



Rigged for silent running

Jon Tarrant traces the lineage of the Mamiya 7 and reports on its performance in a variety of picture-taking situations

When the Mamiya 7 medium format rangefinder system was launched, it was heralded as ideal 'for the pro on the go'. Here was a 6x7 body little bigger than a roll-film folding camera of old, blessed with an exceptional quartet of modern lenses. The only real drawback was the price – which has changed for the better of late.

The Mamiya 7's path was cleared by the Mamiya 6 and the multi-format Mamiya 6MF. All three cameras feature interchangeable lenses and rangefinder focusing with aperture priority and manual exposure modes. Blade shutters are fitted to the lenses, allowing flash synchronisation at all speeds. By the same token, however, lenses can only be changed when the cameras' internal blinds are drawn to protect the film. The blinds must then be released again before picture taking can proceed once more.

On the Mamiya 6, the lens mount retracts for more condensed storage, but this feature does not exist on the bigger body. As a result, the Mamiya 7 is slightly bulkier than the 6, but is still remarkably

compact for its format. Indeed, when the effect of the retracting lens mount is excluded, both cameras have much the same overall dimensions and weight – the 7's figures never exceeding the 6's by more than 4%.

The other difference between the Mamiya 7 and the two previous models lies in the lenses offered. Whereas the 6 and 6MF had three lenses (50mm f/4, 75mm f/3.5 and 150mm f/4.5), the 7 has four – including the remarkable 43mm f/4.5 ultra-wide. Thanks to this addition, and in view of the larger format, two of the other lenses are also increased in focal length; the 50mm is replaced by a 65mm f/4, and the 75mm is now an 80mm f/4. Only the 150mm remains unchanged.

According to Johnsons Photopia, distributor of Mamiya cameras in the UK, many people who bought the Mamiya 7 in its early days did so choosing the 43mm optic either alone or in addition to other lenses. That single fact probably explains why most photographers believe the Mamiya 7 to be an expensive system, for the 43mm has a rather considerable £1800 list price – which is

■ Above: Pool-side picture from a photo-documentary project based on the Crystal Palace Diving Institute. A selection of original prints from the project will be displayed at *Focus On Imaging*. Right: Cornel Lucas, photographed using the Mamiya 7 hand-held at a shutter speed of about 1/15s with the lens wide open. All pics (except product shot) © Jon Tarrant.

as much as the body and standard lens together. But by checking the back pages of *BJP* it is now possible to obtain a brand new Mamiya 7 with standard lens for around £1300 (from the likes of Robert White and Dale Photographic). Such deals actually make the Mamiya 7 less expensive than a Pentax 67 with TTL prism.

Whether the comparison between Mamiya and Pentax seems fair will depend largely on how individual photographers view the difference between rangefinder and SLR designs. Is it significant, for example, that the Leica M6 is no more expensive than a Nikon F5?

LEAST RELIABLE

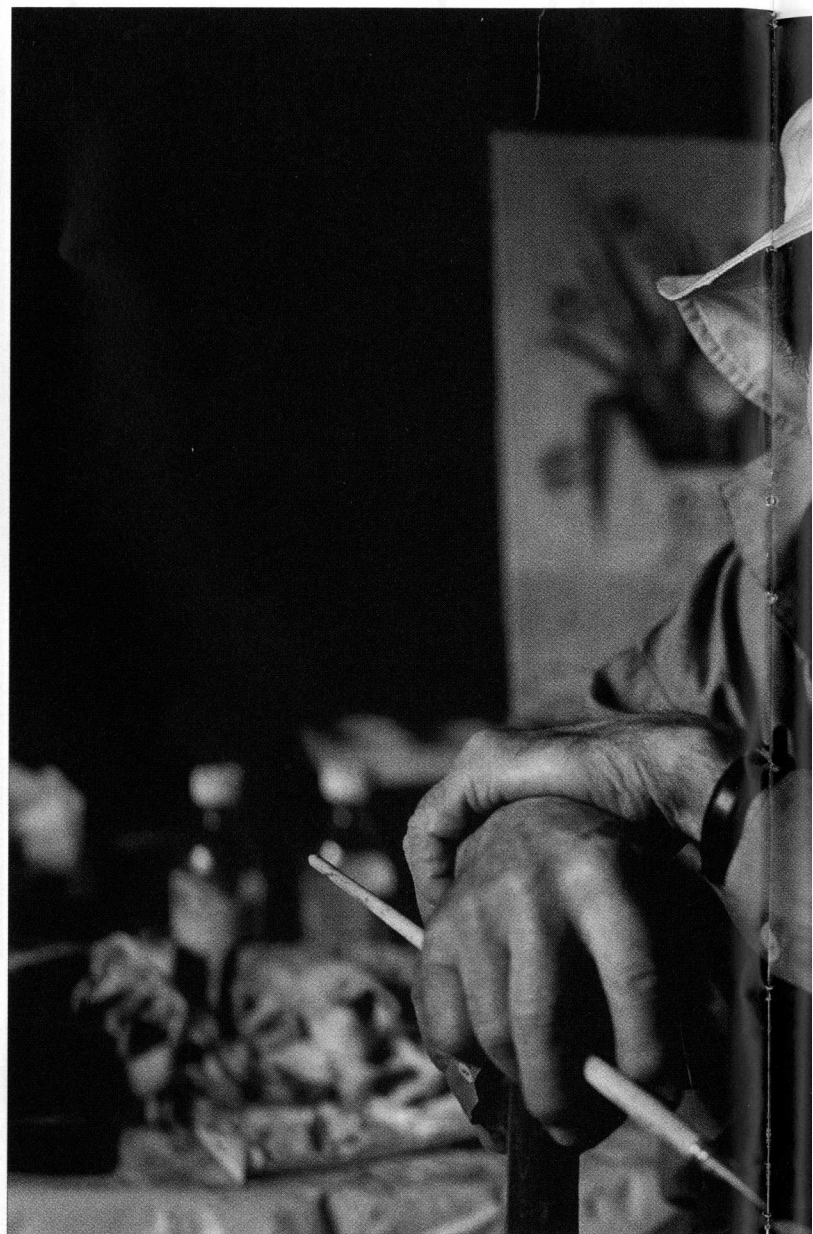
Until the advent of autofocus, one of the most important considerations in any camera was the ease with which its lenses could be focused. Plain ground glass screens are among the least reliable focusing systems, especially in low light. To help overcome this, split-image prisms and microprisms were

