

THE ABC's OF NO-BUDGET FILMMAKING

*Peter Broderick goes below the line with today's
guerilla filmmakers*

This article contains case studies of:

THE LIVING END

LAWS OF GRAVITY

EL MARIACHI

In 1992, three young filmmakers proved that exceptional features can be made for less than the cost of a mediocre short. With ample supplies of creativity, ingenuity, and determination (and miniscule amounts of cash), these writers-directors were able to complete outstanding features that achieved festival success, critical acclaim, and national distribution. *Laws of Gravity* (\$38,000) and *El Mariachi* (\$7,225) were first features that launched the careers of Nick Gomez and Robert Rodriguez spectacularly. *The Living End* (\$22,769) was a third feature that boosted Gregg Araki to a new level of prominence and opportunity. Made for a fraction of the cost of many resume shorts (which can cost upwards of \$100,000), these full length features achieved greater festival play and much wider distribution than most successful shorts while effectively showcasing their directors' talents.

There have been notable examples of no budget features during the past fifteen years (including *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, *Chan is Missing*, and *She's Gotta Have It*, but they were seen as lucky exceptions to the rule that feature filmmaking requires hundreds of thousands of dollars. The successes of *Laws of Gravity*, *The Living End*, and *El Mariachi* within a nine-month period prove irrefutably that terrific features can still be made for next to nothing. *El Mariachi's* entire budget might not cover a week's location fees for an average Hollywood feature.

Instead of spending years raising money from film companies, nonprofit sources, and dentists, each of these filmmakers decided to make a film utilizing the limited resources they could easily and quickly put together. They had all made films before (Rodriguez and Gomez had made shorts; Araki had directed shorts and features). As young filmmakers (Rodriguez was 23, Gomez was 28, and Araki was 29) with limited experience and no commercial track records, none of them had easy access to major sources of financing, but they didn't let that stop them. They each had experience making something for nothing and were convinced that they could do it on a larger scale. The striking diversity of these three features shows that resourcefulness and resolve can produce miraculous results in many different genres and styles.

Araki, Gomez, and Rodriguez have generously agreed to let *Filmmaker* publish their budgets, and have been very candid in their explanations of their

no-budget methods. They have been willing, to share their secrets hoping they will enable other filmmakers to make features with small change.

It's important to note that the budgets accompanying this article list cash expenses only and don't include deferments. All three directors and their producers were able to marshal the support of cast and crews while paying little or no money. *El Mariachi* was filmed with at most a two-person crew. Gregg Araki needed only a small crew for *The Living End* and had earned a reputation on the basis of his other features, making it easy for him to attract interested crew members. And Nick Gomez, one of the central figures in New York's Shooting Gallery, is a real leader in the New York low-budget scene. All three filmmakers were in the position of calling in favors or bartering something - experience, future work, deferred pay, or simply the excitement of working on something out of the ordinary - in return for their crew member's dedication. For further notes on no-budget filmmaking, we refer readers back to Andrea Sperling's article in our last issue. Every film requires its own unique producing approach: Sperling's piece, including advice on insurance, permits, dealing with unions and actors, provides an overview for producers mulling over the pros and cons of a no budget shoot.

The Living End

Previous no-budget experience: After making shorts as a film student at USC, Araki made two features - *Three Bewildered People in the Night* and *The Long Weekend o' Despair* for \$5,000 each. Filmed MOS in 16mm black and white, they were written, shot, directed, and edited by Araki. "I don't think you should make a feature until you've made a couple of shorts and made your mistakes on them. I knew I could make a feature which I saw as a short times ten."

Script: While he doesn't write with a particular budget in mind, "I tend to be interested in more intimate, contemporary stories, not the Chinese Civil Wars."

Preparation: Araki was planning to again shoot MOS in black and white but ran into Jon Jost, who offered to loan him a camera, a tape recorder, and a microphone, and gave him some outdated Fuji color stock. Araki seized the opportunity to make his first color, sync sound feature. "We never really had a budget - we just started to shoot. I felt very confident because I'd made two films before. I always knew the film would get done. The only thing I usually worry about is whether my lead actors will die or disappear."

