



THE HISTORY

# LIGHTS CAMERA. AUSTIN.

Our Town's Pursuit of the Silver Screen

BY STEVE UHLER

“What I know about is Texas. And down here, you're on your own.”

—Private Detective Loren Visser (M. Emmet Walsh) in *Blood Simple*, filmed in Austin in 1984

**P**AUL AND WESLEY TILLEY HAD A VISION. They had the equipment—a rickety, 30-pound movie camera—and they had the dream. It was their timing that was a little off. They got to Austin about 80 years too early.

Not much is known about the Tilley Brothers. They started the Satex Film Company in San Antonio in 1910, relocating to Austin in 1911. About all that is known for sure is that they wanted to make moving pictures—or, as they had recently been dubbed by a beguiled public, “movies.” The two cinematically inclined siblings were convinced Austin could be the film capital of the world, and they wanted to get in on the ground floor.

Unfortunately, they found more ground than floor. The brothers managed to produce a few one- and two-reelers and then gave up the ghost, allegedly heading south of the border, never to be heard of again. Meanwhile, the fledgling film industry set up shop on the more climate-friendly West Coast—specifically, a little hamlet near Los Angeles named Hollywoodland, which was later shortened to Hollywood. Austin was left behind in the dust.

For the next 60 years Austin's movie industry languished in limbo while California became the movie mecca. Occasionally, a production company from Los Angeles or New York would utilize Austin's nearby Hill Country for some rare location filming, primarily for Westerns. About the biggest movie-related event was the world premiere of *Batman: The Movie*—the Adam West version—at the Paramount Theater in 1966. No one much thought about Austin as a potential film

production center—until a local politico named Jerry Hall saw an opportunity for the future.

“I was press secretary for Governor Preston Smith back in 1970,” Hall recalls. “We found out that New Mexico had started a film commission and was having some success, and I thought, hell, if they can do it in New Mexico, we can do it in Texas.”

“We had it worked out that we could get it done with just an executive order from the governor,” Hall continues. “It didn't require any legislative action. We pointed out that it could bring in considerable revenues. The governor was really intrigued by that and he said, ‘Well, I think we can wrangle about \$400,000. Let's get this thing going.’”

Thus, the Texas Film Commission, or TFC, was founded in 1971. Its initial mission was to attract productions to Texas by assisting filmmakers with information on locations, crews, talent, weather, laws, housing and more.

Another early advocate for Austin was Gary Bond, who spearheaded the Austin Film Marketing Office for the Austin Convention and Visitor's Bureau. Bond knew how to pitch Austin's attractiveness to potential filmmakers. “You can get lots of different looks, varied topography for shoots,” Bond pointed out. “Just look around—30 minutes to the west, you have lush hill country. Thirty minutes to the east, you have Kansas flatlands. You've got your piney forests. At Pioneer Farm, you've got your basic frontier town. Plus, it's a clean industry—non-polluting, and it doesn't damage the environment. Most importantly, it brings in revenues and employment.”

THE TFC AND AUSTIN FILM MARKETING OFFICE met with moderate success in their early days. A few Hollywood productions began trickling into the Austin area for location work—including Sam Peckinpah's 1972 heist film, *The Getaway* (filmed in San Marcos), and George Roy Hill's homage to the early days of aviation, *The Great Waldo Pepper* (filmed in Elgin and Lockhart).

*The Getaway* turned out to be a box-office smash, but did little for the fledgling film industry in Austin. The studios had sent their own film crews to Austin from California, an expensive commute. Local talent was restricted pretty much to student films and car dealership commercials.

It took a young locally born UT film teacher, who had a grisly story inspired by real-life serial killer Ed Gein, to tap into Austin's potential as a filmmaking community and change the face of American independent films in the process. One day in 1973, 30-year-old Tobe Hooper was shopping in an Austin mall and began feeling claustrophobic from the crowds. Glancing up at a chainsaw display in the hardware department, he thought, "Now *there's* a quick way to get out of this crowd."

