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## THE Indie Life

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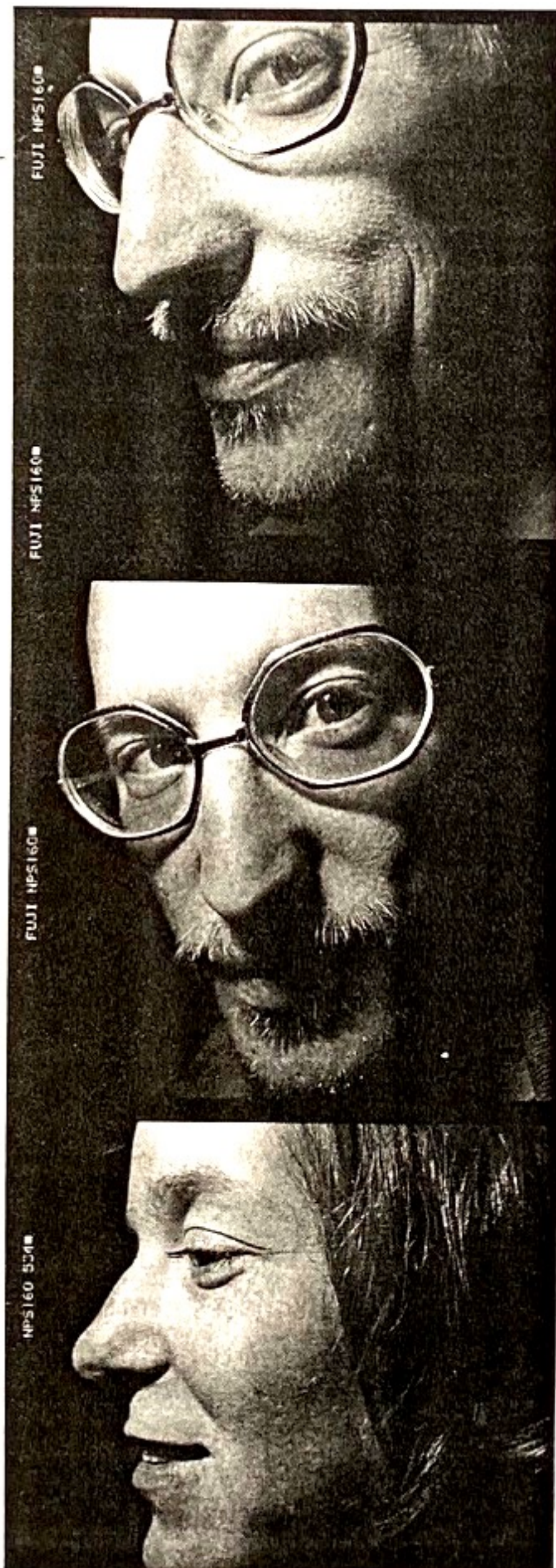


# Living the Indie Life

## MEDIAMAKERS DISCUSS HOW THEY KEEP THEIR CAREERS ON TRACK

By Andrea Meyer

**T**he notion of the starving artist is a romantic one. Sepia-toned images float through our collective minds of creative geniuses scraping together enough pennies to drink a pastis in a Boulevard Saint Germain cafe, tummies growling while masterpieces bubble up in their brains. But the reality of life in the twenty-first century requires serious cash—and it's the rare artist who agrees to go hungry. While determined creatives might be willing to make sacrifices for their art, paying the rent requires a lot more than talent, good intentions, and scraped-together pennies. It's hard to find a studio in Manhattan, San Francisco, or Seattle for under \$1,000 a month. Even those fortunate enough to have cheap dream holes-in-the-walls have to juggle ever-increasing basic living costs that have expanded to include such indispensable items as cable TV, a high-speed internet connection, and a cell phone, in addition to the usual food, clothes, and electricity. When your calling is film, throw in the shrieking costs of camera equipment, crew, and post production, to name just a few, and the numbers become intimidating enough to drive away even the noblest of artistic ambitions.



The ways that filmmakers earn a living while working on their independent projects are as diverse as filmmakers themselves. While there are surely still writers and directors waiting tables and tending bar to support their filmmaking habit, it's clear that independent filmmakers in 2003 are smart, entrepreneurial, and multitalented, and they know how to parley their skills and creativity into both money and art.