Financing: Given Araki's experience making \$5,000 features, his producers, Marcus Hu and Jon Gerrans of Strand Releasing, were confident that *The Living End* could be made for \$20,000, which they promised to raise. Starting with a loan from a relative, production began. The money was raised in bits and pieces along the way. A private investor was found, and toward the end of post-production Araki received a \$20,000 AFI grant which was enough to cover over 85% of the budget.

Equipment: Camera, sound gear, additional equipment, and expendables were all borrowed from friends of Greg Araki. Jon Jost loaned the CP GSMO camera and the Sony cassette recorder and microphone for the sound. Lighting kit and prime lenses were rented. "We shot with fast film, using available light whenever possible. I don't need a lot of lighting. I prefer things to look more natural than overlit."

Stock and Processing: "Stock and processing are hard costs that even I, the scam artist, can't get for free." 80% of the film was shot using the purchased Kodak stock; the rest using the donated Fuji stock. Gregg's shooting ratio on his previous MOS features was 2 1/2: 1, but his ratio doubled to 5: 1 because "a lot of takes were NG for sound."

Crew: Size ranged from one (Araki) to seven (Araki plus camera assistant, gaffer, sound recordist, and between one and three PAs). "A small crew makes things much easier, more spontaneous and portable, and much less conspicuous."

Locations: No location fees. A lot of it was shot in the boondocks of LA where there were fewer people around and less hassle. We were able to steal shots at our locations because none of the action was terribly involved. For example, we didn't have to blow up the gas station, we just got gas."

Props: Only expenditure - gun rental. "A lot of the texture of my life enters my films, from my car to posters, T-shirts, and other props. Using little bits and pieces of my reality makes my films more authentic."

Schedule: On and off over four months (October 1990-January 1991, one month of which Araki was out of the country). "We tended not to shoot really full days. When we did sixteen-hour days, the work really suffered because I had to do so many things. We usually shot no more than eight hours, and often less. I don't believe in the army mentality - everybody up at 6:30 and march till sunrise. Because the schedule was haphazard -whenever people were free - it really helped to have a small crew." They had the "freedom to shoot whenever" because they weren't paying cast and crew, and weren't incurring substantial rental fees.

Directing Actors: The film was tightly scripted with very little improvisation. "Before production began, I had one or two read-throughs of the script with the actors. Usually the actors only got a little notice of what scenes we were going to film. They would run through their lines a few times before we'd shoot. I like to have a certain spontaneity, a sense of things happening at the moment."

Cost of Getting Film in Can: \$6,244 (production expenses plus stock).

Post Production: Edited on Araki's Moviola in his apartment. "I'm interested in setting up my own means of production. I bought a Moviola for \$1,500 which I used to edit my first two films and *The Living End*." Mag transfers were obtained

for free from a friend with a machine and FPC donated magnetic stock. Also, friends donated the initial artwork and design and shot the animation for free.

No-Budget Approach: "I try not to rent things. We rented lenses for *The Living End* and kept them out a really long time, costing us \$1,200. For my next feature (*Totally Fucked Up*), I bought a lens for \$700 and I will keep using it for other films. I recommend buying or borrowing rather than renting." Araki points out that, "it all depends on your resourcefulness. Look at where you are spending money, and try not to spend it, even on small things like xeroxing."

"As Chris Munch (director of *The Hours* and *the Times*) has said, if you really have the determination to make a movie, you can almost fashion it out of thin air."

Credits:

Written, shot, directed, and edited by Greg, Araki

Produced by Marcus Hu and Jon Gerrans

Co-Producer: Jim Stark

Associate Producer: Andrea Sperling

Cast: Mike Dytri, Craig Gilmore, Darcy Marta

Distribution: U.S. theatrical: October Films

The Living End Budget

(furnished by Andrea Sperling, Associate Producer)

Production Expenses

Lights: Lowell lighting kit (rental)	\$390
Lenses: prime (rental)	\$1,200
Props: guns (rental):	\$150
Food:	\$1800
sub-total:	\$3540

