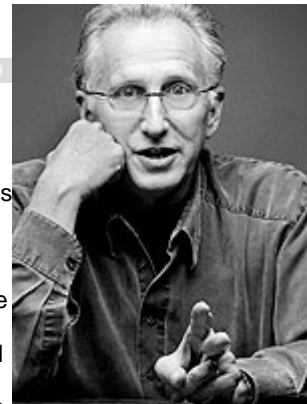




### a conversation with Tom Stern

"I start each film by figuring out the simplest way to approach it and not make the film any more complicated than it needs to be. You have to trust your eye and intuition and rely on the consistency of the film and lab. That's what gives you the freedom to get inside the movie and discover those serendipitous moments when you see light playing on an actor's face. A large part of what I do is create and light the spaces where the story happens. It can be as simple as glazing the paint on a wall so it reflects the quality of light you want when the actors are moving through the space on a set. ... I've had directors say, I don't know if you're going to be interested in my film because we only have a 40-day schedule. I tell them my goal is to work on great films like the ones my role models made during the 1970s and 1980s. You can make a great film in 40 days."



Tom Stern  
Photo by Kirkland

Tom Stern's cinematography credits during the past four years include *Blood Work*, *Mystic River*, *Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Romance and Cigarettes*, and the upcoming *Flags of Our Fathers* and *The Last Kiss*.

[All these films were shot on Kodak motion picture film.]

**QUESTION:** Where were you born and raised?

**STERN:** I'm from Northern California. I was born in Palo Alto, and grew up there until my family moved to France in 1960. We lived there for three years

**QUESTION:** Why did your family move to France?

**STERN:** My father's job. He was an aeronautical engineer for United Airlines.

**QUESTION:** Were you interested in movies as a fan at that time in your life?

**STERN:** No, I wasn't. I have kind of an engineering DNA, so I was interested in mechanical things. I had a Kodak Retina reflex camera that we bought when we lived in France. I liked taking still pictures and fiddling around with black-and-white chemistry in the darkroom. I was fascinated by the ability to freeze time with still pictures.

**QUESTION:** Did you discover photography on your own, or were you influenced by someone in your family or a friend?

**STERN:** I did it totally on my own. No one in my family was interested.

**QUESTION:** Where did you go to college?

**STERN:** I went to St. John's College, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. They had just opened the campus. It was a four-year liberal arts program. We started out studying Homer, Aristotle and Plato and ended up with Sigmund Freud, along with math, science and French. During my second year, a kid transferred to Santa Fe from the school's campus in Annapolis (Maryland). He wanted to make a movie. That seemed kind of cool to me. He asked me to photograph it. This was around 1965. I had no idea of what to do, so I read the ASC Manual from beginning to end. We had an ARRI SR and rented a blimp.

**QUESTION:** What was the film about?

**STERN:** In the 18th century Spanish-Americans owned all the land in New Mexico. The film was a story about their progressive disenfranchisement over the generations, and their changing relationship to the land.

**QUESTION:** How did the film turn out?

**STERN:** The film must have been okay, because it helped to get me into graduate school at Stanford. Film studies was part of the communications department.

**QUESTION:** What was the film studies program like at Stanford?

**STERN:** I was the guy who shot all the student movies. I also worked with John Else while I was finishing my thesis. I was his gaffer/first assistant on documentaries.

**QUESTION:** Did you have a plan for what you wanted to do after graduate school?

**STERN:** It seemed like 60 percent of the people looking for jobs in the industry wanted to be directors and the others wanted to be cinematographers. I decided in kind of a calculating way to concentrate on lighting. I had a mechanical aptitude, so I could fix things without electrocuting myself. I figured if I was any good at lighting, I could find a cameraman or two whom I had an affinity with, do interesting things and be challenged.

**QUESTION:** What were some of your earliest projects?

**STERN:** I worked with John Else on medical films and I was the lighting guy on a film about the birth of the semiconductor. I also met Urs Furrer, a feature cameraman who shot Shaft. He was my first lighting mentor. I worked with him on 16 mm quasi-documentaries around the country. I also worked on the crew that filmed the Bob Dylan Rolling Thunder Review tour and got to watch Albert Maysles dance with a camera.

**QUESTION:** When and how did you transition into doing narrative films?

**STERN:** I worked as a best boy on Between the Lines, a Joan Silver movie in New York (in 1977). Ken Van Sickle was the cinematographer. After that film, I went back to Palo Alto. I was thinking of settling down and finding some balance in my life. I got a call on a Saturday night. A gaffer had fallen out on a movie that Robbie Greenberg (ASC) was going to shoot. I had never worked in Los Angeles before. While I was there, John Bailey (ASC) introduced me to Willy Kurant (ASC). I worked with Willy on Harper Valley P.T.A., and on several other films.

