



IT'S ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT CREATIVE CONTROL.

You choose your tools: a typewriter and photocopier, keyboard and Blogger account, or your parents' video camera.

Independent film production and exhibition date back to the invention of the movie camera. As early as 1895, producers of the new gadgets set off on DIY tours wanting to share their passion for the new "moving picture" medium by tabling at events and showing their work in temporary storefront spaces. Since then, film has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry with trappings well beyond the average punk kid's means.

But like zinesters — who turned to saddle staplers and photocopiers when they felt their interests and stories underrepresented by major publishers — filmmakers are returning to the roots of film, reasserting their control over a medium by fueling their projects and productions on excitement rather than on investors and the hopes of major box-office returns.

How did you first get into film and video?

BIEL: In 1996, I transitioned from making field audio recordings of live bands to getting a VHS-C (and later a 8mm) camcorder and started doing video of bands. I wasn't some crazy documenter or librarian or archivist. I just thought I would want to remember these experiences later. Then I started offering the recordings for mail order in 1997.

DEAN: I always wanted to reach the world from my bedroom [and] I've always wanted to make movies, but the tools were too expensive. I first got my hand on a digital video camera in 1998, and quickly "got" it. It involved skills I'd already mastered: photography, writing, general computer skills, editing in a timeline (I'd done this with music), and motivating other people.

PERNA: I took a filmmaking class in high school. We watched

short films, wrote reviews on them, wrote scripts of our own, drew storyboards, and then filmed and edited the footage. I did well on the script, boards, and editing; I was a horrible director.

SPOONER: I started when I was in fine arts. I was a sculptor, and I moved from my warehouse space to an apartment, so I really didn't have a working area. I had to start thinking smaller in terms of physical room for art. At a certain point I came up with the idea of making this documentary about being a black punk rocker. I did the research and found out what physical equipment I needed and set upon getting it.

What were your experiences with your first project?

BIEL: The first developed, thought-out project was a collaborative narrative movie called *Do You Copy?* It was about three characters all employed at a photocopy shop who have intersecting fantasy lives and learn about the

real world through that escape. Considering it was written by 21 people and made in two weeks it is exceptionally coherent and I am quite proud of it.

DEAN: When I was in eighth grade, me and a buddy made a Super-8 short about a kid disappearing and then reappearing. It was pretty stupid, but we were impressed. I wanted to use that film on the DVD extras of *DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist*, and it didn't happen.

PERNA: In high school, it was a little short film called *Passions: The High School Years*, I'm sure you've heard of it. My first actual adult project was *Open Mic Tour*, a nine-minute photo documentary about performing comedic prose/spoken word at poetry open mics in New York City [in] late September 2006, wherein the narration is also in prose.

SPOONER: I was like, "I want to make a documentary about black punks and about the experience of being a black person in a primarily white community." So I was very specific about the questions I was asking and the direction I was going in terms of the topic. It was really just a matter of finding people to talk to. I started with people that I knew from the hardcore scene, so there was a word of mouth. But I also did a lot of searching on the Internet, going to punk rock message boards and asking kids if they knew any bands that had black members or if they knew any kids in the scene. I wasn't looking for anyone in specific. It's like, "if you are black and at one time identified as punk rock or hardcore, then I want to talk to you."

What are your thoughts on MySpace, YouTube, or other video streaming sites for DIY filmmakers?

above: Clips from *Afro-punk* and the director James Spooner

THE DIRECTORS:

Joe Biel borrowed some equipment from friends and made the 70-minute *A Hundred Dollars* and a PSN, a documentary on zines and their editors. He has since released five short "talkies" and is in the post-production phase on numerous others.

Michael W. Dean started out with three interviewees, himself included, for a short about making art on your own terms. The project snowballed into over 30 interviewees all "celebrating the underdog," in *DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist*. He recently completed *Hubert Selby Jr.: It'll Be Better Tomorrow* with Kenneth Shtifin.

Kaetlin Perna tours the coffeehouses and art spaces of New York with spoken word performances. *Orion* documented in her zine, *The Year of the Kaet*, her most recent tour was captured in a photo documentary, currently in post-production.

James Spooner needed to find a new medium after moving into a small apartment that would not accommodate his sculptures. He found video, and shared experiences on screen with dozens of peers in his documentary, *Afro-Punk*.

