



cool creatives

By **Laura Ohata** | Photography by **Matt Lankes**

Creativity has been ascribed to divine inspiration, madness and even caffeine. Working exhaustive hours and braving poverty, local artists fashion our culture in the edgy cowboy aesthetic that we call Austin. To celebrate the dipping temperatures of December, we present you with 10 of the coolest creatives in town.

**An
Austin
FILM
ICON**

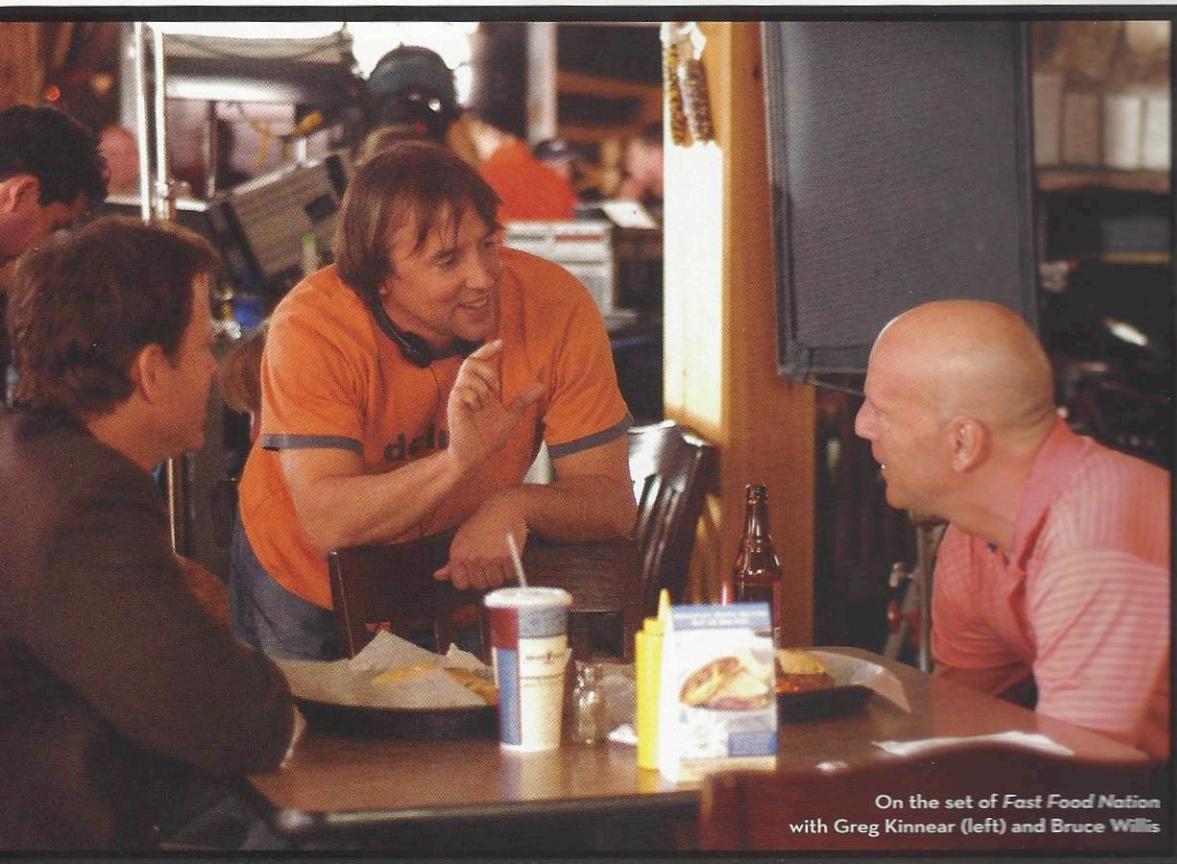
TAKES ON AN
AMERICAN
INSTITUTION





Richard Linklater doesn't eat hamburgers. Getting ready to kick off a whirlwind press tour in conjunction with the November release of *Fast Food Nation*, the director reveals, "I would gladly go to McDonald's if they had a good veggie burger. I became a vegetarian when I moved to Austin in 1983." Not what you might expect from a Houston native who went to college on a baseball scholarship—but Linklater is no ordinary guy. Director of such films as *Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Before Sunrise*, *Waking Life* and *School of Rock* and founder of the Austin Film Society, he is an icon of the independent movie scene both in town and across the globe.

Midway through his undergraduate program at Sam Houston State University (where he studied literature), Linklater put his academic career on hold and spent the next two and a half years working on oil-drilling rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Once he saved up \$18,000, he quit his job, bought a bunch of film equipment and set up residence in Austin. "You can't really decide to be a filmmaker. Film discovers you in a way," says Linklater. "When I was in my early 20s, movies took me over. I had friends who were going to school at UT, and back in those days, they were showing five movies a day on campus, and I wanted to see as many films as possible. I had visited Los Angeles



On the set of *Fast Food Nation* with Greg Kinnear (left) and Bruce Willis

'What's your major?' After you graduate, they say, 'So what do you do for a living?' For an entire decade, I would go home to be around my family and not be able to answer those questions. When they asked me what I did, I would say 'I'm living in Austin,' and that felt substantial enough.