"I became the film teacher by default after the original film teacher quit," Hooper remembers. "I was a student and shooting stuff for Mr. Swenkin, the president of PBS. I also directed Farrah Fawcett's first TV commercial. It was a great situation for a young filmmaker because I had a camera and all the film I needed."

Hooper managed to procure \$140,000 in production funds, saving considerable crew costs by using the talents of his friends and film students. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* went on to gross nearly \$31,000,000 in the United States alone.

The 1980s proved to be a boom decade for Austin film production, with several major—and vastly different—productions being filmed. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was the kind of big, clunky and kitsch disaster that helped kill the Hollywood musical—memorable

**RIGHT: Rory Cochrane and Matthew McConaughey at the 10-year anniversary party of *Dazed and Confused*.**  
**BELOW: Austin Studios**

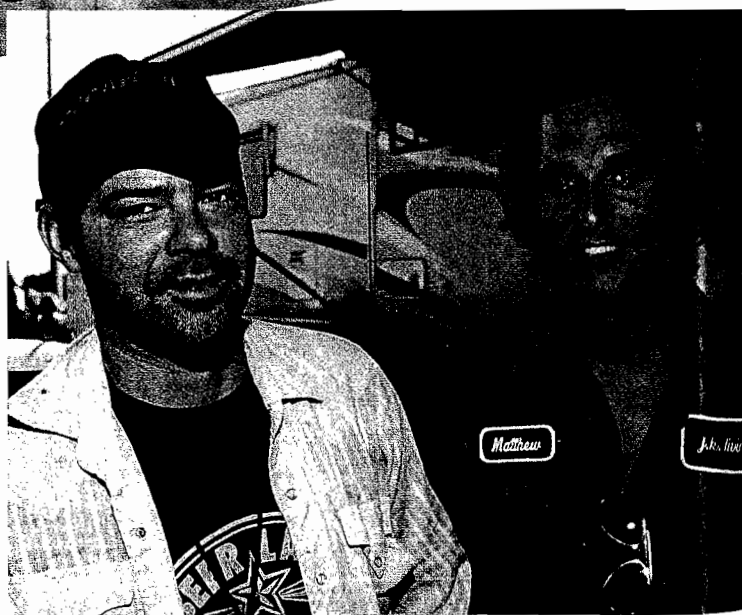
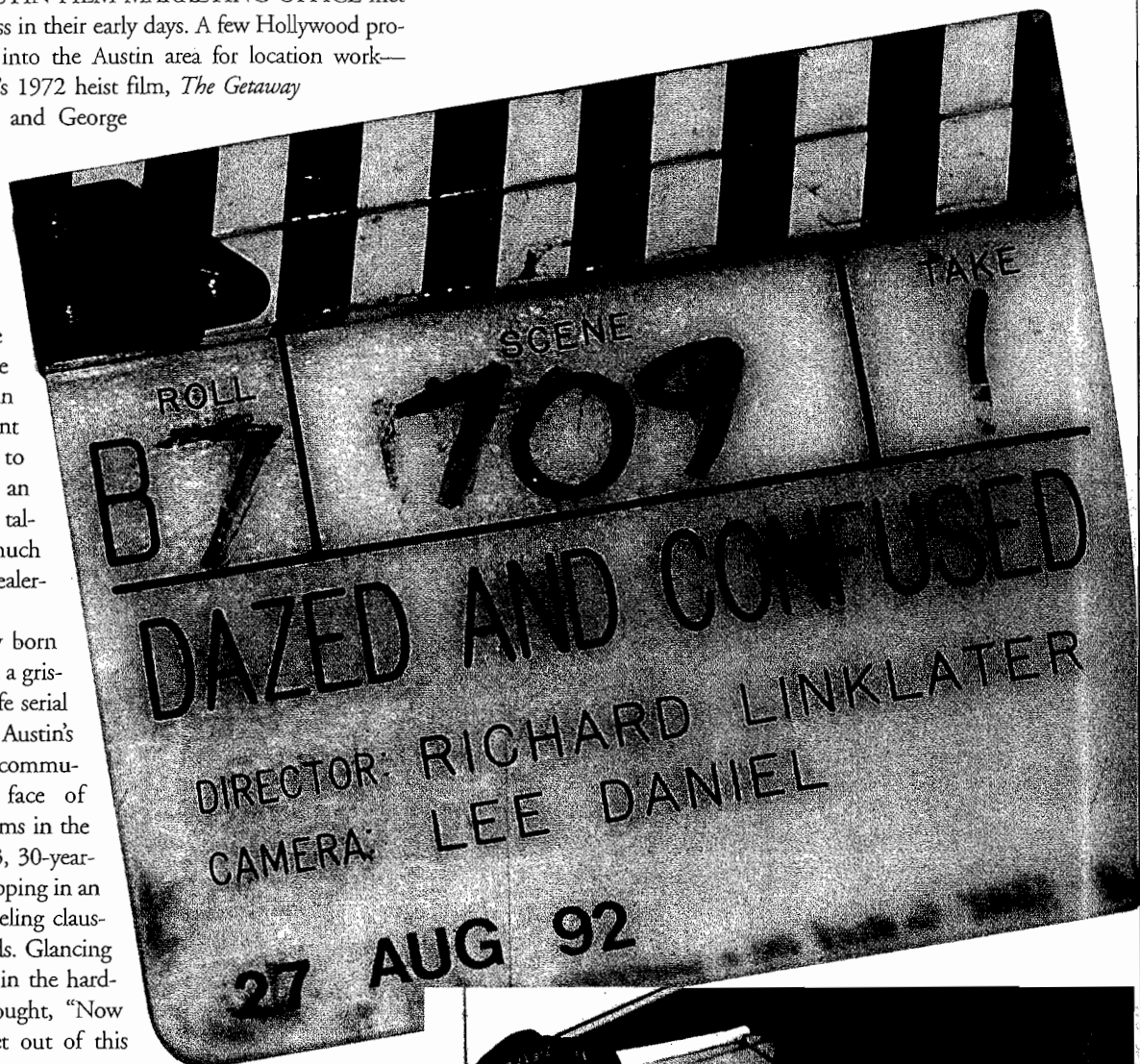
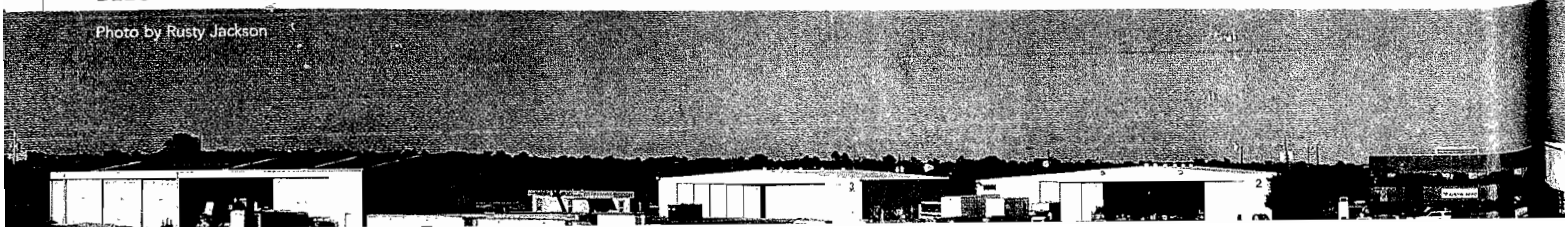


