



Bright Spots

As the economy turns around, a market expands.

February 27, 2004

By Fred Cisterna

A number of production and postproduction shops in the Southwest report a recent upswing in the region's business—for some modest, for others a deluge—possibly reflecting the upturn in the nation's economy.

"It's been crazy for the last six months," says Jeremy Besser, partner/executive producer at Directorz, Dallas, and president of the Southwest chapter of the Association of Independent Commercial Producers (AICP). "We've been about as busy as we can be."

Recent jobs out of Directorz include an AT&T Wireless spot directed by Jeff Bednarz via Gotham, New York; a Denny's commercial helmed by Tom Ryan through Publicis, Dallas; and a Volvo ad directed by Jean-Marc Piche, out of Euro RSCG MVBMS, New York.

Besser says that production crew activity—which seems to be on the rise—is a good indicator of how business is faring. "We're hearing a lot less complaints from crew members," he notes. "That's where you always hear it the most. Right now, it seems like everybody's busy."

While business is good, John Gilliland, executive producer at Directorz, notes that in the big picture, business has changed in the Southwest over the past five years. "The big change for us has been there's almost no regional-ness to it anymore," he comments. "It's a global marketplace and we all have to compete with every company in the country on every job, and [as a result] we don't really look at it as a regional business at all."

Directorz has always sought work outside of the Southwest, something Gilliland feels has served his shop well. "This has never been a regional company," he asserts. "It's always been a national company that's located in a regional market."

Executive producer Justin Corsbie of Synthetic Pictures, Austin, Texas, says business is up, but things could be busier. "We've been pretty lucky to have some steady clients to anchor our business," he adds.

The economic downturn of recent years has led Synthetic to branch out beyond commercials. "With spots slowing down, it allowed us to dedicate some time to entertainment projects that we have always been trying to get off the ground," says Corsbie. For instance, he plans to pitch a television comedy series, and director/DP Richard Kooris, who is on Synthetic's roster, is co-executive producing and serving as cinematographer on an independent film called *Drop Dead Sexy* starring Crispin Glover and Jason Lee, and directed by Michael Philip. The movie is being produced by Mythos Studios, the movie unit of Austin

agency GSD&M; Tim McClure, co-founder of the ad shop, is serving as an executive producer.

Spot production is essential to the Lone Star State, according to Tom Copeland, director of the Texas Film Commission. "Even though motion pictures and television take up a great deal of our time," says Copeland, "the bread and butter is—and probably always will be—commercials."

Copeland notes that in terms of features and spotwork, a great deal of the business is generated within the state. "A lot of our business is home grown," he says. "We don't depend upon importing [business] as much as some places do because [Texas] is a regional hub for a lot of people—both Dallas and Houston on the commercial side, and on the major feature side we have directors like Robert Rodriguez, Richard Linklater, Tim McCanlies and Mike Judge. These people can get major funding to do the films they want to do, and they live here."

Synthetic does a roughly even mix of work for Southwest agencies and shops from other areas. "We have to tap every market across the country that we can," says Corsbie. "We get the nod from some of the larger agencies that are here in our backyard—and even some of the smaller and regional agencies that are here—because of proximity and the relationships we have with people. But we're definitely going after work from agencies all over the country."

About half of Synthetic's spots are for national broadcast. Recent jobs include Champs/Reebok's "Doc's Pitch," helmed by Anibal Suarez via agency AKA, New York; and Wal-Mart/DreamWorks' "Gingy Intro," directed and shot by Kooris via GSD&M.

Robert Latorre, owner/director of Big Fish Films, Dallas, says business has improved recently, but overall campaigns are smaller these days, which has led to the need to do other projects. "There are still spots being done, but the volume is considerably less," he observes. "Instead of doing four or five spots on a campaign, they do two or three."

So it's no surprise that Big Fish is also diversifying. The shop has completed a music documentary, directed by Latorre, and is looking to do other longform projects. "We're exploring the possibility of doing some low-budget features," he says. "I think before long, Big Fish Films will have produced and directed a feature."

Latorre says he doesn't get much work from Texas agencies, and instead does work for shops in cities such as New Orleans; Memphis; Little Rock, Ark.; and Birmingham, Ala., along with occasional jobs from companies such as DDB Chicago or Young & Rubicam, New York. In addition to Latorre, there are six other directors on the Big Fish roster.