Stock

Film stock: 16mm color Kodak 7296. 12,000 ft = 30 rolls @ 5 106.5¢ roll minus discount plus tax:	\$2654
Cassette tapes: production sound:	\$50
DAT tapes: post-production sound:	\$50
1/2" tape: post-production sound:	\$100
sub-total:	\$2854

Post-Production Expenses

Editing supplies:	\$50
Dialogue editing, sound effects recording and editing, music recording and editing, ADR, looping and final sound mix, all done digitally with computer and 3/4" videotape, flat deal	\$5,000
sub-total	\$5,050

Services

Edge code: 24.000 ft x .0 15c -discount + tax	\$326
Negative cut. flat deal:	\$1000
Film to 3/4" videotape transfer. Incl. stock. for post-prod sound mix:	\$350
DAT to mag transfer used to make optical from:.....	\$400
Optical Track:	\$1500
sub-total:	\$3,576

Titles

Lithography	\$150
Processing and printing:	\$50
sub-total:	\$200

Lab

Workprint: (250c x 12,000 ft)	\$3000
1 st Answer print: (83c x 3240 ft)	\$2,689
Release print: (37c x 3240 plus tax: wet gate made from original A x B roll negative)	\$1,277
Check print: (18 c x 3,240 ft)	\$583
sub-total \$	7,549

Grand Total:	\$22,769
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Note: this amount of money got *The Living End* to its premiere screening at the Sundance Film Festival. After the film was acquired by October, more money was spent to improve the picture and sound, as well as to make a 35mm blow-up.

Laws of Gravity

Previous no-budget experience: Nick Gomez had written and directed two shorts- *No Picnic and Wild Kingdom*, both produced by Bob Gosse. The first was made when they were film students at SUNY Purchase. After film school, Gosse produced Gomez's *Wild Kingdom*. Gosse and Larry Meistrich then founded The Shooting Gallery, a filmmaker's cooperative, which quickly became a hub of activity and energy, producing many shorts in its first year. *Laws of Gravity*, the first feature produced through the Shooting Gallery, utilized the resources and talent that it had attracted, as well as the many lessons that had been learned in no-budget production.

Financing: "We had \$35,000 in place before I wrote the screenplay," Gomez explained during an interview at the Toronto Film Festival. It was raised from individuals - "uncles and friends from college." During post-production, Larry Meistrich raised another \$3,000.

Planning and Scripting: Gomez's model was Gus Van Sant's *Mala Noche*, "a fine piece of work which was made for \$25,000-30,000." Gomez wrote a script that could be made for \$35,000. It included "a lot of day exteriors," and was to be filmed in his neighborhood. The film had to be shot quickly using actors and crew members willing to work for deferments instead of cash. Gomez knew that finding the right D.P was crucial, since he needed the film shot hand-held to stay within his budget.

Casting: Gomez wrote a few parts for actors he knew he wanted to use (including Edie Falco, Paul Schulzie, and Saul Stein). To cast the other parts, he placed an ad in *Backstage* and saw almost 500 actors, asking each one to read a monologue he had written. Once he narrowed it down to the finalists, he put people who were the best choices together. There had to be chemistry because the film was to be done as an ensemble piece.

Rehearsals: Gomez spent four weeks rehearsing almost every day. He started with the script, then had the actors improvise. They did a dozen rehearsals with no script. "We rehearsed like a band. As long as everything was in the right key, we kept going. If someone was off-key, I would tell them." He then rewrote incorporating the best of the improvisation. "By the time we got ready to shoot, the actors were the characters." Some scenes were heavily scripted, and others were improvised (including scenes where four characters talk at once).

Equipment: Camera: Aaton LTR 7. Almost all of the film was shot hand-held. A wheelchair was used for dolly shots.

Stock and Processing: Kodak 16mm 7296 interiors and night_exteriors); Kodak 7248 (exteriors). The shooting ratio of 3:1 wouldn't have been possible without what cinematographer Jean de Seconzac described as Gomez's "decisiveness." "I would ask to do another take and Nick would say, 'We don't have time for that. We are shooting this movie now; we'll shoot another movie later.'" There wasn't any navel gazing."

