

The 78 Project Movie

A conversation with Director/Producer Alex Steyermark and Producer/Recordist Lavinia Jones Wright (excerpted from previously published interviews)

Tell me what the film is about.

Alex: The 78 Project Movie is about two people driving across the country to record contemporary musicians on a 1930's Presto direct-to-disc recorder. The musicians get one microphone and one blank disk to cut a 78rpm record of an old song in one 3-minute take anywhere they choose. The adventure of capturing these intimate musical performances on film reveals the shared cultural connections of people from seemingly disparate backgrounds.

Tell me a bit about your background and how you became a filmmaker.

Alex: I studied film & photography in college, and started out professionally as a documentary editor and cameraman. I eventually ended up as an editor on feature films, before finding myself fully immersed in the music side of film. I was a music supervisor and music producer for many years, and got to work with some really inspiring directors: Spike Lee, Ang Lee, Paul Schrader, Robert Rodriguez and Jim Sheridan, just to name a few. My music experience is what helped get me my first opportunity to direct a feature, *Prey For Rock & Roll*, which premiered at Sundance in 2003. I've directed two more features since then, *One Last Thing...* and *Losers Take All*.

Lavinia: This is my first feature film as a producer. My background is in journalism and performing. Before coming to The 78 Project, I worked for ASCAP writing and editing ASCAP's *Playback*, *Inside Music*, website, award shows, and Field Recording web series, and I contributed to numerous publications such as *Billboard*, *SPIN*, *WSJ*, *AOL* and *Harp*. I also put together concerts independently and toured and recorded with a few bands.

How did this whole project come together from your perspective?

Alex: The 78 Project Movie is my first feature length documentary as a director. It began as an ongoing multiplatform web series that Lavinia and I launched in the Fall of 2011. The basic idea is that we give contemporary artists one 3-minute take to cut a 78rpm record of an old song on a 1930's Presto direct-to-disk recorder, in a location of their own choosing, and then film and edit the whole experience into short webisodes. After we'd done the web series for about a year, we felt the need to make a feature-length film which would explore some of the context for our fascination with the early field recordings and also show the musical connections of folks from all kinds of musical genres and from seemingly disparate cultural backgrounds. So Lavinia and I hit the road, and spent the better part of a year traveling around the country recording and

filming musicians in their homes and other locations, as well as filming with some of the incredibly cool people who are the caretakers of our country's cultural legacy at places like the Library of Congress and The Smithsonian.

Lavinia: Everyday we'd find ourselves in a new place, lugging the old gear out of the car, up steep hills (when we were in Topanga Canyon), into a chapel in Mississippi, or into a home on the Louisiana Bayou. We were constantly amazed by the openness with which we were received by the artists, and by the support we received from friends and strangers along the way. A lot of generous folks made us meals and let us crash on their floors. We're also extremely grateful to everyone who backed our Kickstarter campaign, which made the film possible in the first place.

What is it about the work of Alan Lomax that you found so fascinating?

Alex: We've both been inspired by the work of many field recordists, and it's our interest in field recordings that drives the project as much as what we find intriguing about the sound of 78s themselves. Needless to say, Lomax's work as a folklorist and field recordist is massive and seminal and unparalleled, and he's been an inspiration to so many people. Lomax has been a big part of both of our musical consciousness for as far back as we can both remember. One of the things that's so inspiring to us about Lomax's work is the extent to which he was fully engaged with the people he was recording; his interest in the people he recorded was very humanistic, you feel the connection to them in his recordings. What's also notable is the degree to which that is reciprocated by the people being recorded. You sense the importance of the moment both for him as the recordist and for the folks being recorded.

Lavinia: Lomax used a Presto recorder exactly like ours for many of his recordings, and it's that performance aspect of the Presto recording process that is at the core of what we're trying to explore with The 78 Project.

What was your experience of the Presto recorder and how did that come to be the centre-piece of the project?

Alex: I had bought two Prestos back in Spring of 2010 with an eye towards developing the web series, which had been conceived of as a film and music documentary recording journey based around cutting one-of-a-kind records of old songs with contemporary artists. The Presto was always going to be the focal point of the project, and it was fortunate that the first two Prestos were working machines, which isn't always easy to find. We've since bought two more, as having working machines is essential to the viability of the project, to say the least.

Lavinia: Alex spends a fair amount of time maintaining our Prestos. He's become quite an expert Presto repairman! It took him about nine months of trial and error to find the best practices and combinations of microphone and materials to get the result we were seeking for the project.

Alex: While using the Presto recorder produces certain sonic results and a specific type

of unique recorded artifact, it's the singular performances that result from this process that is what particularly intrigues us. It's really not so much about a fascination with retro gear or retro sound. It's about the power of the performances contained in those records. And since we give artists one take, there's a tremendous focus that goes into that recording. The result is what feels to us like truly definitive performances.

Is modern music too disconnected from its own past?

Lavinia: Our American musical canon was created through the interpretation of old songs by new musicians in new places on the instruments and in the voices particular to where they live and what their experience is. That's still happening with pretty much every style and new culture that exists today, and it will for the ones that are yet to be forged.

Alex: We always encourage our artists to explore public domain songs and find one that they are interested in interpreting. Some choose songs that they already know, either family songs, or songs that they picked up along the way.

Lavinia: Often folks are surprised by how much they already know, and how much of our musical legacy is with them just through experience. And some of the choices are completely surprising, as often people are interested in choosing something that might be construed as out of character or out of genre for them.