Photo by Rusty Jackson

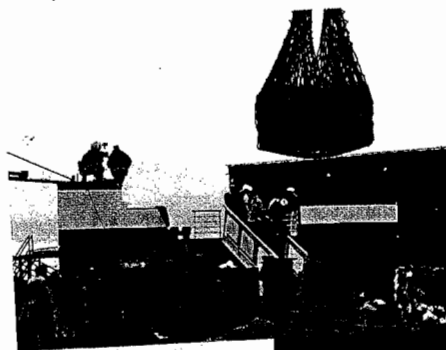


## Homegrown: Movies Filmed in Austin

<i>The Getaway</i> (1972)	<i>The Hot Spot</i> (1990)	<i>Teenage Catgirls in Heat</i> (1997)	<i>25th Hour</i> (2002)
<i>Lovin' Molly</i> (1974)	<i>In Broad Daylight</i> (TV Movie) (1991)	<i>True Women</i> (TV Movie) (1997)	<i>Beyond the Prairie, Part 2: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder Continues</i> (2002)
<i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1974)	<i>Ned Blessing</i> (TV Movie) (1992)	<i>The Faculty</i> (1998)	<i>Lone Star State of Mind</i> (2002)
<i>The Great Waldo Pepper</i> (1975)	<i>Slacker</i> (1991)	<i>Hope Floats</i> (1998)	<i>The New Guy</i> (2002)
<i>Leadbelly</i> (1976)	<i>Dazed and Confused</i> (1993)	<i>The Newton Boys</i> (1998)	<i>The Rookie</i> (2002)
<i>Outlaw Blues</i> (1977)	<i>A Perfect World</i> (1993)	<i>Two for Texas</i> (TV Movie) (1998)	<i>Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams</i> (2002)
<i>Piranha</i> (1978)	<i>The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1994)	<i>Just Sue Me</i> (1999)	<i>Texas</i> (Thirty Odd Foot of Grunts Documentary) (2002)
<i>The Whole Shootin' Match</i> (1978)	<i>What's Eating Gilbert Grape</i> (1993)	<i>Office Space</i> (1999)	<i>Warning: Parental Advisory</i> (TV Movie) (2002)
<i>Roadie</i> (1979)	<i>Willie Nelson: The Big Six-O</i> (TV Movie) (1993)	<i>A Slipping-Down Life</i> (1999)	<i>The Alamo</i> (2003)
<i>Honeysuckle Rose</i> (a.k.a. <i>On The Road Again</i> ) (1980)	<i>Blank Check</i> (1994)	<i>The Soul Collector</i> (TV Movie) (1999)	<i>God in the Machine</i> (2003)
<i>Raggedy Man</i> (1981)	<i>Love and a .45</i> (1994)	<i>A Texas Funeral</i> (1999)	<i>Levelland</i> (2003)
<i>The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas</i> (1982)	<i>Texas Justice</i> (TV Movie) (1995)	<i>Varsity Blues</i> (1999)	<i>The Life of David Gale</i> (2003)
<i>Blood Simple</i> (1984)	<i>The Underneath</i> (1995)	<i>Attack of the Bat Monsters</i> (2000)	<i>Once Upon A Time in Mexico</i> (2003)
<i>Songwriter</i> (1984)	<i>Courage Under Fire</i> (1996)	<i>Bullfighter</i> (2000)	<i>Screen Door Jesus</i> (2003)
<i>Fandango</i> (1985)	<i>Horne Fries</i> (1996)	<i>Cicadas</i> (2000)	<i>Secondhand Lions</i> (2003)
<i>Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer</i> (1986)	<i>Michael</i> (1996)	<i>Miss Congeniality</i> (2000)	<i>Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over</i> (2003)
<i>Red-Headed Stranger</i> (1986)	<i>SubUrbia</i> (1996)	<i>Picnic</i> (TV Movie) (2000)	<i>Texas: The Big Picture</i> (IMAX Movie) (2003)
<i>Nadine</i> (1987)	<i>Waiting for Guffman</i> (1996)	<i>Scary Movie</i> (2000)	<i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (2003)
<i>Heartbreak Hotel</i> (1988)	<i>The War at Home</i> (1996)	<i>Road Trip</i> (2000)	<i>When Zachary Beaver Came to Town</i> (2003)
<i>Lonesome Dove</i> (TV Movie) (1989)	<i>The Whole Wide World</i> (1996)	<i>Where The Heart Is</i> (2000)	<i>America Brown</i> (2004)
<i>A Pair of Aces</i> (TV Movie) (1990)	<i>Austin Stories</i> (TV Series) (1997)	<i>American Outlaws</i> (2001)	
		<i>Going to California</i> (TV Series) (2001)	
		<i>Spy Kids</i> (2001)	
		<i>Waking Life</i> (2001)	

