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THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

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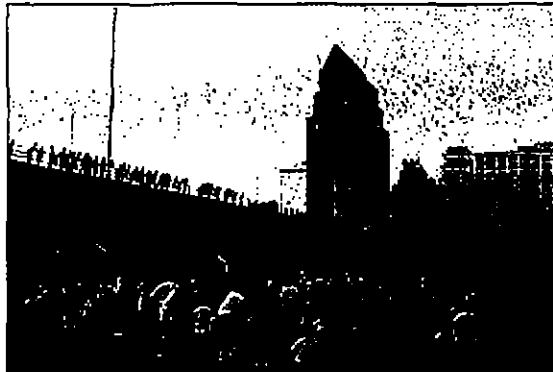


MovieMaker 2004 Top 10 Cities for Moviemakers

Our fourth annual ranking of the best places in the US to live and make movies

by James L. Menzies

EMAIL TO A FRIEND



Austin boasts various location types, like Bat Bridge; and is also a great place to shoot period pieces like *The Alamo*, starring Billy Bob Thornton and Jason Patric.

two Southwestern cities are turning the state into a moviemaking powerhouse, and bookend our list of picks.

Moviemaking is not an exact science. Just as there is no formula that will automatically calculate the box office success of a film, or what an actor is really worth to a picture, there is no one correct answer on which city is right for every moviemaker. It all comes down to personality, and making sure that yours matches the climate and attitude of the city you're living in. Luckily, there's a bit of something for everyone on this list—and that

When the new year rolls around at *MovieMaker* it means two things to our staff: the annual Park City issue had better be at the printer and our annual countdown of America's top 10 moviemaking havens better be part of the editorial mix.

Based on way too much research and statistical analysis as well as numerous conversations with local film offices and individual moviemakers, this 2004 list contains several of the usual suspects—but several surprises, too.

Over the years, we've witnessed the effect a changing economy has on location-based film production. When budgets need to be cut, state-funded film offices are often the first to suffer. Los Angeles and Chicago have felt the strain this year, which is reflected in their rankings. At the same time, Boston, a city without an official film office, is making its first appearance, offering a true rags-to-riches story.

But the biggest story of the year has to do with things really being bigger in Texas—Austin and Houston, to be exact. Complementing each other's efforts, the

should make the task of finding the perfect base for a blissful moviemaking career a bit easier.

1. Austin, Texas Last year: #4

If it's not careful, austin may wake up one day to discover it's become the new Mecca of American moviemaking. Or has that day already arrived? Inching up on our list for four years in a row, it seemed only a matter of time before the City of the Violet Crown wrangled the top spot. What's so amazing is that Austin is still in its indie film production infancy, at least compared to long-established moviemaking megalopolises like Los Angeles and New York.

In 2003 the city had its "biggest year ever," says Gary Bond, director of the Austin Film Office. Austin hosted six major feature films last year with budgets totaling more than \$200 million, including Alan Parker's *The Life of David Gale*, Marcus Nispel's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Alamo*, which reteamed director John Lee Hancock and actor Dennis Quaid, who worked together on *The Rookie* in Austin the previous year.

According to Bond, film production has increased "tenfold" over the past decade in Austin. In large part this is because the city's advantages have drawn moviemakers back to town again and again—and because the city is home to some of the most recognizable names in the business, like indie auteurs Robert Rodriguez and Richard Linklater.

"Austin's diverse locations and deep pool of crew and talent are the main reasons the city's a favorite of independent producers," says Bond. This seems to be the consensus among local moviemakers as well. "You can almost always get free labor here. But beware: the free labor is usually friendly and intelligent," warns producer-director Damon "Tuscany" Chang.

