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DIY or Die film interview with director Michael W Dean

by Dixon Christie

PunkTV.ca: It's Dixon Christie here with PunkTV.ca. We have on the phone today Michael W Dean, director of "DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent artist", a film for and by and about independent artists. How are you today Mr. Michael Dean?

I am happy and tired, which is how I am a lot because I get really excited every morning to get up and work on my different projects. I'll sleep five or six hours, get up to pee, and then just say, "I am just going to get up and turn on the computer." I don't sleep enough.

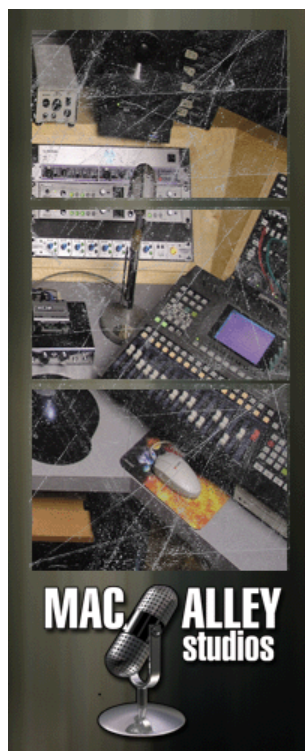
PunkTV.ca: That is part of the DIY experience isn't it? Finding the work that you love to do so that it doesn't really feel like work.

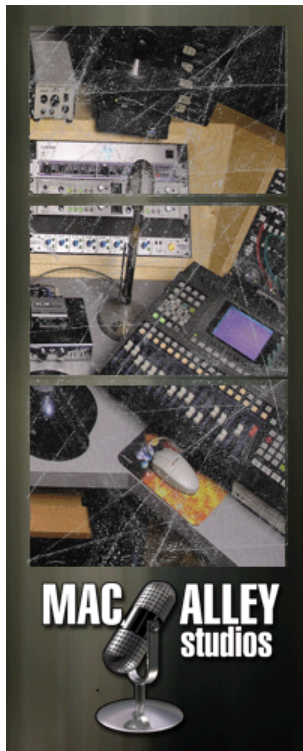
Yeah, I mean, I kind of get that from my dad. He's not an artist though; he is a small business man who has run a lot of different businesses. He is now 86 years old, but from a really young age he was always into working 80 hours a week on his own companies. Although he never got rich at it, he made a good living: he made what he would have made working 40 hours a week for someone else but he liked working for himself. I think he is probably one of my biggest influences.

PunkTV.ca: Thomas Edison he had a thing where he only slept three hours a night as well.

I always recommend that DIY artists read the book "The Art of War" [by Sun Tzu] and "The Prince" by Machiavelli... not so much to learn how to strategize but to realize that the businessmen that you are dealing with read those books and will use all the tricks to try to screw you.

PunkTV.ca: Well that is the dark way of looking





at it, but you can use those tricks to your advantage too without screwing people over. Thomas Edison was an amazing inventor, but he was even more so a businessman and not necessarily, I think, that ethical of one. He allegedly borrowed a lot of his ideas from Tesla, one of his employees, and Tesla died penniless. Edison was also one of the first guys to kind of do digital rights management, or I guess they would call it analog rights management. There were two companies that made phonographs and he made his so that the other company's records wouldn't play on his. The other company tried to make them so both companies' would play on their model and he tried to sue the other company to prevent them from doing that.

PunkTV.ca: He wasn't the first one to actually manufacture a light bulb with a heat-able filament in the middle of it: he was the second or third to market that. He wasn't the first one to invent the motion picture player or camera either. You don't always have to be the first to market, it can just come down to who is the smartest at marketing.

Yeah it's like how Ford didn't invent the car, but he put one in every garage.

PunkTV.ca: I am a huge fan of what he did for industrialization... if someone else would have came along without his whole philosophy of thinking we would probably still be putting cars together one at a time.

It's not black and white with business moguls like that. Ford was a really amazing guy and furthered society in a lot of ways, but he was also a really creepy racist.

PunkTV.ca: He was also an anti-socialist: he was totally against any kind of left-wing thinking and he would beat down any type of union movements. There were a lot of anti-human rights issues going on with what Ford was doing.

And unions are a whole other kind of thing... I can see the pros and cons of them because they extensively exist to protect the little guy, but on the other hand they often end up being corrupt. So who knows?

PunkTV.ca: It's the process and the concept; money corrupts without exception.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely.



PunkTV.ca: Yeah that's exactly it.

Money is the root of all evil... but how do I get some?

PunkTV.ca: And once you get paid you need money to pay your people.