mostly for Dolly Parton's mammaries and Burt Reynolds' ludicrous attempts at vocalizing.

1984's *Blood Simple* was another story—a low-budget (\$1.5 million), high-concept dry-Texas-noir project by a couple of upstart, young, first-time filmmaking brothers, Joel and Ethan Coen. It was filmed in Austin and Round Rock. "People have strong feelings about Texas, which we thought we could play off of," Joel Coen told Ronald Bergman in 1999 for the biography *The Coen Brothers*. "Your classic film noir has a real urban feel, and we wanted something different." They got something different—the film's locations of abandoned Austin oil pumps, derelict houses and desolate farm fields provided a modern, sun-bleached spin on the classic dark-noir scenes of



Photos courtesy Austin Film Society

lust, betrayal and murder.

Other notable films utilizing Austin locations included director Robert Benton's breezy white trash junkyard comedy *Nadine*, starring Jeff Bridges and Kim Basinger; *D.O.A.*, a remake of the 1950 film-noir classic, featuring a young Dennis Quaid in what would become the first of several Austin-filmed projects for the actor; *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*, featuring a wacked-out Dennis Hopper; *Raggedy Man*, starring Sissy Spacek; and a TV miniseries that

would come to be regarded as one of the greatest Westerns ever filmed—*Lonesome Dove*.

But not every Austin-bred film featured glamour and A-list productions. Quickie, low-

budget flicks like *Teenage Cat Girls In Heat* and *Piranha* (which launched the careers of director Joe Dante and writer John Sayles), TV movies and music videos provided experience—and employment—for the burgeoning supply of local production talent. They did not win any **TOP, RIGHT: *Secondhand Lions* set. LEFT: *The Life of David Gale* set.**

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Photo courtesy New Line Cinema



Photo by Dimitrios Kambouris, Wire Image



Photo courtesy Austin Film Society

**Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over premiere at The Paramount. (Top: Cast members Sylvester Stallone, Alexa Vega and Daryl Sabana with others; Left: The audience; Right: Congress Avenue.**

Oscars, but they did provide valuable learning experience for a rapidly expanding local talent pool of writers, directors, producers and camera operators.

Around this time a young aspiring filmmaker from Houston arrived in Austin, fresh from a year of working on an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Richard Linklater loved Austin, but he loved classic film even more and was frustrated at the lack of foreign films, documentaries and independent films available for viewing. Gathering together a coterie of

like-minded cinephiles, he launched the Austin Film Society, or AFS, in 1985.

Linklater was more than just a fan—he also had film-making aspirations of his own. He began working on a unique project, drafting his fellow AFS members as crew and cast and using the streets of Austin as a backdrop to film a series of interweaving, non-sequitur vignettes—some profound and some pretty stoney—told primarily by a cast of non-conformist twenty-somethings. The result was the madly inventive

and original *Slacker*, which was made for under \$23,000. It would go on to become a genuine indie phenomenon, grossing over \$1,227,500 in the United States alone and adding a new word to the vernacular in the process.

