



First Love in Focus: *Priscilla*

Philippe Le Sourd, ASC, AFC reteams with director Sofia Coppola to tell the story of Priscilla and Elvis Presley.

By Tara Jenkins

Conveying the intensity of first love as experienced by a shy teenage girl was an experience Philippe Le Sourd, ASC, AFC won't soon forget. "You connect with a character like that, and when you operate the camera, you put all your emotion in it," he says. "You put all your passion into every frame and every lighting choice to make sure it's all aligned."

Le Sourd is discussing *Priscilla*, his latest collaboration with writer-director Sofia Coppola. Adapted by Coppola from Priscilla Presley's



memoir, *Elvis and Me*, the film follows the title character from her first encounter with Elvis Presley, when she is a 14-year-old military brat living in Germany, to her divorce from him 10 years later. Despite Elvis' fame, the story is an intimate, quiet portrait of first love grounded in Priscilla's point of view.

Noting that sensitive young women navigating unfamiliar terrain also shapes the perspectives of many of Coppola's prior works, *Le Sourd* observes, "Sofia knows this type of character very well. It's a subject she understands."

A Different Flavor

Priscilla is *Le Sourd's* fourth collaboration with Coppola, following *La Traviata* (co-directed with Francesca Nesler), *On the Rocks* and *The Beguiled* (AC Aug. '17).

Despite the film's thematic similarity to Coppola's past projects, she was keen to give *Priscilla* its own visual language. "It was interesting for Sofia and me to play with the different feelings you can create within a film," *Le Sourd* says. "We had more use of color, handheld work, 16mm, Super 8, Steadicam, zooms. Sofia doesn't usually move the camera too much, so it was good to do something different, to create a different flavor."

Le Sourd turned to Bolex H-16 (with Kodak Vision3 250D 7207 film stock) and Super 8mm (Vision3 50D 7203 and Ektachrome 100D 7294) cameras to create an authentic 1960s "home movie" look for some scenes of the young couple. But he shot most of the picture digitally — a



Opposite: Priscilla Presley (Cailee Spaeny) poses for a photograph with husband Elvis (Jacob Elordi) on their wedding day. This page, top: Upon leaving the military base shortly after meeting Priscilla, Elvis promises he'll keep in touch. Above: The couple share a moment.



Top: Priscilla and Elvis ride bumper cars in the early days of their romance. Bottom: Philippe Le Sourd, ASC, AFC on set.

first for him — on the Arri Alexa 35, which he paired with Panavision Ultra Speed lenses. “Sofia doesn’t like ‘bigger than life,’” he notes. “She prefers 1:85 or 1:66, so we framed for 1:85.”

In general, the filmmakers avoided re-creating famous images of the couple. “I found it not very interesting to copy important moments, but instead to give an interpretation of this couple together,” says the cinematographer. “I want you to feel that these memories, these moments, are connected to you. This becomes something different.” Photographs by William Eggleston were an inspiration, he adds.

Embracing Digital

Although the choice to go digital was dictated by budget, Le Sourd found he loved shooting digitally. “First of all, you get better sleep at night — you’re less concerned about [what you’ll see at] the lab at 10 o’clock the next morning. Also, finding the right camera is about texture. Because this film is very intimate, it was about how the digital camera would help the interpretation of skin tone, which was the first thing I tested.”

Le Sourd positioned the camera close to the actors, and he found himself shooting close-ups on a 50mm to keep a sense of the environment without allowing it to dominate the frame. An Angénieux HR 25-250mm 3.5 zoom lens helped give Priscilla’s life at Graceland a claustrophobic feel. The cinematographer offers an example of a shot where the camera zooms out from her slowly as she sits framed in a window looking out on the grounds. “Sofia wanted to [zoom] until Priscilla was very, very



Interior and exterior shots of the Presleys' Graceland estate cast the mansion as a space of enormity and isolation.

small in frame," Le Sourd says. "We used the full extent of the zoom, starting at 250mm and going all the way wide to 25mm."

Although Le Sourd loved the way the Alexa rendered skin tones, he felt its "super clean" rendering of white needed a bit of adjustment, "especially because [the décor in] Graceland is so white," he says. "So, we did some tests and ended up adding grain in the DI to add a bit of texture."

Expressive Choices

Color was particularly important. "You can have an idea about color when you read a script, and then it becomes a discussion with the director," Le Sourd says. "Sofia likes a more neutral color. The '60s did not look like Kodachrome ... the sky was no more blue than normal, the yellow and greens weren't more vibrant."