BIEL: MySpace is not anything that I'm interested in for socializing purposes. I do appreciate that you can stream videos there for free, but I don't know how to set it up, and my feelings about the relationship of MySpace as a marketing tool for Rupert Murdoch and his media empire is very distressing, at best.


DEAN: Lots of potential, but lots of garbage. I have accounts on both, and I'm kinda disappointed in both. YouTube should be the wave of the future, the direct link between the content creator and the consumer, and it more or less is. But the content that gets tons of views on YouTube isn't anything groundbreaking. The videos that get tons of views are people putting a tin can in a microwave or wrecking their testicles on a stop sign pole while falling off a skateboard.

PERNA: I watched Saddam Hussein's execution on YouTube the other day. There's something wrong with that, as curious as I was.

SPOONER: I think they're cool. For me, I use them for marketing and getting the word out. Technology, with anything, has its good points and its bad points. Usually the good points are that anyone can do it, it's affordable and accessible. But at that same time, those are the bad points; it makes the ocean larger, so it's harder to find that perfect fish or that perfect wave.

"IT USED TO BE THAT KIDS WOULD GET A GUITAR AND SAY, 'YEAH, I WANNA BE IN A BAND.' NOW, I THINK THAT A LOT OF KIDS ARE GETTING THEIR PARENTS' VIDEO CAMERA AND SAYING, 'I WANNA BE A FILMMAKER.' AND THAT'S COOL; WE NEED MORE STORIES."

James Spooner



ABOVE: Clips from *DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist* and director Michael W. Dean with George Earth.

Can you talk about your equipment, from camera to editing?

BIEL: I use a three-chip miniDV made by Panasonic. I have a lavalier mic, a handheld mic, some tripods and a unipod, and do editing on a Mac Powerbook. It's a pretty meager setup but very portable.

DEAN: It's funny — a lot of people write me and ask, "What camera would you recommend?" and I say, "I have no idea. I hire other cameramen." miniDV three-chip cameras; they're all pretty good as far as I can tell. On *DIY or Die*, Miles Montalbano did the editing in his garage on a Mac G4 and Final Cut Pro.

PERNA: I'm very low-rent due to financial constraints; I use a Logitech Messenger webcam for my camera and Windows Movie Maker for editing.

SPOONER: For *Afro-Punk* I used the Sony DVX-2000 and I started with Final Cut 1. By the time I was finished, Final Cut 4 had come out. For *White Lies*, we used the Panasonic 24p camera and still use Final Cut. We're on version 4.5 now.

Are there any documentaries or films that inspired your style?

BIEL: When I was making *A Hundred Dollars and a T-Shirt* I watched half a dozen films about the beat poet movement to understand how someone would approach similar subject matter. Most of them are

really bad and hard to stay awake to.

The pace is really slow and the clips are really long. I tried to stick to a more commercial approach for this reason.

SPOONER: There were a few, as far as story structure is concerned. I lifted the idea of having a bunch of different people talking about the same issue in short clips from the movie *Wattstar*. It's a documentary about a rock and soul concert in the late '60s, and in between the concert footage they had people from Watts just talking about being black, or talking about the experience of living in Watts. And it didn't really matter who they were, it didn't tell you their names or anything, it was just like, "these are people and this is their story."

What kind of response and feedback have you received, and was it what you were expecting?

BIEL: Well, the response to *A Hundred Dollars and a T-Shirt* is far greater than I ever expected in my lifetime, and the response to the new DVD and documentary collection is much less than I expected. I naturally assumed it

one would care when I made my first DVD and then when they did I expected a somewhat similar response the second time around, or at least that I could ride the momentum of the first time. On tour, response totally surpassed my expectations once I got my act and confidence together.

DEAN: I get email from strangers every day saying my films or books have changed their lives for the better. I also get two or three emails a month from strangers who tell me I'm an asshole and a fraud. If you live your life in a way that doesn't hurt others, you're fine. But if you live your life in a way that doesn't hurt others and also draws attention to yourself and to your work, you're going to have some weenies accosting you (at least on the Internet), regularly, for the rest of your life.

PERNA: I haven't heard anything bad yet, a majority of the response is positive. I had an editor tell me my writing is conversational, informal, and structured; he liked that. So yes, it's what I've expected.

SPOONER: It's mostly been really positive. When I first showed [*Afro-Punk*], I wasn't expecting as much positive feedback as I got. I really just thought it would show a couple of times and then I'd keep it moving. I didn't expect that it would turn into what it has. Negative feedback has been pretty minimal. I enjoy the criticism if it's about the content.

