

Synthesis and characterization of smooth ultrananocrystalline diamond films via low pressure bias-enhanced nucleation and growth

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This letter describes the fundamental process underlying the synthesis of ultrananocrystalline diamond (UNCD) films, using a new low-pressure, heat-assisted bias-enhanced nucleation (BEN)/bias enhanced growth (BEG) technique, involving H₂/CH₄ gas chemistry. This growth process yields UNCD films similar to those produced by the Ar-rich/CH₄ chemistries, with pure diamond nanograins (3–5 nm), but smoother surfaces (~6 nm rms) and higher growth rate (~1 μm/h). Synchrotron-based x-Ray absorption spectroscopy, atomic force microscopy, and transmission electron microscopy studies on the BEN-BEG UNCD films provided information critical to understanding the nucleation and growth mechanisms, and growth condition-nanostructure-property relationships. © 2008 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2838303]

Ultrananocrystalline diamond (UNCD) films developed at Argonne National Laboratory¹ are outstanding material candidates for the fabrication of multifunctional devices, such as for microelectromechanical/nanoelectromechanical systems (MEMS/NEMS),^{2,3} requiring high Young's modulus, low friction coefficient, and high resistance to wear, requiring low threshold voltage for electron emission,⁴ and biomedical devices,⁵ requiring bioinertness and/or biocompatibility. Improving the performance of UNCD films for MEMS/NEMS devices requires either the optimization of the synthesis process using the original Ar-rich growth chemistry developed to synthesize UNCD films, or developing new processes that yield stress-free UNCD films with stronger adhesion to the substrate, higher growth rate, and smoother surfaces. The surface roughness and growth rate of UNCD films grown using Ar-rich (99%)/CH₄ (1%) chemistries are typically 7–15 nm root-mean-square (rms) and ~0.3–0.4 μm/h, respectively, depending on the pregrowth diamond seeding and growth parameters.^{2,6} The film adhesion, surface roughness, and growth rate of UNCD films are controlled by nucleation and growth processes.^{6–8} The bias-enhanced nucleation (BEN) process investigated by several groups has several advantages over mechanical polishing or ultrasonic seeding processes, namely, (a) better efficiency,⁹ (b) stronger adhesion to substrates,^{8–11} and (c) an integrated fully dry nucleation/growth process using plasma processing only. Prior work⁸ demonstrated that the BEN process enhances UNCD film adhesion to substrates, although UNCD films were grown using an Ar/CH₄ chemistry without bias, on BEN layers produced by 70 mbar H₂/CH₄ plasma chemistry. Other prior work involved BEN plus

bias enhanced growth (BEG) processes, using H₂/CH₄ chemistries for growing nanocrystalline diamond (NCD) (30–100 nm grains) films, resulted in formation of diamond clusters, relatively high surface roughness, high compressive stress, delamination of the film, and high content of nondiamond phase.^{11,12} By contrast, we describe here a process to grow UNCD films identical to those produced by the Ar/CH₄ chemistry, but using relatively low pressure (25 mbar) H₂/CH₄ gas chemistry and an integrated BEN-BEG process that yields films with low stress, ultras-smooth surfaces, high growth rates, and uniform grain size (3–5 nm) throughout the whole film area, making them potential candidate materials for the fabrication of UNCD-based MEMS/NEMS devices.

The low pressure BEN-BEG process described here involves the following steps: (1) etching of the Si (100) substrate for 10 min in a pure hydrogen plasma under bias to remove the native SiO₂ layer from the surface; (2) *in situ* BEN-BEG, using a H₂ (93%)/CH₄ (7%) plasma produced by 2.2 kW microwave power at 25 mbar pressure and applying –350 V bias on a substrate heated to 850 °C in a 2.45 GHz 6 in. IPLAS CYRANNUS microwave plasma chemical vapor deposition system. The UNCD thin films were characterized by several complementary techniques, as discussed below.

