

First look

BY MICHELE FRANK



FUJICA ST-801

- Shutter speeds 1-1/2,000 sec
- X and FP synchronization
- Hot-shoe and PC outlets
- Built-in fully integrating through-the-lens light meter
- Seven light-emitting diodes for exposure indication
- ASA range 25-3,200
- Meter switch in tandem with shutter release
- 50-mm EBC Fujinon f/1.4 lens
- Minimum focusing distance 18 in.
- Full-aperture reading
- Depth-of-field preview button
- Screw-mount lenses with lock
- Self-timer

I can't tell you how many times I have gotten into a dim-light situation where I knew my film was capable of capturing the scene but I was unable to do so because I didn't know the proper exposure. Sure, I had a through-the-lens-reading camera, but when I couldn't read what the little dials or needles had to say it was pure guesstimation. Apparently the people at Fujica took the lament of the low-light photographer to heart and came up with seven light-emitting diodes for exposure indication.

Briefly, an LED, or light-emitting diode (keep your eye on that word, I predict you're going to see it cropping up a lot in columns to come), is a semiconductor generally constructed of gallium-arsenide-phosphide that/when excited with a charge of electricity, causes electrons that were resting at discrete energy levels to move to other valence bands. In doing so, light and a small amount of heat are given off.

The beauty of these little electroluminescent lights is that they will more than likely outlast you: they have an estimated operating life of something in excess of 10,000 hours. They're also fairly shock-

proof and, since they have no moving parts, can't suffer from mechanical difficulties. I can attest to this since the camera and I went tumbling down a flight of stairs recently. The camera continued to function well—I didn't. When used in a light-metering system, LEDs can give faster results without the problems of mechanical failure sometimes encountered in trap-needle systems.

Fujica has lined up these diodes on the right-hand side of the viewfinder, vertically. There's a cutout indicating the center diode, and plus/minus symbols and arrows above and below them. The center cutout indicates "0" exposure-error diode. The particular model I used had all circular-shaped diodes so that under adverse light or grab-shot conditions it was difficult to distinguish the center diode quickly from those located just above and below. It is possible, in fact it happens all the time, that more than one diode can be lighted at one time. This is not failure in the system, but rather a way of telling half- and quarter-stop under/overexposure. When the center diode was lighted and the one above it was equally bright, it meant that I was a half stop over. When the upper one was bright and the center one dim, it meant that I was 3/4 stop over. In this manner you can get the exact exposure you want. Unfortunately, Fujica didn't follow through by giving the lens half-stop clicks, so that at times it became a bit frustrating. In practice, however, when the center diode and one other were lighted, I would shoot anyway and be hard pressed to tell you whether I was a half or quarter of a stop over or under, especially when using a film like Tri-X.

Instead of the standard-CdS cell, Fujica employs a silicon photocell. This type is capable of responding faster to low light levels than the standard CdS cell. In actual dim-light situations my exposures were more than acceptable.

The meter system turns on automatically when you press the shutter-release button. As one rotates the aperture the diode light moves up or down. If you want to select an aperture and play with the shutter speeds, you do have to keep one finger on the release button while twirling the shutter-speed dial—sometimes a bit frustrating. What usually happened was that I would end up pressing down too hard on the shutter release, accidentally exposing a frame.

The only other complaint I had, I've mentioned before: the center diode cannot be picked out quickly. I've suggested, to the Fujica people that they put in either another color for the center diode or offset it slightly so that there will nev-

er be any question. Later-model ST 801 s (I had a very early production sample) have replaced the circular center diode with a diamond-shaped one that should help to eliminate some errors in judgment. But I still stand on my suggestion of a different color.

Other controls operated extremely smoothly. There's a large rubber collar around the lens for easy focusing. The viewfinder itself is very bright, thanks to a silvered pentaprism, and the combination of a split-image RF spot, microprism doughnut, and fresnel screen makes focusing really easy.

I had a ball putting the camera through its paces. The wind lever is very smooth, but single stroke—it would have been nice to have it ratcheted. Should you not have Fujica EBC lenses, other Pentax/Praktica screwmount lenses can be used in the stop-down mode. Again, it does become somewhat of a finger exercise when one has to stop down, meter, and change the aperture. The lock on the lenses means that some ham-fisted so-and-so won't accidentally twist off or unseat your lens while trying to focus.

Fujica has joined the multiple-coating race and seems to have come out quite well. I found very little evidence of flare in my shots even when I tried. The designers' attention to camera-body flare also deserves a mention. Rather than using the dead-black, corrugated finish so prevalent today inside the body, they've chosen to put on a layer of black flocking to absorb any stray rays of light. The combination of their EBC (electron-beam coating) and the flocking makes for really clear, crisp pictures. Add the extremely bright viewfinder with its multiple focusing aids, and I found it well nigh impossible to get a poor shot. Shutter speeds are also shown in the viewfinder, so it's not necessary to pull your eye away from it to check the setting.

In summation, I think that Fujica has really come up with a winner. It's a small camera, very easy to handle, with a focusing system somewhat short of "gee whiz" and a metering system with great potential for the photographer. As mentioned before, there are some minor hangups, but, in general, this is a nice piece of hardware. There's a full complement of interchangeable Fujinon EBC lenses from 28 through 200 mm that will work automatically, as well as two zooms. Price of the Fujica ST 801 with 50-mm f/1.4 lens and case is \$369.95; with 55-mm f/1.8 and case, \$329.95. A black version is available for \$10 more. For further information, contact Fuji Photo Film USA, Inc., 350 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001.