

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Handmade

Montana filmmakers work to strengthen the culture of craftsmanship.



By A.J. Mangum

There's a moment in the trailer for the film series *The Makers* in which blacksmith Eric Dewey runs a wire brush across an iron bar heated to red, sending hot slivers of metal raining down on the floor of his Montana workshop. In a sequence of slow-motion shots, the camera pulls in tight as Dewey strikes the still-hot iron with a hammer and begins the process of giving the raw material shape, form and utility.

The work possesses a primitivity – metal and fire,

hands and a hammer – that's almost shocking. How many viewers, one can't help but wonder, are even aware

blacksmithing still exists as a profession? It's a craft whose intricacies would seem appropriately documented not in the cutting-edge media of digital film, but in faded sketches on the yellowing pages of a weathered notebook. For the documentarians behind *The Makers*, that juxtaposition – the use of 21st century tech to illustrate an archaic vocation – is a key theme of their work.



photo courtesy *The Handmade*

The ink says it all. Montana saddlemaker Brian Esslinger displays his commitment to the notion of handcrafted work.

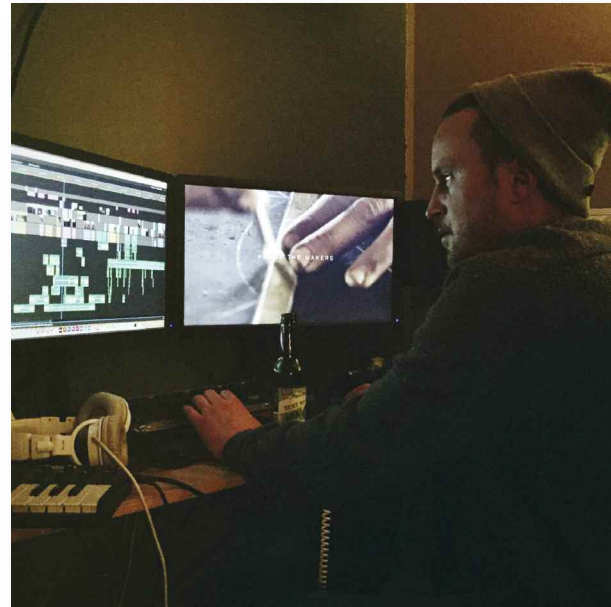


Elliot Lindsey is the Bozeman-based director of *The Makers* and the principal behind The Handmade Movement, a collaborative effort between artisans and creative professionals to document and celebrate handcrafted work.

“The effort is half and half,” Lindsey says. “Part of it is the preservation of these crafts on film, but the other part is motivating craftsmen to see content and social media as ways of working with one another and marketing themselves, to see technology as something other than this evil thing that’s taking over their industries.”

Lindsey first became involved with filmmaking more than a decade ago, as an 18-year-old semi-professional skateboarder fascinated with the work of crews filming his sport. As digital video revolutionized the medium – creating affordable strategies to enter the field and produce quality work – Lindsey moved behind the camera, eventually landing a job as a film editor for

from the Montana Film Office. The MFO has since awarded filmmaking grants to Lindsey and his team, which includes his producing partner Justin Brodin, cinematographer Eric Kucinski and editor Sam



Elliot Lindsey in the editing bay.



Oregon hatmaker Cate Havstad is among the first subjects featured in *The Makers*.

a production company in his native Bozeman. He saw Montana’s culture of craftsmanship as a unique storytelling opportunity and spent two years developing the concept for *The Makers* before applying for funding

Hedlum, as well as some “freelance film kids” from Montana State University’s film program.

The first four installments of *The Makers* feature the aforementioned Eric Dewey, Montana saddlemaker Brian Esslinger, Oregon hatmaker Cate Havstad, and Montana knifemaker Thomas McGuane.

“The craft is always the big contributor in our decisions as to who we feature,” Lindsey says. “We don’t feature anyone whose work we don’t love. The most important thing as a filmmaker, though, is the story. How did these people come to devote their lives to crafts that are so threatened, possibly even dying? And how did they learn these trades when those resources are not generally available?”

Supplementing the film series is a collection of artisans’



The team behind *The Makers* works in what Lindsey describes as a “run and gun” fashion, with a tight budget and skeleton crew.

galleries – online at www.thehandmademovement.com – and a forthcoming series of digital tutorials filmed with craftsmen featured in *The Makers*.

“The bigger idea is to create an online channel where craftsmen can feature their work, and share ideas and resources, and where we can feature the stories behind the work,” Lindsey says. “Ultimately, it’ll be a feed of all kinds of content, a digital celebration of handcrafted work.”

Since the release of the film series’ first trailer,

Lindsey says five to 10 craftsmen have contacted him each day, asking about being featured. The filmmaker admits that such enthusiasm has been hard-earned, that getting buy-in from craftsmen was initially a challenge – “like pulling teeth,” he says. He chalks up such hesitance to the reclusive nature of independent craftsmen, and to their culture’s understandable disdain for technology. For many artisans, the concepts of digital filmmaking and online media were uncomfortably close to those of mass production and corporate marketing, arguably two



Filming Esslinger on location.

of the biggest threats to their trades.

“It was a big PR issue, getting people to understand that media creation didn’t have to be a bad thing,” Lindsey says. Technology, he asserts, could in fact prove to be the savior of even the most ancient of handcrafts. “The first craftsman we filmed didn’t even have a phone. After we started working with him, he got on Instagram and now has people ordering from Japan. With our ability to connect globally through the Internet, we can all find handmade goods if makers are active enough online. If you wanted a really nice knife or cowboy hat, you could just search and find makers. You wouldn’t have to order from some big company. Through that technological revolution, we’ll see more makers online, and they’ll be able to distribute their goods internationally. We’ll see more quality products on the market. In the future, everything could be handmade.”

In a similar spirit, Lindsey and his team have declined offers for corporate sponsorship of The Handmade Movement, preferring instead to work in

“run and gun” fashion, with a skeleton crew, a shoestring budget and full creative control of their films.

“We can never get everyone in the same place at the same time, and we have to take opportunities when we have them,” Lindsey says. “Only occasionally do we have the luxury of planning bigger shoots for more cinematic efforts. But, right now, the best thing is still to keep big brands off of it. That’s not what this is about – promoting companies.”

Working on *The Makers* has led Lindsey to believe stories about craftsmen and craftsmanship get to the root of what it means to be human, and can offer clear perspectives on the connections of people to the world around them.

“I studied anthropology in college, and most of our brain development can be attributed to humans being bipedal,” he says. “Standing on two feet, holding something close to our eyes to inspect it, to manipulate it, to make it be something it doesn’t want to be. That’s what’s enabled us to come up with ideas, understand the world, create languages, plan. There’s something inherently human about it.”



<http://vimeo.com/112881618>

The trailer for *The Makers* had close to 50,000 Facebook views within two months of its debut.

A.J. Mangum is the editor of *Ranch & Reata*, and the author of the non-fiction collection *Undiscovered Country: Dispatches from the American West*. Learn more about The Handmade Movement at www.thehandmademovement.com.