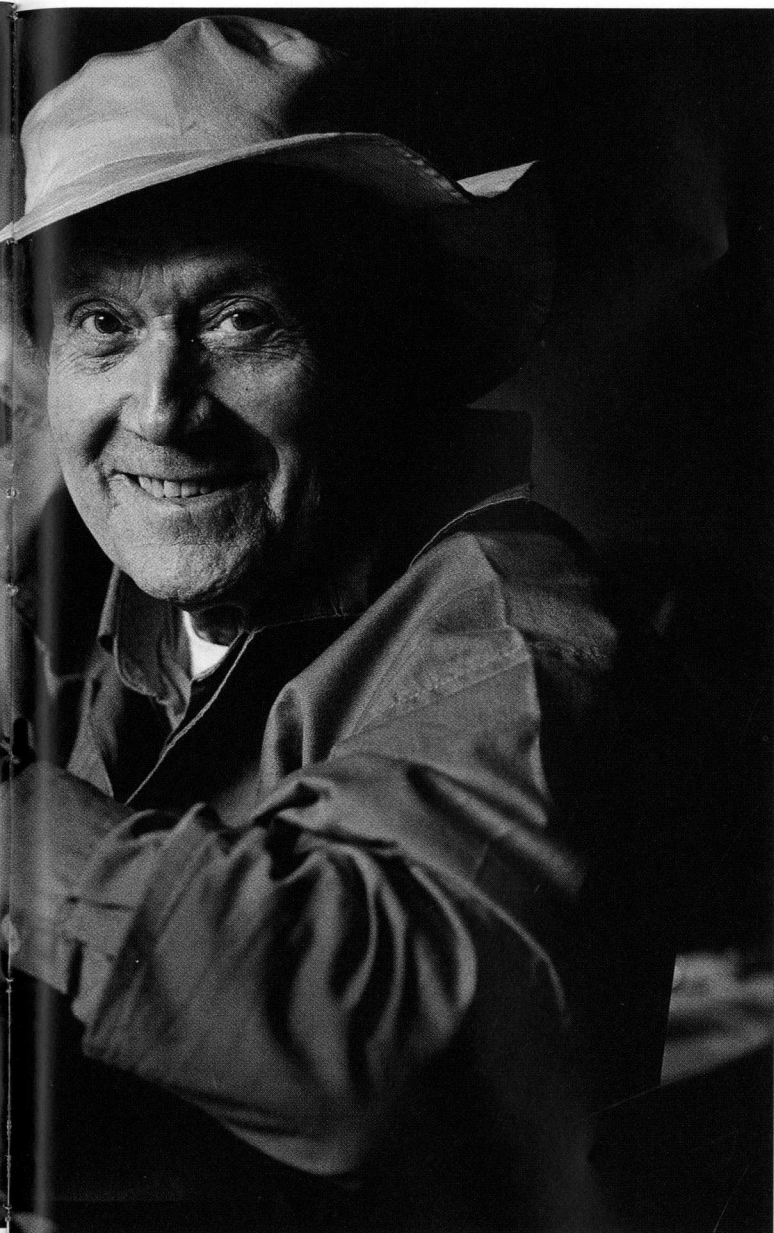
installed, utilising the fact that the eye is very much better at detecting a misalignment of straight lines than it is at determining absolute sharp focus.

