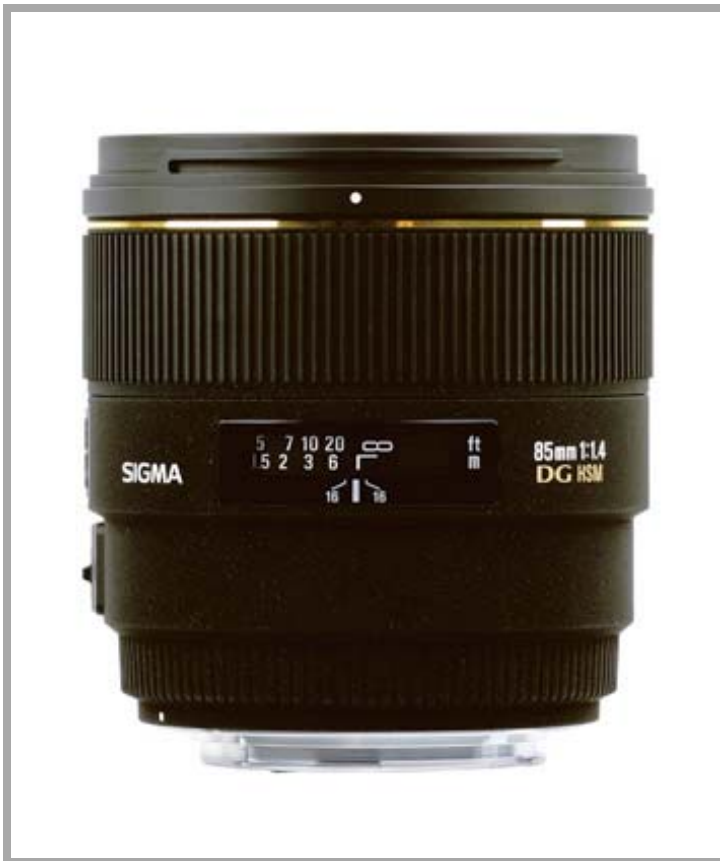


Product Reviews: Sigma 85mm f/1.4 EX DG HSM Lens

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If you're a portrait photographer, the classic focal length and aperture of the Sigma 85mm f/1.4 EX DG HSM should catch your eye no matter what brand is on the lens barrel.

Remember when you were a little kid and you'd go to the grocery store with your parents and instead of buying the Heinz ketchup you'd seen on TV—"it's slow good!"—they'd insist on the supermarket brand "catsup" your friends would make fun of when they came over for a cook-out? Ok, maybe that never happened to you but you probably know what I mean.

Believe it or not, that experience is how a lot of people feel when they're

considering a third-party lens for their camera. It reminds them of catsup; that watery, inferior version of Heinz tomato ketchup your parents would force on you every summer.

Get over it people!

Some third-party lenses are not only cheaper than Nikon or Canon-branded glass, they offer image quality that's often on par with what the big boys produce. And while flying the Sigma or Tamron lens brand on the front of your Canon 5D Mark II may not impress your buddies at the Kool Fauxtographers Club & Lounge, third-party glass likely won't get you laughed out of the room like that old Safeway Supermarket Catsup.

One new third-party lens that might even spark some pangs of envy is the Sigma 85mm f/1.4 EX DG HSM. If you're a portrait photographer, that classic focal length and aperture should catch your eye no matter what brand is on the lens barrel. I recently got to test the Sigma 85mm f/1.4 with portrait photographer Jordan Matter and we both felt this \$899 lens stacked up extremely well when compared to similar lenses from Canon and Nikon that sell for more than twice the price.

MOUNT THIS

A Nikon-mount version of the Sigma 85mm wasn't available in time for this review, much to Jordan's chagrin since he's a Nikon shooter who's in the market for a new portrait lens and wanted to compare it to his older Nikon 85mm f/1.4. (A new version of his lens, the AF-S Nikkor 85mm f/1.4G, recently went on sale for a whopping \$1,700.)

Instead we received a Sigma 85mm f/1.4 loan in a Canon mount and tested it with a new Canon 60D, which is also reviewed in this issue. With the 60D's APS-C size image sensor, the Sigma 85mm is magnified to a 136mm focal length which gives you a comfortable working distance for portraits. The lens comes with a petal-style hood that adds over two inches to the front of the lens. There's also a lens hood extender included that provides additional shading for APS-C-sensor DSLRs and turns the lens into a rather serious-looking black tube.

The Sigma's build is solid with a comfortable rubber manual focus ring on the front. While it's a few inches longer than the Nikon, the difference is negligible. The Sigma is quite a bit thicker than the Nikon though and Jordan said he preferred the narrower barrel of the Nikon because it gave him a better grip.

Autofocus is fast and whisper quiet thanks to the lens' Hyper Sonic Motor (HSM) which features full-time manual override. Though it feels like a more significant chunk of metal compared to Jordan's elegant old Nikon 85mm, in no sense did we feel that the Sigma had a lower quality build, despite selling for half the price. (Whether this would change over the long haul was impossible for us to say since we only had the lens for about a month.)

In terms of specs, the Sigma matched up fairly well to the Nikon. Along with that fabulous max aperture of f/1.4, the Sigma has a minimum aperture of f/16. The lens is constructed of 11 elements in eight groups. Like the Nikon, the Sigma has nine diaphragm blades that are designed to produce attractive background blur or "bokeh."

In comparing the bokeh produced by the Sigma to the Nikon, Jordan said he preferred the background effect from the Nikon, calling it more “dramatic.” I could see his point—the Sigma produces a smooth, graduated out-of-focus blur while the Nikon blows out the background with a swirling flourish. It’s really a matter of taste though. Both lenses produced extremely shallow depth of field thanks to their fast apertures, giving all attention to your subject for a classic, professional look.

Minimum focus distance on the Sigma is the same as the Nikon—85mm—as is the filter size which is 77mm.

What most impressed both of us about the Sigma 85mm was the sharpness. In comparing the Sigma to the older Nikon (which was mounted on a Nikon D3s), Jordan estimated the Sigma produced sharp images 90 percent of the time compared to 60 percent for the Nikon. Also, the Sigma matched the Nikon in focus lock speed; even when recomposing, it was able to quickly lock in on a new subject.

Though we weren’t able to compare it to the new version of the Nikon 85mm f/1.4 nor to a comparable Canon lens—Canon only makes an f/1.2 and f/1.8 version—the Sigma did amazingly well in our portrait tests, especially for a lens that lists for around \$900 and should have a street price of even less. Of course, how this quality will stand up over time is the real test. In the short term though, the Sigma was aces.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you’re looking for a great portrait lens but can’t afford the best that Canon and Nikon have to offer, get over your fear of third-party glass and give the Sigma 85mm f/1.4 EX DG HSM a shot. This relatively inexpensive lens with its fast f/1.4 aperture and quick and quiet autofocus is one of the best bargains out there right now. Better yet, the images it produces are tastier than Heinz ketchup on a bacon cheeseburger.

Sigma 85mm f/1.4 EX DG HSM

www.sigmaphoto.com

Pros: Great price for the image quality; solid build; fast and quiet autofocus; consistently sharp results; produces pleasing shallow depth of field to isolate your subject.

Cons: Bokeh not as dramatic as from Nikon model; thicker barrel than the competition.

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