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where music meets moxie



MOX-IE (N.)

- 1 ABILITY TO FACE DIFFICULTY WITH SPIRIT & COURAGE.
- 2 AGGRESSIVE ENERGY, INITIATIVE.
- 3 SKILL, KNOW-OW.

featured noisemaker

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The Music+Moxie Interview: Glen Heggstad

Feb 02 2012

The Music+Moxie Interview: Johnny Otto

The Music+Moxie Interview: Johnny Otto entertain us, interviews

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In the third installment of Project Culture Cred we talked to indie film-maker and enfant terrible Johnny Otto. Johnny has long held a special place in our hearts as the mad genius who gave us the *Slimdunce: 7 movies in 7 days* short film series that forever changed our lives. When we started project culture cred, we knew we needed this Woody Allen meets Tim Burton meets David Lynch character to speak with us if we wanted to ensure our 'cred' in 'culture cred' had any real, well, cred.

How did you first become interested in film-making?

When I was a kid, very young, maybe 5, my dad would go to the library where you could check out 8mm films and a projector...he would get Heckle & Jeckle films, Under Dog, Mighty Mouse, and I think some Popeye. Our family would gather in the family room in the basement, set up a screen, make some popcorn and watch these really cool cartoons!! It was very surreal how the only thing alive in the darkness, the only thing moving or making noise, were these flashing images. I was wowed immediately!! Blew me away. Like seeing visitors from another dimension. The dimension of creativity, I guess. It was like looking into someone else's mind. I got hooked. When you're that young you are impressionable so anything you see that is strange or different is thought of as being magical...otherworldly. That's what these short films were to me. They were unlike anything I had ever seen and I had no idea how they were made. I wondered, of course, how the magic was made, but I was young and clueless. A few years later, probably when I was about 8 years old, my father bought a super 8 camera for my older brother Eric with the intention that we all kind of would play with it and make movies. I was still too young to do the camerawork or to be involved in the process other than being an actor who gets covered in make-believe blood (ketchup), and gets chased by a guy with a knife. My brother was obsessed with movie blood but fainted at the sight of real blood. As the years went by I remember technology changing and someone in the neighborhood had a video camera...a very large video camera...and we would make films with that...just strange, stupid, silly films with the kids in the neighborhood. I quickly got to learn how the magic worked. I begun to understand that I could do something that was magical like the cartoons I had seen when I was younger. I was bitten by the bug. Throughout high school my hooligan friends and I continued to make films that we had no way of editing, so basically whatever you shoot, that's your film! One take. No mistakes. Go!! That style of filmmaking has stuck with me throughout the years. I love the spontaneity of just grabbing a camera, some great actors, diving in and making that magic!!

My father was a big influence on me as a filmmaker. He was a doctor but he was obsessed with films... big epic films by directors like David Lean. He also loved Hitchcock, Polanski and Scorsese. I think he took me to every single Clint Eastwood movie that there ever was and tried to get my mom to come along by telling her they were romantic love stories but with names like "Dirty Harry" and "The Enforcer", I think she knew better. Come to think of it, if my dad hadn't bought us a super 8 camera and had not taken me to see all of those great movies, I am not sure if I'd be as interested in filmmaking as I am today. So, I really do have him to thank for this silly obsession of mine. The shame of it is that he passed away before he saw a single film of mine.

What inspires your uniquely odd-ball genius (the premises for your films)?

Oddball? What are you trying to say, Kristen?!! That I am odd? My ideas are unusual? Okay, Cool! Thanks!! I have never aspired to be odd but I suppose that when you spend most of your youth and a great part of your adult life hiding from the world, your views may become slightly warped. I was never one to join in the reindeer games. I was definitely the Rudolf of the gang. I always felt like I was watching the world and waiting for it to become the kind of cool that I wanted it to be. For a while in the 80's it was definitely that kinda cool. The misfits came out to play. That is the world I always felt a part of. That is why I like to pepper my films with 80's music. I am definitely inspired by films from that time period like "Repo Man" because of the sheer ridiculousness of it and the outrageous "cool" factor. I also love "Clockwork Orange", and believe it or not, all the 80's flicks like "Pretty in Pink", "Breakfast Club" and "Weird Science", which all had outstanding soundtracks! Music has definitely made an impact on me as a filmmaker. I don't think I could make a film without great music. The films today that use cheesy pop songs really kill the inspiration for me! I am just not into modern music. I can't make a cool movie and use today's music. You just can't! Watch "Donny Darko" and replace "Mad World" with Lady Gaga!! I don't think so!! PUKE!! Great music and great films go together!! Even Star Wars had an amazing soundtrack that scares the crap out of you. When Darth Vader enters you know he means business!! You feel it in the tone of the music. When Tarantino hit the scene he hit it hard with music!! His films and the characters in them, are extensions of the music!! He understands that and that is why his films are cool and other people who try to emulate him are not so cool. They don't really love what they are doing. They love the style but not the substance. I have always been one for substance, even if it is odd-ball. I just prefer the weirdos, the crazies, the lunatics and the freaks!! They seem to be freer, more



