



## Community Based Micro Budget Film Making

### Q - Why make a children's film?

**Janis** - We've done a lot of Music and Art Therapy for kids in foster care. Many of the kids are from incredibly abusive backgrounds and have survived things that most adults couldn't tolerate. Most of these kids love films and love to escape into them. Films are often what has given them another perspective and has let them know that another kind of life exists elsewhere. Often the kids parents are drug addicts, and are mentally ill (often as a result of drugs). These kids can use films as an escape, for inspiration, to help them to make sense of the world, or just to make them laugh and enjoy the moment. Kids need to see positive reflections of themselves and to know that they're not alone, and that life can be better and their future can to an extent, be what they make it. They just have to hang on in there for a while longer. Film is a way of seeing into someone else's mind, or living someone else's fantasy and it can also be an incredible escape from reality. In the way that you can put on an album and lose yourself in the wildness and pure raw emotion of the music. Music can change your mood; a film can change your mind. To take people out of themselves for even a few hours and to possibly change their perspective on life, seems to me to be pretty special. It really appealed to me to make happy films with lots of music and to include some social comment without hitting people over the head with it. After reading your book, *The Guerilla Film Makers Handbook*, I was inspired and it made me believe that I really could go out there and make a film with very basic equipment.

### Q - Why did you choose to tell this story?

**Janis** - I originally wrote a song entitled 'Lunar Girl' which was the inspiration for the film. It's about a girl who is happy living in her dreamworld until she is diagnosed as having mental / emotional problems. She's then taken to a psychiatrist and put on medication. Her view of the world changes and she becomes sad and unhappy. The theme of the film is whether 'being normal' and being a realist is preferable to being a slightly mad (but happy) dreamer. I wanted to make 'Lunar Girl' because I was sick of seeing negative, depressing independent films, many of which always seemed to me to be trying to use shock value (drug addiction, violence, abuse etc). Many independent film makers and critics seem to see poverty, mental illness and physical

disability as 'arty' or 'worthy', or at least that's how they try and portray it. These kind of independent films often win awards, the more depressing the film, the more 'arty' they apparently become. I personally think they're often a false portrayal of the reality as they don't show the humour that exists in those communities, or the dreams or the struggle to survive. Those films rarely show the extent of corruption of many of the people regarded as middle / upper class who are part of the establishment. 'Lunar Girl' was intended as a sort of musical drama for children and was never intended for the big screen, it was always a 'community project'. I wanted to make a children's film (slightly surreal) with lots of music. I ended up including some social issues including true stories of how kids became homeless and ended up living on the streets. My hope was that I'd learn a bit about film making and editing. My dream was that it would be good enough to be shown on television and that at least some scenes would strike a chord, create a bit of magic and hope in people's hearts and have some heart warming moments.

### Q - How did you finance Lunar Girl?

**Janis** - I borrowed money from a credit card company. It cost around £8k to make and took three weeks to shoot.

### Q - How did you deal with locations and permits in London?

**Janis** - We shot on the road in Covent Garden with hand held cameras avoiding the need for a permit. We didn't always look like a film crew so we could get away with more. The Police did move us on in Covent Garden because we were obstructing the pavement, but they turned a blind eye and told us they'd be back in about half an hour giving us the time to finish our scene. The Royal Festival Hall wanted to charge us £3,000 a day for shooting on the terraces outside their building even though we told them it was a community non profit making film, so we moved along a few yards. The security men from the Royal Festival Hall escorted us off the terraces but we got the shot first!

### Q - What did you shoot on?

**Janis** - The Sony VX 1000 and Sony VX 2000, miniDV.

### Q - How much lighting did you have?

**Janis** - Negligible, none mostly. We would use what lighting was available in locations most of the time.

### Q - How did you deal with casting?

**Janis** - We advertised in Stage and sifted through hundreds of photos and CV's. We then shortlisted on look and gut feeling. Then we hired a room in Jackson's Lane Community centre (church) in Highgate for a few days, filmed the auditions and chose who best suited the roles. A very straight (and nice) actress

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who used to be in *Crossroads* asked us if she would have to strip. We asked her what sort of film she thought we were making!