Well, my whole thing with DIY is that it's OK to make a living if you can still sleep at night. I think if you live a life of integrity you tend to make decisions that don't step on other people. Especially now, with the computer connectivity of the world, I feel like now there is enough fame, attention, and money out there for everybody who is really, really good and really, really driven to get a little piece of the pie or at least enough to live on... if they live a life of integrity and if they just work incessantly for 90-110 hours a week.

Still, people get into these arguments with me constantly about how they're "punker than thou." Right now I am facing a surge of emails and blog postings from people who think I am evil because I put out this punk rock movie on the Microsoft Zune Marketplace and gave it away for free. First of all, who the hell are they to tell me what to do with my art? Second of all, what have they done lately? Third of all, I don't see using tools like that as problematic to a DIY integrity lifestyle. I've had people yell at me on tour in Europe when I was in squats showing films or playing music because I pull out my laptop to hook it up and I am running Microsoft Windows. Even if you're running a Mac, they're like "You have to use Linux, because Linux is the only pure software." I can see the advantages of Linux but, first of all, I don't want to spend all my time configuring stuff, I just want to spend time making art; with Linux you spend a lot of time configuring, which can kind of become an art unto itself. But, secondly, you are running a computer made by a major corporation [regardless]. I have met punk rockers who have written their own software but I have never met punk rockers who have built a microchip that can run a modern computer: you need a corporation to do that. So I can see the downside of dealing with corporations but I will take the tools they have and run with them.

PunkTV.ca: Well you and I are in exactly the same boat. I think we are just passing 400,000 views on You Tube and I get the brunt of every twelve-year-old kid that has no shortage of opinion on what he thinks punk rock is according to his own paradigm, which at twelve is probably a one-year paradigm.

I end up sounding like a stodgy old fart when I say "I was putting out punk rock records and stuffing the covers in my living room ten years before you were born" but those are the facts. Who are they to tell me what punk is?

PunkTV.ca: Punk rock is at the heart of the reason why you do something: it is basically a simple question - if you wouldn't get paid for this would you still do it? I will tell you this, we have been doing PunkTV for two years and one month and although my staff are now getting paid, I have yet to be getting paid a dime and PunkTV itself has yet to make more than a thousand dollars. So without a question we follow the DIY ethic. Those kids that have something to complain about, well they are always going to have something to complain about. You know what I mean?

Yeah, I am giving [DIY or Die] away for free on YouTube but I am also giving it away for free in a near-DVD-quality download. The DVD sold about 5,000 copies; I have made about twenty-five grand on the movie and I have put about twenty grand back into promoting it and traveling with it, so I have made a net of five grand which is an incredible financial success for a first film but I don't measure success that way entirely. I measure success on people getting the message of this film. I didn't make this film to make money, and I never dreamed I would tour Europe and America with it... I never dreamed I would be getting massive downloads on it like I am this week. I just want to share it and I don't think also giving it away takes food off my table. If it does and if I sell less DVDs it's ok, I have a day job writing for a couple different websites and I write books. This week I just got an email from my publisher for "\$30 Film School" saying it's going to go into the 9th pressing, and I have four days to do the update for it, so I have been working eighteen hours a day to do the updates for it. I don't get paid for that, I do that to keep the book in print and to keep paying my bills and keep the book out there. I just want to make something great and have a lot of people see it.

Basically I am a really smart guy and I could have been a lawyer. I am really argumentative, I can write legal-type letters that have a thesis, body, and conclusion, that work in a legal way, and my mind works that way. I could be making \$400,000 a year

as a lawyer. My wife is a paralegal and she is just blown away by it. But I chose not to go that way. I make about as much as you would make managing a record store, and I work about twice the hours you would doing that, but when I'm dead I don't want people to just say "that guy made a bunch of money." That's not what I want to be remembered for... if I make a lot of money, fine. If I don't, also fine. Basically, I think you live forever by having your art out there – that is the way to be immortal. I don't believe in reincarnation, I don't know if I believe in heaven or an afterlife, and cloning isn't cheap and freely available yet, so art is how I am going to be immortal. I have this saying that "whoever dies with his art on the most hard drives wins." That is my goal.

PunkTV.ca: PunkTV.ca: I agree, we don't make any money, but we will eventually, and all that means is we can hire more hosts and cover more bands. It's not like I want to personally horde money.

To me money is just a tool to buy art supplies, computers, microphones, etc., and it pays for travel to spread that art. Everything I do goes to art. I'm married now, she's not an artist, which is interesting because I've ever only dated artists and I liked her in every other way, so I've made her into an artist. She's pretty good at writing, and I've become her editor. I do a podcast with her, it's called "Clone The Homeless", and our idea of fun Saturday night isn't going out partying, it's sitting in front of our matching laptops in our office, which is also a soundproof recording studio, and making brilliant art and taking that out to a lot of people....although I wouldn't say "as many people as possible" because when I was younger and playing in bands my goal was to always have my face on the cover of every magazine and that is more of a young man's game. Now it's less about my face and less about my name and more about the art; the name and the face get to go along with the art but I don't go out dancing or drinking on a Saturday night. I'm in front of my computer at midnight every Saturday night and I don't have a boring life. I do have a quiet life; I don't leave the block, in a given week, more than once or twice and I work at home, but that is something I've always wanted to do. If I leave the block it's to fly to somewhere in America or Europe to lecture, teach, or show a film.