Can you talk about your current projects?

BIEL: I'm about to finish up editing a video about the relationship of people and where they live with a case study of Bloomington, Indiana. I shot it last January [2006]. I'm shooting a video about printing techniques for zinesters. After that, I'm going to start editing another feature documentary about Plan It X Fest 2006 that I shot in July. That's the one everyone wants to see.

DEAN: Well, Kenneth Shiffrin and I finished *Hubert Selby Jr.: It'll Be Better Tomorrow*. It's a documentary about the life and art of Hubert Selby Jr. who rose above tuberculosis, drug addiction, and financial ruin to pen seven of the most remarkable and distinctly American books.

PERNA: I'm continuing with the *Depressive Diaries* for awhile or until I get tired. I have a column called "Kaet's Place." I'm writing a book/very long essay that I might submit to magazines, as well as beginning a year-long Polaroid photo project. I'm also polishing up scripts and plays and distributing my zine, *Year of the Koet*.

SPOONER: *White Lies*, it's a film about a young black kid who's struggling to get right with his identity. He grew up in Bed-Stuy, but lives in Williamsburg and chooses to spend most of his time around white kids. It's basically him coming to terms with who he is and finding love for himself. I'm hoping that in the next 30 days, we'll be ready to start submitting it to festivals.

"I WATCHED SADDAM HUSSEIN'S EXECUTION ON YOUTUBE THE OTHER DAY. THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH THAT, AS CURIOUS AS I WAS."

Kaetlin Perna

BELOW: Clips from *Depressive Diaries* and the director Kaetlin Perna

Any success or failure stories from screenings?

BIEL: It's frustrating that video doesn't always mesh well into a touring live event environment. Many people come to socialize and not to watch movies, and I understand that it's hard to transition to a quiet, listening mood from a loud, talkative one. I've found that talking a lot before and between videos is very helpful for both selling DVDs and making people listen.

DEAN: I've avoided film fests, for the most part. I've only had a film in one festival, and it was a wonderful one, the Deauville festival in France. It was nice. I saw some great films there, and met some cool people. The festival flew me to France and put me up in a five-star hotel, with maid service. Then I came home and wondered why my socks were still on the floor when I'd come back from coffee.

PERNA: None yet, I'm still a novice at the whole thing. I just need to finish editing the dub and the film before I can distribute it to festivals. Soon enough, though.

SPOONER: You know, every time I hear that *Afro-Punk* changed someone's life, it strikes a chord with me, in the way that I might say "Black Flag changed my life," or "Minor Threat changed my life." I know what that means. For someone to think of me the way I thought of Ian MacKaye is beyond my comprehension, but it's an amazing feeling. And whenever I'm feeling a little bummed or like I'm not getting enough accomplished, someone will send me a friend request on MySpace. Just yesterday, someone sent me a friend request and it was this black kid and his black girlfriend, they both had piercings, and they were holding the *Afro-Punk* DVD box. And they were just hella amped! (laughter) When I set out to make the movie, I didn't know that those kids in specific, or those kids in general, existed. I really felt like it was me and my 10 friends. To know that it has reached thousands is amazing.

Any issues or topics you'd like to see more independent films focus on?

BIEL: I would like to see more documentaries about things that I'm completely ignorant or oblivious about. I would also like to see people stop making digital leftist propaganda films. That is the dumbest new trend of the millenium. Imitating the right doesn't do anything but make you look stupid. Pretending they aren't propaganda is even worse. While balance is nearly impossible to find, I think it's better to at least attempt it.

DEAN: It's hard to make a great drama on no money. It's much easier to make a documentary because with a documentary, you don't need actors. I'd like to see more indie dramas with great writing, acting, directing, shooting, and editing. A lot of indie stuff I see gets an A-plus in two or three out of those five, but not in all five.

PERNA: I'd like independent films to focus more on making statements, whether it be satirical or social. Art is entirely about making a statement and trying to create change within society to where the artist sees fit.

SPOONER: I don't necessarily know if it's about the topic anymore — whatever the issue is, somebody's discussing it. Now, it's just about telling the story better or making it accessible to those who want to see it. It's exciting in terms of what the possibilities are, and all the outlets that are available. Video is becoming the next band; where it used to be kids would get a guitar and say, "yeah, I wanna be in a band," now, I think that a lot of kids are getting their parents' video camera and saying, "I wanna be a filmmaker." And that's cool; we need more stories. ☺