### Q - How much fun was it to make?

**Janis** - Incredible fun. A lot of the fun was in the relief of having managed to get some of the shots, dressing the doctor up as a sort of *Dominatrix* was fun too. The spur of the moment kitchen dance I loved. I had to sing and play guitar in Covent Garden because the singer / actor who was to play the busker didn't turn up. Initially, I wasn't happy about it but I ended up really enjoying it. Chefs across the road were hanging out of the windows and applauding. A couple who were obviously on drugs kept saying 'you're not really singing are you' (I was really singing) and they started singing along with me. A man started talking to Charli, the sixteen year old actress in the lead, not realising she was in the middle of a scene. He kept asking her 'why are you so happy?'

### Q - How long did it take to edit?

**Janis** - We edited at home on our PC and it took about 6 months.

### Q - There are a lot of very creative effects in the film, how did you do them?

**Janis** - These other-worldly scenes, enhanced by CGI effects achieved on relatively standard PC's, appeal to children especially. Using music as a device to further the storyline adds rhythm and movement to the pacing of the film and by deliberately opting for a more pop / rock rather than rap / dance orientated soundtrack, children and older folk were able to share a more common language together, perhaps more timeless. We did all the effects on the computer using 3D Studio Max, Particle Illusion and Adobe After Effects. We know we could do it all so much better now, better blue screen keying and rotoscoping, but hindsight is 20/20!

### Q - How was the premiere?

**Janis** - It was screened at the NFT on the Southbank. We cringed at a lot of the beginning of 'Lunar Girl' but eventually relaxed and enjoyed it. We initially thought everyone hated it, but it was a great relief when we heard laughter during the funny bits and people cried at the sad bits. There was an incredibly warm atmosphere in the place and everyone applauded. After watching it we later re-edited it and re-organised the sequence of scenes, cut about ten more minutes out until we were a bit happier with it.

### Q - Your film has been screened on Sky. How did that deal come about?

**Janis** - Out of the Blue. They saw it included in the British Films brochure produced by the Edinburgh Film Festival. They thought it would suit The Community Channel, so they rang us, we sent them a VHS and they've now screened it 48 times! We have had a really good reaction from viewers. We were not paid directly for

the screenings, but as we wrote and performed most of the music in the film, we have earned a fair amount from the PRS, nearly paying off the film. We also sold a lot of DVD's after screenings.

### Q - What has been the response to this quite unique film?

**Janis** - I'm well aware of the short comings of 'Lunar Girl', how technically we were very inexperienced, and how the story is corny, but I'm not ashamed of it. Some people have loved it and have said that it has changed their lives. People who like it tend to watch it again and again and again. Other people hate it and think it's corny rubbish with a big cringe factor. There are a group of Foster Children (from incredibly abusive backgrounds) aged from five to twelve years, who adore 'Lunar Girl' and know all of the dialogue inside out and see it as akin to a sort of *Rocky Horror Show*. They speak the lines and sing the songs along with the characters.

### Q - How do you feel about the film now?

**Janis** - I am amazed that with no knowledge at all of film making, that we managed to get it screened on Sky Television without even asking! Charli who played the lead role in 'Lunar Girl' has now done a 14 part series for the BBC. 'Lunar Girl' was Charli's first ever acting job, so it was a pretty good showcase for her. Obviously we've learned loads and hopefully our next film will be a million times better, but as long as we enjoy what we're doing, that is what matters. I'd love to make another film and to get it screened. A film with lots of music (I love music) and a few moments that could touch people's hearts and make them feel that life is worthwhile. Now who wouldn't want to do that.

### Q - What advice would you offer a new film maker?

**Janis** - Just enjoy it and don't give a damn what anyone else says. All of your friends who have gone to film school will fiercely criticise you even if they've never even attempted to make their own film. If you're a woman, it's fairly common for the men to get all the credit, as everyone tends to imagine that it was all their doing, due to their expertise. But as we all know; there's no better team than women and men working together, side by side and helping to portray both the male and the female angle. Filming may be about teamwork but the director should have the final say, as the director and the writer have the overall vision. Helping the actors and crew understand the vision you're working towards is all important. I think the director should also listen to the actors too. Capturing moments of emotion is what does it for me.

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