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## MICHAEL DEAN THE EXAMINER Q&A

By Dan Evans

### Punk film lets people be equals

Michael Dean is a Los Angeles filmmaker. Well, don't go away, there's more. Dean, who lived in Baghdad by the Bay until being forced out by the ever-increasing rents, recently completed a film called, "D.I.Y. or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist." The film, which interviews the famous and unknown about making art without selling out, is being shown this month in San Francisco and Berkeley. More information can be found at [www.diyod.org](http://www.diyod.org).

**Dan Evans: Is your film a punk film?**

**Michael Dean:** There are punkers in it, and it's got the punk ethic. If punk means low production values, then no. But if punk means doing something the best you can without worrying about whether there's a market for it, then it's a punk film.

**Q: So what does punk mean?**

**A:** One of the dictionary definitions of punk is "substandard." I looked it up. To some people it might mean a style of dress, a way of life. It's really hard to say now.

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## Punk film lets people be equals

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There are probably 10 million kids who call themselves punk, and when I started there were probably 10,000.

I don't like talking about my punkcred (credibility). I start to sound like some wino on Haight Street who starts telling you about how he used to party with Janis Joplin. It's not like I don't believe these guys when they say it. I do believe it, and that's what makes me worry about them. That's what I figure I sound like when I start going off about my early punk days. That doesn't make me cool. That makes me old.

**Q: How old?**

**A:** I'm 37, and my daughter turned 18.

**Q: Does she like punk, or is she into stuff like easy listening just to piss you off?**

**A:** Nah, she's into punk. She also likes Hanson, and that's how she rebels against me.

**Q: When did you start the film?**

**A:** About a year ago. This is my first feature-length film. I got a lot of help through Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco. We're still broke, but we got nonprofit status, and that helps.

**Q: Where was it filmed?**

**A:** In New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco and Los Angeles. I moved to L.A. early on in the project because I couldn't afford to live in San Francisco anymore.

**Q: What was the inspiration?**

**A:** The inspiration was this: I wanted to make something that showcased my heroes and my friends in an equal light. The whole crux of the movie is downplaying the star system and upplaying talent. The movie is a bunch of interviews with a few famous people and a bunch of unknown people who do stuff that is equally as cool.

**Q: Are you trying to subvert the star system, to show everyone as the same?**

**A:** I'm not out to subvert the Hollywood world. I don't know anything about it. I live in L.A. but I don't really see it.

**Q: So why do some people become stars and others not. If they're all, as you said, doing equally cool stuff?**

**A:** Part of it is, some people do their thing really well and have a clear vision, and others, quite simply, don't. Part of it is charisma and luck, and another part is who gets up earlier in the morning. A lot of people want the world to hand them something.

**Q: You've said the point of your interviews is to ask, "What's it like to be you?" So, I'll ask that same question, though more literally. What's it like to be you?**

**A:** How is it to be me? Hmm. I'm like a shark. I have to keep moving, or I'll die. I'm quoting somebody, but I can't remember who. I have to be doing something, or I'll get nervous. I'm creating, promoting, researching. I always have eight windows open on the computer. But I'm also trying to pace myself so I don't explode.

**Q: How do you get into your subjects' heads?**

**A:** You know, I had a list of questions, but I threw them away after the second interview. I guess what I do is have more of a conversation than an interview. A lot of the people are my friends or, at least, acquaintances I've known for years, so it wasn't too hard.

I throw all the star system bullshit out the window. I think it's very refreshing to people that are used to being treated like gods.

**Q: Did you do any of the shooting of the film yourself?**

**A:** I did the filming when no one else was available. The whole punk credo of "Do It Yourself" holds unless there's someone around that can do it better. In the credits, the people that helped for a whole year got named the same way as the people who came in for three hours one afternoon and typed.

**Q: So who did the filming?**

**A:** Film students from everywhere. I got a lot of people from [craigslis1.org](http://craigslis1.org). Craig (Newmark) was one of the people I interviewed. He's not an artist, but he facilitates a lot of other artists hooking up their resources.

**Q: What was your most interesting interview?**

**A:** They were all amazing. The hardest one was Jim Rose. He was really hard because he's a funny guy, and a character. When I got to him, he's like, "OK, amuse me." We only had 10 minutes, and that's the shortest one. Honestly, he was the only one I was starstruck around. That's mainly because a character in a "Simpsons" episode is based on him.

The best interview was Ian MacKaye from Fugazi. He was really confident and humble, and he said some stuff that blew me away. He turned down a million-dollar record deal to run a small record label out of his garage. He wanted to maintain control over what he was doing, and it wasn't something that was for sale.

**Q: Who is interviewed in the film? Is it mostly musicians?**

**A:** There are musicians, a couple of writers, a dancer-choreographer, filmmakers. A pho-

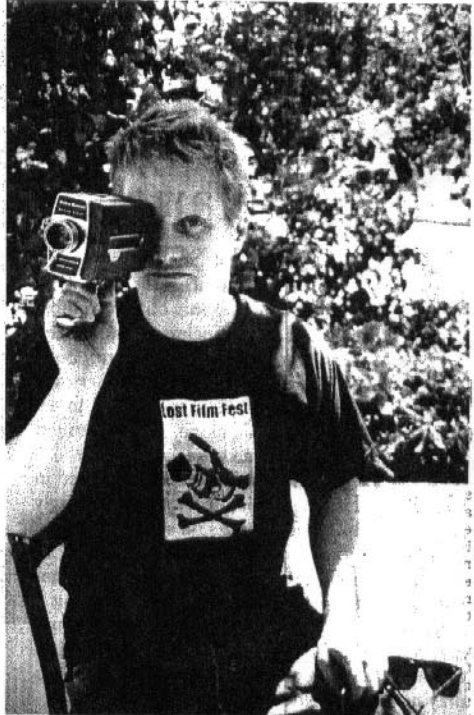


Photo courtesy Lydia Lunch

Michael Dean

tographer, a sculptor and painters. There is, like I mentioned, Craig Newmark, and a computer programmer who does weird spooky things that we can't talk about. People will see his fake name and know who he is. There is also one guy who is a roadie. It's a 57-minute film, and there are 25 to 30 people in it. That's from 45 hours of footage, too.

**Q: Why do you live in Los Angeles?**

**A:** I lived in San Francisco for 18 years until the dot-com thing priced me out. I could have moved somewhere cheap up there, but the people were what attracted me, and they're not there anymore. Young, cool weird artists that can't afford to live there anymore.

**Q: Does that culture exist in L.A.?**

**A:** Yeah. Most of them have an agenda, which they don't have in San Francisco. People here are trying to grab 15 minutes of fame, or have something handed to them. But there are a lot of weird cool people that live here because it's cheap and warm.

**Q: Is moving to Los Angeles selling out?**

**A:** Kurt Cobain said once, that you sell out when you leave the bedroom with your guitar. I'll do anything artistic if I can still sleep at night. No one's beating down my door yet (laughs). I'd take a job in the industry if I felt it wouldn't compromise me.

Lying seems pretty pervasive in Hollywood. People will do anything to get on TV, and I don't want to do that. I don't have to be rich. My goal is to make a plumber's wage at art.

The five big names in my film make art without compromise, and they aren't millionaires. They make in the low six figures, and work 80 hours a week.

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