Crew: Usually the production used a crew of fifteen or sixteen (not including cast). For more complicated scenes (e.g. night exteriors), it grew to 24 or 25. Gomez found de Segonzac, a very talented cinematographer with his own equipment who had primarily shot documentaries. De Segonzac explained how he managed to shoot the film hand-held: "'First we would rehearse the scene without camera, then we would do it with camera and I would choreograph the camera movement. We then did one slow motion run-through and then shot the scene. Then we would shoot it the opposite way.'" (For example, right to left became left to right.) He noted that the biggest difficulties presented by his constantly moving camera were those faced by the focus puller, and the sound man who was "'mixing and running at the same time.'" Fortunately, due to the weeks of rehearsals, the actors "never flubbed their lines so we didn't have to cut in the middle of a scene." Even though \$5,000 had been set aside for the D.P., de Segonzac was so committed to the project that he put the money back into the production, agreeing to a deferment instead.

Locations: The script was written so it could be shot in Gomez's Green point, Brooklyn neighborhood using "places I knew I could get for nothing. One set (the main character's apartment) was built at the Shooting Gallery for \$239.

Schedule: Twelve consecutive days.

Cost of Getting the Film in the Can: Under \$ 10,000. As Bob Gosse explained, "We would not pay bills until the lawyers came after us. That way we also got interest on the money we had raised."

Post-Production: The film was edited at the Shooting Gallery. The Power Station (a new state-of-the-art recording studio) agreed to do a free mix in return for a prominent credit. Opticals were avoided by cutting to black throughout the film.

The only expenditures made were those absolutely essential to getting a print that could be shown at festivals (New Directors; San Francisco; Boston; Toronto; Mill Valley). All other expenditures were postponed until after a distribution deal was made (including music rights, E and O insurance, internegative, interpositive, and composite).

Credits:

Written and directed by Nick Gomez
Produced by Bob Gosse and Larry Meistrich
Executive Producer: Larry Meistrich
Line Producer: Bob Gosse

Director of Photography: Jean de Segonzac

Editor: Tom McArdle

Starring: Peter Greene, Edie Falco, Adam Trese. Arabella Field, and Paul Schulze

Distribution: US theatrical, RKO

Laws of Gravity Budget

(Supplied by Producer Bob Gosse)

Equipment	
Sound rental:	\$2,100
Lighting rental:	\$2,500
Production supplies:	\$97
Camera and grip expendables:	\$382
Electric expendables:	\$350
Sound expendables:	\$15
Hardware:	\$100
sub-total:	\$5,584
Stock and Processing	
Raw stock:	\$5162
Developing and printing:	\$6,160
Audio stock:	\$275
Sound processing:	\$1,650
sub-total	\$13,427
Location and Travel Expenses	
Location fees:	\$200
Stage:	\$700
Auto rental:	\$500
Gas and tolls:	\$310
Meals:	\$1284
Craft services:	\$645
Local transport:	\$727
Kit rental:	\$150
Phones:	\$60
Make-up supplies:	\$95
Miscellaneous:	\$93
sub-total:	\$4,764
Props and Wardrobe	
Set rental and dressing:	\$100
Prop purchase:	\$100
Wardrobe purchase:	\$98
Prop guns:	\$185
Prop car gas/tolls:	\$20
Prop phone:	\$75
Prop blood:	\$33

Miscellaneous:	\$292
sub-total:	\$903
Set Construction	
lumber and materials:	\$162
hardware:	\$77
sub-total:	\$239
Pre-Production and Wrap Expenses	
Xerox:	\$100
Office supplies:	\$130
Gas and tolls:	\$25
sub-total:	\$255
Post-Production	
Flatbed rental:	\$843
Edit supplies:	\$503
Music/effects:	\$363
Answer Print:	\$1,972
Coding:	\$405
Optical:	\$1,000
Mix mag:	\$400
Mix:	\$800
Titles:	\$700
BW slop/video transfer:	\$700
Negative cutting:	\$3,000
sub-total:	\$10,691
Miscellaneous	
Miscellaneous petty cash:	\$200
Strip board:	\$55
Phones and cable:	\$300
Polaroids:	\$48
Office rental:	\$200
Xerox:	\$225
Miscellaneous:	\$1,329
Subtotal:	\$2,357
Grand Total:	\$38,000

El Mariachi

Previous No-Budget Experience: Robert Rodriguez had made numerous no-budget video shorts, and the award-winning 16mm *Bedhead*. "I knew after *Bedhead* that I could make *El Mariachi*."

