

On how limitations can be inspiring



Filmmakers Joe DeNardo and Paul Felten (*Slow Machine*) discuss making their first feature film, the intimacy that comes with smaller budgets, and the power of collaboration.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2577 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Collaboration](#), [Money](#), [Success](#), [First attempts](#).

The *Slow Machine* cast is mostly your friends rather than big names audiences might recognize. I'm curious why you went this route, and I'd also love to hear about how working with friends enhances your creativity.

Paul: These are people we knew we could enlist to be involved. But they were also people we were able to tailor the writing of the script to. Every single person is playing a part written for them specifically, with the hopes that they would play it. Not the assurance, but the hopes. And everybody said yes, I think in part, because we were flexible enough to work around their schedules. Part of why the movie took so long to shoot is that we were waiting for people to come back from projects they were getting paid more to do...or waiting for them to have a free weekend.

Some of [the actors] are closer friends than others. Some of them are people we knew we could get in touch with who might be game. Some of the process was nervously asking people we didn't know that well to go out on a limb for us. We were really, really lucky to have people say yes.

Joe: I think it helped the creative side [to have] a lot of trust. It was [our] first time directing a feature. So we were nervous in a lot of ways, and having it be people [we] were comfortable around helped.

How do you figure out who you have on your side and how you can work with them creatively?

Paul: Some of it is based on actually having conversations with people before we even start the process. [For *Slow Machine*], we'd said, "Hey, we're thinking about doing this, is this something you might be interested in down the line?" Another part has to do with the work they've done previously. In the case of Scott Shepherd, I'd seen a lot of his work in theater and thought he would be really good for something like this and heard he would probably be interested if he had the time. Stephanie [Hayes, the lead actor] also knew him a bit, and I knew they wanted to work together. [It was] a combination of enlisting people early on and having a sense of people's work prior to our thing.

Joe: Paul had seen both Scott and Stephanie in theater work that dealt with some heavy dialogue. And since Paul's writing is so text-heavy, I think that was [appropriate]. We'd been friends with Stephanie, and I met Stephanie through Paul, and we'd helped her on some things. But right from the get-go, both of them...tackled it super easily.

Paul: It was a far less arduous shoot than I expected because of how comfortable they were. They [naturally] fit

into the context and help[ed] us be more comfortable in it.

How do you identify that moment when it's like, "Oh, these folks are really locked in, and we're working together creatively really well?" And what do you do to lean into that moment?

Paul: I'm not sure I remember the first time I felt like this...but I do remember the day we shot a scene [with] a pretty close physical altercation. I was really nervous because, again, this is the first time we directed anything. We certainly hadn't choreographed a fight on film before. [I wasn't] sure how comfortable Scott and Stephanie would be with the physical intimacy the scene was going to require. And we got on set and they blocked it themselves. And we were able to do it in two or three takes. I was reminded how lucky we were to have these particular people invested in this film.

Joe: They relished the empowerment they got, because we were somewhat hands-off: "Hey, well, you guys want to try it a few times and see how it flows?" And they were so good at it... We didn't have to add much to what they were already doing. We didn't plan it that way, but it feels so much more collaborative and fun when that's the case. Paul and I have talked about the next film we work on having some of that element in play where everybody's involved in some kind of top-down set.

I want to hear more about how you'll go about your next project based on what you've learned from this one.

Paul: I'd love to shoot in three weeks as opposed to four years. I want to keep as small a crew as we can, as controllable sets as we can.

One of the things that turned out to be really nice was that we shot where we could. There wasn't some location scouting trek we went on where we found the perfect place. We had to work within the contingencies of whatever place we were given for free or a little money. And I wouldn't mind letting that rule apply for the next one. It helped me feel a little less precious and more spontaneous inside those spaces.

Joe: We definitely want to keep the scale similar. The set was me, Paul, a sound person, maybe a line producer. It might be nice to have one more set of hands, but we [don't] want to create too many more roles than what we were working with.

Paul: Would you want to edit again, Joe, or would you give that job almost entirely to somebody else?

Joe: I think it would be interesting to have an editor who's dedicated to it. I'm someone that is always kind of DIY, where the idea of asking someone else [for help] feels painful to me. But once I get over that, I think it would be liberating.

What do you find are the advantages and disadvantages of working with people you know and keeping things close-knit?

Joe: Sometimes, feelings get a little hurt. But other than that, [there aren't] many disadvantages as long as everyone's open to all the different things that can happen.

Paul: I found there to be almost no disadvantages. The people on this movie were far more experienced than either Joe or I. They brought a level of professionalism we rose to, even under the DIY circumstances. I learned that I'm going to feel more confident as a director on the next one because I won't feel intimidated by the more experienced people around me. I hope to work with people we know closely and people new to whatever we're up to. It would be fun to bring new people into the fold and see what that's like too, specifically with actors.

Joe: Having made *Slow Machine* now, there's something we can show folks so they know what they're getting into.

Paul: We [now] have one example that we can describe to people as our process.

From what I understand, the roles you played in making the film are first-time roles for you both. How do you both find the confidence to just go and do something you want to do?

Paul: I don't know what else to do. I feel cursed. It's sort of an irritating vocation to feel like you need to make movies. It'd be one thing if it were writing, which you can do for free. Movies take a long time; you have to enlist other people. It's absurd. I just don't know what else to do. I know that if I weren't doing this, I would feel even more nervous than I already do. But it's a lot of dumb termite persistence. Courage doesn't play much into it.

Joe: As stressed as Paul and I got, every time we went to shoot, we were excited and eager to enjoy ourselves and witness what our friends were going to do and how we were going to adapt and capture it. There's a lot of pleasure involved even though it's hard work.