X-ray absorption near edge structure (XANES) spectroscopy analysis revealed the atomic bonding characteristics of the UNCD films. Compared with visible Raman, XANES unambiguously distinguishes between the *sp*² and *sp*³-hybridized bonds in carbon-based materials. Figure 1 shows the C (1s) XANES spectra for the top surface of the BEN-BEG UNCD films grown at 850 °C for 10–45 min. The XANES spectra show characteristic diamond features, namely, a peak at 289.3 eV (diamond C 1s electron core

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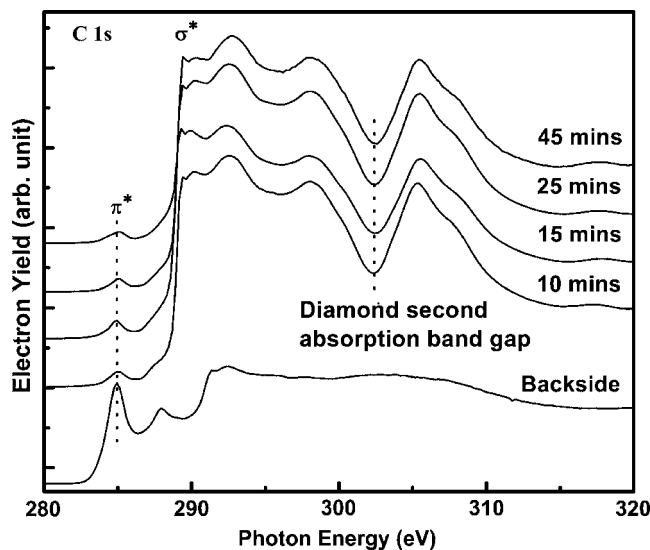


FIG. 1. XANES spectra on the top surface of UNCD films with different growth times and the back side surface of the UNCD film at the UNCD/Si interface.

excitation), a dip around 302 eV (second absorption band gap of diamond),¹³ and a small peak at 285 eV corresponding to the $C=C$ ($1s \rightarrow \pi^*$) transition for sp^2 -bonded carbon, which is substantially located along grain boundaries of UNCD films as revealed in prior experiments,¹⁴ and in agreement with computer simulations.¹⁵ The nature of the “back side” surface of the BEN-BEG UNCD films at the UNCD/Si interface was investigated by etching away the Si substrate, using a mixture of nitric and hydrofluoric acid, as described previously.⁶ The XANES spectrum of the UNCD back side shows peaks at ~ 285 eV [$C=C$ ($1s \rightarrow \pi^*$)] and ~ 287.5 eV, [$C-H$ ($1s \rightarrow \sigma^*$)] transition caused by $C-H$ bonding produced during Si etching with a mixture of nitric and hydrofluoric acids to lift-off the UNCD film. The larger $C=C$ ($1s \rightarrow \pi^*$) peak for the back side of UNCD films, compared to the top surface, indicates a higher sp^2 -bonded carbon content at the UNCD/Si interface, suggesting that the nucleation process, for the growth conditions used here, results in the formation of a nondiamond carbon layer with possible nanodiamond inclusions (cross-sectional TEM studies below), as shown also by prior work.⁹

Figure 2 shows a high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) image of a BEN-BEG UNCD film. The corresponding selected area electron diffraction (SAED) pattern shows diffraction rings corresponding to the $\{111\}$, $\{220\}$, and $\{311\}$ planes of diamond (bottom right inset of Fig. 2). The histogram from the HRTEM images (80 grains) shows an average grain size of 5.6 nm with standard deviation around 1.3 nm (top left inset of Fig. 2). The XANES and TEM analyses show that BEN-BEG UNCD films exhibit identical carbon bonding characteristics and grain size distribution (3–5 nm) as for UNCD films grown with the Ar-rich/ CH_4 chemistries without bias.