"It's incredible the pressure society puts on you to create things that have a monetary value in our free marketplace," says Linklater. "If you come up with some nasty contraption that pol-

and decided it was just too big of a leap. L.A. just didn't speak to me. I didn't know my exact future, but I loved Austin. It was a conscious choice to put myself in a creative environment, knowing that this would be the best place to grow and meet kindred spirits."

During those years, Linklater was obsessed with learning the technical craft of filmmaking. "I got a Super-8 camera and started shooting hours of footage. I would do an entire short film and focus only on the lighting. Then I would do another movie and concentrate on camera movement. A lot of filmmaking is problem-solving," he explains. "The basic technical elements are not that tough, and that's not what gets anyone excited. It's all about the ideas."

While most men in their early 20s fritter away their finances on a new car and lavish vacations, Linklater lived like a monk. "In those days, \$18,000 went a long way. My rent was only \$150 a month, all bills paid. I ate rice and beans and never went out to eat. Instead I spent all my money on film stock, processing, movie admission and books. I was a lame boyfriend. My idea of a date was, 'Let's go to a double feature.' Those years were a pure rebuilding of who I was. It was heaven to watch three or four movies a day, shoot film, edit for 48 straight hours and live in my own film bubble. Of course, it had its own anxieties like, 'Where is this all going?' and 'Am I really accomplishing anything?'"

When the money ran out, in 1987, Linklater got a job as the night bellman at La Mansion (now the Doubletree), a business hotel in Austin. Linklater says, "I consciously picked what I call a 'warm body job,' where they needed someone for the off hours but there wasn't a lot of work to do." Linklater spent the majority of his shift reading Russian literature and writing.

Just like an artist in any field, Linklater suffered financial and social stress as he struggled to master his craft. "In college, people ask you,

lutes the environment but that you sell for a lot of money, you get a pat on the back. If you're an artist or just trying to be an interesting person or live an interesting life, you're the subject of scorn. But that's your price of admission. If you can't handle that, you don't qualify for a career in the arts." These experiences and feelings eventually inspired the creation of the film *Slacker*, a cult classic that *Filmmaker* magazine listed as No. 10 in its ranking of the 50 Most Important Independent Films (fall of 1996).

As a director in a volatile industry, Linklater is loath to talk about future projects, even with friends, until they get the green light. Lee

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Daniel, a cinematographer who roomed with Linklater during the early years in the Victorian house on the corner of Nueces and 24th (now a commercial development), didn't even know he was going to shoot *Slacker* until it actually happened. "There was just some casual banter about a film," recalls Daniel. "Then one day, I came home from work expecting to grab a refreshing beverage and some food, but when I opened the refrigerator door, I found 80 cans of 16 mm film instead. Then I knew we were really going to make a movie."

In spite of his reticence, Linklater reveals that he currently has four projects in some stage of development. "When you're young, you have the sense that you're entitled to your desires. But as I've gotten older, I realize that I am very blessed to get to make movies. Each one is a mini miracle. I certainly don't take it for granted. I played baseball in college, and as an athlete, your own victory is somebody's loss, and your loss is somebody else's victory. It was very competitive and not always in a healthy way. Whereas in the arts, the only competition I feel is with myself—to make the best film I can possibly make."

"I try to play against my limitations by focusing on what is already a part of me," he explains. "An actor can look at himself in the mirror and say, 'I'm not a leading man, but I could be a great character actor.' You have to find your zone and be OK with that. As a director, you are stuck with your own interests and experiences. I would love to say that I'm an unlimited person, but the truth is we all have our blind spots, weaknesses and limitations."

Linklater spent years trying to make a movie about industrial workers but never managed to secure financial backing. "Indirectly," he says, "*Fast Food Nation* was a good way to express that side of myself." The film is based on the bestseller penned by Eric Schlosser, and the cast includes Patricia Arquette, Ethan Hawke, Greg Kinnear, Kris Kristofferson and Bruce Willis.

Linklater first met Schlosser when the author came to Austin for a reading: "I had a note that he wanted to meet me, so we met at the Hotel San José and were quickly off and running with the idea."

Rather than shoot a documentary based on the book, the duo turned the nonfiction exposé into a dramatic narrative centered on the bag-and-go meal. "It was a big challenge," admits Linklater, "but it was Eric's idea to put the book aside and create characters within the milieu of the book. In addition to his incredible track record as an investigative journalist, Eric has written some plays and is a natural dramatist."