While Linklater was busy filming his follow-up film—a homage to the disenfranchised youth of the '70s called *Dazed and Confused*—a film student at nearby St. Edward's University named Robert Rodriguez was trying to raise funds for his own low-budget action-thriller, *El Mariachi*. The resourceful auteur came up with an unorthodox but inventive way to raise the funds—literally, with a pound of flesh—by subjecting himself to being a human guinea pig in medical experiments to raise the \$7,000 he needed. In a scenario that even Hollywood would not believe, *El Mariachi* won the Audience Award at the 1992 Sundance Festival. Almost overnight, Rodriguez found himself Hollywood's new golden boy. There was only one thing wrong with the fairy-tale picture: Robert Rodriguez did not want to go to Hollywood. So Hollywood came to him.

Meanwhile, the Old Hollywood guard continued to come knocking at Austin's door. When actor/director Clint Eastwood was scouting for a suitably barren landscape for his 1993 project *A Perfect World*, he selected Austin for his production center. He spent his days shooting around Austin, Martindale and Huntsville and his nights taking in jazz at the Elephant Room. Eastwood began to tentatively use local production crews on second-unit shots, and was impressed with the results. "The people in the city are warm and cooperative, and have real film know-how," he told a reporter in 1993. "And there's always great jazz at the Elephant Room. We'll be back."

Other major productions followed in the '90s, including *The Hot Spot*, directed by Dennis Hopper; *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, starring Johnny Depp and a very young Leonardo DiCaprio; and *Office Space*, a live-action comedy written and directed by *King of the Hill* creator Mike Judge.

Austin has some of the most passionate, knowledgeable and eccentric film fans in the country, if not the world. Whether attending special screenings in the most unlikely places (huddled in underground caves for a screening of *The Goonies* with original cast member Corey Feldman or floating on a raft in Deep Eddy pool for a screening of *Jaws*) or sitting through a marathon of *The Godfather* trilogy complete with spaghetti dinners at the Alamo Drafthouse, Austin cinephiles savor the smorgasbord of cinematic dishes, all served up in their own backyard.

Perhaps no film fans are more devoted—or occasionally deranged—than the regulars at the Alamo Drafthouse, arguably the most innovative film venue in the country. Here, film fans can literally feast on eclectic fare such as *Weird Wednesdays* (free movies!) and *Mr. Sinus Theater 3000* while dining on some of the finest cuisine and wines available in the city. When actor Peter Fonda visited the Drafthouse this year for a retrospective showing of his 1971 movie *The Hired Hand*, he weaved his way down the aisle after the screening, and turned to the audience, raising his empty wine glass. "Any movie theater that serves a good merlot along with the movie is all right by me," he said, adding, "By the way, is this floor moving?"

Austin also boasts some of the most prestigious and eclectic film festivals in the country. In addition to the annual Austin Film Festival and SXSW, other local fests include the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival and Quentin Tarantino's sporadically annual QT Fest, where the maverick film mogul personally introduces his favorite films, and often takes questions from the audience. (However, Tarantino takes no queries about his next projects and does not accept projects pitched to him. Audience members who try anyway will find themselves pitched right out of the theater.)

Increasingly, stars and filmmakers are selecting Austin for their world-premiere locations. Ron Howard, Kevin Costner, Woody Harrelson and Sandra Bullock have graced the red carpet recently at local world premieres for films such as *The Newton Boys*, *EdTV*, *The Faculty* and *U-571*.

IS AUSTIN THE NEW HOLLYWOOD? Not yet, but it is an excellent stand-in. *Moviemaker Magazine* ranks Austin as one of the top ten locations for making independent movies. While other local industries have seen

