

## The kids are alright

Indie godhead Richard Linklater on teaching fifth-graders to shred for “School of Rock,” the amazing Jack Black and moving from the margins to the mainstream—and back again.

By Scott Thill

Talk about your roads not taken. Richard Linklater’s name came to the attention of popular consciousness when his 1991 no-budget film “Slacker” helped light the spark for an independent film renaissance that some guy with the last name of Tarantino helped turn into a full-fledged conflagration. And although he dipped into the mainstream here or there—most notably with 1998’s “The Newton Boys,” which, with its relatively modest \$27 million budget, was hardly a big-ticket blockbuster—Linklater has stayed true to his prodigious vision and his small films. Fans of his bittersweet 1995 romance “Before Sunrise”—a film that might be considered an ancestor of Sofia Coppola’s current “Lost in Translation”—will be thrilled to learn that his next project will catch up with Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy’s characters nine years later.

Linklater’s last film, the dazzling “Waking Life,” was an equilibrium-challenging animated film that featured not one chase scene or jaw-dropping stunt, but rather a series of deeply philosophical dialogues with street prophets, barstool visionaries and other heavy thinkers. Bob Sabiston’s unusual animation software—which integrated live action with painterly superimpositions—gave Linklater the perfect visual palette to play out his ideas on societal strictures, love’s mysteries and the problems of agency in a world becoming more dominated by routine and program every minute.

So it’s a testimony to Linklater’s laid-back worldview that he’d jump right from that heady philosophical tangle into a conventional studio comedy featuring Jack Black, Joan Cusack, Sarah Silverman and a classroom full of kids learning how to be rock stars. “School of Rock” is riding a pretty addictive buzz, and chances are by the time you read this it will be well on its way to both dominating its weekend opening and cementing the status of Jack Black as the intimidating comic talent that everyone know he can be, even after the troubled “Shallow Hal.” (How troubled was it? How much time do we have?)

But if anyone knows how to rock—besides Black, one-half of the hilarious riff factory known as Tenacious D, that is—it is Linklater. After all, where do you think he got the title for 1993’s “Dazed and Confused”? The mighty Led Zeppelin, of course, the band that Black spends most of “School of Rock” trying to get his class to emulate.

And though he may not agree—I asked him, so you’ll see for yourselves—many have been emulating Linklater since “Slacker” hit the screen. If it’s not his enthusiasm for film history and culture, then it’s the pot-happy kids from the ’70s around whom he built “Dazed and Confused” (“That ’70s Show,” anyone?) or the singular animation style of “Waking Life” (see the carbon-copy Target commercials, among others) that has helped pop culture make way more money than he probably ever will. But then, that’s why he’s the perfect guy to helm “School of Rock.” The dude is in a class by himself.

**Q: Like “Dazed and Confused,” “School of Rock” seems like an homage to the rebel ethos. What do you think of it?**

It’s a little rock ‘n’ roll fable, and it was fun to tap into the same brain as “Dazed and Confused.” The rock ‘n’ roll comedy; that’s always a good thing. I initially read the script that was sent to me—I get stuff sent to me all the time—but I passed on it at first. I actually bent myself out of shape thinking about it, and I’ve never really been in that dilemma. Usually, I just say no to everything and keep doing what I’m doing. But this time, it got its hooks in me. I was thinking, “Well, this could be good, but it’s not quite there yet.” And it wasn’t until I met Scott Rudin, the producer, and then independently

with Mike White, who wrote the script, and Jack Black that I felt like I could get in there and have fun with it.

I felt that it needed some direction, someplace to go. That's sort of what a director does; he pulls everything together and gives it a tone. I mean, it was very funny, but it still needed a lot of work and we all started from there. And I was in sort of uncharted waters, but I learned a lot in the process. I learned that the director has more control than I ever imagined. (Laughs.)

**Q: Uh-oh, you're power-mad now.**

(Laughs.) No, no! I just treated it like every other film that I've done, you know? I really did. I didn't say, "Oh, since I didn't write the script, I can't do this." It was more like, "OK, three weeks rehearsal, we're going to rewrite some things, do some improv, etc.," basically do the normal things I do on every project. In this case, it was great to be collaborating. I wasn't limited to my own writing; I could go to Mike and we could work together. And he and Jack were great collaborators. We all rocked and rolled together. It was a lot of fun.