PunkTV.ca: Take us back a little bit and tell us about the nucleus of the "DIY or Die" movie, and the plan you formulated to tell your story.

Well I did it kind of backwards: most people either learn filmmaking and then they say "Well, now that I know enough to make a film, what am I going to make a film about?" I didn't do that, I had a complete idea for this project with interviews with these people and I didn't know if it should be a book or a play or radio show. I finally decided it would be best as a movie and then I learned filmmaking just to make this film.

The people who ran the cameras on most of it were film students that had more experience than I had, but they don't let you make a full film in film school, they make you learn theory and make little short films: I walked around the corner from my house to the art college and I found people that looked interesting filming stuff on the street and I said "Hey, I'm Michael Dean, I have an idea for a project. You're not going to get paid, but you'll get a credit. Work for four days with me and I'll feed you on the set".

PunkTV.ca: And the movie became a tattoo of sorts for you?

My original goal with the movie was to get it shown in the San Francisco Independent Film Festival, and that was pretty much my entire business plan with it. We finished the film and submitted it to them and they turned it down. Then I tried to get distribution with it and I couldn't, so I booked a tour of America of about 40 cities in 70 days, flew out to the east coast and the Midwest and rented cars. Showed it a lot in bars, libraries, church basements, homes, anywhere I could, to of an average of forty people a night. I was even selling the movie on VHS then; I couldn't afford to get DVDs made, but I sold around a thousand copies on VHS. This company MVD (Music Video Distributors) from Pennsylvania, somebody there read about it in the paper and they went to my website and they contacted me and said they would like to put it out on DVD, and it sold 5000 copies and now it's selling for eight dollars. How can you beat that? How can you be punker than that? I don't want to get into a thing with yelling at those "punker than thou" people, they're their worst enemy and I don't really deal with them. If people want to sit

in their parents' rec-room eating the food their parents bought them and tell me how to run my own adult life, that is just ridiculous.

PunkTV.ca: Tell us about how you choose your subjects, how did you hook up with the people in the film?

Well there are 30 people in the film, some of them are my dear friends I've known for years, some are people I've emailed, some are people I didn't know but had to go find. I've known Ian MacKaye for twenty years and used to see him around. I've hung out with Richard Kern.....I'm not saying these people are my best friends, none of them came to my wedding and I didn't help them move, which is kind of my definition of being a best friend, but I knew some of them.

Basically there were three things I was looking for with each person, and they had to have two of the things to be in the movie: they had to be someone that did something unique and influential; they had to be someone that has been doing independent art for a long time; and they had to be someone I'm personally a fan of. I'll add one more and just be shallow: I actually picked some of them that looked good, not necessarily pretty, but just interesting looking people. People the camera liked.

PunkTV.ca: How did you create natural and essential elements of storytelling in your process?

I didn't consciously know anything about storytelling when I started filming it, but I was always the kid when I smoked pot when I was twelve that all of the older kids would get high so I could tell them stories; I was always someone people listened to because I could put a good paragraph together on the spot. But I had never heard of three-act format, back then, and since then I've heard of it and come to like it, but at the same time I have lots of problems with it. We had a cut of "DIY or Die" that was two hours, and then one that was 70 minutes, and they both just dragged on. We felt that 55 minutes was where the film just wanted to be, but I think that really the format of it is less of filmmaking and more of an essay - basically this movie is a mission statement while the people in it kind of float by. There are six chapters and they kind of start with the problem being stated and then people give their take on the problem. I guess it is kind of three-act format, but I feel that it follows

more of the form of a well-written high-school essay.

PunkTV.ca: Where you outline your intentions in the first act and then prove them?

Yeah, and then you support them and then you conclude them. There is a saying in the US Army... "We're going to tell you what you're going to do, then you're going to do it, then were going to tell you what you did".

PunkTV.ca: What were the major challenges you found in the processes?

I don't know what my beliefs of god are, but it seems like someone wanted this film to happen and kept providing for me. The whole time I was making it I was completely broke and really ironic things were happening. Like someone would fly me out to do something but I wouldn't have ten bucks to catch a cab, and I would meet someone at the airport who would be going there and they would give me a ride. People donated time, money, equipment, just everything. One of the things I learned is that you should always have a backup to everything: have two sets of batteries, two interns to do everything, etc., because someone will always flake out on you and something will always break.

