

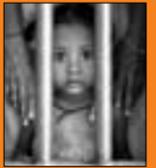
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The Opinion Maker

The humourous **Ken Rockwell** and his reviews draw equal numbers of ardent fans and harsh critics. He tells **Raj Lalwani** why he thinks equipment does not really matter.

How does one begin to write an article on a man who generates such varied reactions across the world? He generates a kind of hysteria in the online photographic world—while some people love him, he also has a lot of detractors. Welcome to the online world of Ken Rockwell! Most people discover Ken the

same way as I did. He is often Google's first search result when one searches for reviews of any camera. Rockwell says wittily, "That is a problem when I am searching for more information on a camera or lens that I have already reviewed. Now, Google is a great search engine but it should understand that I do not want to know what I already know!"

Urban decay is one of Ken's favourite subjects, besides landscapes. The blue-white mercury light was rendered as a green tone on film.



While shooting landscapes, Ken prefers to use Velvia film, or increase saturation in-camera if he is using a digital camera.

“The term ‘professional’ can be derogatory. I am not shooting to make ends meet, but because I love to!”

the success of his site to his outspoken style of writing. “The point where I differ from other websites or magazines is that I do not rely on any company for my own survival. So, if I do not like a camera, I ensure that the world knows about it.”

However, he says that while the internet is ideal for research, the best way to learn photography is through books and magazines. He jokes, “When I was young, photography magazines would mostly carry pictures of scantily clad women. That is what really got me interested in the subject! On a serious note, the kind of learning you can get from seeing photographs of the masters in print, cannot be replicated online.”

It is Not About The Camera

While speaking to him, I realised that Ken Rockwell is a paradox of sorts. His website primarily comprises of reviews of cameras and lenses, but at the same time, he always mentions that the camera does not matter. “Real photographers are curious artists, not technicians or equipment lovers. Even if you consider my photographic heroes, only Sebastião Salgado has a technical background. Ansel Adams loved music, Annie Leibowitz has a degree in Arts, and Jay Maisel is a beautiful painter.”

As a photographer, Ken enjoys shooting landscapes and scenes of urban decay. Both allow him to use vivid colours and shoot at the widest angle of the zoom—two

Ken enjoys playing with perspective by getting really close to the subject while using extreme wide-angle lenses.

A Bunch of Strong Opinions

Besides his long, detailed reviews, Ken is equally known for his irreverent style and humour. His website has over 60,00,000 readers, who almost consider him as an institution in himself. “I do it all on my own,” he admits. “I am not any sort of organisation. If anything, you can call me a model of disorganisation. If it were not for the search box in my own website, I would not be able to find anything!”

Rockwell’s opinions often go against the norm. For instance, he has always preferred the entry-level Nikon D40 to high-end DSLRs and has also called it “the best DSLR for all practical purposes.” His criticism towards some revered high-end products is often about how they are either too heavy to lug around, or too complex to operate. According to Ken, his reviews are a reflection of what he believes; he is not necessarily advocating that it would work the same way for everyone else.

However, these simplistic opinions often rile a lot of feathers. It is not always a great feeling to read someone rating an entry-level Nikon D40 higher than the expensive DSLR that you may own. A lot of people have ranted on online forums against his views. Some articles have also exaggerated his likes and dislikes to create humorous spoofs.

According to him, the problem lies in the fact that a lot of people forget about what kind of audience he is talking to. “Most of my website is directed towards amateurs

and beginners. I believe that if you are someone who is not sure whether you need something, then you certainly do not need it. If your professional work demanded the use of the RAW format or that of a high-end camera, you would not be wasting time on my website, would you?”

“You Cannot Be Serious”

According to a disclaimer on his website, Ken has mentioned that while writing articles, he often makes mistakes deliberately. A lot of his statements are practical jokes, and anyone reading his site must have a sense of humour to spot these ‘mistakes’. “I do these deliberate gaffes because they are fun!” says Ken.

The website has a photograph of Ken holding what seems to be a “left-handed” Nikon F100 camera. He decided to tell people that it is a custom-made left-handed camera that Nikon were kind enough to gift him. “In reality, of course, it is a regular camera whose picture I flipped around, because it looked better on the webpage’s layout!” With the constant scrutiny that surrounds his articles, his readers send him over a thousand emails even if he gets one product specification wrong. “But when I play these elaborate practical jokes, everybody believes me!” he laughs.

A Decade on the Web

Ken started his website in 1999, and quit his regular job in 2004 to concentrate only on publishing the site. Rockwell attributes



TIPS BY KEN

- Do not buy any new equipment. Take what you have and use it well.
- Instead of wasting time changing lenses, spend time in perfecting your composition skills.
- The key to photography is understanding how composition affects the manner in which the eyes travel across an image.



Ken loves using ultrawide lenses. He had spotted this bathhouse that had been painted by a production company, and says that he was lucky enough to get perfect clouds.



“The point where I differ from other websites or magazines is that I do not rely on any company for my own survival.”

things that he loves doing. He is also a strong advocate for shooting JPEGs, instead of RAW. Alternatively, he suggests shooting with film, since a film negative is where the concept of a RAW file comes from. He even refers to film as “RealRaw”! True to his philosophy, he enjoys shooting with whatever gear is available and convenient—from disposable cameras to high-end DSLRs or digital point-and-shoots.

The last innovative camera was the Nikon D1 (the first consumer DSLR).”

Rockwell, however, hopes that things will change with the introduction of the simplistic Leica M9 (the company’s first full-frame digital rangefinder) and the small-sized Olympus PEN series.

An ‘Expert’?

While I have always considered Rockwell to be an expert, he takes offence to that

Ken’s compositions are simple, and they mostly rely on colour and lines.



This image was shot with a compact camera. Ken enjoys using compact camera for their convenience, especially if the camera allows him to manually control exposure.

word. “Even the term ‘professional’ can be derogatory. I am not shooting to make ends meet. I am shooting because I love to!” Ken says that he would rather be called a photographic artist who also runs a website. “And also someone who is a lot of

fun to read, or talk to,” he signs off. We will not disagree with that at all!

Ken’s strong opinions, deliberate gaffes and beautiful images can be found at www.kenrockwell.com

Ken’s photographs show an excellent command over composition and its impact on how the human eye travels through the image.



GADGETS & GEAR

- Ken owns a Nikon D3, but enjoys using smaller cameras like Nikon D40 and Canon PowerShot S90.
- His favourite is the Mamiya 7 for its technical quality and light body.
- His dream camera would be a hybrid one that converts the look and quality of the film into digital files immediately.

Technology Going Backwards

“The problem with obsessing too much about cameras today,” Ken explains, “is that the technology is going backwards.” When I probed this intriguing statement further, he said, “For the first 50 or 60 years, the features that were added to cameras were all meant to make it easier to use. The early nineties was really the pinnacle. After this, manufacturers ran out of features that they could add to their cameras and press releases. So, they decided to give so many pointless options, functions and menus that the poor photographer is left confused. You miss your shot while you are busy fiddling with the menus!”

In terms of design, cameras have stagnated. “Nothing has really changed since the Nikon F5 in terms of ergonomics.