department. We sell only direct, so all our sales are done either through mail order or by taking orders over the phone. The order people are tied directly into the computer, so they can bring the customer up on the screen if he's bought from us before. We have thousands of customers on our database, and that's just in the last few years since we've had the computer system. It was all done by hand before.

**MFH:** So everything is done right here?

**DK:** What we do here primarily is final assembly, burn-in, testing and shipping. We do quite an extensive set of tests. Units sit up on a rack for half a day to burn-in. If electronic parts are going to fail, they'll generally fail within the first few hours.

We have ten people actually in production. They trade off and do various different things. We have a full-timer who takes in repairs, logs them, puts them on the computer and calls the

customer if necessary. She has some time every now and then to work in production, in actually building the product, but most of her time is taken up in repair.

We have one technician dedicated primarily to the White Lightning 5,000 and he does all the repairs on those. He also does final production testing on the new products. And we have an Ultra technician who does all the Ultra repairs. A production tester works on the lights that we're manufacturing before they finally end up on the shelf as finished product.

We have three actual assemblers and two people in shipping. And we have about a dozen contractors set up in their homes where they stuff the boards with the electronics and solder all the parts on. They get paid by the piece. So we keep our payroll down in here by doing as much as we possibly can outside with the contract people.

"Back order" is a bad word here. We don't ship to order. Without asking anybody else, the order people are supposed to be able to tell the customer that we ship within 72 hours. Everything's on the shelf; we ship from stock.



## ONGOING CONTEST!

Whoever wins will get... will get... will get to see their photo on the cover, and maybe even a complementary subscription. But wait... the contest is only open to subscribers. Well, that's all right. We'll just give 'em a free year's worth of *The Rag* and \$50. Sound's good, eh? Go for it!

Oh, yeah... can't have a contest without a few rules. How about these?

1. This is an ongoing contest.
2. B&W only.
3. Must be on a photographic theme.
4. Must be humorous.
5. Band-aid required.

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