



Dueling Identities

Cinematographer Minka Farthing-Kohl captures mockumentary and scripted-narrative styles for *The Nowhere Inn*.

By Tara Jenkins



A filmmaker and subject embark on an ill-fated attempt to craft a music documentary in the surreal dark comedy *The Nowhere Inn*, an exploration of identity, ego, authenticity and fame. Playing fictionalized versions of themselves, Annie Clark (better known as rock star St. Vincent) is shadowed by her close friend Carrie Brownstein (a founding member of the band Sleater-Kinney and co-creator of the IFC series *Portlandia*) as they attempt to document Clark's life on the road — while their respective visions for the project begin to markedly diverge. The production, shot by Minka Farthing-Kohl and directed by Bill Benz, comprises a scripted narrative interwoven with footage designed to emulate the documentary form.

Previous spread: Annie Clark (aka rock star St. Vincent) faces the grievances of her disgruntled creative partner. This page, top: Clark and co-star Carrie Brownstein — both co-writers and producers on the film — play fictional versions of themselves. Bottom: Cinematographer Minka Farthing-Kohl.



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Envisioning Styles

“The film definitely took on a handful of permutations before we landed on the hybridity that it ended up becoming,” says Brownstein, who co-wrote the screenplay with Clark. “We started to think about something that could match the otherworldliness of St. Vincent, and get into something that felt more experimental and could [speak] to the ineffable, magical quality of [music], which never lands somewhere specific and asks more questions than it provides answers for.”

Brownstein, Clark and Farthing-Kohl all cite directors Peter Greenaway and Nicolas Roeg, and such films as Roeg’s *Performance* — a 1970 crime drama co-starring Mick Jagger — as significant inspiration for *The Nowhere Inn*. Says Farthing-Kohl, “We were drawn to the pacing and atmosphere [that Greenaway’s and Roeg’s] montages and camerawork created, and the foreboding narrative tension it forced the audience to linger in — whether it was Roeg’s omniscient zooms or Greenaway’s grand sets and heavily scored tracking shots.”

“Through fictionalized renderings, we were trying to get to something more truthful about ourselves and our intentions and our artistry,” Clark notes. “I could have done the more traditional, behind-the-scenes,

Tech Specs: 2.39:1, 1.78:1, 1.33:1
 Formats: Digital Capture and Super 16mm
 Cameras: Arri Alexa Mini, Arriflex 416
 Lenses: Panavision Auto Panatar, D and E Series anamorphic, Primo Anamorphic Zoom;
 Canon 16mm zoom; Arriflex/Zeiss 16mm-format Super Speed
 Film Stocks: Kodak Vision3 500T 7219, 250D 7207

Clark and Brownstein have words.



‘Hey, this is who I am!’ film, but I kept stumbling over the idea that even if I did it in that kind of way, I would still be the one sculpting the narrative. It felt cynical to try and make a behind-the-scenes [movie] that would just make people *like* me. Let’s just make art about making art, and that will be more true to the spirit of things.”

Shooting Methods

This film and the Netflix production *Concrete Cowboy*, which both saw general release this year, represent Farthing-Kohl’s first full-length features as a director of photography. He and Benz have been friends since their time at Temple University, and *The Nowhere Inn* marks their second collaboration — the two previously partnered on the first season of the Comedy Central series *Detroiters*. “The conversation with Bill was always about the best way to make sure the audience doesn’t get lost in this ‘meta-film,’ to make it clear exactly where they are in the story,” Farthing-Kohl says. “To that effect, we used different aspect ratios — 2.39:1, 1.78:1 and 1.33:1 — and different cameras, going between Super 16mm for the documentary look and digital for the [scripted narrative] thread

of the story.”

The digital portions were shot on Arri’s Alexa Mini paired with a variety of Panavision anamorphics, comprising E and D Series lenses, Auto Panatars, and the 48-550mm T4.5 Primo Anamorphic Zoom (ALZ).

The documentary portions were shot on an Arriflex 416 — paired with Canon’s 6.6-66mm T2.7-3.3 zoom and Arriflex/Zeiss 16mm-format Super Speeds — with Kodak Vision3 500T 7219 and 250D 7207 film stocks, and presented mostly in 1.78:1. The only exception is a flashback conversation between Clark and Brownstein, presented in 1.33:1. “In contrast to the omniscient and formal aesthetic of the anamorphic digital camera, we wanted the Super 16mm to feel raw, loose and ‘found,’” Farthing-Kohl says. “The Dardenne brothers’ work in both documentary and fiction was very influential in its kinetic energy and *vérité* aesthetic, while achieving a condensed narrative timeline that’s so present in scripted storytelling.

“Bill Benz and I often discussed the perspective of the scene in deciding whether to shoot it from the ‘documentary’ camera or ‘narrative’ one,” the cinematographer continues. “Sometimes it played best for the

Director Bill Benz on set.



story to switch mediums on a punchline or to ping-pong back and forth. Knowing this was our approach, we lit the scenes with our gaffer, Garrett Ian Williams and key grip, Shun Goldin, to allow us to do both by lighting to a T2.8 at 500 ISO. When given the chance, we would sculpt the light for the narrative camera during close-ups, and allow the documentary lighting to be rougher and less shaped, as if we were capturing those unintended in-between moments.”

Juxtaposing Genres

In addition to emulating the raw, frenetic visual style often associated with music documentaries, the mockumentary elements of the production offered the filmmakers the opportunity to comment on traditional plot points of the genre as well. Says Clark, “First, we had to really familiarize ourselves with the ‘concert doc’ form and the tropes of the popstar behind the scenes. Those films usually play into the idea that ‘I am just a normal person who happens to be a rock star, but I have normal problems just like you.’ There’s usually a ‘coming home’ scene, a ‘romance gone awry’ — all these different tropes and narrative points.

We familiarized ourselves with those and made sure we hit them.”

Also integral to creating the feel of a concert film was the intercutting between backstage and musical-performance material. The footage of Clark’s live concert had been shot in digital format by cinematographer Tarin Anderson at the Hollywood Palladium, prior to Farthing-Kohl’s joining the project. “The constraints of the documentary concert footage gave us a visual language to build off for the rest of the film,” Farthing-Kohl says. “And the concert footage had this loose, marauding lens that steered us into a more formal and singular aesthetic for the narrative portions.”

The filmmakers’ success in crafting a movie that had the spontaneous feel of a documentary, he adds, had much to do with the close-knit camaraderie on set. “Bill, Annie and Carrie set the tone for this incredibly collaborative, generous and open-minded set that trickled down to the whole crew,” Farthing-Kohl says. “It felt like a student film in the best possible way — like making a movie with all your friends. I wish we could do it again!” ◉