The local film community also agrees that the Austin Film Office does a more than *competent job of helping moviemakers. Besides performing the obligatory duties, the Austin Film Office also assists moviemakers with housing needs, sponsors crew appreciation events and provides welcome packets that include information on the city, T-shirts and CDs of local musicians. (The Austin music scene, of course, is one of the richest in the world.)*

The office also works closely with a number of local organizations to help encourage and foster local film production. The Austin Film Society, for example, provides grants to local moviemakers, sponsors screenings and serves as the property manager of the city-owned Austin Studios (which features 20 acres of film and video production facilities, including a 10,000 square-foot production office building and 100,000 square feet of production space).

Besides hosting educational and networking events, the Texas Association of Film and Tape Professionals lobbies for film-friendly legislation. The Chamber of Commerce Film and Digital Entertainment Committee is working to develop a stronger film-related city infrastructure.

Austin also boasts two major film festivals, South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival—both of which emphasize locally-produced work. According to Mel Rodriguez, writer-director of *Mockingbird*, "The Austin Film Festival is one of the most informative and well-organized festivals in the country."

Austin is geographically diverse, and rife with aesthetic appeal. It provides moviemakers with a variety of looks, all within a relatively small area—from grassy flatlands and rivers to deserts and hills. Although according to Chang, Austin "Can't give you a true downtown or metropolitan city feel," what it can give you is a slew of surrounding small towns, a number of which are great for period pieces; others are ideal for representing Any Town,

USA.

With every up-and-coming movie town, however, there are growing pains. "The lack of choice with regard to production houses for film developing and transfers is generating more and more discussion around town," says Chang. Also, according to local director-cinematographer Michael Morlan, "Austin is, for the most part, a nice place to live—though recent growth has found the city unprepared and, as such, construction and traffic are ridiculous."

Financially speaking, Austin has additional benefits, like no permits being required to shoot in the city. "Along with the tax incentives available to filmmakers, we offer free or greatly reduced housing rates for location scouts and decision-makers considering Austin," says Bond. "And frequently, city facilities and property are available at no charge to filmmakers." According to Chang, "A local filmmaker can live (rent, food, other expenses) for about \$800 a month." Sounds like a city that may just keep growing.

Austin Film Office * 201 E 2nd Street, Austin, TX 78701 * 512/583-7299 * www.austintexas.org

2. New York, NY Last year: #3

If this weren't a town which serves \$65 cocktails and \$50 hamburgers, New York City might well be number one on our list. But New York can be expensive, and because of that cold, hard fact, it can be a tough place to live and pursue an independent film career. The surprising thing, perhaps, is that these cold, hard facts have not been enough to hold the city back. Feature production shooting days in the city grew 31 percent from 2002 to 2003. Film Commissioner Katherine Oliver sums it up best:

"NYC is the independent filmmaking capital of the United States. We have the best resources, location and all of our services are free of charge. And films made in NYC win awards! At the Sundance Film Festival since 2000, four of five Grand Jury prizes in the Dramatic Film Competition went to films made here."



Jude Law (center) on location in New York City for Charles Shyer's *Alfie*.

Why wouldn't you want to make a movie in New York? The city is romantic, scenic and moviemaker-friendly. Few other cities in the world can be as aesthetically or spiritually rewarding to shoot in. Plus, the NYC Mayor's Office of Film, Theater and Broadcasting is one of the hardest-working film offices in the country. It should be—as the country's first film commission, it's had enough time to perfect its business.

With an inexhaustible list of venues for local moviemakers to display their work, including some of the most competitive festivals (New York Film Festival and Tribeca Film Festival, to name two) and great independent theaters (Film Forum, The Angelika), the potential for success in New York City is endless.

Besides offering free police assistance, the Film Office now allows moviemakers to apply for permits online—saving hours of production time by cutting down on the number of necessary in-person visits. They also offer such incentives as reduced rates on hotels, car rentals, limousine services and air travel. Also, sales tax is exempt on all production goods and rentals.

New York's production facilities, besides being ample, are also first-rate—as is the local talent and crew. Says moviemaker Jason Kessler, director of *What's Wrong With This Picture*, "You're surrounded by the best and the brightest: theater, music, museums, food