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**Film**

*Bitterroot filmmaker shoots to thrill*

By: **Skylar Browning**  
Posted: 05/29/2008

There's a brief scene in the middle of Bitterroot filmmaker John D. Nilles' newest film in which a pickup truck driven by two vengeful cowboys barrels down a field and upends an occupied wooden outhouse. Human waste—in this case, chocolate pudding—and splinters of wood spray everywhere, most of it landing on the truck itself. The whole action sequence takes up less than two minutes in this wickedly entertaining, 30-minute grunge Western, but for the ambitious Nilles it represents so much more.

"I'd like to talk about the outhouse scene," he says with an ear-to-ear grin, before launching into an anecdote he's clearly proud to recall. "The whole scene is filmed in one long take, so the whole scene had to go right. It was the first day of the shoot, and everyone was tired and grumpy. Just tired and grumpy at the end of the day. I'm putting the finishing touches on the outhouse, which means we've got the pudding, and I'm putting it on the roof [of the outhouse] so it will splatter on the windshield. And everyone's going, 'This isn't going to work.' We just kept moving forward and we finally film it—and it happens as good as it could possibly happen...I think it gave everyone a lot of confidence in the production."

That one successful shoot also tells a lot about the type of filmmaker Nilles, 26, has proven to be in his short career. In 2004, he made a "proof of concept"—a short film indicative of a larger script—called Little, almost entirely by himself. Never shy about shooting action sequences on a limited budget, that film included an explosion that totaled Nilles' 1981 Oldsmobile station wagon. With his latest, Cowboy Reckoning, Nilles tested himself by slightly increasing his budget—\$9,000, financed mostly through a personal loan—and working with a wider circle of artists. He collaborated on the script with Bitterroot author Josh Wagner (see Scope in this issue), auditioned a full cast and worked with a dedicated three-person production crew (Mara Lynn Luther and Becka and Ken Marshall). And, in addition to the outhouse collision, Nilles sacrificed another 1981 Oldsmobile in an ax-wielding chase scene.

"[After Little], the next car I got just happened to be an '81 Oldsmobile," says Nilles. "I'm thinking I would kind of like to destroy an '81 Oldsmobile in every one of my films from here on out. As long as I don't set a film before 1981, it should be possible. And, I mean, what better way to sacrifice a car?"



Filmmaker John D. Nilles, foreground, shoots a scene with Matt Moeller and Brandon Johnson for Cowboy Reckoning. The scene called for Nilles' 1981 Oldsmobile to get hacked by Moeller.

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Briefly, *Cowboy Reckoning* is the story of two warring factions—identified by stark, horror-movie-quality masks, designed by Janet Salmonson and Loryn Zerr—in a post-modern Wild West. Told in a series of sequential flashbacks—in other words, it starts at the end and ends at the beginning—the film traces Buster (DJ Sherwood) and Roper (Brandon Johnson) as they settle a score. Nilles shot everything on 16mm reversal stock, which is then cross-processed, enhancing the look of his already artful cinematography. Even better, perhaps, is the film's original score, including a blistering opening track—a big-sounding Western-style theme with 12-string guitar, bass, drums, banjo, mandolin and trumpet—set to a viscous shootout. In all, filming took just three and a half days, but post-production—such as working with musicians Tim Wilson, Brett Collins, Wagner, Q. Scott Turner and Wilson's uncle, John P. Wilson, to nail the soundtrack—took Nilles more than three months.

"When I made *Little*, I did everything," Nilles explains. "I was the only crew member. It was a great learning experience, but this time I realized I needed help. And the most difficult thing initially was just learning how to collaborate. When I sat down and started writing, I had to share my story with Josh. In production, I had to relinquish more control and delegate to a crew. It was a big challenge for me."

With *Cowboy Reckoning* now complete, Nilles has already turned his attention to his next project. As expected, it's another step up for the filmmaker. He hopes to start shooting this summer in high-definition video with a bigger crew, more actors and, of course, more action.

"I feel you have to earn your right as a director to get bigger and bigger budgets—a bigger canvas and more paint," says Nilles, who supplements his filmmaking by working carpentry. "My goal is every film I make, I want to add a zero on to the end of the budget. I made this one in the \$10,000 range. My next one will be in the \$100,000 range, and so on. That's not my only goal, but that's how I like to think this can grow."

John D. Nilles debuts *Cowboy Reckoning* at Hamilton's Roxy Twin—followed by a behind-the-scenes documentary—with screenings Saturday, May 31, at 3, 7 and 9. Cover TBA. In Missoula, the film will screen at the Wilma Theatre Monday, June 2, at 5 PM, as part of the Frenchtown Rock fundraiser. For more information visit [cowboyreckoning.com](http://cowboyreckoning.com)

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