

Erik Weigel, Director of El Camino

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Set against a changing American landscape, EL CAMINO follows Lily (Elisabeth Moss, from AMC's Mad Men) as she travels across the country with Gray (Chris Denham) and Elliot (Leo Fitzpatrick) with their friend's ashes in hand. As these young adults confront their unrealized selves and their grief, nothing happens the way they expect.

We got a chance to catch up with Erik Weigel, Director of El Camino, and among other things, ask him about the production of El Camino.

Indiefilmchat: Tell us a little about your background and how you came to (make films.

Erik Weigel: I grew up in San Francisco in a very creative family, my mother is a talented painter and exposed me to different art forms. At a young age she took me to a lot of films, going to the movies was one of our favorite things to do and was a special treat. I have always been drawn to writing creative stories, and I originally was a literature major in college. After briefly studying psychology and studio arts, I found that filmmaking really encompassed all these interests. I graduated with a degree in film production and moved to New York to pursue my career. After a brief stint as a chef and a bar back, I began teaching film production and making my own projects.

Indiefilmchat: Of all the storylines you could have pursued, why did you (choose to tell this one?

EW: In 2004 an ex-girlfriend passed away, and I turned to writing to help me deal with this loss. What began as a type of therapy quickly evolved into a storyline and soon developed into a screenplay. The process of telling this story and of making the film really helped me to deal with the loss of my friend. ((

I also felt that the story was very relevant to where our country was at the time. It is very much a story of finding your own identity and defining yourself as an individual. I think as a society, the U.S. was really searching for an identity as well, in the midst of a war, on the verge of a recession, and with a government that was very out of touch with the people, I felt that people were really questioning what our country now stood for and how they as individuals would define themselves in this new era.(

I also always wanted to make a "road trip" movie. Beautiful scenery, great music, I love road movies.

Indiefilmchat: Critics have pointed out the unique tone and narrative(sensibility of El Camino. Were you consciously aware of trying to tell a(familiar story in a new way?

EW: I knew I wanted to do a "road trip" movie, which is a very traditional American genre in film, but I really wanted the focus to be on the characters. To me it was important for the journey to effect and change the characters without them fully being aware of that change. I feel that too often in filmmaking we get trapped by the plot, and the story points dictate the film, rather than allowing the characters to experience and evolve in the environment that is created in the film. This is also why it was so important to me that we actually made the cross country trip, that the actors and crew were experiencing the journey, and being effected in their own way. I think this process translated well in the film, and really gave the sense of an introspective personal journey that doesn't rely on traditional plot points or forced story lines in order to move the story forward.

Indiefilmchat: How did you go about financing El Camino and how long did(that process take?

EW: The film was really a personal project and I turned to everyone I knew who had been supportive and interested in my career and past projects. I had made a short film called 'Gravity' a couple of years earlier that was very well received, so that was kind of my calling card to show that I knew how to tell a story and make a good film. Once I had the script for "El Camino" I developed a very detailed business proposal, outlining how the film would be made, who would be involved, how we would market and distribute the film, etc, and with the script and business plan I approached, family, friends, business associates, anyone that had shown interest in my career. All together it took about 8 months to raise financing. I was very lucky that I have extremely supportive and generous people around me.

Indiefilmchat: How long was your shooting schedule?

EW: We shot the film in 32 days.

Indiefilmchat: As an observer of independent film, I believe you did(everything right in assembling the production of El Camino. How did you go(about assembling your cast and crew for this production?

EW: From the beginning I knew this would be a unique project in the sense that we would be a crew of approximately 30 people traveling cross country together for over a month. I wanted to put together a team that I was familiar with and could rely upon to make this project a success. My fellow producers, Fran GIBLIN and Jason Noto had worked with me on several other projects, the cinematographer Till Neumann had shot my film "Gravity", and the co-writer, Sal Interlandi had also collaborated on several projects, including being the lead actor in "Gravity". I turned to this group of talented people to come on board to help make this film with me. We then assembled the rest of our crew, looking for the most talented people we knew, that we could handle spending a month on the road with.((

When it came to casting, I brought on casting directors, Brette Goldstein and Andrea Shane, to help us assemble the talent. We auditioned numerous people and ultimately came up with a wonderful cast. I was able to meet with our lead actors, Elisabeth Moss, Leo Fitzpatrick, and Christopher Denham a couple of times before shooting to discuss the characters, but also to get a sense for each other and build a level of comfort. We mostly discussed personal experiences, stories that related to the characters, it was very important to me that the actors had some experience of loss, that they knew the process of grieving. And of course, as with the crew, we had to be able to put up with each other for a month on the road.

Indiefilmchat: Did you set out to cast with name actors from the beginning(or did that evolve?

EW: Early on I knew I wanted to cast Leo in the role of "Elliot". I had really liked him in previous films, and he has a quirky yet thoughtful quality that really matched well with "Elliot". After auditioning and talking with him, I really felt he had the perfect sensibility for the role. Elisabeth was a suggestion from the casting directors, and after the audition, I knew she would be perfect for "Lily". Chris was a late addition to the cast and was a suggestion from our casting directors. We had a difficult time casting the role of "Gray", and when Chris came in to audition I was so happy that we had waited to cast the role, he was really what I had pictured and he brought so much to the role. For the role of "Dave" I knew I wanted to get a "name" actor, as it is a small supporting role shot over 2 days, I felt we could get a strong name actor to get involved. After several different ideas I came up with the idea of approaching Wes Studi, and after reading the script he came onto the film and brought a great quality to the role.

Indiefilmchat: How would you suggest other independent filmmakers approach(talented name actors)?