The hardest person to get in touch with was Lydia Lunch, and since then I've done some photo work with her. She's a really good person, but I didn't know her and it's very hard to get a hold of her. Some of the big names in this movie are listed in the phonebook, but she was nearly impossible get a hold of. I had to go through her agent in Europe, and I went back and forth for eight months and finally I got an e-mail saying she agreed to do it, and then the next day I got an email from her with a phone number so I called her up and I learned that she lived two blocks from me.

PunkTV.ca: So different levels of accessibility...

Yeah, and I can understand that, she does some really freaky art and that probably attracts really weird people. If I did dark, freaky art like she does, I know I'd want a couple layers of separation between me and the stalkers.

PunkTV.ca: We find it the same way... a lot of people you think would be hard to get a hold are actually really easy to get a hold of.

Yeah, and back to the definition of "What is Punk?",

Mike Watt is in the movie and I think he is the most punkest DIY-er, but he's on a major label. My attitude with major labels and Microsoft and that is that I know that there are people like Fugazi who won't have anything to do with them, but it's not a fight that I personally feel like fighting on an everyday basis. I feel like the companies work for me, I don't work for them.

I don't like major record labels, I was on Warner Brothers and my personal experience was bad, but what I like to do is completely make the art in my home and then take it to the middleman. Not someone like a major label who will want to control everything from the start, but someone like MVD who just gets stuff into people's hands, and they do it really, really, really well. Also, I like their business practices. If I'm approached by some company with a contract or agreement that just makes me cringe I just don't deal with them.

PunkTV.ca: Kids can see the videos in a number of places, YouTube, or they can go buy a copy of the DVD at amazon.com.

And I want to plug my blog, it's <http://www.StinkFight.com>

PunkTV.ca: We've got a couple questions we ask everyone, how many hours did you shoot, and what camera did you use?

I shot about 45 hours of footage, and shot about 40 people, but I had to cut about ten out. Sometimes because of the tape failing, or something like they weren't very entertaining on camera, and a couple of them because they wanted to make my life hell before the film even came out. Like "I demand this and this, and I want to change the release form I already signed." It wasn't a thing of me saying "screw off", but I just wanted it to be a seamless thing. Like someone said that it's OK if I put it in film festivals but if it goes on TV or anything they wanted me to go back and re-negotiate and I was like "no way." I want to own things and this is an interesting issue to some people. I use a copyright notice on most things I make, even stuff I give away, and I get a lot of crap for that, but my reason is because I want to pick and choose when I enforce those rights. Creative Commons makes the world a better place but it doesn't work for everything that I do. When Microsoft came to me and said "We want to put this film up and feature it", I didn't have to think about it. I

was able to just say, "I'll do it." I didn't want to have to pull the release forms, call thirty people up, and ask them "Can I do this?"

I like where my life is at, and that's largely because I've acted on the decisions that I want to make, and not worried what people think about it.

Order your copy now at: Music Video Distributors, Inc. 1-800-888-0486 or at Amazon too!

The film features interviews with: (alphabetical order)

Beth Lisick (performer/poet)
Courtney J. Ulrich (sculptor)
ck0 (open-source computer programmer)
Craig Newmark (founder Craig's List)
Cynthia Connolly (Photographer/ Dischord Records)
Dana Schechter (graphic artist/musician Bee and Flower)
Dave Brockie (singer in Gwar/filmmaker/novelist)
David Wellbeloved (DJ, Musician, and Critic)
Washington, DC
Eric McFadden (songwriter/singer/entertainer)
Ian MacKaye (label owner/musician/Fugazi)
J Mascis (musician Dinosaur jr.)
Jim Rose (director/Jim Rose Sideshow)
J.G. Thirlwell (musician Foetus)
John John Jesse (Demonica Erotica Artist)
Keith Knight (cartoonist Fear of a Black Marker)
Kevin Wengler (Painter/sculptor/performance artist)
Killian MacGeraghty (musician Gun and Doll Show)
Liza Matlack (dancer/choreographer) (R.I.P.)
Little Mike Martzke (Promoter/Roadie) San Francisco
Lydia Lunch (photographer, actor, writer, musician) Los Angeles
Lynn Breedlove (writer/musician Tribe 8) San Francisco
Madigan Shive (cellist, Bonfire Madigan)
Maggie Estep (writer/musician)
Maggie McEleney (painter/graphic artist)
Mark Enger (painter/installation artist)
Matt Enger (painter/installation artist)
Mike Boner (musician)
Mike Watt (musician Black Gang/Firehose/Minutemen)
Phil Sudo (writer/musician) New York City (R.I.P.)
Richard Kern (filmmaker/photographer) New York City
Ron Asheton (musician The Stooges)

Simon Clifton (painter/actor/musician)

Stephen Elliott (writer/activist)

Steve Albini (musician/engineer)

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