

ROAD TRIP

Filmmaker and distributor Todd Sklar tells **Scott Macaulay** why he sidestepped the traditional distribution route for a DIY tour.

After filmmaker Todd Sklar completed his college comedy *Box Elder*, rather than apply to festivals he decided to immediately begin the process of DIY distribution, projecting his film from a laptop at college campuses and art houses throughout the Midwest. This fall Missouri resident Sklar and his company Range Life Entertainment expand upon this distribution model, taking *Box Elder* back on the road along with three other features in a souped-up traveling indie film festival. Below we talked with Sklar about his approach toward guerilla distribution.

When did DIY distribution come into the equation for you? Before you made your film or after you finished it? At the beginning. I wanted to learn a lot and make a great film, and I felt the best way to do that was to have as much control of the process as possible — to not let it get polluted. I knew the festival route pretty well, and I also knew that it wasn't really for me. I didn't like the idea of going out and trying to create hype, trying to generate a sale after which you don't have any control over your film. I wanted to make sure that I was able to be involved in the process of how my film was released into the world so I developed this distribution model. Also my investment group had questions about distribution, and I wanted to show them that I had a direct way to return some of their investment pretty quickly after the film was finished.

What inspired you to first start thinking

about this particular distribution model? It was a combination of two things. The first time I ever read about *Four Eyed Monsters* was also the first time I read the article "The Long Tail" by Chris Anderson. I read about [them] in the same night, and it was just like they fit together.

And how did you go about actually finding and booking the colleges? A lot of it was cold-calling under a fake name. I first started as me, but nobody wants to talk to a filmmaker about releasing his film. When that didn't work I started a distribution company, which was as easy as filing an LLC. I then came up with a fake name and started e-mailing and cold-calling people. As soon as it was "I'm representing this film" instead of "I made this film," people were really responsive. The hardest part for most campus film committees is, "How do we market these films?" So if you can show them a cost-effective way of doing that, they're really responsive.

And how did you say that you'd market it? Grassroots stuff — going on tour with the film with my lead actors and my editor. He's a filmmaker himself; he comes and does Web virals. We combine being in the college — running around to classrooms, talking on campus, meeting kids on the streets, going to coffee shops and bars — with e-marketing through social-networking sites. A lot of it, too, is contacting groups and committees who we feel our film might connect to and allow them to be our spokespersons, our champion base.

How did you do advance publicity? Facebook and YouTube helped a lot. And I had onsite teams — my friends, basically — in each city. I'd send them a really long e-mail [asking] what bar do people go to, what's the local pizza place, what coffee shops do people hang out in, what corner should we hang our posters. Then when we arrived we'd go out and show the trailer on our laptops and my iPhone, explain the model and talk about the film to people. We'd say, "We're not going to preach to you; you're going to laugh and enjoy yourself." We'd throw out condoms, which are kind of a fun thing, in bars. A lot of it was about pitching ourselves rather than the actual film. If you as a filmmaker can connect with someone, they can become your new best friend. They're going to live and die for your film.

And you would drive from campus town to campus town? We got a big conversion van with WiFi for the six of us, and we turned it into a kind of moving office. We'd go to colleges I had a network in, but would then make sure that every fifth stop was a legitimate art house, because that way we'd get press. We made sure that for the first third of the tour we could experiment with our marketing plan, and that if it failed, we'd still be okay. The whole [tour] was kind of like a figure eight. We went through the Midwest where we knew we'd have support, and we would always cross back through our home base areas, which were Minneapolis, my hometown, and then Missouri, Austin and Athens, Ga. We

had enough good friends in all those places that we could [easily] set up offices and send out DVDs and T-shirts and other kinds of materials. The whole tour was 16 weeks total, and we split it in four parts.

How far in advance did you book the screenings? Some of the [bookings] were as short as one or two weeks notice.

Were you doing four-wall engagements — renting the art houses for a fixed fee? Nothing was a traditional four wall. We found general managers who were willing to work with us. If you take it to a corporate level then it just takes too much time. But people who work in movie theaters are generally cool people and if you can connect with them individually, on a theater-by-theater basis, they're going to help you out.

What were some of the theaters that you played at? We did the Gene Siskel in Chicago and the Ragtag in Columbia, Mo., where we're still playing, and that was kind of our foundation. We did the Midtown Arts Cinema in Atlanta, the Dobie in Austin and the Magnolia in Dallas. We've been in college towns like Bloomington, Ind., where we did the Ryder, which is their student [theater]. We did the Ciné in Athens. [Before the tour] I had that romantic [notion] of playing in alternative venues like pizza houses, but for the most part we screened in traditional art houses.

What campuses did you screen on? University of Georgia, Indiana University, University of Austin, University of Iowa. We did Drake's Theater in Des Moines. We did the Oak Street Cinema in Minneapolis, which is near the University of Minnesota campus.

Did you do revenue splits with them, or were you getting guaranteed booking fees? Most of them were revenue splits, and that was for two reasons. One was because I felt like it would make the pitch easier because no one had heard of the film at this point. I wanted to make the [booking] offer as attractive as possible just to get people to answer my e-mails. The other thing is I wanted as many people who had participated in this [tour] to be happy at the end of it so they would champion it [the next time].

How big were your audiences? I guess our lowest was probably in the twenties. We had one that was in the forties, but generally it was in the sixties, seventies or eighties. The highest was 340, maybe. We had six or seven that were a couple hundred for one-night engagements. And then in Columbia we played to a couple thousand people over the course of the whole run.



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And how did that balance out against your expenses? We made about 11 grand total. Spent 21 and netted 32.

Did that go back to your investors? Most of it went back to our investors; some of it went back to us so we could continue touring.

Does national media play a role in your model? It hasn't yet. I would like it to obviously. But people who read national media aren't necessarily the people who would come to a movie they've never heard of on a Tuesday night. I always say there's an inner circle of people, the niche audience for your film. And then there's a larger circle of the maybes, and outside of that you have everybody else in the world. We're really focused on that inner circle and finding the most cost-effective and efficient way of connecting them with the film.

What's next? We're going back on the road in the fall, and we're bringing four films total this time. We're taking *Box Elder* back out, and then we have *On the Road with Judas* by J.J. Lask, *Registered Sex Offender* by Bob Byington and then *In Memory of My Father* by Christopher James. The four films are going

to play one night each in each place.

Aside from the number of films, what are you doing differently this time around?

We're going to try to [ask for] booking fees so we have a guaranteed gross, and we're going to have DVDs available. We sold DVDs toward the end of the last tour, and that's when we made most of our money. We would sell them for either 10 or 15 bucks depending on the nights, and about a third of the audience would buy DVDs after each screening.

You're very outgoing, and I can tell you have no problem walking into a pizza place and handing out flyers to everyone there.

Is part of your strategy simply a byproduct of your own natural gregariousness? That is true. I think the key thing, though, is not to be embarrassed by your work, to take a step back and to not be like: "This is my movie and everything in the world depends on this movie." Instead, think: "What's the best way that you can connect your film with people in the world who would want to see it?" Don't think: "I need to make the money back, or, I need to play at this festival so I can get an agent for my next film." ▼

