Stranger Than Paradise and The First Golden Age

One afternoon in late April 1984 I slipped away from my Films, Inc. office for a pre-Cannes screening of the completed Stranger Than Paradise. We all knew it was headed for the Director’s Fornight, but virtually no one had seen anything since the original half-hour that now comprised the first act of Jim Jarmusch’s 90-minute feature. The atmosphere was mildly expectant when the lights went down, wildly enthusiastic after the film’s final blackout. It was hilariously deadpan with pinpoint comic timing from its letter-perfect nonprofessional cast. Yet the film’s minimalism was also strangely poignant. It was elegantly shot in black and white by Tom DiCille, who finally made his own mark as a director a decade later. The best thing about it was that the mastermind of this surprising triumph was one of our own, the epitome of cool with his silvery hair, Jim Jarmusch. And all for a little more than $100,000. It was too soon to worry about the commercial distribution prospects.

When the lights came up at the Magno Penthouse screening room before Jim and his producer Sara Driver were scheduled to fly off to seek their fame and fortune in France, the fledgling New York film community had been galvanized. It’s a near perfect, organic film completely true to its own aesthetic, which was identifiably European and quintessentially American at the same time.

One of Jarmusch’s crucial contributions to hundreds of future low-budget films was his casting concept. His cast did not come from the Screen Actors Guild; they weren’t exactly actors acting. He chose John Lurie, Richard Edson, and Eszter Balint to inhabit characters not unlike their everyday personalities. Lurie, Edson and Jarmusch all traveled in the same downtown New York scene. Balint’s parents had an experimental theater group whose nude performances in storefront windows sometimes brought out the police. The three of them were the characters, and the characters were them. Jim’s plan was no accident, which is not to suggest that he didn’t write a finely honed script. It was just impossible to imagine the effectiveness of the delivery until his cast spoke the lines. Spike applied precisely the same technique in She’s Gotta Have It.

Jim’s travails through the pre-Stranger years intersect with a number of supporting roots characters. In the NYU graduate film program, he met Sara Driver and Spike Lee, who worked together in the equipment room. He was also Nicholas Ray’s teaching assistant before working on Wim Wenders’s film about Nick, called Lightning over Water, in 1980. Jim then completed his own Lower East Side, existential, guerilla, student feature Permanent Vacation, which was not exactly a harbinger of things to come. Throughout those years, he moved freely between punk music and avant-garde film circles where he knew Amos Poe, the Bs, Charlie Ahearn, Eric Mitchell. He was Eric’s soundman on the feature Underground USA. He sang and played keyboards in a band called The Del Byzantines while his future actors John Lurie (Lounge Lizards) and Richard Edson (Konk) also dabbed in music. Jarmusch has often suggested that underground film was like punk rock; it wasn’t about virtuosity. It was about having something to say with feeling. However, in the same way that John Lurie got quite serious about his music as the years went by, Jim developed deﬁnt filmmaking skills.

Wenders gave Jim a finite amount of leftover black and white raw stock from The State of Things on which he shot the initial 30-minute short in one weekend. Jim and Sara mounted a portable 35mm projector in the middle of the dance floor at the club Danceteria one night early in 1983 to show the short and try to generate interest and cash for
the remaining two thirds of the film, which had been scripted. I got to know them because they were completely broke and would come to the Bleecker Street Cinema, which I was programming, for free movies. I tried to evade their requests for more four-hour Jacques Rivette movies. They did come to the U.S. premiere of the Wenders film at the Bleecker along with Spike Lee and Errol Morris in February 1983. Jim and Sara also attended our Film Forum nuptials where they got to see Buster Keaton with a slice of wedding cake on the side.

Since the power of *Stranger Than Paradise* is cumulative, the initial half-hour segment left an unfinished impression. However, when it was shown in Germany's Hof Festival, Jarmusch found two angels. Director Paul Barriel gave Jim money to extricate himself from a sourer connection with Wenders's Gray City Films. Then liqueur-filled-chocolate impresario Otto Grokenberger stepped forward as executive producer with money to finish the film. When *Stranger* was invited to Cannes, it didn't seem that earthshaking, because the work certainly emerged from the European tradition. Any excitement was also tempered by the fact that previous American invites like *Northern Lights* and Robert Young's *Alambrista* hadn't really gotten any stateside boost from Cannes.