### Working it

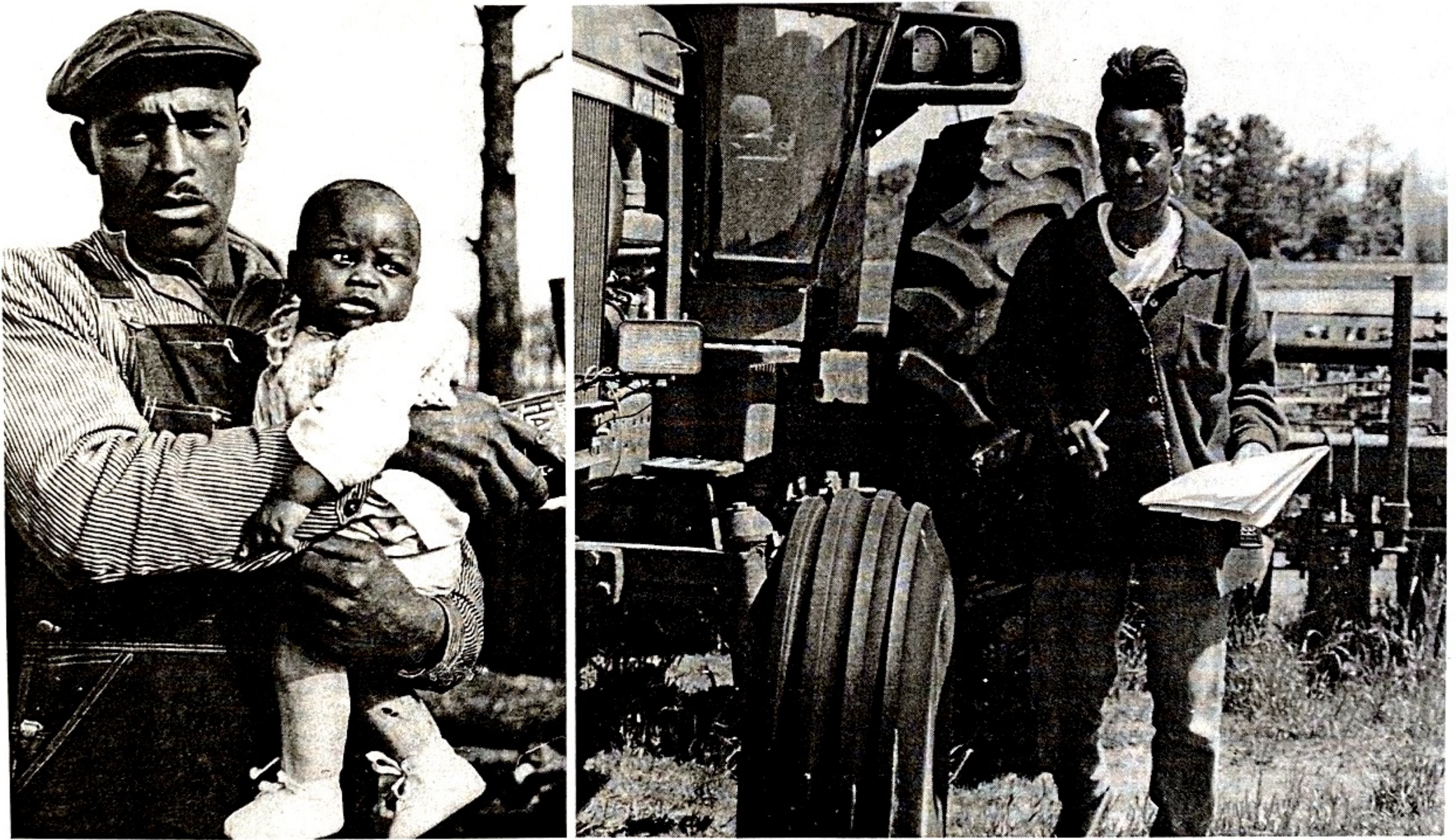
Charlene Gilbert, director of the PBS documentary *Homecoming: Sometimes I'm haunted by red dirt and clay*, has loads of advice for would-be filmmakers. She believes that the key to making a living while making movies is finding the part of the craft at which they excel—be it writing, editing, or cinematography—and using that skill to support themselves while pursuing independent projects. Gilbert cites Orinne J.T. Takagi, a doc-maker who makes a living as “one of the best sound recordists in the business,” she says. “I think it's important to find that one thing that can compete with your passion for filmmaking and try to attain a good deal of skill at it so that you have something that can provide supplemental support that doesn't

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE, COURTESY OF THATCHER KEATS; FACING PAGE, LEFT, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, RIGHT, CHARLENE GILBERT

take you too far astray from your filmmaking.”