Bias current density (J_e) versus time curves acquired under constant bias, during UNCD film nucleation and growth, provided information to understand nucleation and growth kinetics. One such curve, shown in Fig. 3(a), shows an abrupt increase of J_e after an incubation period of about 5 min and saturation at ~ 4.5 mA/cm² at 15 min after the onset of the BEN process. Prior literature⁴ suggests that elec-

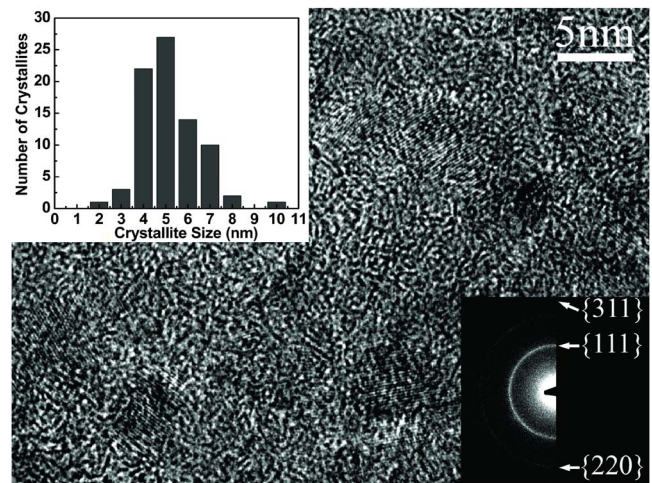


FIG. 2. (Color online) The HRTEM image of BEN-BEG UNCD film. The bottom right inset shows SAED pattern that can be indexed as polycrystalline diamond. The top left inset shows the corresponding size distributions of UNCD grains.

tron emission arises mainly from the grain boundaries of the film, due to carriers originating from the formation of the sp^2 -bonded carbon. Therefore, the abrupt increase and subsequent saturation of J_e can be attributed to the rapid growth of diamond nuclei and subsequent full coverage of the substrate surface by the diamond grains, respectively. The correlation between bias current evolution and film surface roughness may help to identify the BEN-BEG conditions that produce the smoothest surface, to minimize friction and wear in devices involving moving parts with contacting surfaces.¹⁶ The surface roughness of a 1 μ m thick BEN-BEG UNCD film was ~ 10 nm rms over a ~ 10 μ m² area after J_e reached steady state [Fig. 3(a)], then reduced to ~ 6 nm rms after 60 min, as revealed by atomic force microscopy (AFM) [inset of Fig. 3(d)]. The corresponding scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of UNCD surfaces at different growth times are shown in Figs. 3(b)–3(d).

Further investigation of the UNCD/Si interface was performed using cross-sectional HRTEM. The formation of zigzag regions on the Si surface with peak-to-valley roughness (R_{pv}) ~ 15 nm can be attributed to ion bombardment during the 10 min of hydrogen plasma etching [Figs. 4(a) and 4(b)]. The same zigzag morphology was observed previously on a silicon surface¹⁷ during a diamond BEN process. However,

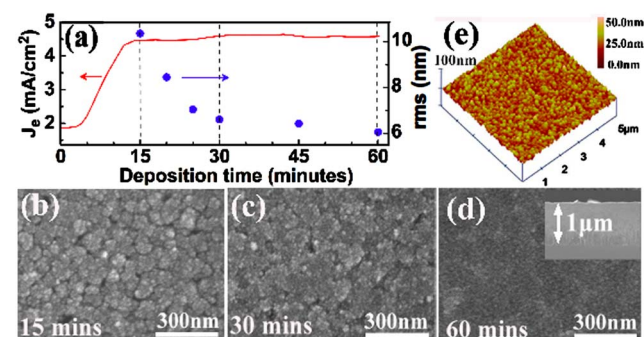


FIG. 3. (Color online) (a) Current density and surface roughness vs time curves corresponding to the BEN-BEG UNCD films. SEM images of UNCD films grown for (b) 15, (c) 30, and (d) 60 min. (e) Three-dimensional AFM image for UNCD film grown for 60 min resulting in ~ 1 μ m thick film [inset of (d)].