Financing: He tried to raise \$12,000 but was only able to come up with \$9,000. He made \$3,000 by checking himself into a medical research facility which was

testing a cholesterol lowering drug. Rodriguez also used some money he had saved. Also, his longtime friend Carlos Gallardo (who plays *El Mariachi*) sold some land to raise money.

Planning and Scripting: "Before I wrote the script, Carlos and I sat down and listed our assets. We had access to a school bus, two bars, a jail, motorcycle, a ranch, and a pitbull. So I wrote the film around these elements. "He had plenty of time to write while he was a "lab rat" in the research facility, and emerged 30 days later with a script. The script has a minimal amount of dialogue. Rodriguez planned to shoot MOS without slates. "I didn't want a lot of talking because I knew I'd be syncing the film by hand."

Casting: Gallardo was set to play *El Mariachi* although he had never acted before, and could neither sing nor play the guitar. Another non-actor, Peter Marquardt, who Rodriguez met in the research facility, convinced him to cast him as the mafioso, even though he didn't speak Spanish, the language of the film.

Equipment: Camera - Arri 16S, which was not designed for sound. It was so noisy that it sounded like "it was eating the film, which made us even more careful." Because the camera was old and out of use, Rodriguez was afraid that it might break down, so he had another reason for shooting as little film as possible.

Stock: Kodak 16mm 7292 and 7248 16mm film. Most shots were done in a single take, since he planned to re-shoot whatever didn't come out. When "everything came out, no re-shoots were necessary. "I did a lot of cutting in the camera." Since he wasn't shooting sound, he didn't have to waste film getting up to speed or with slates, and no takes were NG because of sound. They only had a single 400ft magazine with a counter that stopped working after 350 feet. Since he didn't know how much film he had left when the counter stopped, he'd "shoot cutaways, dream sequence stuff, and other things that didn't really matter."

Sound: Marantz tape recorder and Radio Shack mike. Rodriguez usually record two or three sound takes of each line. If he couldn't sync them with the picture takes later, "I would just do a cutaway to a dog or something else."

"I recorded everything at the same level so the background sound would match." He moved the mike closer or further away depending on how far the character talking was from the camera.

Crew: Rodriguez did almost everything himself, including the cinematography and the sound (which was possible because the sound takes were recorded after the picture takes). Gallardo would push him in a wheel chair for dolly shots and explode the squibs when there was any shooting. Rodriguez had one sometime assistant, who Gallardo nicknamed Mission Impossible "because he couldn't do anything right." The credit "A Two-Man Presentation" is no exaggeration.

Locations: *El Mariachi* was shot in Acuna, Mexico, (Gallardo's home town) which is just across the Texas border. The film was designed to be filmed on locations they could get for free. For meals they would go to Gallardo's house and eat his mom's home cooking.

Schedule: Fourteen days. "I intended to shoot longer. We might have been there three or four weeks but after one-and-a-half weeks of shooting, Rodriguez was told that the camera he had borrowed had been sold and must be returned. "We had four days to finish everything, so it got really hectic at the end'.

Working with Actors: "My actors never saw the script since I didn't want them to sound rehearsed. I would act out the scene for them, and give them their lines just before we shot the scene. I gave them a few lines at a time". In the case of Marquardt, he had to give him a line at a time phonetically, and sometimes just as part of a line. Because the film was shot MOS, he could feed actors their lines and direct the action while shooting.