Filmmaker Gabriel Judet-Weinshel graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in December 2001 and moved to New York, apprehensive about using his editing and camera skills to find work. “We had just started bombing Afghanistan. The economy was falling apart,” he remembers. “I was filled with dread about having a grown-up life and getting work, and suddenly I landed a job shooting a documentary about street musicians in the subway system.” Judet-Weinshel was paid “very well” to shoot, direct, and cut a trailer for the film, which was sent out to VH1, MTV, and other possible funding sources. At the same time, he was hired to edit a docu-drama for the Center for

common way for filmmakers to pay the rent. During the production of the recent release, *Horns and Halos*, about publisher Sander Hicks’ drive to publish J.H. Hatfield’s controversial George Bush biography *Fortunate Son*, Suki Hawley, who codirected with Michael Galinsky, was also shooting and editing content for music-related websites. “I’d do interstitials or band interviews,” she says. “The best part is the freelance aspect. That’s what allows us to do film.” While making the film, Hawley and Galinsky were also hired to collaborate with Peter Bogdonovich’s daughter, Sashy, on the making of an electronic press kit about Bogdonovich’s movie *The Cat’s Meow*, a job that had additional perks. “The sound quality for our film increased



Disease Control, cut a couple of independent shorts, and shoot another. And to top it off, his short, *The Broken Wings of Elijah Footfalls*, made it into the Newport Beach Film Festival, the Silverlake Film Festival, the IFP market, and was among four finalists for the Sundance Channel’s Buzzcuts Award. With money steadily coming in, he was able to finish writing a feature script of his own and still had the time to write songs for his band, Brand New Beggars. “I had a really good string of luck,” he says.

Editing and shooting other people’s projects is a fairly

because we were able to buy a radio mike to mike Peter. Then we were able to mike Sander,” Hawley says.