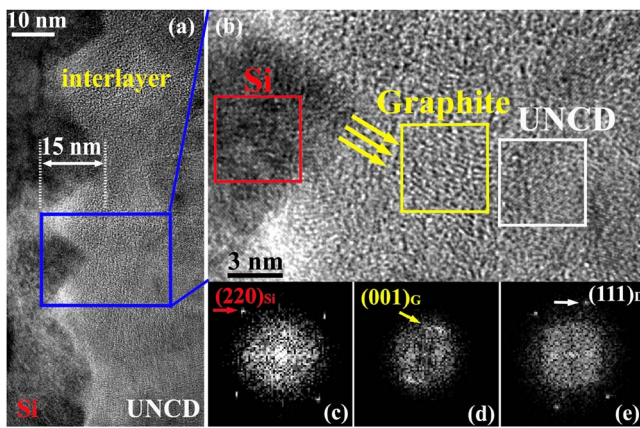


FIG. 4. (Color online) (a) Low magnification and (b) enlarged HRTEM cross-sectional image of the UNCD/Si (100) interface. The corresponding diffractograms are from the (c) Si substrate, (d) graphite interlayer, and (e) UNCD grain.

no detailed explanation was given regarding its origin. We believe that ion bombardment results in preferential etching of the Si surface along the (100) crystallographic direction, which etches faster than the (111) direction, resulting in the triangular Si interface profile defined by the (111) planes.¹⁸ Such interfacial morphology of Si may contribute to the enhanced film-substrate adhesion. Using the lattice fringes from the Si substrate as internal calibration [Fig. 4(c)], the diffraction pattern from the interlayer between the Si substrate and the UNCD layer could be indexed as the graphite (001) plane and diamond oriented along the $[01\bar{1}]$ zone axis, respectively [Figs. 4(d) and 4(e)]. Diffractograms from the graphite and the diamond regions indicate that the (001) crystallographic plane of the graphite area is approximately parallel with the (111) crystallographic plane of the diamond grain, suggesting that cubic UNCD diamond nuclei formed on a hexagonal graphite interlayer. These results are consistent with a model¹⁹ that suggested that diamond nucleation can occur on graphite planes by hydrogenation of the $\{1\bar{1}00\}$ prism planes. Also, no formation of a SiC phase was detected at the diamond/Si interface in prior work.¹⁰ However, the absence of a SiC phase in TEM studies is not conclusive, since nanoscale SiC regions may statistically be missed when preparing cross-sectional TEM samples. Therefore, this issue should be considered as unresolved and open for further study.

Optical emission spectroscopy (OES) analysis was performed to reveal the species present in the plasma during film growth, to determine nucleation and growth mechanisms. The CH_4/H_2 plasma emission spectrum (not shown) obtained under applied bias, showed two sharp peaks corresponding to H_α and H_β emissions, a CH peak from the breakup of CH_x , and a C_2 peak from the breaking of C_2H_x species. The OES analysis complemented the XANES, AFM, and TEM studies to help map the steps involved in the BEN-BEG UNCD nucleation-growth mechanism. The proposed mechanism includes several concurrent processes: (1) silicon etching and formation of silicon facets by ion bombardment of accelerated H^+ during the initial hydrogen plasma exposure. (2) Subsurface implantation, temperature-induced diffusion, and reaction of carbon atoms with Si atoms to form a

graphite interlayer, resulting from the impact on Si of energetic carbon ions, produced by substrate bias-induced acceleration of ions from the plasma. (3) Nanodiamond growth and renucleation resulting from impact of energetic C ions from the plasma and ion-induced dissociation of C_2 and/or CH_x species landing on the surface, (4) Ion bombardment of incipient diamond grains producing sputtering of carbon atoms, which can be subplanted in the surface of the substrate and growing film contributing to UNCD grain renucleation, as well as enhanced film adhesion.

In summary, a low-pressure heat-assisted BEN-BEG process has been developed to grow UNCD films with nanoscale surface roughness, high growth rate, uniform nanosized crystalline diamond grains, and very low content of sp^2 -bonded carbon atoms. A mechanism is proposed to explain the relationship between the growth conditions, structures, and properties of the films.

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