Recently, Latorre directed "Bear" and "Suit" for the Tennessee Department of Transportation via Chandler Ehrlich, Memphis; a package for restaurant chain Golden Corral, including the spot "Food," via The Richards Group, Dallas; and several spots for Farm Credit Services of Illinois, out of Chandler Ehrlich, including "A Friend" and "Next Generation."

Post Time

Last year, Laszlo Rain, a production house with an expanding postproduction arm based in San Antonio, moved into a new facility and expanded their services. The company

posted a banner year in 2003, producing 130 commercials, more than they had done in the previous three years combined. "I think that whatever was holding up the budgets was shook loose last year," says director Tom Nador, who heads up the shop. "We have not slowed down since the beginning of 2003."

Nador says his company is now courting new markets, as well as local business. "We've put our feelers out into the national and international client base," he relates. "That's where I think the extra attention is coming from—other markets we've never tapped into before. We've had quite a bit of shakeup [in San Antonio] in the last year or two. The creatives are going all over the place, and when the creatives move on to a new shop, they tend to [want to work with the same vendors]. Word of mouth is what's taken us into new markets."

Moving to a five-acre campus and adding editing suites has allowed Nador's company to handle more work, he says. Recently, Laszlo Rain entered into a relationship with editorial house Red Car, whereby Laszlo Rain's new facility hosts the San Antonio office of Red Car. (Red Car also has offices in New York, Chicago, Santa Monica, San Francisco, Dallas and Buenos Aires.) As well as working on Red Car jobs, Red Car artisans are now available for Laszlo Rain projects, and the partnership has opened doors for the shop. "We're going in and getting bids that we would never have been considered for before," says Nador.

About 30 percent of Laszlo Rain's jobs are for the Hispanic market, including a pair of Center for Disease Control spots helmed by Rocky Lane through Garcia 360, San Antonio; and American Cancer Society's "If Athletes Smoked," directed by Nador via Creative Civilization, San Antonio.

The post market in the Southwest is a thriving industry. "I don't think that the Southwest area has any lack of great technology in terms of competing with either coast or anywhere else," says Richard Gillespie, owner/ editor of Fast Cuts, Dallas, and national president of the Association of Independent Creative Editors (AICE).

"In the area of talent, there are some very skilled people," he continues. "In the editorial community, we've got some terrific editors [and] great finishing people. I think we've got some specialties emerging in the Southwest in terms of animation companies. It's helping some of the work to stay in the market that maybe in the past would have gone to either of the coasts." Recent jobs out of Fast Cuts include Peditasure's "Kids," helmed by Rob Lieberman of Form, Los Angeles, through Publicis, Dallas, and edited by Gillespie; and Zales' "True Brand," directed by Marcus Nispel of bicoastal/ international Morton Jankel Zander (MJZ) via Publicis in Dallas, and edited by Marc Hoffmeister of Fast Cuts.

Gillespie's shop has three Avid Media Composers, two Avid DS Suites (one of which is HD), and two recently added Digidesign ProTools that are linked via Avid Unity. "Having a central server has made for some very strong technological abilities to do work," says Gillespie, noting that his shop now has the ability to have all of its machines working on the same project at the same time. "It's made for some terrific interrelationships where we can do multiple tasking."

Success on the post front is not necessarily confined to Texas. Blade Editorial, a post facility in Phoenix that opened last year, reports that business has been good. "Obviously, we're coming out of a recession, so everybody is beginning to start shooting commercials again," says Louise Parker, president/executive producer of Blade. "Just in the last two

months, we've seen an incredible increase in the amount of productions being shot in the area."

Recent spots out of Blade include: "Ram," for the Phoenix Zoo out of the Phoenix office of agency R&R Partners, and directed by Mark Trengove of Trengove Films, Phoenix; and a two-spot package, "Couch" and "Dealership," for Casino Arizona out of Riester-Robb Advertising, Phoenix. The shop is currently posting a feature, *Forget About It*, starring Burt Reynolds and Raquel Welch, which was shot and finished in high definition; and it just finished a PBS documentary that is part of the *Monumental Arizona* series. About 60 percent of the shop's work is for HD projects. "For us, it's been huge because we went the HD route with the Quantel eQ," says Parker. "Having HD capability has certainly given us a completely different foothold in this market."