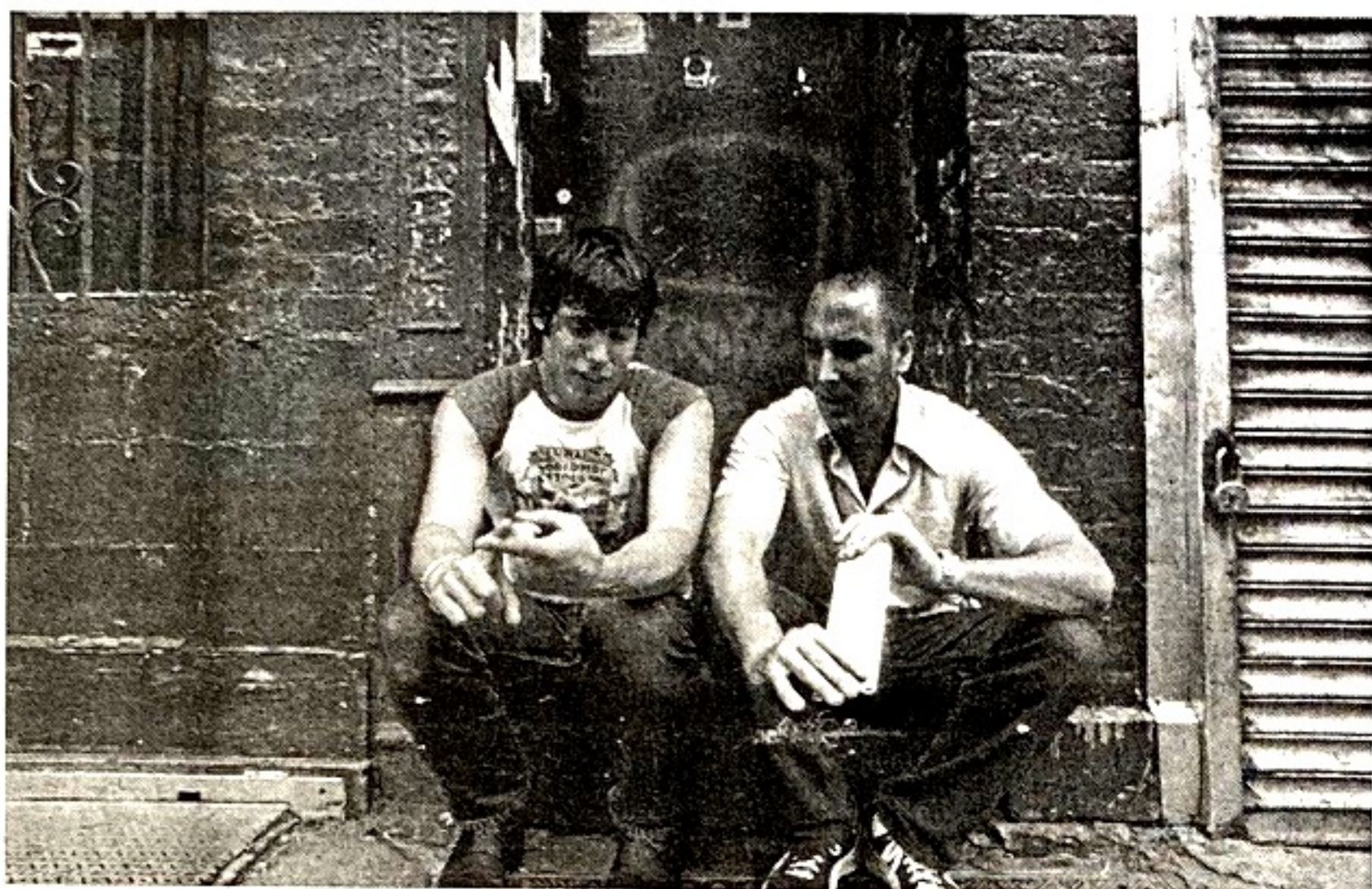
In line with Gilbert’s advice, Michael and Mark Polish, the identical twin filmmaking team responsible for *Twin Falls*, *Idaho*, *Jackpot*, and, most recently, *Northfork*, work as Hollywood screenwriters. (Mark also acts in their own films, as well as such projects as *The Good Thief*, by R.T. Herwig, and Mary McGuckian’s upcoming *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.) This plum gig allows the Polishes to earn a nice living practicing their craft, and the stakes are not as high as with their own, more personal work. “When you are a hired writer, you surrender the fate of the project,” Michael says. “We would like to see the screenplays produced, but there are many chains of command that a project must go

Left page: Michael Galinsky and Suki Hawley. Above, left: Archival photo of an African American farmer and child, part of the documentary *Homecoming*, by Charlene Gilbert (shown at right).

through before it can be greenlighted. Hollywood is littered with projects that will never make it to the screen.”

### Oh, the academic life

In addition to skills, filmmakers have a wealth of knowledge that many institutions are willing to pay them to impart to hungry would-be filmmakers. “I was living in a



farmhouse with my crew in this small, rural town in Georgia, and the chair of the Media Studies department at SUNY [the State University of New York] Buffalo tracked me down,” recalls Gilbert, who currently teaches production and theory in the American University School of Communications. “It took another phone conversation to convince me that working independent filmmakers had something to offer students in the academy. He convinced me, and I began my first job as assistant professor there.”

Jamie Yerkes, director of *Spin the Bottle*, is a tenure-track professor at Long Island University and director of summer programs at Manhattan School of Cinema, which he founded with other working filmmakers. He teaches courses in directing, editing, sound, cinematography, screenwriting, and film history. “I love teaching film because it’s a subject that most of my students are already excited about,” Yerkes says. “It’s not like teaching calculus, where you have to do stand-up comedy in between equations to keep your class interested. I’ll be watching a film at home and I’ll be blown away by the director’s, say, shot construction in a particular sequence. I’ll bring the scene in the next day and we’ll spend a whole class talking about it.”

Teaching offers myriad advantages to people with artistic aspirations. Most obviously, a teaching schedule tends to leave the summer months available for other projects, something that both Gilbert and Yerkes have found helpful. Yerkes admits, however, that it’s difficult to balance any kind of job, even teaching, with a pro-

duction schedule. “We shot *Pagans*, one of the films I have in the works, in March, and I’d be shooting all night and sleeping in the pass[enger] van in the parking lot,” he says. “You only have to teach two days a week, and they’re great to you.”

