

# Spliff Notes

*Slacker* creator

Richard Linklater relives the stoned '70s with *Dazed and Confused*

By Jason Cohen

**R**ichard Linklater may have coined the buzzword "slacker," but he's no longer one himself. Instead, for thirty-eight days of a typically torrid Austin, Texas, summer, he is the slacker community's largest employer, overtaking record stores and coffee stands with the making of his new film, *Dazed and Confused*.

A clear-eyed, hilarious rendering of the last day of high school in 1976, *Dazed* became known around Austin as "the *Slacker* prequel" and "Rick's '70s movie." Such descriptions are neither completely false nor true. "*Slacker* is how I lived for a long time, and *Dazed* is how I lived as a teenager," Linklater says. Set to a soundtrack including Alice Cooper and Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Dazed* is a misanthropic addition to the teen-movie canon. "It's about kids who know things are fucked up," says Linklater. "They're rushing around, waiting for life to begin."

Linklater, who claims to be thirty-one (friends say he's thirty-three—the fiction came about, one suspects, so he could be twentysomething for *Slacker*), considers the '70s a "very important time culturally." The Vietnam War had ended, Watergate was in full swing, hippie optimism hadn't yet mutated into punk nihilism. "But it's also true that the story has nothing to do with the '70s. It's what teenagers have always done—ride around feeling oppressed."

*Slacker* was the prototypical independent film, made for less than \$25,000; *Dazed* was made on a \$5 million budget under the aegis of Universal Pictures. While first films often serve as a ticket into Hollywood for indie directors, *Slacker* did not exactly inspire instant studio largesse. Its antinarrative celebration of the marginal "was just weird enough to scare the industry away," Linklater says. *Dazed* exists because one of *Slacker*'s admirers was friendly with producer and former Universal exec Jim Jacks. During interviews, Linklater kept himself entertained by inventing new answers to the question "What are you doing next?" Except, he says, with one guy. "I said I wanted to make an honest teenage movie, where not much happens and kids drive around looking for something to do. He liked it and called Jim Jacks."

So here's Rick Linklater at 10 P.M. on an Austin Little League field, indistinguishable from the production assistants in his purple T-shirt and denim shorts. He's just begun a month of



night shoots. Making *Slacker*, Linklater answered to no one. Now he's got obligations—to producers, executives, a cast of thirty, and a crew of one hundred. When I introduce myself, he automatically asks how long I'll be in town. I remind him that I live here and can come and go at will. "I wish I could," he sighs, half-seriously.

Linklater's job at the moment is that of baseball manager. The scene he's directing is the final inning of a Little League contest. One of the film's main characters, fourteen-year-old Mitch Kramer, is gunning for that final strikeout. The problem is, the minute he leaves the game, three paddle-wielding jocks plan to usher in his high school years with some traditional small-town hazing. He has to choose between a swollen ERA or swollen buns.

Mitch is played by Wiley Wiggins, a fifteen-year-old local. With a dry delivery and a wide-open face strangely reminiscent of Juliette Lewis's, he has become the star of the movie. He'll go back to high school after the shoot, where he's just starting a commercial arts program, and says at the moment he has no interest in making other films. Unless, of course, "David Lynch needs a fifteen-year-old kid."

After "lunch," which is served at midnight,

Linklater and Jacks haggle over the shooting schedule. Time and budget restrictions have forced the director to cut scenes from his script, and almost every night the cast and crew furiously race to finish before dawn. Tonight Linklater seems particularly frustrated.

"Then I got out there," he later tells me, "and Wiley's saying, 'Man, I'll work all night until we get this right.' His little determination brought me back to life. He seems so much more mature and professional than the older guys."

"The older guys"—the high school seniors—are walking a thin line between life and film. Some of them have turned their temporary quarters, the Crest Hotel, into a party dorm, their days consumed with the same activities they play for the camera at night—namely cruising, smoking weed, and drinking. According to Linklater, Universal president Tom Pollock, who championed such films as *Do the Right Thing* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, carped about *Dazed* being "the most socially irresponsible movie Universal has ever produced." Indeed, pot, alcohol, and profanity cover the film like wallpaper. But they're not sensationalized. The joints, like the metal music, wide-body cars, frayed bell-bottoms, and bad hair, are just there. "It's not like smoking all that pot is fun," Linklater contends. "It's all they have." (Eventually, the studio came around—the film is rated R, and the ad campaign calls it "the film everyone will be toking about.")

The vibe of any movie set is often described as "hurry up and wait"; in the case of *Dazed*, this cliché applies to the finished film. Linklater's greatest directorial gifts are his leisurely eye and ear for the mundane realism of a moment. His languid style makes the whole movie seem stoned, and in the end, it's a subversive and surprisingly poignant comedy, fueled more by groaning recollections than wistful nostalgia.

Though basically satisfied with *Dazed*, Linklater still harbors doubts about his benefactors' intentions. "They don't know my dark side," he says. "Jacks told one guy I'm going to be like James Brooks—making comedies with a social underpinning. That's so way off the mark. They'll say, 'Did you like *Back to the Future*?' I don't tell them I'm into Fassbinder."

But what really irks him are Jacks's references to *Dazed* as "Richard's *American Graffiti*." Though Linklater pays winking homage to his spiritual predecessor by including *Graffiti*'s Paul Le Mat's yellow drag racer in one scene, the comparison, he feels, is otherwise fatuous. "*Graffiti* is the American upbringing people wish they had," Linklater says. "*Dazed* is the upbringing we're stuck with. For me, growing up was too real, too crummy, too limited. There was nothing mythological or nostalgic about it."

Jason Cohen wrote about Sam Raimi in the March issue of *Details*.