The response in France was avid and Jim was the first American to bring home the Camera d'Or for best first feature as a meaningful selling tool. Distributors weren't entirely convinced, thinking that the enthusiastic reaction might be unique to foreign filmgoers. The next stop was an increasingly prominent Los Angeles event called Filmex. Although Cinecom had already passed on the film, two other indies, the Samuel Goldwyn Company and Island/Alive, used Filmex to monitor the domestic audience very closely. They loved it. So Goldwyn, with strenuous pushing from the recently relocated Jeff Lipsky, stepped up and sealed the deal. During the negotiations, I became aware of the fact that my old friend Sam Kirt was assisting the producers, although I wasn't sure how. After American Mavericks and Libra, Sam had headed UA Classics in its final year. Now without coincing the term, he was acting informally as a producer's rep.

Scorsese claims that the greatest impact of John Cassavetes' 16mm *Shadow* was simply this: There were no more excuses for aspiring directors who were afraid of high costs or unmanageable equipment. That was then, and this was now. His statement, when applied to Jarmusch, rings totally true: the first three New York filmmakers I worked with,
video rights, but the initial shipment was a pathetic five thousand units. Buyer beware: It was the theatrical experience which made that film click.

As 1985 rolled along, there were a few theatrical disappointments like Spectralfilm’s release of the second Victor Nunez picture, Flash of Green, Cinecom’s failure with Horton Foote’s 1918, and Pampling Iron 2. However mid-summer brought the biggest surprise up to that moment in the eighties. Island Pictures, which had jettisoned Alive as its partner, went completely against the grain of conventional indie distribution strategy and opened Kiss of the Spider Woman in late July. This now looks like bold Hollywood counterprogramming, but it was unprecedented then. The result: $17 million and Academy Award nominations. Because it starred William Hurt and Raúl Julia and wasn’t exactly cheap, Spider Woman did not directly inspire no-access, low-budget directors. However, its performance as a nonstudio production made the entire industry take note and made Island Pictures the preeminent quality independent. (Declasse New Line had already begun to print money with the Nightmare franchise.) Island didn’t rest on its laurels. Cary Brokaw and Russell Schwartz planned a December opening for The Trip to Bountiful so that Geraldine Page would qualify for a Best Actress nomination. She did, and she won. So did William Hurt as Best Actor for Spider Woman, giving Island a remarkable, stunning one-two punch in the face of the studios. Their marketing was tasteful, yet very aggressive and they began to spend money pretty freely—especially when a film was in profit and earning overages, since any money spent at that point is really producers’ money.

Distribution deals for completed independent features generally involve two pages worth of substantive deal points and another twenty, or more, of boilerplate. Since it is a license agreement, the first three issues are the territory, the term, and which rights are included. Even simple things change over the years. The standard term used to be seven, ten, or twelve years; now it’s twenty, thirty-five, or (gasp) perpetuity. It’s always been extremely hard to segment theatrical, television and home video rights. Producers might win a negotiation to exclude sequels/remake rights, books, merchandise, or, looking ahead, interactive rights.

Ideally the distributor pays a significant, nonrefundable advance which is recouped from any future producer net profits. They earn distribution fees for releasing the film theatrically (30 to 35 percent) and
sublicensing the other ancillary rights (25 to 35 percent for home video, pay cable, syndication). When it comes to prints and advertising (P&A) and other distribution/promotion costs, the smart producer is looking for a strong show of distributor support without careless or frivolous overspending. After the fees are earned, the costs are covered, and the advance (with interest) is recouped, the film has entered the promised land of overages. This normally means it's either done quite well, or had a modest purchase price. As costs have steadily risen, overages have become rarer.

After the fact, producers David Weisman (Kiss of the Spider Woman) and Sterling Van Wagenen (The Trip to Bountiful) bitterly complained about Island's credit-claiming, spendthrift ways. Weisman captured the producer attitude perfectly when he described Island as having had "the privilege of distributing Spider Woman." The Bountiful gripes zeroed in on the $2 million P&A expense, a large final chunk having gone toward the successful Oscar campaign, which pumped up the home video release. Obviously, the time to object to draining profits is while the money is excitedly being spent, not a year later.

Shortly after Kiss of the Spider Woman came out and received enormous support from the gay community, I got a call from an old NYU schoolmate of mine who had also been a partner in Roadmovies. He wanted me to come and screen a gay feature that was close to completion.