

Beating The Odds For Finishing Your Low-Budget Film

By independent filmmaker Dave Paull

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The thing is, we care about a film we badly want to make and start shooting it right away, without having much money or actual experience to back it up. Believe me, I've been there.

We call it guerrilla filmmaking, but let's be honest—guerrillas at least get to enjoy the serenity of the forest. Me? I'm standing in a parking lot outside a post office in Cougar, Washington, trying to get a boozy guy named George to talk about Bigfoot. It's less "Heart of Darkness" and more "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

Filmmaking, for me, is a high wire act of balancing inspiration with the urge to cut my losses and admit defeat. Nothing goes right, everything costs money I don't have—and inevitably, someone wipes the SD card containing an entire day's worth of parade scenes and interviews.

And yet, I keep going—why? Because eventually, long after a studio-quality microphone tumbles off my car roof at 20 mph and a featured guest does a disappearing act, there's a golden glow of creative grace—as when our drone's camera pans across rolling green farm fields and distant, rain-shrouded mountains. Really.

This is not a how-to. It's a how-not-to, told with love, incredulous disbelief, and gratitude, not only for the finished film, but also for the loyal volunteer crew members who stuck with it - and with me. Welcome to my world. Bring some Scooby Snacks.

A Drunken Spoof

Let's say you're trying to coax the town drunk to do an interview for your Bigfoot documentary, *Searching for Sasquatch*. He's come into town to pick up his mail at the post office in Cougar, Washington, near the Mt. St. Helens wilderness. He's talking with his cronies and smelling a bit boozy as you step up and introduce yourself. That's after a quick conference with your cameraman, Carl Winston, who agrees to stay back and act casual so as not to spook the guy.

George lives up in the heavily-wooded hills, where he's spent most of his life. His grizzled mountain man vibe will look good on camera. Then he starts telling stories. True or not, they sound fantastic. George says he lives near a ridge line above the town

and he hears sounds late at night that he knows aren't made by a bear or a cougar, sounds that seem almost human, "like Bigfoot, ya know?"

You signal Carl to move up closer to get this recorded on video. "How'd you like to answer a few questions," you ask George. He shuffles his feet, looking off in the distance. "Oh, I suppose you want me to sign some kind of release form, huh?" he says. "Well yes, we have a release form for you" I reply. "How about it?" He frowns.

"Nah. I'm not signing any form" George says. "I got chores to do." With that, he climbs into his battered pickup truck and drives off. So there goes what sounded like a colorful segment for your Sasquatch film, an interview with a genuine character who was probably just pulling your leg to amuse himself.

Lesson: Always get permission first, before rolling camera. Have release forms ready, and realize that people might refuse.

What If They Say No

Or how about the video interview you and cameraman Carl record with a newspaper publisher in Roswell, New Mexico for your UFO documentary *Roswell Revisited*? The publisher has just finished hosting a panel discussion about the Roswell incident, which his newspaper covered as a breaking news story in 1947. He references his paper's archival research of the original reporting and how the government dictated the weather balloon story to the news media back in the day.

The publisher refuses to grant permission for you to use his compelling on-camera interview unless you sign a release form promising to pay his newspaper \$1,000. He even mentions that he might seek legal counsel if you don't sign. Eventually, though, he agrees to drop the fee as long as you promise to use the interview only once.

Lesson: Clarify usage rights up front — get a signed release form before you film.

Then there is the live action Sci-Fi film that you are producing, *Wordspeaker*. It's a rare venture outside of making documentaries. Your crew is able to shoot with a single actor in one day. It's been a long time coming, after the script was written and the actor was finally convinced to perform the role, just days before his scheduled cancer surgery. After eight hours of shooting it is 'in the can' as they used to say in Hollywood.

But the director of photography (DP) takes a hard turn and drops out of the project. He has researched the *Wordspeaker* actor online and believes he has satanic connections,

someone he doesn't want to help promote. You sure didn't see that one coming. Trouble is the DP has possession of the only copy of the video he shot and won't hand it over for editing. Only after a quick trip to the mortuary where he works will he meekly give you the DV video cassettes three months later. Says they'd been available all along where he kept them, locked in the glove box of his hearse.

Lesson: *Vet your team. Only give control of your footage to someone you trust.*

Budgeting Realities

There are often funding problems, always one of the hardest things about filmmaking. Your editor wants to be paid from your film's budget, but there isn't one. Expenses are self-funded out of your personal checking account. At the time, I didn't realize how important having a budget really is. The editor wants \$500, which is less than the going rate and very reasonable. In the end, producing *Roswell Revisited* including airfare, car rental, motel and editing costs a mere \$1,500. Fortunately, cameraman Carl is willing to split the expenses. Note to self: next time figure out the money thing as you begin pre-production planning.

