

SHAKEY GRAVES



STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Behind every great song is an even greater story. What better way to tell it than through the intimate immediacy of film? 50 feet of it, to be exact.

INTERVIEW BY JOSHUA COON AND MEAGAN RAMPLIN
WORDS BY BENITA YEN

Folklore. Captured in a single Super 8 film cartridge. New stories created by old technology. It's a very personal choice for director Max McSimov. Confirmed in the backseat of a 1972 Dart on a 100°F August day in Seattle with country artist Shelby Earl. Roll the film.

McSimov has an abiding love for Super 8 that has taken him and his small yet mighty crew on the road all over the Pacific Northwest, for a passion project that combines film and music in a beautifully creative way. To him, the film stock is essential to the overall feel of the project. One take. No edits. "Having that time constraint creates this intimate immediacy that only a Super 8 cartridge can provide," he says. "And inside that space? That's where the magic happens."

The length of a Super 8 film cartridge and its three-minute song counterpart is a holdover from the physical limitations of a 78rpm record. Rip away the production and studio work of a music recording and you get the bare bones of the song. It suddenly becomes new.

MUSIC AND ITS MUSE

Inspired by Alan Lomax and his visionary field recordings, McSimov's project opus, *50 Feet of Song*, seeks to honor that vision. Because it's so easy for songs to get lost today, McSimov wants give them a larger life beyond the audio recording, by preserving them on film. They need to live in an enduring historical document to truly be appreciated for the artform they are.

"It's where the true value of the Super 8 film lies. It creates a space. You just cut away everything that doesn't matter."

In the smaller regions of America today, these are the songs with little to no airplay, unsigned by labels. McSimov is on a search. It's not about preserving the past but preserving this moment in time. →

→ Folk music and its country cousin are very personal forms of songwriting. Transparent. Raw. And oh so honest. A solid pulse check of the deep vein that runs through America. “It comes from the heart and that’s also where Super 8 comes from,” McSimov continues. “It’s a film stock for the people, it’s affordable, accessible and easy to use, and folk music correlates and mirrors that.” The two are bound by more than words. Lyrically-driven folk and great storytelling live on way past their creators’ intent to a life all of their own.

When you talk about folk music and film, there’s an automatic predisposition to the art of the craft. Their very nature speaks to a particular mindset, unconsciously real in a very what-you-see-is-what-you-get way. It never gets old to those who are fans of originality and authenticity. Personal expression is uniquely gratifying. It’s wholly yours with its own markers and DNA. It’s not about hitting the notes. Or scoring that backlit profile. There is nothing new to invent. Everything natural will play itself out. Unfiltered. Filled with emotions. In highs and lows that rival nature in its many forces. Perhaps that’s why notes and reels always seem to ignite together. They give us permission to revel in the pure pleasure of life as it’s meant to be messily celebrated. In the age of digital perfection, is it any surprise that we long for those perfect imperfections?



SESSION SONG

The idea is to give each artist 50 feet of film to tell their story in a song. No more. No less. At festivals, in cars, on the road and on back porches, the audio is recorded right there and then for an incredible acoustic quality. The film does what Super 8 does so well. It shimmies. And shakes. It plays with sound and image in all its natural glory. Unknown and unplanned variables make for a great supporting cast that turns every session into something unbelievably unique and unforgettable. Imagine the post-recording musings and the second take in post-production weeks, months later?

The characteristics and pervasiveness of Super 8 open a floodgate of nostalgia for many of us, regardless of whether we’re behind the lens or in front. Even casual observers stop and take a moment out to remember and relive memories from the distant past that feel so very present today.

IS THAT FILM?

So many people love film, it draws them in like moths to a flame. As McSimov discovered at a music festival in Oregon. “That was the beginning, because I realized there was a real interest; people wanted to be on film,” he recalls. “Walking around with my Bolex 150 Super, I would just approach artists and hold it up to them and they’d say ‘is that film?’ and I’d say ‘yeah, it is’ – and they’d say ‘let’s do this!’”

At first, McSimov and his team would seek out the artists to be involved in the project. But once the project began to live and breathe, things shifted, with artists reaching out to them. “There’s definitely a certain type of artist that’s attracted to the project, because of the film stock we use,” he confirms. “The look of Super 8 is undeniably gritty and beautiful and no other film stock offers that.” This is the stock he wants to shoot on. This is how he wants to tell stories. And this is how many artists want their stories told.