***El Mariachi* Budget**

(provided by Robert Rodriguez)

Stock

12 400 ft rolls-Kodak 7292 (indoor):	\$1,1140
13 400 ft roll-Kodak 7248 (outdoor):	\$1,170
1 100 ft test roll (B+W):	\$19
sub-total:	\$2,329

Processing

25 400 ft roll, (13c per foot):	\$1,300
1 100 ft test roll:	\$23
sub-total:	\$323

Equipment

2 clip-on modeling lamps:	\$60
7 bulbs:	\$67
sub-total:	\$127

Miscellaneous

Acting fees:	\$225
Used guitar case:	\$16
3 sheets diffuser gels:	\$15
25 squibs:	\$50
Blanks (machine gun):	\$50

Fake blood. condoms (for squibs), gaffer tape. knick knacks, lens cleaner kit, extra bulb:	\$122
4 rolls 35mm production still film:	\$18
10 Maxell 11 audio cassettes:	\$23
6 197 Ampex 3/4" BLA 60s:	\$103
sub-total:	\$622

Post Production

Video transfer with overall color correction (28c per foot)*	\$2,824
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Grand Total:	\$7,225
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"This is a service where they do a sort of 'overall correction' when transferring to video. It's not the best color correction you can get, but they can fix over and under exposures, and keep faces from turning green. It's a hell of a bargain and all you really need."

(Total spent on film and developing, not including test roll: \$3610) - almost half the budget. So if you're measuring negative costs (not including video transfer), the movie cost less than \$5,000. But my budget represents the cost from conception to finished product.

Action Sequences: For the film's gunfights, Rodriguez filled condoms with fake blood (food coloring and Karo syrup). They were attached to a weight-lifting belt worn under the shirt of the character to be shot, and wires were run from squibs inside condoms to a D-cell battery. Since the belt could only be worn around the upper body, people in the film only get shot in the chest.

Total Cost of Getting the Film in Can: \$2,975 (without developing)

Post- production: Because he had no slates and hadn't recorded sync sound, it took Rodriguez as long to sync the dialogue as it took to cut picture - two and a half weeks. The film was edited on video. After a rough edit on 1/2" tape, Rodriguez borrowed two old Sony 3/4" machines and a switcher. He edited the film off-line since he had no time code to keep precise track of his cuts. "Once I cut a section during the final edit, I couldn't go back and fix it later." He just had to live with it. The sound mix was also difficult because the 3/4" machines were so primitive. He edited the sound effects at home on his 1/2" RCA camcorder (which had a flying erase head) and then transferred them to his 3/4" cassette that contained picture and dialogue. Then he added the music. He subtitled the

entire film using a character generator that he got access to through his local cable system. Without incurring the costs of making prints or cutting negative, he created a master that was a 3/4" videocassette that could be used to make 3/4" and 1/2" copies. Because *El Mariachi* had been shot on film, the copies looked like cassettes of a film.

Music: Rodriguez asked five different friends to write music simultaneously and didn't show any of them the film. I got two or three songs from each one. My brother and cousin wrote the *Mariachi* music. I had a different style for each character."

No-Budget Approach: "The key is having a low shooting ratio. By shooting one take of every shot, I saved a tremendous amount considering extra takes mean not only extra time filming and editing, but added film costs, developing costs, and in my case, video transfer costs. "Note: Shooting two takes instead of one would have made the final budget over \$13,000." "Careful planning and avoiding the temptation of shooting a second take just in case" saves tremendous dinero.

"Where I really saved was in shooting the movie silent. A lot of takes would have been blown due to unexpected drive-bys, noises, and all the things that usually blow a sound take, which I noticed more when it came time to record the sound. Since I was only using cassette tape for the sound, we could afford three of four audio takes to get a good_clean audio recording.

"Had I shot sync sound, I would have wasted a ton of film on simply running the camera to speed and slating the shot with a sync clapper, especially since a lot of my actors had never seen their lines. We would only shoot one or two lines at a time, so to have to run up to speed and clap each shot would have used up more film, and driven the cost up considerably.

"How I shot this film may not be the best way but it is a unique approach. We only had \$9,000 to spend, and necessity is the mother of invention, so that's how I came up with this method."

Credits:

Written, shot, directed, and edited by Robert Rodriguez.

Producers: Robert Rodriguez and Carlos Gallardo.

Cast: Carlos Gallardo, Consuelo Gomez, Peter Marquardt.

Distribution: Columbia Pictures.

