



Creative Review: Transistor Studios

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Transistor Studios recently relocated its Brooklyn-based headquarters to a former tattoo parlor, a wood-floored haven of exposed beams, metal and glass doors. Decor choices range from taxidermy to 1920s- and '30s-era mug shots. It's both beautiful and bad-ass, and as such, is a fitting reflection of the design ethos of its founding partners.

Transistor executive producer Damon Meena and executive creative director Aaron Baumle went to high school together in Louisville, Kentucky. They played music together in the local hard rock scene, and continue to do so to this day, in a metal band called Marching Teeth. They both attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and they both worked at H-Gun Labs after graduating, a legendary-in-some-circles production shop specializing in industrial, adrenaline-fueled music videos for acts ranging from Ministry and Soundgarden to Public Enemy and the electronic music artist Josh Wink.

H-Gun was a kind of incubator for Art Institute grads, a young, aggressively creative group of artists who became forerunners of the style of hyper-kinetic editing and skewed angles that would become MTV's go-to aesthetic. It was also among the first companies of its kind to animate using first-generation Macs, and was a game-changer in terms of work process as well:

"It was a soup-to-nuts production," said Meena, "and back then there wasn't anything really like that. It was still very traditionalâ€ But H-Gun would shoot it, edit it themselves, they would do any animation and motion graphics and they would finish it and turn over the finished Betacam tape. Everything was under one roofâ€ Over time, that's become the norm anywhere you go."

In short, Meena continued, as a 20-something, hard-rocking designer fresh out of art school, he couldn't have found himself in a better place to be. "I was just a little kid running around there, and I always said, 'If I ever have my own company, I want it to be modeled after this place.'"

Before that vision could materialize, however, Meena's career path would take an unexpected detour. After H-Gun, he transitioned to another Chicago-based studio called Tricky Pictures, an offshoot of a company called Backyard Animation. But shortly thereafter, Tricky closed up shop, which probably wouldn't have been too damaging had Meena's apartment not burned down in a building fire the same week (he didn't start it). The one-two punch of disastrous life events sent him back to Louisville, where he recouped by running a doggie daycare with his then-wife while continuing to work on projects for clients in Kentucky and back in Chicago - under a company label he had taken to calling Transistor.

Eventually, Meena would make his way back into the Backyard Animation fold, when the former Tricky owners made him an offer he couldn't refuse: Join forces with them and bring Transistor Studios to Los Angeles. Meena accepted and made his old friend Aaron Baumle the company's first hire. At the Art Institute and while freelancing in Chicago, Baumle had been working on a lot of display art projects, giving him a strong background in "more physical work that mixes graphics and practical objects," he said, including stop-motion. His slightly out-of-the-box design experience would set a trend at Transistor of seeking out varied backgrounds that continues to fuel the company nearly 15 years later. Today, some team members have "a more illustrative or painterly background," Baumle continued, while others, added Meena, "live in the tattoo world or the music worldâ€ That's really something that's part of a lot of us here and part of our design process."

But while the company's culture is certainly shaped by the realms of ink and distortion, it's more in terms of the diverse viewpoints those non-traditional realms offer to the promo space than, say, its design aesthetic. On the contrary, Transistor has built a huge and extremely diverse portfolio over the years, reflecting an astonishing array of styles - sometimes within a single spot, as with this promo for last season's NBA All-Star Game in New York.

Traveling rapidly between the five boroughs of New York City, the All-Star Game spot uses different styles of artwork and typeface to turn each neighborhood into a character of its own, before culminating in a lovely bit of

transit-centric general animation that manages to be simultaneously playful and urbane. "We were not only pulling from the flavor of each borough but also what fed into [their history]," said Baumle, "the history of hip-hop and basketball itself and the relationship that it has to this city and why it felt so important that the All-Star Game was happening here." Colorful and vibrant, the promo's individual, non-basketball-related frames could be paintings in their own right, which is why Brief featured it as a Hot Spot when it arrived last February. Book-ending the broad spectrum of Transistor's versatility, a much more recent Hot Spot showcased a markedly different design direction:

In creating this open for Oprah Winfrey Network's *Belief*, it "was really important to cover the different locations and show that wherever you are in the world, people believe in something larger than themselves," said Baumle. "That was really the main point of the show—diving into these different cultures' belief systems and how they're different and also related to each other on a larger scale. That's where the use of the globe became pretty important to us—to see the grand scale of this and then dive into the story and then pull back out to show that connection. But we didn't want it to feel too graphic and hokey because of the tone of the show, so it was important for us to create a photo-real environment but still give some imaginative animation to it. The process was really about developing a CG globe that we could use not only to house footage but also felt tactile and real."

The expansive feel of the *Belief* open seems like a symbolic reflection of a new direction at Transistor and a new sense of openness. No longer affiliated with Backyard and ever-committed to scouting new talent and perspectives from off-the-cuff places, the studio recently brought on British export Nicola Finn as executive producer. Formerly managing director of the London-based, Oscar-winning production company Passion Pictures, Finn is well-equipped to expand both Transistor's clientele and talent pool into international realms, where "these guys don't always have time to focus on," she said. "I'm hoping to be contributing new resources, finding other non-traditional artists, and also giving the management team a bit more bandwidth."

But with roots in the American South and two company heads who like to rock out in their spare time, Transistor seems destined to feel homegrown no matter how far it expands. As if to underscore this sentiment, the company's new stateside office is located not in industry hubs Los Angeles, New York or even Chicago, but in the quiet music-and-barbecue Mecca of Austin, Texas. "We took a look at where would fit us as people now, and Austin was a great fit," Meena said. "It has its own vibe, its own creativity, its own barbecue, its own everything."

The city's laid-back vibe also perfectly manifests another core tenet of

Transistor's new iteration, which entails just "being a little more relaxed about ourselves and the way we go about our own identity and who we are," Meena continued. "Not really worrying so much about it."