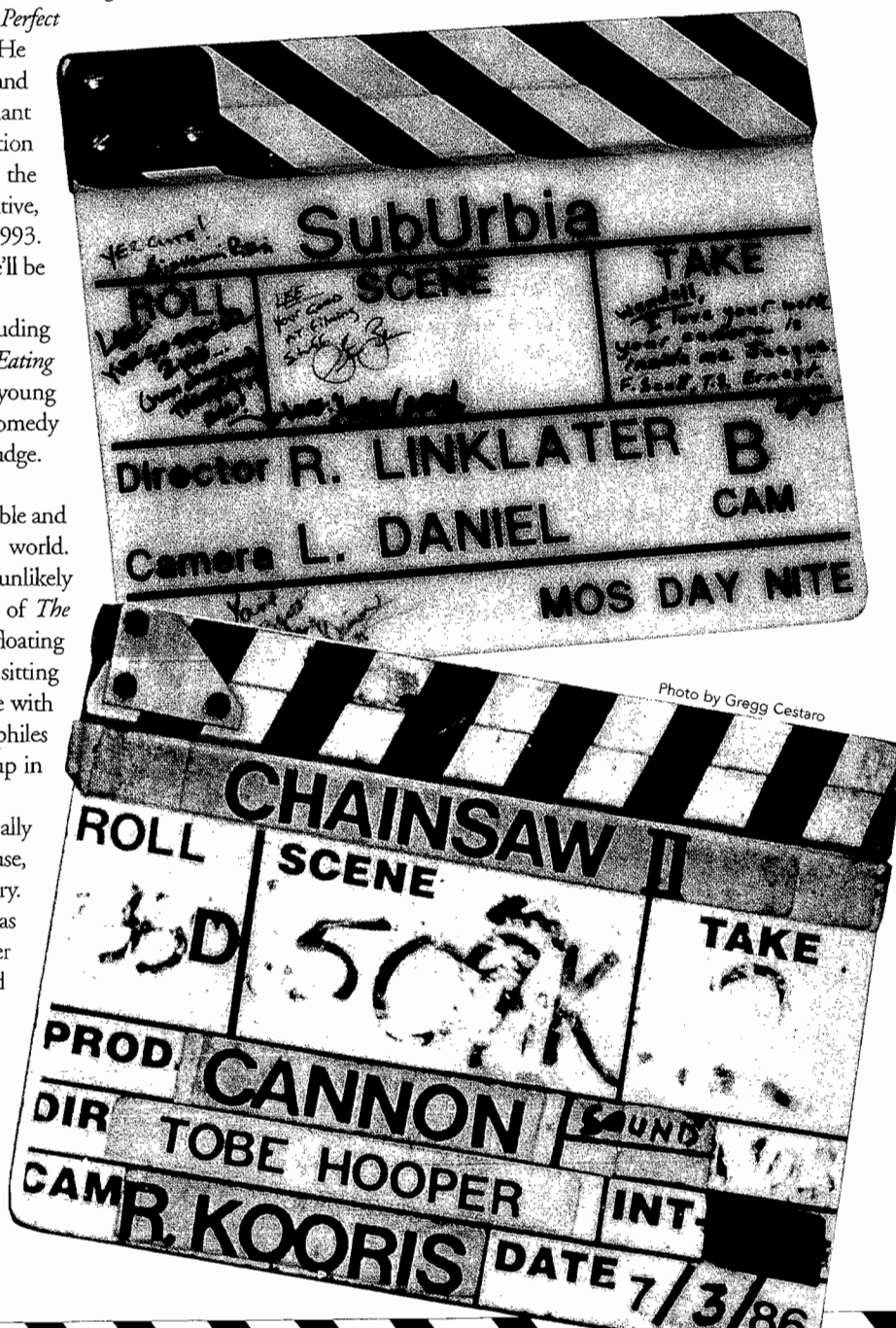
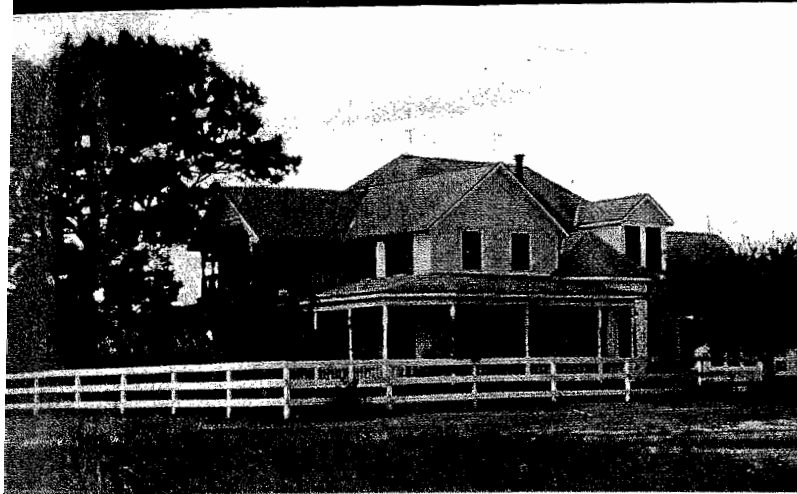