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honest, more rebellious and much more interesting than the mainstream culture. I grew up across from Detroit and started going to clubs in the 80's, clubs that had been overtaken by Punks, New Wavers, and all sorts of misfits...this was before it became mainstream...before you could buy the fashions on Melrose or at Hot Topic. They were the real freaks of the night and captivated me immediately. I think I will always be inspired by all that is slightly off-center or unusual in music and in film. That's just the way I am.

Have you ever gotten even through your cinema?

This may be the adult thing to say, but I don't really think of cinema as a tool for getting even with people who have wronged you in the past. Then again, I may be wrong. Maybe it's the perfect tool for this. If it is then I certainly have not utilized it in the fashion I should have. You're stirring question, Kristen, has just given me a great, although devious, idea! I am going to make a film about all the f#@ked up people who have treated me poorly throughout the years. I will use cinema as a weapon, a sword, and wipe out all of the Negative Nancy's who have crossed my path! Filmmaking is a powerful tool which can spread your ideals, your voice across the world and make real change so why not use it to destroy one's enemies?!!! Oh, I can feel the anger swelling within me now!! I feel the madness stirring!! My eyes have been awakened to the true purpose of cinema: REVENGE!!! Thanks, Kristen. :)

Explain Ottophobia.

Ottophobia is the name of my production company. I believe that film is a weapon and should be feared. So, as a filmmaker, it stands to reason that I should be feared. My motto is that, "It's not the film that kills, it's the filmmaker." I hope to use my production company to continue to create odd-ball classics, animation, tv shows, and other projects which will blow your mind!! So there is a lot to fear from Ottophobia in the very near future. Be warned!!



Where did the idea for "Bring Me The Head Of Walt Disney" come from?

Ever since I was young boy I heard stories about Walt's head being frozen and I wondered for years and years, for decades, if anybody would uncover the truth. When I moved out to Los Angeles as an adult and the rumors still lingered, I thought to myself, "why don't you try to find out for yourself?". So I did. I realized that most of the rumors put his frozen head somewhere in Southern California, within driving distance of where I was living!! I had to find out! I was compelled to! So I began asking questions. I began prying into it. I visited all the sites where people said Disney's head could be. I became obsessed with finding the truth. I honestly believed that there is some sort of cover up. I believe that he is frozen somewhere. When we think of Cryogenics, we think it is science fiction but there are actual organizations which specialize in it. They coordinate with caregivers and hospitals to make sure that when you die your body is delivered to the cryogenics Lab in a timely manner. It is like a military operation. It's no joke. If you watch my documentary you will see a couple talking about it. They take it very



Photo by Shirley Levi

seriously and have changed their entire lives because of their beliefs. It's very intriguing to think about. I love the idea and to this day believe that it is an idea that Walt would have loved as well. That is what my film explores. If you want to

know more, watch my film!!

How did the 'Slimdunce' project come about?

I went to Sundance one year and saw all the other festivals that had cropped up all around it and thought to myself, "I should have my own festival!". Then I thought, "what would it be called?". I thought, "I'm SLIM, and a bit of a DUNCE...SLIMDUNCE!!". But nothing really came of it until a few years later when I found out about Steven Spielberg's show "On The Lot". I heard they were having a competition and looking for filmmakers to enter for a chance to be on the show. I have always admired Spielberg in a huge way and wanted desperately to get on the show. So, with just a week or so before the deadline, I set out to make a film. I shot it quickly, in an afternoon and stayed up all night editing and making the music for it. I finished early the next morning and went to enter it in the contest. As I went to upload my finished film I found out that the deadline had been extended six more weeks. I jokingly said, "I should make six more films. One every week." A friend took my words seriously and I stuck to it and make six more films, one every week! Now I had enough films to showcase and have my own festival. So that's what I did. I began screening my films in Hollywood and called it SLIMDUNCE!!! The rest is stuff of legend... You can read about it in *MovieMaker Magazine* [here](#).

