

On track for a new pursuit

For many years, camera supervisor, jib and crane operator, GTC member **Rob Ballantyne** embraced the hard-and-fast lifestyle of high-profile gigs and LE shows. In 2018, Rob took stock of his life and career to re-evaluate where he was at and what really mattered to him. He decided it was time to push himself out of his comfort zone and, with a little help from his friends, he set his business, Robbaduck Camera Services, quite literally, on a new track. Little did he know what 2020 would hold for us all...



CHRIS MCCLUSKIE/100ISO PHOTOGRAPHY

Life twists and turns through uncertainty. We all have an idea, a plan maybe, as to what we would like to achieve. In adult life, dreams may be pursued, grasped, challenged and changed to fit a personal landscape. A timeline, of sorts, can be mapped – or so we hope! Of course, there's no guarantee it'll be a smooth journey – navigating a recession or two can certainly spoil the path. But resilience is a strength and so it's important to plough on, to maintain the vision, to soldier on! Unfortunately, to top it all, we now know there's nothing quite like a worldwide pandemic to give the faith in what you are doing a real good kicking, right? Hopes and dreams are stalled, smashed even, and there's that word again: uncertainty. Not the uncertainty that every freelancer has felt at one point or another, whereby you await the return of that game show that might afford you your holiday or that new road bike you've had your eye on; this is something far more testing. It's uncertainty on a whole new level: whether you'll be able to pay the mortgage, put food on the table or ever work again within an industry that's been kneecapped and may not rise back up to what we all knew before.



Gino Moody, from Luna, (left) and Adam Slater (centre) rigging a Sony VENICE onto a Shotover G1 on the ULTRA arm for a shoot with Aston Martin

So, I've been invited to write an article about my new venture, this new pursuit, my next challenge! All this whilst COVID-19 hampers every one of us. This isn't going to be the usual show-and-tell piece that perhaps members are more used to reading but instead, what I can offer, is an honest account of what it's like to diversify at a time like this.

Identifying what really matters

It only feels like a moment ago that I was an eager young camera assistant at The London Studios, hungrily chasing the next opportunity, wanting to operate on the big shows, but that was actually 23 years ago now.

I look back with mixed emotions at my formative years. I was so fortunate to work with extraordinary talents, both staff and freelance, that ultimately shaped my craft. I'm very lucky, to a degree, to have received classical training within a competitive environment that spurred me on to better myself. As a cameraman, I have been privileged to catch a glimpse, through the lens, of other worlds, which has undoubtedly made for a richer life. I have worked with the biggest rock bands, TV personalities, queens – both real as well as those in drag! I have worked on incredibly interesting projects (as well as some unbelievably tedious ones!) all over the world and, for the most part, I wouldn't change a bit of it. I've been to exotic, faraway places and I've been to Grimsby!! It was all in a day's work.



Perhaps we can take heed and introduce a little more understanding for those around us. Perhaps it's that camera assistant or runner who might actually need a cup of tea from us rather than the other way round.

And yet, one day, some years ago, I realised that deep down I wasn't actually happy in what I was doing and, more importantly, in how I was doing it. Now, at first, that was hard to realise and to admit to myself. All that time, I had been pursuing what I thought was my life path, but in fact I'd been chasing a false dream of money and career establishment, where I wanted recognition for my talents – even demanded it. Such arrogance! With that insight, I changed direction.

Driving change, building a team

With a new route comes a new vision. Now, I love what I do and I want to continue loving it going forward, and the way to do that is for me to keep moving, learning and challenging myself. So, in 2018, I flew to Minneapolis, USA, and visited a small unit in the industrial part of the city to test-drive the prototype of the MotoCrane ULTRA. I've worked with camera cranes for most of my career, specialising in jibs, Technocranes and remote-head tracking systems. This, however, was a crane on a car. Easy, right?

I've been around long enough to understand that success takes time; it comes with experience and dogged perseverance. For me to achieve anything, I knew I had to have the right people around me – I needed specialists who could help. What's that saying... 'Surround yourself with people smarter than you.'