EW: The whole process of reaching out to name actors was new to me and was very daunting in the beginning, but I was surprised at how accessible people are. With that said, I would never cast another feature project without a casting director, their connections and knowledge are invaluable and they can really help your project by putting together a great cast. Also, in the end I am a strong believer that it always comes down to the script, if a name actor loves a script they will often make sacrifices in order to play the part.

Indiefilmchat: El Camino is graced with remarkable performances, especially(by Elisabeth Moss. How much creative input did the actors have in how their(characters developed)?

EW: I came in to the process with the characters fairly well defined, but I think it is always important to get the actors involved with developing their characters. I like working with actors that draw upon their own experiences to help to better understand and fill out their character. I asked each of the actors to write a personal story about an experience of loss to help them connect to their characters and to give me better insight into their personal experiences. We also talked a lot about wardrobe and style, the addition of "Gray's" jewelry and accessories was a suggestion made by Chris, and Elisabeth was very much involved with discussions about "Lily's" wigs and make-up. From the beginning we discussed the overall growth of each of their characters, and as we traveled we continued to explore how the characters evolved and responded to situations. The cast brought a lot to their characters and the overall film.

Indiefilmchat: Road films have been a staple of American independent cinema(for decades. Were you influenced by any earlier films of this genre, and if(so, which ones and how)?

EW: I love the American road film genre, its a very classic setting for some great films. "Easy Rider" was a big influence in how we shot this film, the cinematography of Lazslo Kovacs and the open feeling of being on the road, were very inspiring. I also drew from films like "Y tu Mama Tambien", "Thelma & Louise", and "My Own Private Idaho". In all these films there is really a journey of self discovery and a bonding of friendships and relationships, the characters learn about each other and themselves through the process of the journey, that was what I wanted to achieve with "El Camino".

Indiefilmchat: Overall, who are your favorite filmmakers and what are your(favorite films)?

EW: This is always a difficult question. I am probably most influenced by Terrence Malick in terms of style, environment and mood. All his films are among my favorites and I often draw upon his style in my own filmmaking. I am a fan of Julian Schnabel's films, "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" was amazing. There are a lot of filmmakers that I admire that have very different styles than myself as well, Wong Kar Wai, Jim Jarmusch, Lars Von Trier, Steven Soderbergh, Andre Tarkovsky, Gus Van Sant, Mike Leigh; there are so many great filmmakers that I draw interest from.

Indiefilmchat: Please share one war story from the production that you and(your team overcame.

EW: To be honest there were not that many war stories. We had the usual production growing pains, but nothing major. I would say the biggest issues were a hurricane that we had to deal with in North Carolina, and we lost the passenger side front door to the picture vehicle at one point, it just fell off. But we replaced it, had it painted and were back on the road. All in all it was a pretty smooth production.

Indiefilmchat: Technically, the film looks great. What led you to use hi(definition? Did you shoot on it or transfer? And was

it that much more(money?)

EW: In the past I had worked with both film and HD cameras, and while I love the look of 35MM, the freedom and ease of HD is great for independent filmmakers. At the time of production, the Panasonic HVX200 was the camera of choice for low budget independent films looking for a good quality HD camera. I had used the camera on several other projects and I was impressed. We met with a Panasonic representative who made some suggestions in terms of shooting style and the capabilities of the camera. We ended up using a lens adapter which allowed us to use 35MM film lenses which gave us room in terms of depth of field and image quality. ((

Also, because of our constant movement, we needed a camera that allowed us to move fairly quickly. The HVX200 is a pretty compact and light camera so that was ideal. The relatively inexpensive cost of the camera also allowed us to rent 2 of them, so we were able to have a B unit camera for much of the scenic photography, it also gave us a safety net if something happened to one of the cameras.((

We were lucky in terms of timing, because Apple literally released the software update the week that we wrapped shooting which allowed us to edit in 1080p resolution. This made it possible to edit in full image quality and saved us money by not having to off-line and do an on-line session later. We traveled with an editing system which allowed us to watch dailies, and we burned back ups of the P2 cards onto 8GB DVD's so that we had the footage in case anything happened to our drives. The ease of the work flow was really valuable.((Financially, the decision to shoot HD was less than if we had shot film. We were able to get a great price on the camera rental, and we did not have to deal with processing and transfer costs, not to mention film stock. With the new advances in cameras, I am looking forward to continuing to shoot HD, film is not dead, but HD is taking over.

Indiefilmchat: What was your favorite part of this process?

EW: I enjoyed the whole process of making this film. There were a few moments where I was able to step back and take everything in. Standing in the middle of the desert with all these people, cameras, lights, actors, everyone coming together to help create your vision; it's a pretty amazing feeling.

Indiefilmchat: What was your least favorite part of this process?

EW: I am not a huge fan of promotion, I love the process of making a film, after that I feel the film should speak for itself . . . but it doesn't work that way.

Indiefilmchat: What is your next project?

EW: I have a few projects in the works. I am producing a project called "The Red Envelope", a story about a young hustler in NY who gets indebted to the Chinese mafia, that will be fun to shoot. Also, I will direct a project about a group of 4 friends that go camping in the Catskills, but only 1 of them makes it back. It's a look at random violence and the struggle for power among men. Another one of my projects, "The Landing", deals with a plane crash and a family's loss of a child, it's a beautiful story. That will be a big one, hopefully.

Indiefilmchat: Any general advice for aspiring filmmakers?

EW: I am still figuring it out myself, but I would say that you should make films any way you can. When people tell you it has to be done a certain way, or that you will never be able to make your film, prove them wrong and figure out how to make it happen. Then do it again, and then again. You can't call yourself a filmmaker unless you're making films. ((

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