Photo by Gregg Cestaro



Before-and-after pictures of two Austin houses used in *Flesh and Bone* (TOP) and *Secondhand Lions*

Photos courtesy Austin Film Commission

their revenues plummet, film production continues to be an ever-expanding cash cow for the city and a vital shot in the arm for Austin's economy.

When Tobe Hooper filmed *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 1972, the combined budgets for all projects shot in Austin that year was \$5.3 million. As of August of 2003, that figure has risen to \$129.2 million, with another \$49 million anticipated before year's end. According to the TFC, there are now nearly 1,000 film-related businesses operating out of Austin, including one-room CGI labs, historical consultants, catering services, casting agencies and animal wranglers (armadillos included).

Perhaps the most spectacular local success story is that of the Austin Studios, a state-of-the-art film production facility launched by the AFS in partnership with the City of Austin. Housed in the old Robert Mueller airport, the 20-acre film and video production facility houses over 100,000 square feet of production space, including four separate soundstages.

"The idea for Austin Film Studios started floating around in late 1999," AFS executive director Rebecca Campbell says. "I think the real spark for it happening occurred between Richard Linklater and his long-time projectionist, a fellow by the name of Stan Ginsel. The two of them and some other folks sat down with then Mayor Kirk Watson. By early 2000 we had a proposal in front of the city council, and by the fall of 2000 we had an agreement with the city and moved in. The turnaround time was astonishing." Recent films utilizing the studio facilities include *The Life of David Gale*, *The Rookie* and *Miss Congeniality*.

In addition to boosting the economy and producing much-needed employment for Austinites, the film industry brings a little bit of unde-

niable glamour to the Capital City. Everyone is noticing the increasing influx of film crews, movie productions and, yes, movie stars. It is not a rare sight to see Robert Duvall having brunch at the Four Seasons, Sandra Bullock shopping on South Congress, Matthew McConaughey bar-hopping across town or Dennis Quaid chowing down on a burrito at Chipotle.

Another major coup on the local film scene was the September 5 launching of the University of Texas Film Institute, an enormously ambitious education and production co-op venture between UT, Burnt Orange Productions and Town Lake Films. Spearheaded by UT professor Thom Schatz, the revolutionary program includes plans to produce at least three feature films per year, the mission being to let students graduate with a feature film credit on their résumé. The 31-member advisory board bears several impressive names from local and national film production, including Linklater, McConaughey, Campbell, Bob Berney (president of New Market Films) and many other major industry players. Motion Picture Association of America head (and Texan) Jack Valenti described the endeavor as "a revolution in the shape and form of a film school."

**P**ICTURE THIS: Small Texas town meets glamorous Hollywood West Coast dream. Small town goes on to hit the big time, gets a swelled head. Town loses dream, goes through hard times, learns some tough lessons, then comes back bigger and better than ever for the big climax. Town gets the girl, saves the populace, helps vanquish the bad economy. Sun sets over the skyline. Fade to black.

Now *that's* a Hollywood ending—Austin-style.