Lesson: *Budget early and make sure your team signs on with clear financial expectations.*

'The one that got away' is an example of a derailed documentary. You craft a cute title for it, *The Little Cafe That Could*. Susan is the sole proprietor of a popular cafe in an historic neighborhood and she wants to celebrate 25 years of being in business. She invites you to create a documentary about it. Since you frequently hang out at her great little cafe, you immediately say yes and sign up a videographer to get going on preproduction. It's a story rich with the local history of Italian and Jewish immigrants who built homes and shops nearby.

Yet again there is a money obstacle that seems insurmountable, and ultimately, it is. You show Susan a one minute fundraising 'pitch trailer' that you've carefully crafted, encouraging viewers to contribute money to the project on the crowd sourcing website Indiegogo. That's so you can pay the cameraman/editor for his many hours of work. Trouble is, she doesn't like it.

Susan doesn't want her cafe to be perceived as begging for donations. You spell out more details about how you plan to pitch the project to potential donors, but Susan is highly skeptical and won't allow it. "Why would you need money, anyway?" she asks. As a filmmaker, it's sometimes best to cut your loses and walk away.

Lesson: *Discuss fundraising strategies early, before production begins.*

Technical Pitfalls And Assorted Catastrophes

Then there are the inevitable technical issues, such as when you discover, too late, that there was no mic connection to the camera during all the location scenes you shot near the Mt. St. Helens wilderness, even though you and cameraman Carl checked the microphone cable and it was plugged in the whole time. Fortunately, the onboard condenser mic works well. Then having to drive out of state to a friend's house where he can convert your *Searching for Sasquatch* DV video tape files to digital. Yes, DV still lives!

Gotta say here that my audio is always clear and present because I usually use a digital voice recorder for up-close-and-personal interviews (wish I'd had it for the Sasquatch project). I hold the recorder up to the person being interviewed as I would a regular mic, sometimes asking the interviewee to hold it themselves if it's a sit-down interview. So the voice recorder acts as a wireless mic, if you don't have one. An extra step is required, though, because the editor will have to sync the audio/video tracks.

There's no excuse, though, for what I did with a mic after an acting gig in the short film *Reunion*. I heard an odd thumping sound as we drove away from the filming location and remembered too late that I'd set the microphone on the roof of the car while we were packing up to leave. The film crew and I searched along the roadside, but didn't find it. I returned weeks later, using a metal detector, probing through grass and weeds, but all I came up with was a few dented pop cans. Goodbye studio-quality mic, one of my all time favorites.

Lesson: *Check the audio and video recording while you're still on location. Also, don't leave stuff on the roof of your car.*

Guests Who Bail And Parade Footage Does, Too

What if your main on-camera guest is a no-show? We are shooting *The McMinnville Mystery*, a documentary at the annual McMenamings UFO festival that draws several thousand visitors to McMinnville, Oregon every spring. I feel fortunate to have a rare two-camera shoot set up in a hotel meeting room. When it becomes clear that the published paranormal author I'd invited isn't coming I feel suddenly stressed. We only have use of the room for one hour. While the crew waits, I dash downstairs to the crowded hotel lobby, holding a hand-lettered sign that cameraman Carl made. It reads "UFO Stories wanted."

I'm on a fishing expedition, walking through the lobby, pointing to the sign, hoping to reel in a tale or two. But wait, here comes someone I recognize with a bushy dark beard. He's the founder of the NW Flying Saucer Film Festival. "Vince!" I call out. Perfect. He's just the guy we need. (I know Vince from having entered a couple of my documentaries in his festival). Upstairs, the bearded one with a twinkle in his eye sits down for what turns into a thoughtful interview about extraterrestrials. Vince's musing could become one of the main set pieces to anchor our paranormal documentary.

Except for one thing: the camera #2 video of that interview, plus video of the entire alien costume parade and a dozen street interviews is gone. The SD card was left in the camera, later used by someone else who erased it all. Poof! So it's no longer a two-camera shoot. Once again, Carl on camera #1 saves the day (we hope). Note to self: remind your videographers to keep their SD card safe - or IN a safe, if necessary.

Lesson: Reconfirm guest appearances. Label and lock up those dang SD cards.

That's A Wrap

This grab bag of snafus gives you a behind-the-scenes-look at possible 'hiccups' for low-budget filmmaking. I use the jump-in-and go method, which has its limitations. For me, though, it gets the project up and running, forcing me to innovate and problem solve. That's why I make films, to catch inspiration and expand a creative story, allowing it to go places I didn't expect.

There are obvious things you'll need that can be anticipated, including a budget, and having a script with a shot list, and a stack of release forms. Pro tip: check playback of your audio/video while you're still on location so you can fix potential glitches. And for gosh sakes protect those SD cards.

The payoff for me as a film whisperer is what I call 'the golden glow' of thankfulness and gratitude after the documentary is polished and ready for screening.

While it's unlikely that the same problems will crop up for your project, there will be unexpected challenges. Be ready to pivot and improvise. Your script is the starting point, but allow for changes to your film's blueprint. Flexibility is important. If the sky should fall, have a Scooby Snack and maybe you can fix it in post.