Yerkes points out that a lot of the freedom he is given stems from the fact that professors in any field are supposed to publish. In his case, that means that the university expects him to make movies and attend film festivals. “They want professors to make movies,” he says. “They’ll give you grants. They want professors keeping up in their field, going to conferences. Sundance is considered a conference.”

Because he teaches production as well as cinema history, Yerkes is also expected to stay up to date on film technology, equipment, and software, which is helpful in his filmmaking. “I have to know Final Cut Pro 3 and Pro Tools and the full range of DV and hi-def cameras,” he says.

Gilbert also benefits professionally from her classes. “It’s the life of the mind,” she says. “I like to be in a place where I can think critically about how media impacts people and where I can have those conversations and make those kinds of connections, because I’m interested in my own films working on many levels.”

Academia provides the kind of lifestyle that can be ideal for people trying to balance creative and financial needs. Both Yerkes and Gilbert have children, and teaching affords them a welcome level of stability. “Before I had my daughter, if someone called me up and said, ‘Hey, can you come to Costa Rica for six months and do this documentary in this mountain village?’ I’d be like, ‘Yeah, that



sounds great. I’ll be on a plane tomorrow,” says Gilbert. “But now I have a lot more things I have to take into consideration. And given that this is where my life is now, this is actually the best place for me to be.”

## It's just my day job

While filmmakers like Yerkes and Gilbert are fortunate enough to develop dual passions, others prefer to compartmentalize, separating the money job from filmmaking aspirations. Tim Kirkman, director of *Dear Jesse* and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, teaches film appreciation at Hunter College and also works as a graphic designer and marketing consultant for Miramax from September to March every year, focusing primarily on their awards campaigns. While Kirkman enjoys the work he does for Miramax, he considers it his day job and imposes a rigid structure on himself for making his own films. "I have an office, and I go there and write from 6:00 to 9:00 a.m., and then I go to work," he says. "This year I'd go to the office in the morning before work and in the evening. My eyes were practically bleeding, but I set deadlines for myself and I made them. I finished my script."

Galinsky has a profession completely separate from his film work as well: He is a freelance photographer who shoots musicians, for magazines like *Jazz Times*, and the occasional wedding. "I love doing weddings," he says. "It's the most intense day of people's lives, and you're involved in it. And I actually like doing stuff for magazines. I do a lot of it for no money, just because I like doing it. I enjoy the opportunity to shoot interesting jazz musicians."

While Galinsky would keep taking pictures of jazz players and bridesmaids even if he didn't need the money, Kirkman would like to reach a point where he doesn't have to do his consulting work at all. "It's advertising, and in many ways it goes against everything my graphic design education taught me, but it's for movies and I love movies. And I'm always interested in marketing the film in a way that keeps the integrity." While he envisions a day when he'll be able to earn a living solely writing scripts—for his own or other people's projects—and directing, for the moment Kirkman sees the benefit in having a job that has little to do with his creative work. "In the eleven years I've worked at Miramax, it's never done anything for my film career," he says. "They don't see me as a filmmaker; they see me as a graphic designer. For a while that bothered me, but

now I'm glad because I'm able to keep separate what I do for a living and what I want my life to be."

## Double the pleasure

Wouldn't it be great if a filmmaker had the ability to magically divide in two, with one part doing the money work while the other performs the labors of love? That's where the Polish brothers are luckier than most. As writing part-



ners, they have completed a script called *New Mexico* for New Line, another called *Teargarden* for Disney, and they have since been hired to write two more. The Polishes have the luxury of being able to divide their time between two projects at once. "Depending on the material, Mark or I will take the first draft of a hired screenplay, while the other writes our own project," Michael explains. "We don't write together, so this allows us to tackle different screenplays."

The Polishes believe that their work on other people's movies has advantages in terms of their work and their lives. "You only get better the more you practice your craft," Mark says. "Even when you are in disagreement with the studio's notes, it is just another challenge. It is helpful to see every facet of the industry. All the contacts that I have made are good, but not necessarily for the independent pictures. They all admire what we do, but don't really want to do it. They do feed you well."