Alex: For example, one of our lovely friends in California, Coati Mundi, who had numerous dance music hits in the 80's, chose to sing "Billy Boy" in a spoken word/latin rap style using only spoons as accompaniment. As a kid from Spanish Harlem, the Fresh Air Fund had sent him to a summer camp in the Appalachians, where he learned the song from farm hands.

Lavinia: The connections there are so unexpected, and it's beginning to seem like connections like that exist everywhere, they're sometimes just below the surface.

What are we losing in the digital age that the 78 project is seeking to emphasize?

Lavinia: As far as digital recording versus our recording process, it's really about embracing the moment. We don't do re-takes, and there's no opportunity to do overdubs or edits, and there are often extraneous sounds like trucks and sirens or even flaws in the records themselves. The artists, being used to the infinite possibilities of modern digital recording, sometimes find the one take a daunting prospect at first, but after they've been through it they find it was exhilarating and liberating.

Alex: One of the things about The 78 Project, however, is that we actually fully embrace the digital age, it's essential to the project. We like to say that The 78 Project brings 100 years of technology together in one project: we shoot on digital cameras, edit digitally, and self-distribute via the internet, which allows us to reach a limitless audience in a way that could only be possible in the digital age.

Lavinia: Also, we engage with our artists and audience via Twitter, Facebook and Instagram on a regular basis. And particularly when we're shooting and recording it allows us to have a direct conversation with all the collaborators, which is ourselves, the artists and our audience.

Alex: One of the things that the digital age has done is make reproducibility infinite, and we see that as potentially devaluing the uniqueness of a given piece of expression. So we seek to preserve the uniqueness of each recording: they are one-of-a-kind, we don't make duplicate copies. The other thing that we've become aware of in the course of doing The 78 Project is the extent to which it is really an analogue experience in the truest sense of the word: we have to physically travel somewhere to make the recording, and then the process itself is so physical. The machine is quite heavy to move around (it weighs 50 pounds), and the record is made by literally sculpting a groove into the record. It's given us a real appreciation for how remarkable it is that all those great early field recordings exist at all.

What was the biggest challenge, or challenges, in making the film?

Alex: That's an interesting question, because to tell you the truth, the whole experience has been one of the most satisfying experiences creatively that I've ever had. This is the most personal film I've made to date, and getting to make that with Lavinia, and sharing that experience with so many incredible musicians who put all their trust in us and in the process, really felt like a gift rather than a challenge. That being said, I suppose the biggest challenge was that, except for a few days of production, Lavinia and I were a two person crew. While that gives the film the unique intimacy that it has, it also meant we were always pushing ourselves to our fullest capacity physically and mentally. And that was just plain exhausting at times.

Lavinia: Sometimes our Presto would break down, but we were always able to fix it on set, and get a recording.

Alex: And I suppose post-production was also a challenge, since I was editing for the better part of a year, and being alone in an editing room for that long is also mentally taxing.

If you had to pick a single favorite moment out of the entire production, what would it be?

Alex: Honestly, I can't pick one favorite moment. The whole experience was one continuous pleasure. I mean, it isn't often that you get to do something like this with so many of the people you've always admired.

Lavinia: It would be impossible. Because each day was spent in a new place with a new person whose experience was unique and fresh and moving, each moment of making the film was singularly meaningful.

I would love to know about the technical side of the film, your relationship to the director of photography, what the movie was shot on and why it was decided to be filmed this way.

Alex: Well, I was the DP, and to some extent that was by necessity. There were a couple of days in Memphis and Nashville where Nathan Black shot with us, and that was great because it also meant he could capture some of the process that Lavinia and I go through on a shoot. But for the bulk of production I was shooting, and Lavinia also shot some material. We had always said to ourselves that it would be good to get to the point where, if we needed, we could shoot The 78 Project, both the webseries and the feature film, with just the two of us. While there's no doubt that having another camera person and a sound person can be very beneficial, Lavinia and I have gotten a method down where we can show up, set up the Presto recorder, the digital recorders, and the cameras in an hour or so. It means we can be very nimble, and it means when we're on the road we can be flexible with artist's schedules and availability. And we just have our rhythm and our process down, and we work fairly quickly and quietly, and that makes for a much more intimate experience with the artist. It's just the two of us and the artist. During shooting, Lavinia is operating the Presto recorder and I'm shooting as well as recording digital audio. The film was shot with the Canon 5D, 7D, and Rebel, as well as the Canon C100. There's even some stuff shot on the iPhone. Basically, I set up 3 cameras on tripods and have one handheld on a rig. There's a boom mic on a C-stand, and a stereo recorder on a tripod. Lighting is almost always available light, with maybe one old halogen light to supplement from time to time.

What keeps you going while making a movie? What drives you? How much coffee?

Alex: The thing that keeps me going is knowing that there is no other option but to get it done, and that this opportunity won't come again.

Lavinia: And, yes, there was a fair amount of coffee involved on our film. In our case, Stumptown Coffee was keeping us fairly well stocked, and I brought along a French press coffee maker and we bought a grinder at a hardware store in Alexandria, Virginia when we first set out on the road. So, we always knew we could count on having good coffee around.

Excerpted from:

eFilm Critic: South By Southwest 2014 Interview – THE 78 PROJECT MOVIE: Alex Steyermark & Lavinia Jones Wright (by Jason Whyte, published March 7, 2014)

The Vinyl Factory: "The past isn't dead, it isn't even past" – Recording the present direct-to-disc with The 78 Project (by Anton Spice, published Feb 18, 2014)

For more information about The 78 Project Movie:
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