**Q: My favorite film of yours is "Waking Life," and this one seems, um, just a *bit* different than that.**

I don't think you can get more different for back-to-back films than "School of Rock" and "Waking Life." (Laughs.) I don't know how much farther apart you can get. That's pretty great, to do them not 20 years but one year apart. I'm feeling versatile these days. But seriously, I treat them all the same. For me, being stuck in my own brain, I know they couldn't look more different. But I take a similar approach and bring the same methodology. One is tapping into one part of my brain and the other is tapping into another. We all have these different parts of ourselves, and I never wanted to be consistent. In anything. You want to explore different parts of yourself, in everything you do. And "School of Rock" appealed to the part of me that loves comedies, that loves Preston Sturges, that likes Jack Black and would like to take the challenge of collaborating with him to make something funny.

I've always been very critical of studio comedies, but I love them. I go out of my way to see them all, but I'm like, "Well that's funny, but it could be better." My critical antennae are always up. I see a big action-adventure and I just tune out, because I can't see myself doing one. But comedies? It's more fun for me to be playing in that sandbox.

**Q: Has the process of making these larger films eased for you over time?**

Yeah. The only one that I was really traumatized by was "Dazed and Confused." I did that one for Universal, so it was a studio film, even though it's kind of seen as an independent. It did get an independent-level release, and didn't make that much money at the box office initially, although now everyone's seen it on video. But not only was that an early film for me, it was my studio filmmaking wake-up call. After that, I recalibrated everything, and it's been smooth ever since. And "School of Rock" is probably the smoothest film I've worked on. It helps when they like your dailies, you're on time and on budget and everything's going great. They liked the cast and the script; we felt that everybody liked what we were doing. I've been on those films when they're *not* happy with what you're doing.

**Q: It's funny to hear you say that "Dazed and Confused" didn't get much notice when it emerged, because it was only a few years later that "That '70s Show" came out and took over the world. I wonder where they got the idea for that show?**

Right! (Laughs.) Well, no one copyrights a decade.

**Q: Talk about Jack Black a bit. He's got some serious gifts.**

Oh my God, he's incredibly gifted. And he just keeps coming at you with more ideas. He was the greatest to work with because he has all the tools. Not only is he a good musician with a great voice, but he's an actor who came up in theater and a gifted comedian too. He just has so much ability. He was always going, "Give me one more take. Let me work on this some more." He never gave up on trying anything; he's the opposite of lazy, and he's hardest on himself. I would walk over to him in between takes and he would already be getting on himself. "I put a little too much mustard on that one. I'll get it right." Between him, Joan Cusack, Sarah Silverman and Mike White, there were scenes where I was just going, "Wow, I'm blessed to work with such comedic talent."

**Q: Were you and Jack each familiar with the other's work?**

Yeah. You don't talk about it much, but I found out later that he had seen "Slacker" way back when, which was cool. But I was a big fan of his, both as an actor and musician. Like everyone, I'm a Tenacious D fan, so I was really looking forward to working with him. I thought it would be fun to rock 'n' roll together. I mean, a lot of our first meetings were spent talking about music. Even now, after we've wrapped, we're still turning each other on to stuff. He was always laying CDs on me, people I hadn't heard too much about, and vice versa.

**Q: Since we're talking about music, how did Jim O'Rourke, who's now a member of Sonic Youth, get involved with you and this film?**

He's amazing. I think my music supervisor, Randy Poster, just called him up. I'm a big Sonic Youth fan, always have been, and Jim is such a smart producer and a really cool guy. The kids respected him, and he taught them how to be rockers, you know? How to carry themselves. He'd come up with fun bits that they could rehearse. He was great; Craig Wedren, who wrote some songs and scores, was great; George Drakoulias, the music producer, was great. We were blessed. But Jim was wonderful; he was even giving some of the kids help on how to sing off-key for the audition scenes, because, as much as I love music, I'm not technically that helpful. He's multitalented.

Every day you're going, "Gosh, we're getting paid to do this?" When people say that it must have been hard to make this movie, I just go, "Uh, no." Being an offshore oil worker, that was hard. But this? The hours are long and everything is built to be supportive and help you do the best that you can, but it's not hard. Mowing yards is hard; hanging out with Jack Black and a bunch of kids and putting the camera in the right place is not.