**QUESTION:** It sounds like it was an interesting time in your life.

**STERN:** I did some interesting things. I worked on Bob Dylan's Reynaldo and Clara, an underground movie that hardly anyone has seen. I also worked on a lot of commercials, including some with Haskell Wexler (ASC) and Connie Hall (ASC). My first picture with Bruce Surtees (ASC) was White Dog (in 1982). We had a wonderful time. Later that year, I did my first film with Bruce and Clint Eastwood. It was called Honkeytonk Man.

**QUESTION:** What was it like working with Bruce?

**STERN:** It was a wonderful experience. Bruce was the original prince of darkness.

**QUESTION:** You worked on some wonderful Clint Eastwood movies with Jack Green (ASC). Originally he was a camera operator, and then a cinematographer starting with Heartbreak Ridge. Can you share a memory of those experiences?

**STERN:** It was great working with Jack. I'm extremely proud of the work we did on Bird, an homage to Charlie Parker. There was a realism that was truthful.

**QUESTION:** How about Unforgiven?

**STERN:** The production designer was Henry Bumstead. He did an utterly brilliant job. He found this old style of glass that was perfect. You couldn't see straight through it like you do with the glass panes on windows today. It was perfect for that film. I learned a lot from watching and listening to Jack, including the brilliant choices he made in framing.

**QUESTION:** How about Spaceballs with Nick McLean (ASC)?

**STERN:** We were shooting on big stages at the studio. I was introduced to Mel Brooks at a production meeting. Afterwards, a group of us were walking from the production office to the stage. Mel looked up at me and said, Tom, I've seen your work and your lighting isn't funny. I said, yes sir that's probably true. He said, this is a comedy and kooks are funny. He was telling me something that was really articulate in his universe.

**QUESTION:** You got to work with Conrad Hall for the first time on Class Action.

**STERN:** We had a fantastic time together. Connie and I had a funny relationship, because we were always good friends, but at the beginning of my career he rightly judged that I didn't have enough experience to work with him on films like Marathon Man or Black Widow. That stung a little, but he was right.

**QUESTION:** You also got to work with Owen Roizman (ASC) on French Kiss.

**STERN:** Owen could judge a tenth of a stop by eye. I don't depend on light meters. You have to trust your eye and intuition and rely on the consistency of the film and lab. That gives you the freedom to get inside the space of the film.

**QUESTION:** Your last film as a chief lighting technician was Road to Perdition.

**STERN:** Conrad Hall's artistry was so rich that being his gaffer was kind of like being the bass player for a great maestro. It was sort of a mind meld thing. After Conrad died, I quit working for about six months. I had a lot of thinking to do. That Christmas I got a call saying that Clint Eastwood wanted me to shoot Blood Work with him.

**QUESTION:** Were you thinking about trying your hand as a cinematographer?

**STERN:** It was absolutely the last thing in my mind. I had never even thought about it.

**QUESTION:** What was it like shooting your first film?

**STERN:** One of the things I learned is that you need to be a leader. Once you get everyone moving in the right direction, you have to get out of his or her way. I remember Conrad Hall saying that's what gives you time to discover those serendipitous moments when you see how light coming through a window is playing on an actor's face.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us a personal example?

**STERN:** There's a silhouette shot that I'm fond of in Million Dollar Baby. It wasn't something we planned. People have gotten comfortable with the idea that sometimes you can tell the story by not showing the actors' faces.

**QUESTION:** The second film you shot was Mystic River.

**STERN:** Clint was very clear about the story he wanted to tell, and we knew what we had to do. We had a 42-day schedule and shot it in 39 days. Thirty-two of those days were 10 hours or less. One day was 14 hours long, but we did three days work. The other six days we finished before lunch. We only shot 169,000 feet of film.

**QUESTION:** We discussed your mechanical aptitude earlier during this conversation. How do you feel about the various new technology tools?

**STERN:** I don't necessarily need the latest toys. I start each film by figuring out the simplest way to do it and try not to make it any more complicated than it needs to be.

**QUESTION:** Clint Eastwood is famous for getting shots in as few takes as possible. How does that affect you as a cinematographer when you are working with him?

**STERN:** It's a director's prerogative. He does it because he likes the freshness of the first take. The actors know what to expect and come prepared. In my experience, 9/10ths of the actors in his films thrive on it. It's the same as acting in a play.

**QUESTION:** How does that affect your work?

**STERN:** I've lit Clint's films for a long time and was never rushed. You just have to be ready when he says roll. I'll go back to what I said earlier. You have to put together a great crew and let them do what they do best. Clint's work speaks for itself, but it's not the only way to make movies.

**QUESTION:** So, there's no one textbook way to make a movie?

**STERN:** No. I believe that any dogma about how to make a film is poison.

**QUESTION:** This is an esoteric question. Do you think the fact that you started with documentaries affects how you think about lighting and narrative storytelling?

**STERN:** You have limited resources when you're shooting documentaries, so you learn to capitalize on what you have and also anchor the film in reality. When I worked on the Bobby Dylan Rolling Thunder tour all my lights were packed in two fiber cases that I could carry by hand even if my knuckles banged on the ground.