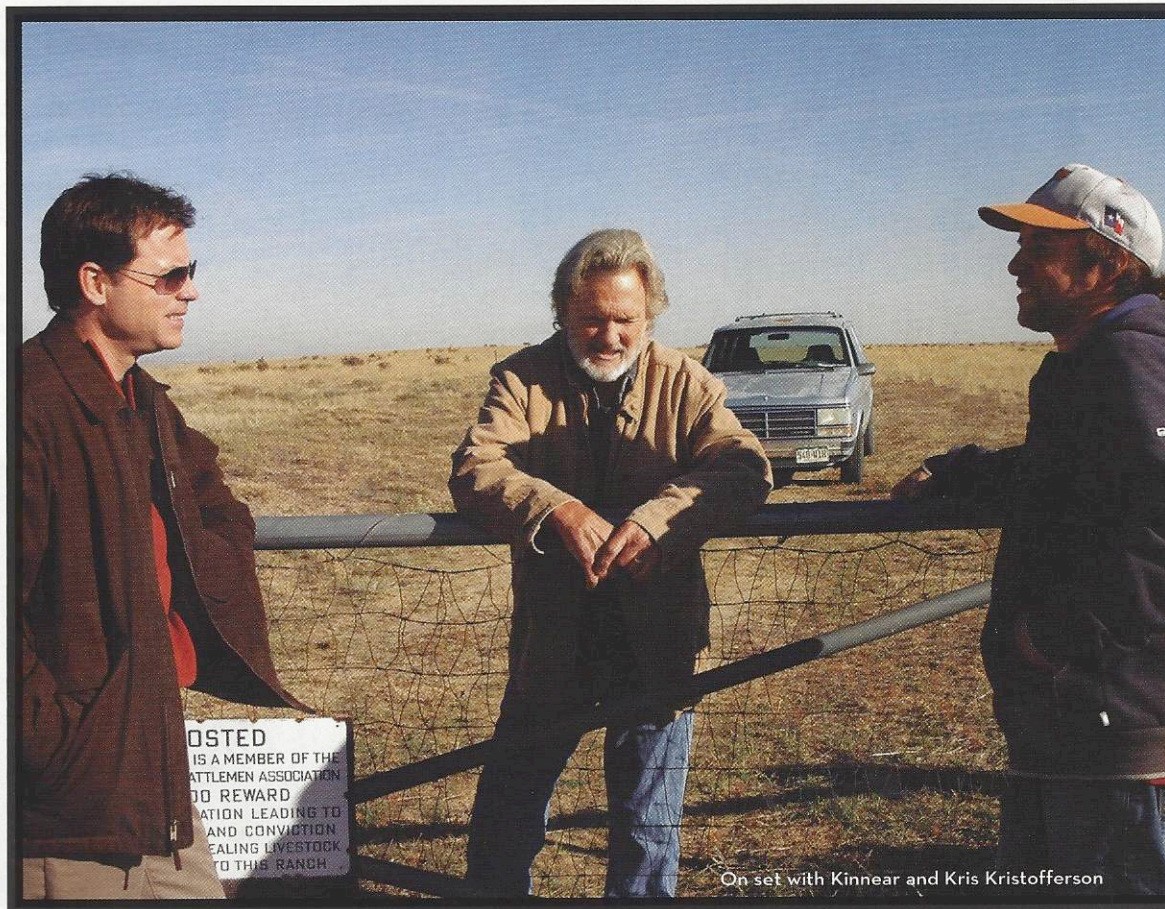
Schlosser and Linklater hammered away at the screenplay over a course of three years, meeting in person or working through details via e-mail or phone. One plotline in *Fast Food Nation* revolves

around a marketing executive of the fictional Mickey's restaurant chain who discovers that his best-selling burger is contaminated with fecal matter. Going on a quest to find out why, he leaves the opulent corporate headquarters for the slaughterhouses, feedlots and strip malls of America.

Film editor Sandra Adair (a frequent Linklater partner) says, "Rick has a great deal of integrity when it comes to telling a story. Of course, certain things have to become fictionalized, but he tries to keep it grounded in reality. There is nothing in *Fast Food Nation* that wouldn't happen in real life. It's not fabricated for the sake of shock value."

When asked what the film achieves artistically, Linklater says, "I'm hoping for it to be unsettling but in some strange way satisfying. When you witness injustice, something should go off inside of you. We all have a little injustice meter in our internal mechanisms. Hopefully that part works inside of everybody."

So what words of advice does Linklater offer to aspiring filmmakers? "Forget the business altogether. It's no different than wanting to make a living as a musician or painter. Get really good at what you're doing, and put it out of your mind that it's all about personal contacts. It's comical when I see all the young people with ambition leading the way rather than the talent. Talent begets ambition, and it should go that way."



On set with Kinnear and Kris Kristofferson