What are you currently working on?

As usual, a million things at once. I have a folder on my desktop with all of my ideas, scripts, tv pilots, animation projects and there are over 50 projects in various stages of completion!! But the most pressing is my short film "The Legend of Five Fingers" which is a sci-fi film I will be shooting in March of this year. I am trying to do things a bit differently with this project. For the first time I will be using a DP. I have always shot everything myself but I wanted to start broadening the scope of my productions and one way you do that is through creative collaboration. As much of a genius one might think they are, there is nothing compared to collective genius. I found that when working with actors. When I let my actors loose to play and participate in the process and not just be puppets to my dialogue, something magical happened: You get the life experience of that actor coming into play, blending and enhancing what you've written. That's true genius.

Was there any single response to your work that got you the most?

Actually a friend of mine recently sent me a very powerful message about my acting and my film related work. He said, "You're a genius! Your acting seems effortless, yet is filled with a great wit of subtext that is pleasurable to watch in person and onscreen. The endless tool-bag of talent you have as an actor, writer, director, producer, editor and innovator is rare and admired. Any and all that know you and have worked with you would attest what a real pleasure you are. Excited to see and hear of your continued inspiring path..." His name is Sunny James Lohden and he himself is a very gifted actor. Coming from a fellow artist that means a lot. I also have had a good deal of positive response from my Slimdunce screenings, which have become a sort of semi-annual event showcasing 7 short films that I made in a 7 week period. Those are the odd-ball films you asked me about earlier. They seem to resonate with a lot of people. The most important feedback that I have received is from my closest supporter and ally, the one and only Shirley Levi, also a very talented artist. She has not just been responsive to my work but has also taught me the value of infusing my work with what she calls "intent"! What she has taught me is invaluable and should be the cornerstone for anybody who is a creative person: Put intent into everything you do and you will shine! Your work will shine! Everything she does has purpose and motive so, as a result, Shirley has taught me to think the ways she does. She has taught me to be more aggressive with my thought process and to really give a damn about everything I do! I still have a lot to learn but it's nice to have a great teacher like her. That counts for a great deal. She's been very inspirational.

What happened to the Johnny Otto Cult?

The cult is still alive. It's very informal, though. There is no place to sign up or anything like that. You just need to be an unwavering fan who is committed to giving your life for my cause. That's all. Oh, and you must enjoy Kool-Aid and/or tainted punch. Once you join you can never ever leave, you must be willing to have all of my children and share me with many other beautiful brides. You must be willing to change your name and follow all of my orders! Other than that you are free as a bird!

What is the Otto Army? Do we need to be afraid?

The **Otto Army** is made up of human clones of myself. It came about out of necessity because I found myself doing everything from filming to editing to special fx and even acting in my own pictures, so, needless to say, I became very tired and needed a helping hand. Clones make great workers. They all dress alike and have the same appetites so shopping is easy. As for whether or not you should be afraid... please see answer number 9.



The Otto Army by Zack Morrisette

What prompted you to form the USIF?

The United Society of Independent Filmmakers was started because I wanted to have a place where wannabe filmmakers could come and learn about the process, get help, get resources & info, ask questions and get mentoring. It is still in it's infancy but I hope that it will grow into a sort of social networking site for indie filmmakers of all sorts. Time will tell. It is a longterm project of mine which I hope to grow organically. I am not rushing it to be anything. It is just part of what I care about. I want a place where all the dreamers can go and find inspiration. Wouldn't that be great????!!

What's next for you?

Feature films are next for me. I have been cultivating several projects over the last few years. One is a massive epic about Zeus' rise to power and his assumption of the throne on Mount Olympus. That project is called "**The Horn of Amalthea**". It has gotten outstanding coverage from one of the top literary agencies in LA so I am hopeful it will be picked up soon. I am also laboring over a superhero trilogy which revolves around a character I developed name "**Spectrum**". It is a futuristic superhero film...so think Star Wars meets The Dark Knight or something like that. It is going to be mind-blowing and beyond anything you've ever seen!! Geeks, get ready!! I am writing all three parts so it is a major undertaking!! It will make Avatar look like a small, indie film!!



Socially Stalk Johnny Otto all over the Inter-Webs!

Catch the Ottophobia via Johnny's official website, JohnnyOtto.com, [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [IMDB](#), or even on [Wikipedia](#).

Please submit all Booking Inquiries to: booking@johnnyotto.com

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