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INTERNATIONAL

Scout & About

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Bay Area shops survive the biz's ups and downs

Scout & About: Northern California 2012

By TODD LONGWELL

The San Francisco Bay Area has inspired a wealth of memorable on-screen moments, from James Stewart stalking Kim Novak in Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo" to Steve McQueen's hill-hopping car chase in "Bullitt." But perhaps more impressive is its long history of attracting and nurturing groundbreaking cinematic visionaries such as director Francis Ford Coppola, sound designer/film editor Walter Murch and, more recently, the team at Pixar Studios.



Behind the scenes on 'Star Wars Episode I The Phantom Menace' miniature being prepped for shooting in ILM backlot.

At the top of the heap, of course, is George Lucas. His Northern California empire includes vfx house Industrial Light & Magic (located in San Francisco's Presidio park since 2006), which has earned 15 visual effects Oscars and 24 Scientific and Technical Awards from the Academy, and Skywalker Sound in Marin County (22 Academy Awards).

"Sometimes I joke that there's something about the air in Northern California that contributes to sourdough bread and sound design," says two-time Oscar winner Randy Thom, director of sound design at Skywalker Sound.

But for many in the local film industry the air is filled with lingering fear and uncertainty in the wake of a succession of seismic shifts that have rocked the biz.

The post-production facilities at Saul Zaentz Film Center in Berkeley were shuttered in 2005. Visual effects houses the Orphanage and Kerner Optical, both ILM spinoffs, closed in 2009 and 2011, respectively. ImageMovers Digital, a Marin County facility set up by director Robert Zemeckis and the Walt Disney Co. to produce 3D animated films such as "A Christmas Carol" and "Mars Needs Moms," ceased operations in January 2011.



Athena Studios green screen

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The latest blow came in August, when Disney shut down production on Henry Selick's latest stop-motion animation feature that was in production at his Shademaker Prods. in San Francisco, laying off 150 workers.

The causes of the decline range from the outsourcing of visual-effects work to places with cheap labor (such as Asia) or generous tax credits (like those provided by Vancouver) to the general downturn in the economy.

Berkeley's Tippett Studio, led by Oscar-winner Phil Tippett ("Jurassic Park"), has managed to survive, with recent credits that include 3D animation for "Ted" and the "Twilight" series, but it hasn't been easy.

"There's a very slim margin for profit in visual effects," says Tippett Studio president and CEO Jules Roman Tippett. "It's cash in and cash out. You're basically just trying to keep current with wages and technology."

When the bottom fell out of the homevideo business in the late 2000s, Kim Aubry of Zoetrope Aubry Productions in San Francisco had to scramble to find another business model. Instead of mastering DVDs and producing their special features for Hollywood studios, he switched his focus to providing post-production services for the Bay Area's thriving documentary filmmaking scene.

"With the loss of so many one after another of the post houses in the Bay Area, they needed a company that could work with their budgets, but still provide creative control to the end," Aubry says.

But there are those who continue to think big and optimistic, like the owners of Athena Studios, a new full-service production facility in Emeryville, across the bay from San Francisco, featuring a 40' x 48' stage with a 25' x 25' greenscreen.

"As soon as we got the lights in, High Noon Entertainment came for a new show called 'Collection Intervention' for the Syfy network," says Athena CEO Jon Peters. "And we're now doing walk-throughs with Tippett, Pixar and all the folks in the area."

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