**Q: I read an interview recently where Jack talked about how "Shallow Hal" had brought him an uncomfortable amount of fame. Did you two ever get a chance to talk about negotiating that tightrope between mainstream acceptance and the desire to retain some independence from it?**

That's sort of an actor dilemma that's not really a problem for someone behind the camera like myself. But yeah, you get recognized by people going, "Hey I loved 'Shallow Hal.'" And I'm not sure Jack would say that's his best film, but you'd have to ask him. You've got to get used to that if you're going to put yourself out there. But Jack's an incredibly gracious person; he's really a sweet guy that way. So I don't think it screwed him up, but—this goes for the industry—people have a tendency to put you in boxes. "OK, you're good at this. You're good at that. You can't do that and you shouldn't do this." We all want to limit others, tell them what they can and can't do. But I think Jack can do anything. I wouldn't want to put any limits on what he can do. He'll probably take it slow and follow his own instincts. He's got amazing range, especially with anything comedic.

**Q: How about you? Your films don't seem to respect limits in any way.**

I hope so. I mean, that's what I'm trying to do, although not consciously. If you're working within a genre, you want to kick ass within it, and maybe create some of your own genres along the way. I've got all kinds of things I want to do, but you are stuck with your own interests and personality, so I'm not itching to make a certain film. There are certain kinds of films that I don't think I'd be totally fulfilled by, but comedies have always spoken to me.

**Q: And this one has some great lines. I dig Jack Black's incredulous response when he finds out that his kids have never heard of Led Zeppelin.**

"Don't tell me you've never gotten the Led out." (Laughs.) I love when adults in their 30s or 40s watch that and laugh, while their kids don't get it at all. I love those moments.

**Q: See, it's not just for the kids, parents!**

No, no, no! I've always pitched this film at Dewey's level. To me, I wasn't making a kids movie. I was making a movie that has kids in it, that kids would like, I hope. But he doesn't treat them like kids; he treats them like peers, so I thought that should be the tone all the way through. We're not making some condescending kid movie; it's more about suspended adolescence! (Laughs.) That was the tone.

**Q: Which seems to be a more constructive way of bridging the gap between the generations.**

Yeah, because it's fun for kids to be treated as older people. Your worst memories of childhood always involve someone treating you like a little kid, not giving you any respect, you know? That happens early; by fifth grade, you're certainly dealing with it. Someone's telling you what to do all the time. And you're your own person by that age; I know, because I have a 10-year-old daughter. At that age, you're a complex psychology in full bloom.

**Q: Did you see any of that maturation in action as these kids grappled with working together musically as a group?**

Yeah. They were already pretty cohesive and got along really well, but it was fun to see them become a band. It didn't take long. Kids are so adaptable. It was just fun to see them have such a good time. And they really took it in. I could sit and talk to them about their characters and I don't think they ever felt that I was pushing them too much. I was never making it all about pleasing me or anything; it was all about them doing their thing, being cool and having a good time. They weren't thinking that I was the guy that they were working for. You know, "the Director." I was just trying to be like an older brother or an uncle. I never had to ride them hard; they were always good.

**Q: Are you worried at all about the future of independents, especially with this FCC debacle about media ownership? Can the independent spirit survive in that kind of environment?**

I don't know, but I think it's always been that way. It's disturbing to think that a few companies are going to own everything; that sounds ominous. But people will discover that independent spirit on their own. I think, in this film, Dewey is giving kids a jump on things they might have experienced later in life. But it's up to each individual to explore their pop-culture past, and they're going to. They're going to check out music from different eras, or follow a thread from something they like back into the past. If they're curious, that is. If they're not ... well, they're already consumers anyway. But there will be those who do explore things that mean something to them. The message of this movie isn't just that they're consumers; it's more about them realizing that they can be in a band and have fun.

Everyone is mostly interested in people—kids in particular—as consumers, but this movie is more about showing kids that they can express themselves. I think that's a

positive thing to tell people. I think people are always going to rebel and create; you can never stop that. There will always be a creative force out in the margins; the creative rebel spirit will find its place.

**Q: How do think that independent spirit has changed over time since you made “Slacker”?**

I think it’s the same, I really do. I don’t think things change much. I mean, back then it hadn’t changed much from the previous generation. The thing that changes is the business, you know, the distributors and the theaters. There’s a continuum that goes back to the late ’50s and early ’60s that’s been fairly consistent. I think the difference is that now there are more people making films, whether it’s indie or digital or whatever. There are a lot of people doing it now. But that’s good, you know?

