

Tinseltown South

Birmingham, Ala., Lands a starring role in film production — By Kevin Markey

There was a time when Birmingham, Ala., was known as the Pittsburgh of the South. The city's massive steel and iron works drove the regional economy, generating wealth and forging the city's muscular image. More recently, the city of 250,000 has earned a national reputation as a center of health care and medical research. HealthSouth Corp, the nation's largest provider of ambulatory surgery and rehabilitation services, is based in Birmingham, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, which includes University Hospital, takes honors as the city's biggest employer.

There is another business in town that, while not nearly as entrenched as steel or medicine, has begun to register on the national cultural radar. Steadily over the past decade or so, Birmingham, has developed into a hotbed for film and video production. The city is home to a couple of full-scale studios, perhaps another dozen smaller production houses, and score of independent directors, producers and editors. They create commercials for several industries, including automobiles and toys.

Recently, this tight-knit community has begun producing feature films. At last count, at least a half dozen crews were in various stages of development of independent projects—an extraordinary number considering the city's relatively modest size. Forget the outmoded Pittsburgh comparison. At the current rate, it might not be long before people start calling Birmingham the Los Angeles of the South.

Until recently the story of film production in Birmingham was all about cars. A generation ago, two advertising agencies, Vazda Studios and Leo Ticheli Productions, began dealer accounts.

They starters small, shooting on video and doing some production work, and gradually expanded. In time Vazda was handling 70 percent of Chevrolet's regional work and Leo Ticheli was taking care of a comparable percentage for Pontiac.

“For a town this size, we have fantastic postproduction facilities,” says Les Rayburn, ad director who worked at Vazda for five years before leaving in 1998 to establish his own company, High Noon Film & Interactive, “We have access to a state-of-the-art, multimillion-dollar Inferno digital editing software system. It's what Hollywood special effects are done on. Another key system is FLAME [real-time, online digital effects tool set] —we have three of those. What makes us attractive to clients is the cost of postproduction work. To get on an Inferno in New York City, you pay \$1200 an hour. Here you can do it for \$500.”

Birmingham's wealth of automotive work attracted directors, editors, producers, camera



THE SIDEWALK FESTIVAL SHOWCASES THE VAST WEALTH OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL TALENT.

CITY FOCUS

people and gaffers—the legion of technicians it takes to guide a commercial project from start to broadcast. With that critical mass, it was only a matter of time before people started branching out to do their own thing. “I think every commercial director has a screenplay in his desk drawer,” Rayburn says. His is called *Abilene Rising*, described by High Noon’s Business Manager, Jim Walker as a contemporary *Bonnie and Clyde* story about a pair of unlikely lovers who embark on a crime spree. The screenplay was written by Richard Ferguson, a hot young Hollywood talent who has also had scripts optioned by Sean Penn’s L.A. production company. Walker and Rayburn plan to shoot an 8-to-10-minute investor reel this spring, and then screen the short at festivals to raise money for a full-scale production.

Another Birmingham director, Alan Hunter, got his start on the other side of the camera. One of MTV’s original VJs in the early 1980’s, Hunter returned to his native Birmingham six years ago after a TV career and started Hunter Films. “My heart’s desire was always to be producer and director,” he says. “Birmingham made sense. It’s ripe territory. There’s lots of enthusiasm and lots of creative people and because of the automotive stuff, great facilities and equipment.”

In addition to producing spots for Blockbuster and Little Debbie, Hunter and his business partner and brother Hugh, are in the early stages of work on two independent feature films. *Gene in ‘68* is the story of a young couple set against the backdrop of Vietnam War and the 1968 presidential campaign. *Memphis Leg* is a quirky road movie about a German tourist who gets dumped by his southern girlfriend and hitch hikes across the Mississippi Delta.

“It’s a growing scene,” says Erik Jambor, director and cofounder of the Sidewalk Moving Picture Film Festival. “You have unique pockets of the filmmaking going on here; there’s energy.”

The Sidewalk Festival has been instrumental in putting Birmingham on the indie map. Jambor, a longtime resident and film

school grad, along with Wayne and Kelli Franklin, co-founders, launched Sidewalk in 1999 as a way to bring new films to audiences that might not otherwise get to see them. As a further inducement for mainstream moviegoers, they infused the weekend-long event with the top-down spirit of a street party: The festival features food, drink and live outdoor music, as well as movies screened at six venues.

The formula seems to be working: festival crowds have grown each year. Spiking attendance, in turn, has attracted more filmmakers and increasingly high-profile movies. Two films screened at Sidewalk in 2000, the animated short *Rejected* and the feature documentary *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, received Academy Award nominations this year.

Not so long ago Wayne Franklin left the festival board to concentrate on his production house, Wannabe films. He is working on *Remember the Rose Bowl*, a film about the 1935 University of Alabama football team, the first southern squad to win the Rose Bowl. Showtime has already picked up Franklin’s film. Don’t be surprised if it gets a screening at Sidewalk. ◇

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