

COMMUNITY PROFILES | MATT STANTON

Dreams do come true

Filmmaker keeps it real on the road to Sundance Fest

BY MICHAEL J. TITTINGER | Daily Press Staff Writer

A FORMER GIRLFRIEND'S COUCH Of the 16 directors who'd beaten out thousands of rivals to make the final cut at next month's Sundance Film Festival, Matt Stanton was probably the only one who celebrated by drinking a "forty" in an alley with an unwitting homeless man.

Such is the off-off-Hollywood odyssey of the longtime Santa Monica resident, who has spent the better part of the last three years doing whatever needed to be done in order to get his first feature film -- the independently produced "North Starr" -- filmed and produced.

The glamor and accolades associated with "overnight sensations" will have to wait. Stanton's office is a late-90s model Ford Explorer, the backseat of which contains most of what he owns. His bed is an ex-girlfriend's couch, which he must vacate by 6 a.m. each morning. His off-the-radar journey to Park City, Utah, is the stuff of a bad country music song befitting his movie's West Texas locale -- along the way, Stanton has lost his girlfriend, his Mid-City apartment, his dog and has even been locked up for sleeping in his car.

So, after writing, scouting, producing, casting, arranging

music, directing and starring in "North Starr" -- which was made for a paltry (by Hollywood standards) low six-figures -- it's somewhat understandable that the 38-year-old is a wee bit sensitive when Sundance profile pieces label him "a rookie."

"It's not like I'm just starting out here," Stanton said. "This has been one hell of a long journey."

Just when "North Starr" was born to the cosmos is hard to pinpoint. Was it a decade ago, when the Chagrin Falls, Ohio, native was finishing his studies as a theater major at Loyola Marymount University? Or maybe it was in Venice, when Stanton rescued a typewriter from a dumpster and began hammering out his thoughts for the project, all to the ridicule of his surfing housemates?

To moviegoers, it will likely be sometime in 2008, as a berth in the Dramatic Competition at Sundance is a virtual assurance that the film will be sold in some capacity. Factor in the prolonged writers' strike and production companies' resulting thirst for completed projects, and this year's festival could be a perfect storm for those looking to sell a promising independent film.

"I'm not even in it for the money. I want to tell stories. Anything I make off this project is just going to get rolled into the next one," Stanton said last week. "I've got a lot more stories I want to tell."

HOLLYWOOD CALLING

On Wednesday, Nov. 28, the Sundance Film Festival made public its roster of films, including those select few deemed eligible for the showcase's top prizes. The names were familiar to most: Anjelica Huston, Maria Bello, Winona Ryder, Paul Giamatti, Amy Adams, Billy Crudup, Ben Kingsley ... the list goes on.

Conspicuous by its presence was "North Starr," so described on the festival Web site: "After witnessing the brutal murder of his best friend, a young African American man flees the badlands of Houston and finds himself in Trublin, a backward, racially intolerant town where he meets an unlikely kindred spirit who takes him under his wing."

The cast is comprised of names no one has ever heard of, impossible to distinguish which are actors with a smattering of professional experience and which are everyday residents of towns like Baird and Oplin, Texas, where the majority of the film was shot in the summer of 2006.

By late morning, Stanton's phone was ringing off the hook, receiving calls from just about every top Hollywood agency looking to represent the Santa Monica, that is, after they found out who the hell he was.

"They even tracked down my mom back in Newbury (Ohio). How'd they do that?" Stanton wondered aloud. "I got a frantic call from her saying 'What do I do? I don't want to mess this up for you.'"

Sitting in JP's bar and grille on Wilshire Boulevard, working on a pitcher, Stanton was beginning to realize how his life was changing overnight ... after only a decade.

"I'm the same guy I was on Tuesday as I am on Thursday," he reflected. "But now everything around me is changing. Actually, it makes me a little sad ... that all of a sudden, I'm in demand and people are taking my calls. I'm the same guy and I'm just gonna keep it real."

"The (Hollywood) system is going to try and make money off me however they can, which may not be the best thing for 'North Starr,' but I have to use the system to get where I want to go and make the movies I want to make."

That system has a funny way of surfacing in the most unexpected places. A sniff of success often begets a stench of selfishness in those nearby. Indeed, the same week the Sundance announcement was made, Stanton found himself being prepped for the obligatory press onslaught that accompanies the festival by a member of his own crew who was worried the "rookie" might not be polished enough for such a high-profile junket.

"A member of my crew wanted to sit down with me and go over technical film terms and school me in cinematic jargon," Stanton said, shaking his head. "That's so pretentious when a director or filmmaker gets up there (on a stage) with his ascot and shades and starts deconstructing his whole philosophy behind every shot."

"Look, this is a simple story. It has complex themes and something to say, but it's organic and real, and that's probably what (the Sundance judges) responded to," the director explained. "I'm not going to change who I am or the way I talk about my project just because I've gotten



Photo courtesy Matt Stanton

FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST: Longtime Santa Monica resident Matt Stanton advises filmmakers to just get out in the field, "point the camera and shoot."

some validation for it. That's bullshit.

"The best advice I can give a young director is to just get out there in the field, point the camera and shoot. It's that simple."

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Matt Stanton, Filmmaker

'BUILDING A STAGE'

Whether Stanton plans to ruminate on his characters' every subtle motivation or not, the symbolism and metaphors are there for the taking in "North Starr." Watching a rough cut of the film at a friend's house recently, he stared intently at the screen as his protagonist, Demetrius, a small-time hustler from Houston looking to shed his past in rural Trublin, builds a mountain of haystacks.

"Is he nesting or building a stage for himself?" he asks rhetorically.

The same might be asked of Stanton, who after living out of his car for three years, may soon find himself being pulled from several directions, depending on how his film is received at Sundance and the series of subsequent film festivals he plans to show "North Starr," leading up to Cannes in May. Stanton insists once the festivals have run their course, he's going to bolt to the next film location -- far from Hollywood -- to undertake his next project.

Furthermore, his distrust of the town that could make him famous has Stanton surrounding himself with friends and family at a time he could be rubbing elbows with A-listers. His plans to make a multi-day road trip out of the ride to Sundance with a handful of friends, including Santa Monica Zach Johnson and Wayne Campbell -- both of whom act in the film -- seems like something out of the popular TV show "Entourage," in which a young movie star continually travels with his older brother and two friends in efforts to stay grounded.

"I know it's cliché to say I'm not in it for the money, but I really just want to make enough to sink into my next project and Fat Bessy Films (his fledgling production company)," Stanton said, while sitting his

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