Rangefinder cameras use a double-image system that betters the SLR split-image type because the focusing area appears brighter at the point of sharpness when the two images coincide. Rangefinder cameras are therefore easier to focus in poor lighting – which is exactly when SLR systems are at their weakest.

The argument that auto-focus obviates this advantage is poorly founded, for AF always leaves a degree of uncertainty about exactly which part of the image is made fully sharp.

If you focus 'on the eyes' when taking a portrait, will the AF system focus on the eyes themselves or on areas of face around the eyes? With a rangefinder (as with an SLR's split prism) the edge between the iris and the white of the eye is an obvious focusing line – and is precisely the





part of the picture that needs to be sharpest for a really effective portrait.

As well as being easier to focus, rangefinder cameras are also more intimate than reflex systems because the user sees the scene directly, not within the confines of a hooded viewfinder. In addition, there is no interruption caused by movement of the mirror when the picture is taken.

There is also much less noise – a fact that Cornel Lucas commented on when I took his portrait using the camera some time ago.

The effect of camera noise is not simply one of disturbance, but also of setting the tone of any picture-taking session. In the most extreme cases, rattling motordrives can charge-up models during a shoot, and often seem more in keeping with fast-paced action or sports photography. Not having a motordrive, and working with a camera that is virtually silent, creates an altogether more peaceful ambience.

The defining characteristics of

the Mamiya 7 – its ease of use in low light, its intimacy and its lack of noise – do not immediately suggest the kinds of uses for which the camera is often promoted. While it is true that the Mamiya 7 is relatively small and lightweight for its film size, it is the unobtrusive nature of the camera that gives it special appeal – at least as far as this writer is concerned.

ODD SEASCAPE

Over the course of almost two years, the author's Mamiya 7 has been used in the pits at Brands Hatch to photograph the Fuji-sponsored Mint Motorsport British Touring Car Championship team, to undertake a photo-documentary project based on the young high-board divers who train at the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, for portraits of people from glamour model Jo Guest to *Guardian* photographer Roger Bamber, for a location fashion shoot in Edinburgh and even to photograph the odd seascape and church interior.



■ Top: Despite using non-TTL viewing, picture composition is remarkably true to the viewfinder image when working with the standard 80mm lens. This picture has been cropped during printing to remove excess foreground, but was recorded on the negative exactly as intended in terms of horizontal framing. Above: the Mamiya 7.

After all this and more, several practical points have become apparent about the Mamiya 7. The first is that the 80mm standard lens, which the writer has used extensively, is a really amazing piece of glass that is capable of excellent sharpness and shadow detail. The late Larry Bartlett always used to say he could spot a negative taken on a Leica because of the subtlety of its shadows: he might well say the same thing of those taken on a Mamiya 7.

The second point concerns the battery. Despite feeling traditional, the Mamiya 7 is an electronic camera that needs a 6V power supply if it is to do anything at all – a respect in which it differs from the M6. The bad news is that there is no battery check function: the good news is there is still a quick way to confirm the battery's status: simply press the self timer button and if the light comes on you know the battery is live. (The timer is then cancelled using the camera's on/off switch.)

Lastly, there is the matter of framing, which starts with remembering to remove the lens cap. Be warned that because the viewfinder and metering sensor are both inde-

pendent of the lens, it is perfectly possible to overlook the fact that the lens cap is still in place!

The full viewfinder area shows the coverage of the 65mm lens, with bright-line frames defining the standard and 150mm lenses' fields of view when these are fitted. It is not possible to call up the frames manually. An external viewfinder is provided for use with the 43mm ultra-wide.

There is also a newly launched magnifier eye-piece for the 150mm lens, which concentrates attention where it is needed and provides more accurate framing than the viewfinder's lines can give. In both cases, however, focusing must still be done using the normal rangefinder window.

Consequently, the optional 150mm external viewfinder is really only of use when photographing static subjects, and is not suited, for example, to the types of work undertaken by the writer. In practice, this is not bad news but good, for the normal bright-line frame is adequate for routine applications and saves expenditure on an additional accessory.

After nearly two years use, the Mamiya 7 has proved itself to be an outstanding system in a very portable guise. To describe the camera as a medium format M6 is not really fair on either model, but their modes of use are similar. In addition, the fact that lens design does not have to be compromised to accommodate a mirror box probably goes far towards explaining the sharpness and subtle shadow detail that the 7's optics are capable of recording.

There is no better final conclusion to be drawn than to say that the Mamiya 7 puts involvement back into photography: it is a pleasure to use and gives results that do very much more than just please. **BJP**