I mean, not everyone’s a director. I’ve always said that everyone should *be able* to make a film, but that doesn’t mean everyone *should* make a film! (Laughs.) Just like everyone should be able to write a book or paint a picture. But you’ll find out who’s good at it, who has talent. I mean, I grew up thinking that it wasn’t an option. Growing up in East Texas, making films just was not a career choice. It wasn’t until my early 20s that it even crossed my mind as a possibility. I always thought I’d be a writer.

**Q: How did it eventually cross your mind?**

I just started getting interested in movies. I was studying theater, but something about film, probably the visuals, clicked for me. It tapped into my mind. And it might have been the combination of the writing, the technical aspects of storytelling, and the whole visual apparatus, but it just took over and I never looked back. It might have happened to me earlier had I ever thought about it. It just wasn’t put out there.

**Q: What was it that gave you the hunger to express yourself? It seems to me that kids are growing up today without realizing that expressing themselves in a creative way is an option, as you say.**

Well, I felt that my whole life, to be honest. Even as far back as second grade, I was always writing. I always felt I would do something like that, but I didn’t know what. It’s also the environment you grow up in; there’s never much encouragement for that, you know? Most people are so obsessed with getting their kids into the right college or job. No one ever says, “What will be fun? How will you express yourself and have a good time in this life?” That doesn’t figure into most parents’ thinking.

**Q: I think you’ve got to link the two together.**

Well, they should be. The best teachers will say that: “You really learn when you’re goofing off.” That’s how my rehearsals were, but we were also honing the movie. We’re finding humor and writing it down, but it’s about play. The best teachers you ever had? They made it fun. You looked forward to that class, to reading that story and talking about it. Anything can be made into drudgery if there’s no enthusiasm. It’s that old saying—“Nothing great ever comes without enthusiasm.” Much better than doing everything by rote.

**Q: Which leads me to the Austin Film Society. How has your enthusiasm changed it over the years?**

We’ve been watching movies since 1985, and now we’re giving out grants. I just believe in local film culture; I like the idea of watching movies with an audience that hangs out and talks about them afterwards. I love the social, communal aspect of movies; mainstream cinema is good for that because people still go to the theaters. But when it comes to repertory or the history of film, more and more that’s something you see at home on video or DVD. Which is fine, but I still value those moments with a group in the theater; that’s increasingly become harder to do, economically. But we manage pretty well.

**Q: Does it give you a sense of satisfaction to share that enthusiasm with the community you came up in?**

Oh yeah. I've always felt that the Film Society is an equally expressive outlet of my passion for film, even more so. When I spend a year of my life on one film, well, that's just one film. But I probably communicate with more people by showing 100 films a year that we've picked from world cinema or curating a series. That's equally important, and to me it's the same. I mean, the French New Wave all thought that cinema was just a part of your life; you live it, whether you're writing or creating it. Unfortunately, the busier I get, the less I get to do with the Film Society. I'm still artistic director, but I'm in and out of their orbit. Yet I just love the communal aspect of it; we've built up a serious film community.

**Q: So what's next for you?**

Actually, as we speak, I'm editing another film. When I finished the "School of Rock" sound mix, I flew to Paris the next day and shot a film that I've been working on for the last year, a continuation of "Before Sunrise" with Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. It's those same characters nine years later. It's very low budget; we shot it in like three weeks. I like them; they're great collaborators. They were in "Waking Life" as well. It's important to work with people you're on the same page with.

**Q: Speaking of "Waking Life," where would you rank that in your body of work so far?**

It's all integral; there's certainly a thread that runs from "Slacker" to "Waking Life." That's how my mind works—in the narrative vein, using film as a storytelling medium. "Waking Life" was something that I thought about forever. It actually predated "Slacker," but I just didn't know how to do it. It was the animation technique that brought it to a boil. When I saw Bob's animation, it was the "Eureka!" moment.

**Q: It seems like a "Eureka!" moment for others too. I'm starting to see a lot of commercials using a similar method.**

Oh definitely, it's been totally ripped off. They're cribbing the style the best they can. They don't have his software, but they're going for the look. His software is already at a new level. I was actually thinking of doing another animation film. Something in a totally new direction.

**Q: Do artists have a duty to push that envelope, move things in a new direction?**

I think you can't help it. When you dig into the human spirit, you're going to explore and push the parameters of genre and technology. I always felt shackled into narrative, period, so I'm pushing storytelling. Maybe not on something like "School of Rock," but other films. There's a part of me that enjoys that, pushing the envelope, and then there's a part of me that enjoys the traditional stuff. It's all about tapping into the different parts of your brain.

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