Conclusion

While these films are very different, the no-budget approach methods used to produce them have much in common. The scripts for *Laws of Gravity* and *El Mariachi* were written to fit the budgets available, by maximizing the use of available resources and avoiding things that were unaffordable. On all three

films, ways were found to get essentials for free (e.g. camera equipment, crew) to minimize the cost of those things that had to be paid for (stock and processing costs were kept down via low shooting ratios) and to postpone expenditures whenever possible. Lighting requirements were reduced by using natural light and day exteriors extensively.

Limited amounts of time and energy were spent raising money. The emphasis was placed on making the money available go as far as possible. Each of the three films used a two-part strategy to do this: they figured out ways to get the film in the can for as little cash as possible, and then to only make the post-production expenditures that were essential to getting a showable copy of the film. In the cases of *Laws of Gravity* and *The Living End*, this was a single print that could go to festivals and attract a distributor. Once a distribution deal was signed, other expenditures necessary for distribution could be made. All three films used festivals skillfully.

These three writer-directors also have much in common. They all had learned a great deal from their previous filmmaking experiences and mistakes. They all had a realistic idea of how they could make a film on a tiny budget, and were determined to do it. They were each able to assemble and get the most out of a dedicated cast and crew. *Laws of Gravity* used a larger crew and more rented equipment and thus had to shoot on the shortest, most intense schedule. *El Mariachi* and *The Living End* had smaller crews and fewer rentals and planned more leisurely shooting schedules. *El Mariachi* would have been shot over three or four weeks if the camera hadn't been reclaimed. *The Living End* shot on and off over four months, allowing the actors with jobs to keep working (since the film couldn't afford to pay them).

In the end the careful planning, ingenuity, and determination of these three groups of filmmakers paid off beyond their expectations. Their legacy for other independent filmmakers - the inspiration to JUST DO IT!

Filmmaker would like to thank Andrea Sperling, Gregg Araki, Nick Gomez, Jean de Segonzac, Bob Gosse, and Robert Rodriguez for their generous help in supplying budgets and answering questions.

A FILM FOR A SONG

Robert Rodriguez's Garage Movie

By Peter Broderick

If Robert Rodriguez didn't exist, independent filmmakers would have to invent him - an unknown 23-year old makes a terrific first feature for \$7,000, is snapped up by ICM, signed to a two-picture deal by Columbia, and then applauded at the Telluride and Toronto film festivals. It sounds too good to be true, but I saw the film, *El Mariachi* at the Toronto film festival where I met Rodriguez. He really does exist, the film is a startling debut, and the story of his development as a filmmaker is as remarkable as it is inspiring. Rodriguez got hooked on movies when he was young, at a San Antonio revival theater, he loved action-adventure films and comedies. After his father bought an early model VCR and camera, he started making video shorts.

"I'm from a family of ten children, so there was a seemingly endless supply of cast and crew. Inspired by Hitchcock, early Spielberg, and Scorsese, he wanted to make films with a lot of movement. "The more action I could generate, the more fun it was to do."

After making numerous shorts, he entered the University of Texas but couldn't get into the film department because his grades weren't high enough. Soon after his compilation of three shorts, *Austin Stories*, won first prize at the Third Coast Film and Video Competition, he confronted the chairman of the film department. "I beat your students. Can I get in the department now?" he asked, and was finally accepted. Rodriguez remembers, I didn't have the money to rent equipment. I wanted to be in the film department for the free equipment. I didn't go there to learn how to tell a story."

Determined to make an award-winning short, he wrote a script with his younger brother David; carefully storyboarded it; shot a preliminary version on video; and then participated in a drug-testing study to earn the cash he needed. Using his brothers and sisters as the cast, he made his first 16mm film, *Bedhead*, which he shot handheld with no crew. He filmed only one or two takes, cutting in the camera. *Bedhead* won awards at festivals across the country and gave him the confidence to do a feature. "Since it was eight minutes long and cost \$800, I figured I could make a 80 minute feature for \$8,000."

Rodriguez and his close friend Carlos Gallardo decided to make an action film which they believed they could sell to the Spanish- language home video market for \$20,000. They planned to make a trilogy, financing the second and third features with the profits they would make from selling home video rights.