Paul: That's part of why I'm excited to shoot something over a shorter period. To have that pleasure be sustained over a few weeks, as opposed to this brief spark that happens every month or two.

When you encounter these stressors, how do you get yourself back on track and make your creative processes work how you want?

Joe: I don't know that I have well-thought-out tactics. I just dig in and keep pushing.

Paul: I go off and stop thinking about it. I used to feel guilty about that, but I've realized that doing something entirely unrelated, even if just for a couple of days, is a really good recharge. Whether it's just reading a book, watching some other stuff, seeing some music, or not thinking about it...I say that as somebody who's rarely had deadlines that other people have held me to. So it's very easy to be able to do that. I used to think it was weak, and now, I think it's necessary.

On set, whenever we were stressed out, we would just move the lights or something. Or I'd have a conversation with [an] actor. We'd look busy. We'd sort of fake it for a while. And then that would be its own version of relaxing.

Joe: We knew we wouldn't have limitless film or funding. We didn't ask for long days from people, and we wanted people to just enjoy themselves. We weren't trying to capture everything at the golden hour. We didn't put ourselves in positions where failure was right there on the cusp, and I hope people appreciated that. It seemed like they were enjoying themselves as much as us.

Paul: There was enough time to be intuitive. We could try things out that came to us in the moment. It was all very flexible. I think that comes through in the movie. Sometimes, things that have a very mathematical or fractured structure can feel over-controlled, but I hope that intuitiveness comes through in the finished product.

How do you two keep your creativity going against a limited budget?

Paul: Budgetary limitations never once felt like a creative hurdle. I can't think of one time I was like, "God, I wish we had more money." I wish we had more time.

Joe: It wasn't the [concern about having] more money. It was the planned money we thought we needed [and] trying to find it. We bought the amount of raw [film] we thought we need, but we shot a lot of it without having the money to have it processed. We knew what the processing would cost. We just didn't have that money secured. So the film sat in my fridge for a year until we had the money to have it processed.

Paul: Right. But there was never once, while we were shooting, where I was like, "Man, if we only had more money, we could get this shot I would love to have but can't because it's too expensive."

It sounds like it's a thing of resourcefulness.

Paul: I think that's the project we set ourselves. And I also think it's something the actors enjoyed too, that sort of need to be resourceful and spontaneous.

Joe: There wasn't this big architecture of lights and grips and people, but we had talked about a lot of films we liked that were raw and used a lot of available light and just utilized the scenes, scenarios, and situations that were at their access. Se knew what we were getting. We were excited about what we were getting.

I feel like the overall takeaway is that you two have gotten where you are by consistently treading paths outside the established system. How did you start doing that? And how did you know that would be the right choice for you both?

Paul: I don't know that we made a conscious decision to avoid that stuff so much as we chose to make a movie how we wanted and make the kind of film we wanted to see more of and enjoyed in the past. There wasn't this thing of, "Oh, we're going to not be like all these other films." We talked much more about the things we were inspired by. We knew this was never going to be a movie that would play in multiplexes, but we also didn't expect it to play anywhere outside somebody's garage or storage unit or something. Whatever life it has comes as a huge surprise, and we're very thankful for it.

Joe: I'm not sure how interested we are in making something along film institutional lines anyway. It's hard to imagine working toward that, or having that access, or being excited about trying to find a way in the first place.

Paul: The intimacy was really fun and part of what was the most exciting thing. I think the larger sets get, the more alienated they get. The more expensive things get, the more alienated they get. One of the things we want to do is retain that exciting intimacy with whatever we do moving forward.

Joe DeNardo Recommends:

Ready-Mix: a 45-minute film installation around a concrete plant in Idaho by Lucy Raven at Dia:Chelsea. Very heavy, and free entry!

Chemical Flowers by Helm: old friend Luke Younger's solo musical outfit, I listen to this record on repeat a lot.

Naples '44 by Norman Lewis: hard times in a very complex world rendered beautifully by a British spy agent working with the Americans in occupied Naples.

Memory by Bernadette Mayer: In 1971 the poet Bernadette Mayer shot a roll of slide film each day and kept a journal for a show at 98 Greene street which exhibited the 1100+ snapshots with a six-hour recording of her voice reading the journal text. Siglio published a book version last year. Massive stuff—see if you can find the images from inside a screening of *Two-Lane Blacktop*!

The Friends of Eddie Coyle / The Friends of Eddie Coyle / "The Last Celluloid Desperado": Start with the novel by Geroge V Higgins; a Boston area hard boiled, lean and mean crime story with truly zero good guys. Move on to the film by Peter Yates, a direct adaptation starring Robert Mitchum, Peter Boyle, and Richard Jordan, and top it off with the long read in the March 15th, 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone* by Grover Lewis, a deep dive into all things Mitchum while on the set of *The Friends...*, thereby completing the trifecta.

Paul Felten recommends:

A dart board: the best self-care purchase I've made in years, and not just because of the pandemic. Don't skimp, get the cabinet set.

L'Rain's Fatigue: still a daily listen for me months after it came out - refuses to settle, in all the ways.

@becauseimmissy on TikTok: congratulations to her and Bryce!

Films by Alain Tanner and John Berger: moving Marxist comedies for those nights when Dusan Makavejev just feels like too much.

The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitic Resistance by Anna Watkins Fisher: kind of depressing but diagnostically very exciting, this feels like the last book about art that I will have to read for a long time. Again, this is a recommendation.

Name

Joe DeNardo and Paul Felten

Vocation

filmmakers

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Joe DeNardo by Joanne Kim; Paul Felten by Paul Felten