**QUESTION:** You recently shot a film called The Last Kiss. Tell us about it.

**STERN:** It's a remake of an Italian film with the same name. It's a comedy about relationships. It takes place in Madison, Wisconsin, but we only shot there a couple days. The director was Tony Goldwyn who is also an actor. The lead was played by Zach Braff, who is living with a character played by Jacinda Barrett. They are expecting a child. Another character is married and they have a baby. There's also a fellow who has just broken up with his long time girlfriend, and a guy who is unable to have lasting relationship.

**QUESTION:** Had you worked with Tony Goldwyn before?

**STERN:** No, but I find it interesting working with directors who are actors and watching how they deal with the cast. He was very clear about the spirit of the film.

**QUESTION:** How about choosing whether the format should be anamorphic, Super 35 or Academy aperture 1.85:1 aspect ratio?

**STERN:** I'm sort of an anamorphic guy, but I'm pretty non-dogmatic about it. The format is driven by the story.

**QUESTION:** There used to be this perception that anamorphic was for exterior movies.

**STERN:** I think that concept has been buried. I shot a recent film called *Romance & Cigarettes* in anamorphic format. It's a low budget, musical directed by John Turturro with James Gandolfini, Susan Sarandon, Steve Buscemi, Chris Walken, Mandy Moore, Kate Winslet and Mary-Louise Parker were in the cast. The main characters live in a 1,100 square foot, three bedroom house in Queens. The master bedroom is 10 by 13 feet. We covered some scenes with the camera in the closet using anamorphic lenses.

**QUESTION:** How did you light and compose an anamorphic film in that small house?

**STERN:** Really carefully. A jigsaw puzzle is two dimensional. This is like Rubric's Cube, because it's a more complex. Sometimes we didn't move the camera, because we wanted a static shot with characters in that space.

**QUESTION:** How did you light and keep it visually interesting in a little house?

**STERN:** One of the things I learned from Conrad is not to be afraid of white walls. You can create a feeling of depth with the paint or glazing on a wall. That can help if you don't have a lot of space to play with. I'd say, give me 100 percent glaze here and 50 percent there, and we are going to shoot a funny scene, so let's glaze the ceiling. I used to play a lot of pool, so I know that the angle of incidence equals the angle of reflectance. It's real simple. I steal ideas from Conrad every day. Sometimes I feel that he is standing behind my shoulder telling me what to do. I learned a lot by watching Conrad work with Sam Mendes on *American Beauty* and *Road to Perdition*. They used a static camera and moved the actors around the space. Conrad designed natural lighting.

**QUESTION:** There is a perception that you can fix anything in postproduction with the recent developments in digital intermediate technology. How do you feel about that?

**STERN:** I've done a couple of DIs. The first one was *Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius*. We shot that in four-perf Super 35 format. The next was *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. That was four-perf Super 35. It's a tool that can be useful on the right pictures.

**QUESTION:** You've also done films with an ENR process. Tell us about that.

**STERN:** We used an ENR process on the prints for *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby*, because Clint wanted really lush back tones. If you start out with deep blacks, ENR can help you make them look like a velvet, black swimming pool. Either way, it all begins with the images that you record on the negative.

**QUESTION:** Can you give us an example of how you choose negatives?

**STERN:** I used (Kodak Vision2) 5218 and 5205 on *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. I loved the 5205 look, because we were in a place in Canada that had very flat light. It saturated the slope of the curves and gave us incredibly lush images. On *Romance & Cigarettes*, I used (Kodak Vision2) 5218 and 5229, a lower contrast film, because we had Susan Sarandon, Aida Turturro and Kate Winslet in the cast, and we wanted to emphasize their feminine beauty in flattering light in parts of the film. I never use filtration, because it degrades the image. We can get the same effect with lighting.

**QUESTION:** Can you expand on that comment about filming female characters? In *Million Dollar Baby*, the story revolves around Hilary Swank playing the role of a boxer, so she can't be too glamorous. How did you approach lighting her character?

**STERN:** Hillary was a total angel while we were filming *Million Dollar Baby*. She played a total scrapper and comes across that way during most of the

movie. At the very end, when she's lying in bed dying, we wanted a visual counterpoint. We want her to look incredibly beautiful and she totally dug it. You can use lighting to help support the arc of how a character or characters develop.

**QUESTION:** Flag of Our Fathers is your most recent collaboration with Clint Eastwood. That made it eight films since your career shifted from gaffer to cinematographer just five years ago. Looking ahead, what are your plans or hope for the future?

**STERN:** I feel that I've been blessed with this new opportunity. I want to work on films that mean something to me like the ones my role models did during the 1970s and '80s. I've had directors say, I don't know if you're going to be interested in my film, because we only have a 40 days schedule. I think you can make a great film in 40 days.