Rodriguez firmly believes that "if you want to make movies, the best way is to make movies since you get better with each one." The planned *El Mariachi* trilogy was designed to improve Rodriguez's skills, before he made his first "real film." *El Mariachi* was not designed as a resume film since "no one is going to do a \$7,000 action movie to get work." His belief that "no one would ever see *El Mariachi* freed him to cut corners he would not have dared to cut if he had believed that his future was at stake.

Rodriguez's goal was simply to sell the film for enough to finance a sequel and give him more practice. He wanted to tell the video company it had cost \$70,000, "so we tried to make it look big with lots of action and cuts, and as much production value as possible."

Shot in August 1991, the film was finished before Thanksgiving. *El Mariachi* came in way under budget - only \$7,225 was spent of the \$9,000 raised. Rodriguez went to Los Angeles to sell the film to a Spanish language video company in December. While there, he dropped off a trailer for the film at ICM (International Creative Management), one of Hollywood's most influential talent agencies. Robert Newman, director of special projects at ICM, agreed to represent Rodriguez. While Rodriguez kept waiting for the home video company to finish the paperwork to acquire US and Mexican rights to the film for \$20,000, Newman sent cassettes of *El Mariachi* to the major studios. For Rodriguez, it was as if "my trunk novel was going around to all the publishers." In April, Columbia (the studio of another young phenomenon, John Singleton) signed Rodriguez to a two-year writing/directing deal. Columbia also acquired the worldwide distribution rights to *El Mariachi*, and discussed the possibility of an English language remake or sequel. According to Rodriguez, "I asked them what they considered a low budget. They told me \$7 million. I told them I could make one thousand *El Mariachis* for that. I would have enough films to fill my own cable network."

Once Columbia acquired *El Mariachi*, Rodriguez had the resources to cut the movie on film. He had to laboriously sync it again, and then edit it by continually comparing it to the cassette. He was able to tighten up some things, and add some sound effects - better gun shots, traffic. Columbia also paid for subtitling and a 35mm blow up. Rodriguez estimated that the blow up cost \$100,000 and noted that the Columbia logo now attached to *El Mariachi* "probably cost more than my whole movie."

Under his deal, Rodriguez owes Columbia two scripts - one is expected to be for a second *El Mariachi*. In his future scripts he intends to create parts for Hispanics. "There aren't enough Hispanic actors working in Hollywood, nor are there many positive Latin roles." Rodriguez remains a firm believer in no-budget filmmaking. He was shocked when a friend who wanted to follow the same path called to tell him he had just spent \$20,000 making a four-minute short with a full, paid crew and a Steadicam operator. "Part of the problem with student films with 100 people in the credits is that you can't tell what exactly is the director's talent. On *El Mariachi*, I took the credit - or blame for the writing, direction, camerawork, and editing." He then added, "The nice thing about making a movie by yourself is that you can take credit for any aspect of it anyone likes."

His experience has made Rodriguez even more convinced that filmmakers must figure out ways to make films with whatever resources are available. "A lot of people are sitting around waiting for someone to hand them money. It's never going to happen."

A Song for A Film

The one song we see the mariachi sing on camera was composed and recorded in less than an hour. Rodriguez worked with a musician who was on a lunch break from his job. "He was expected to write the song magically before our eyes, and he did. We

were desperate. The first notes he started playing as a warm-up became the song. I videotaped him as he composed it so he wouldn't forget what he had just played. We then wrote on verse, and that was all we needed for the movie. We recorded the song right there after he composed it. One take with words; one take without.

"That was midday, and we didn't actually film the scene until later that night. This gave the mariachi some time to practice lip-sync and guitar fingerings. If you watch the movie closely, you realize that wasn't enough time for him to practice. He syncs the first line perfectly, but after that he is all over the place. So in the final edit you see him singing only the first line and parts of two other lines. The camera stays on the girl through the majority of the scene. I used everything I had shot of the girl to fill those holes. Over-all, it came out well considering my mariachi can't sing or play guitar, and that the composer wrote the song under the gun."