Watch any one of the project’s sessions and the connection between the handmade, shaky, grainy film stock and honest folk songs is undeniable. Visceral even. The *50 Feet...* crew has a goldmine in hand. Songs that came out of the early 1940s and spoke of a unique time in America that celebrated the average Joe. Those stalwart citizens who doggedly lived through the Great Depression with very little, but had cultural wealth that gave rise to an American folk revival as an antidote to challenging times. You see the patina here? Richly layered through history, every note on every scratchy film recording became the enduring soundtrack of an entire generation in the midst of great social change.

“It’s the film stock for the people. it’s affordable, accessible, easy-to-use. It’s very personal.”

RESTRAINTS BREED CREATIVITY

From the softly focused to the laser beamed, analog meets digital in dual harmony today. No stranger to either, McSimov shot digitally at the height of the DSLR movement. But for these sessions, he wants something different. Something unique.

Super 8 film shines bright. But it’s not without its shadows. It’s not very light-sensitive. It has to be shot in full daylight. Sometimes at certain times of day. It loves to be outside. Think this is a burden? Think again. “These are parts of Super 8’s restraints that I actually like, because it

becomes a more direct form of filmmaking,” McSimov explains. “It doesn’t have as much production around it. We say, we’re going to meet at 5 o’clock at this spot because it’s completely lit with sunlight. And we’re going to hang out for 20 minutes and do a session.” The director directs.

These location shots are part of a bigger idea that McSimov is exploring. To get into a space where the song actually lives and breathes inspires a context of place. The type of film stock is chosen based on location. Shooting in an alley vs. golden hour on the beach. Very different vibe. Very different story. Very different film stock options. The creators need tools. The tools need creators. And song lovers and storytellers everywhere rejoice.

The inherent differences between shooting with DSLR and Super 8 are telling. Each has its own champions and rewards. For McSimov, shooting with a DSLR on the set means there are about 30 things for him to keep in mind. But with this mindfulness comes great control. In the planning, during the shoot and in post-production. Super-crisp images with near perfect results. There are many whose visions are sharpened through a DSLR lens.

Super 8. Super easy. Super natural. Amazing quality and output that cannot be replicated by digital. “When you pick up a Super 8 camera, it’s an extension of yourself,” he says. “All you have to do is dial in. Focus and zoom the distance, hold down the shutter and you’re done. When I’m shooting an artist, I literally feel like I’m walking a dance with this person. They’re giving something to me and I’m giving something to them. It no longer feels like I’m observing. I’m inside this moment creating. And it’s a beautiful thing.” →

SHOVELS & ROPE



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KITTY, DAISY & LEWIS




→ PROJECTING FORWARD

Sitting on a backlog of 50 pre-recorded sessions from the last three years, one wonders where the next evolution of this project is. McSimov wants to expand on the sessions. As mesmerizing and curiously addictive as the finished films are, there’s so much more to coax out. “We’re trying to build more of a story around the sessions – to go out, find those songs and those little places in America where beautiful songs are being written, but are just completely lost, then bring them together through the sessions. And through the story.”

If it’s true that living through a soul-crushing heartbreak will help you write a song worth listening to, then revealing the cracks behind the words is story gold. In looking to connect, we find the human experience to be universal. We can relate. The artists who dream and create, constantly wear their hearts on their sleeves – giving voice to what all-too-often remains silent.

It’s the kind of courage that is found in those little places McSimov seeks. And as long as there is 50 feet of film around, there will be miles and miles of stories to tell that feel so personal. So human. So now.

Did you know a song has a heartbeat? Listen. 

Hear Max McSimov for yourself at the Kodakery. On top of the full story, you’ll get a snippet of Porkchop, a track from folk duo Two Man Gentlemen Band. Go in hungry.

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THE LOMAX FACTOR

Collector, writer, filmmaker; Alan Lomax was one of the key inspirations behind McSimov’s 50 Feet of Song sessions. But who was he and what did he do?

Alan Lomax’s many contributions celebrated one world music as worthy of a global cultural legacy. An American field collector of 20th century folk music, he was instrumental to the American and British folk revivals of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s.

Influenced by his folklorist collector father, John Lomax, he recorded thousands of songs and interviews for the Archive of American Folk Song as director at the Library of Congress, bringing 70 years of work under one roof. A contemporary of folk and jazz pioneers from Woody Guthrie to Muddy Waters, his place in cultural and musical history resonates today.

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