I started out with support from Luna Remote Systems. Dave Nixon and Dean Clish gave me a home by offering space in their unit on the Pinewood studio lot. There, I could go about assembling my team and, in order to do that, I thought long and hard about who I wanted to work with. This was my enterprise and I could decide how to run it; my aim was to assemble a team of individuals who would subscribe to a project and want to make it their own. I turned to two of the most conscientious technicians I know, Ryan Turner and Adam Slater. Not only are they both highly experienced Technocrane operatives, used to dealing with



Team Robba, from left to right: Lee Cummins, Adam Slater, Rob, Gino Moody



Robbaduck's tracking camera car, rigged with an ARRI SRH-3 stabilised head on the ULTRA arm, on a shoot with ARRI at Dunsfold Aerodrome



In 2018, when I visited MotoCrane HQ, I realised the potential of a lighter weight remote arm, that could be packed into fly-away cases, transported anywhere, and used on virtually any car.

high-pressure environments safely and competently, Ryan is also a Libra Head tech and Adam's a fabricator, making all manner of stuff for the industry. We were joined by Ian Clark, of IMC Tracking Vehicles, who has over 30 years of precision driving experience. Also helping were Gino Moody from Luna Remotes and Lee Cummins, my long-suffering jib tech.

Gearing up

The Autorobot Arm was first developed by Anatoliy Kokush in the USSR in the 1980s; by the 1990s, being the first remote camera car tracking arm, it began to find fame in the United States, becoming known as the Russian Arm. After years of development, the MotoCrane ULTRA was launched in 2019; in fact, I'd actually been one of the first to get their hands on one back in 2018, when I'd visited MotoCrane HQ. That was when I first realised the potential of a lighter weight remote arm, that could be packed into fly-away cases, transported anywhere, and used on virtually any car.

The importance of getting something like this right is obvious. Putting a remote motorised arm on top of a fast-moving vehicle is very dangerous; doing it without any experience at all is pure madness. As a team, we had a vast amount of experience with health and safety, camera cranes and stabilised heads, but we had yet to bring it all together for a safe, working setup in and on a car. I did not rush to market, instead choosing to feel my way in, by testing and repeat testing everything, until we were at least sure of the complexities of what we were doing. I spent the best part of a year making contacts within this new field of work, reaching out to the Met Police Film Unit for guidance, trying out different stabilised head setups, each time gaining insights into how to operate efficiently and safely. I didn't want to be the new guy on the block who turns up and has an accident. I took my time, rebranded my business and began to get noticed. I also made alliances with the likes of Panavision, Optical Support and Camera Revolution, gaining understanding and vital support, building a new family around my business. Then the phone started to ring.

Our reasonably priced car crane

The ULTRA is obviously a fantastic tool for filming cars. It lends itself to the car commercial market, which has traditionally been dominated by larger, more expensive, remote arm systems. ULTRA can offer comparable solutions for a fraction of the cost, thereby opening the gates for companies who create content to get greater production value for their budget. We have filmed for huge, prestigious brands, such as Bentley, Aston Martin and Lexus, who are all eager to promote their product via various communication platforms. We are now also stepping into the feature film and drama world,

having just completed our first successful stunt sequence on the third series of *Sex Education* for Netflix, which is currently being filmed.

What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger

But this has not been easy. I wasn't a huge company, with vast resources or, indeed, premises. I just had faith in what I could achieve, which sometimes needed to be reinforced by a friendly chat with Dean from Luna, who has been through the headaches and heartaches of starting a business himself. It's been tough; I'm not going to sit here and claim it's as easy as buying a bit of kit and getting a return. It doesn't work like that, but it is made tolerable by the folks around me who also have faith and belief: I owe so much to them all.