Le Sourd preferred to let the emotions of a scene inform his color choices. He cites a climactic scene in which Priscilla visits Elvis in Las Vegas as their relationship is dying. "That was probably one of the most interesting challenges for me: the last scene in Elvis' bedroom in Las Vegas. I needed to find something visually that stuck with the idea of this moment. I found through testing that orange and red [neon lighting] gave the impression of love, living, blood, hurt, bleeding. That was the idea. This scene was also shot in studio, so we had the freedom to develop the scene with lighting compared to shooting in a hotel in Las Vegas on the 50th floor. Behind the windows, we had eight SkyPanel S360s

all around, and eight Robe Esprite LEDs inside the room for the rays of light slowly moving. I didn't know until the film was edited if [the scene] would work, but it was interesting to find a solution for the emotion." He adds that the ability to see on set exactly what his images would look like gave him greater freedom to "play."

Another scene that called for experimentation is one of Elvis' performances. Le Sourd explains, "The challenge of this film was the budget. When we started, Sofia had to cut 15 pages. One of the scenes that was cut down was [Elvis performing]. For a film that is so much about intimacy, it was important how we counterbalanced that with the scene of his singing.

"I found an image of one man's silhouette — a character playing alone in a jazz club," he continues. "I suggested to Sofia, 'Let's light him in silhouette, with just one light from the back, and that will tell the story.' So, I used one light, fully backlit, with a bit of smoke and 20 extras."

Graceland Onstage

Lacking permission to shoot at Graceland, the filmmakers built portions of the iconic site on soundstages in Toronto. "Tamara [Deverell] is a fantastic production designer," Le Sourd says. "Every day we talked about color and space and what fit for the scene. One problem for us was Elvis' bedroom, because there weren't any reference pictures. Tamara had to invent a world. We shot 10 days on that set. It's very challenging when you have 20 scenes on a bed! Figuring out the coverage becomes very technical."

Deverell researched the colors Elvis was known to favor at that time

Priscilla's unhappiness grows as she reads of rumors about Elvis' infidelity. Bottom: Backstage with director Sofia Coppola, costume designer Stacey Battat and Spaeny.



and worked with Le Sourd to create a lush, dark space that incorporated the singer's preferred golden browns and marine blues. Avoiding a feeling of sameness in the bedroom scenes was a matter of "where you put the camera for the *mise en scène*, for the director and the actor," says Le Sourd. "Where and when does the actor enter and leave a shot? It's also about size of the frame and the film grammar we developed for this story."

Filming in Canada in the winter became a challenge when the filmmakers needed to create Los Angeles, where Priscilla finally makes her escape. "For the L.A. scene set inside, it was fully raining and the scene is supposed to be sunny," Le Sourd recalls. "At one point, the producers and director look at you and say, 'What are you going to do?' I work with all types of light — I think between LED and old tungsten lights and HMIs, there is always a different tool you can play with. For this scene, I used eight Dino lights and 12 lamps. I think only the Dino could do that work and make such a difference."

Delicate Approach

How the characters were framed and the timing and motivation of close-ups were important to the storytelling. In this regard, Le Sourd points to a key scene early in Elvis and Priscilla's relationship: "For Sofia and me, it was important to figure out how to show Priscilla's first visit to his bedroom — that, and how to do the kiss, how to do the intimacy and not have it feel gross or judgmental."

With Priscilla's perspective in mind, the filmmakers' approach to the couple's first bed scene "was about simplicity — we wanted to discover



the place with her," Le Sourd says. "Where they sit together was important. There was one sofa, one chair. You feel that you shouldn't put them on the bed, so it's about where you put them and place the camera to feel the emotion. Intimacy is also about light. For this film, the direction of the light was more ambient in order to be natural, and rarely over the characters. We were creating these very soft ambient atmospheres, with sometimes more specific accent lighting in a room."

Tech Specs: 1.85:1
Cameras | Arri Alexa 35, Bolex H-16, Super 8mm
Lenses | Panavision Ultra Speed Prime, Angénieux HR, Kern Vario-Switar
Film Stocks | Kodak Vision3 250D 7207, 50D 7203, Ektachrome 100D 7294

Priscilla takes a pause from reading at the counter of a local diner.



“For me, finding the right camera is about texture. Because this film is very intimate, it was about how the digital camera would help the interpretation of skin tone, which was the first thing I tested.”

Shaping POV

Throughout the shoot, Coppola avoided ending scenes on Elvis. “For the scene when Priscilla opens the newspaper at breakfast [and learns Elvis is cheating on her], we did a shot and reverse, but we ended on her. Sofia wouldn’t [end the scene] on him, so you feel intimate with Priscilla. Most of the time, we cut on the close-up.”

He commends Coppola for her exacting vision. “At one point, we were shooting an argument between Priscilla and Elvis, and I asked Sofia if she wanted a reverse on him, and it was a ‘No.’ His voice was strong enough. We didn’t need a close-up on him.”

Le Sourd always does his own operating, and he found that particularly rewarding on this project. “You create something more intimate with the actor, the fact that you are so close. They trust you with lighting, framing and emotion. Not to be able to operate, for me, would be very sad. You feel when you operate that you are the first audience for the movie, the first witness, and I receive that as a gift.” ◻