Unfortunately, even when filmmakers work as a team, money work can get in the way of creative work. When Galinsky and Hawley began *Horns and Halos*, Galinsky was working full time at the music website in sound, and it interfered with their production schedule. "He was shooting and I was editing, but I ended up doing a lot of the shooting, and he would break away from time to time," Hawley says. "It was hard, and since then neither of us have done the full-time thing."

Left page, top: Jeff Cohen and Jamie Yerkes on the set of *Pagan*. Bottom: Tim Kirkland, teacher, graphic designer, marketing consultant, and filmmaker. Above: Director Michael Polish, James Woods (as Walter O'Brien), and Mark Polish (as Willis O'Brien) on the set of *Northfork*.

## Juggling

For Judet-Weinshel, the college grad who had a dream first year in the big city, the work dried up for him as suddenly as it had initially materialized. "I was down to like twenty bucks," he recalls. "And it was February. When things are going well, people want to kill themselves in February." So, he did something he thought he would never have to do: get a job waiting tables. As soon as the snow began to thaw, he also took to the streets to earn his keep the way he has since he was thirteen: juggling. Like shooting and editing film, juggling for crowds is a skill that is always good to



bring in a few bucks, albeit one that's less common among filmmakers. "Juggling is something that I love, and it taps into a part of myself that's very vital," Judet-Weinshel says.

Compared to tossing balls, clubs, and machetes into the air, waiting tables didn't have a chance. Judet-Weinshel recalls a day when he performed at the Met for two and half hours and made \$200 and then raced downtown and waited tables for eight hours. "I got yelled at by the cook, yelled at by the boss. I felt humiliated. I was carrying huge trays, my back was hurting. . . . I made \$150 bucks." Needless to say, he quit immediately. "I have so much fun when I street perform. And it's the biggest rush. It's not dark. I tend to be dark in my art and my life, and street performing brings out this different side of me," he says. "You're just throwing shit up in the air and catching it and making stupid jokes, and people throw money at you."

While juggling might seem to be as far from filmmaking as possible, Judet-Weinshel's day job actually feeds his art while it's feeding him. His short, *The Broken Wings of Elijah Footfalls*, is about a juggler, and one of his early works is called *The Clown*, so he has managed to integrate his occu-

pations. Naturally his experience as a street performer was instrumental in landing his first New York job making a documentary about subway musicians.

For a month every summer, the juggling filmmaker also teaches at a performing arts camp in California called Camp Winnarainbow, and he is now hoping to add video production to the curriculum, potentially making a music video with his students. "The camp has boiled down everything that was good about the sixties and taken out the drugs and the debauchery and created this amazing thing to give to the next generation," he says. "That juices me for the whole year. I'll do it for three weeks and feel good about the world again."

### To each his/her own

Finding a working balance is key. Gilbert believes she has achieved it with a teaching schedule that leaves her summers open and offers enough holidays to focus on her own filmmaking projects. Judet-Weinshel makes enough in seven or eight hours to cover weekly expenses, and spends the rest of the time writing and pounding the pavement for film work. However, his work is weather-dependent. When New Yorkers recently got a brief, faux taste of spring and Judet-Weinshel left his job, he ended up suffering for it. "I quit the waiting job, and then it started to snow, so I was back to trying to live on six bucks a day. But once the weather turns, you can live like a king."

Galinsky can remember a time when he didn't have to worry about money. "I was most creative when I was working as a messenger," he says. "But that was a different time in New York. My rent was \$150. I didn't have to worry about making money, so I could spend my days drinking coffee and writing. I want to try and do some more of that."

Galinsky and Hawley are considering doing just that. They have a one-year-old daughter and are considering making the ultimate move to secure happiness, financial stability, and more time for creative endeavors: leaving New York. They recently took their film to a festival in Buenos Aires, a town they have visited and enjoyed in the past, and are now considering moving there for at least six months. "Everything was cheap, and we felt connected to a filmmaking community there," Hawley says. "Because the dollar is so strong, a really nice meal with wine and everything is like four dollars," Galinsky adds. "We're told you can rent a nice house with a full-time nanny for \$500."

"Fiona actually said, 'Hola,'" Hawley says. "We thought, Oh my God, she could learn Spanish." ■

*Andrea Meyer covers film for Interview, Time Out New York, indieWIRE, and the New York Post. She also reports on relationships and celebrities for Glamour.*

On the set of the experimental short *The Broken Wings of Elijah Footfalls*, by Gabriel Judet-Weinshel (right).