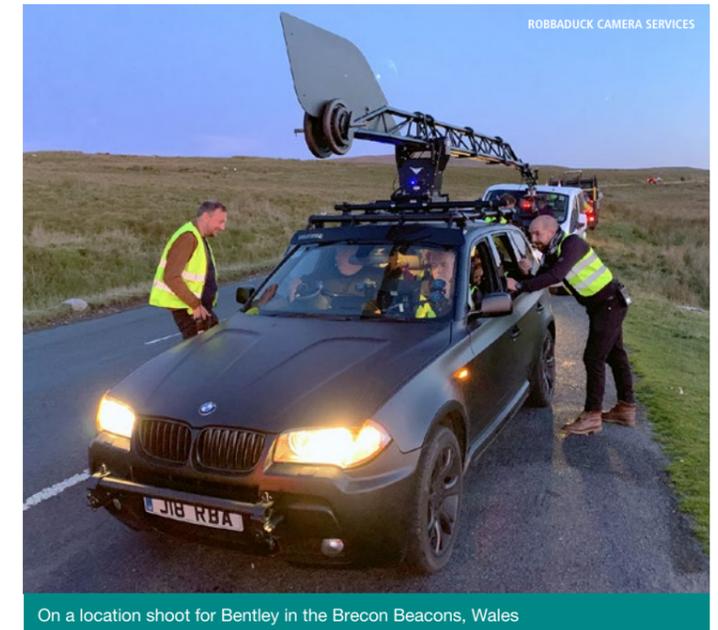
And I guess that is my point. This is not a promotional story about my company. I didn't set out to tell you just how successful I am, 'Look at me!'. COVID has hit the industry hard in ways none of us could ever have foreseen. It will be the ruin of some and the making of not many. I have despaired at times, just when I thought I'd done the hard yards. I have risked more than I care to mention but everyone has a sob story, now more than ever. Building a business is difficult; building a business during a world pandemic is unfathomable. And yet, here we are. People talk about the 'Big Reset'; we've all had time to take stock, and make promises to ourselves about changing our ways, but perhaps we can take heed and introduce a little more understanding for those around us. Perhaps it's that camera assistant or runner who might actually need a cup of tea from us rather than the other way round being some assumed and entitled rite of passage. It's the very wonderful and caring nature of my film and television family that has kept me upright and moving into the wind.

Backseat driver

The transference of skill sets has not been quite as big a leap as you might think. As a team, we need to work closely with one another in what can be a highly pressured environment, which is actually what we've all been doing for years, in many different genres throughout our combined camera crane careers. Given the nature of what we are doing with the ULTRA setup, each role is vitally important, and being able to communicate effectively is paramount. As the camera operator, I control the stabilised head via a console from within the car; I direct the shot, calling for both the arm and car to move as and when required. Adam operates the ULTRA arm, also via its own dedicated console. Having operated Technocranes for years, it's a very familiar way of working and team dynamic for us all.



The control console for the MotoCrane ULTRA



On a location shoot for Bentley in the Brecon Beacons, Wales

The art of track and chase

The car is fitted out with monitors in the front and rear seat positions. Even the driver has one for reference, however Adam, for the most part, keeps his eyes on the crane. The ULTRA has inbuilt safety stops and these get pre-programmed when we rig to ensure we don't faceplant into the asphalt, but it's not a fail-safe, so constant attention and supervision are required. It's a highly skilled role. The precision driver is really in charge. Ian is very experienced and calm within the cabin; he has direct communication with the 'hero' car and will cue moves at my direction. The arm operator and driver dovetail to help create the shot; I just point the camera in the right direction, really.

A highly mobile and versatile solution

With MotoCrane's Heavy Lift configuration, the ULTRA is able to take a payload of up to 30kg, including camera package and stabilised head. We've used a variety of stabilised heads – the SHOTOVER G1, ARRI SRH-3, Camera Revolution's Libra MINI, Ronin 2 and, lately, the excellent MÖVI XL – which we have combined with a range of cameras, such as the Sony VENICE, ARRI ALEXA Mini and RED cameras.

The turret can give a complete, continuous 360° pan in 7.5 seconds and, with a 12ft reach on the arm, we can get into and out of position very quickly, whenever needed. But it's the endless possibilities that are offered by the ULTRA that truly excite: it can be mounted on an SUV like ours, an all-terrain-vehicle (ATV) or even a boat. It's a flyaway kit, so with careful planning it could be thrown onto your Lamborghini if you want!

Fact File

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