

# Crowdfunding

*The first CG short film created via Facebook by animators around the world lands on the big screen*

*By Barbara Robertson*

All the characters are musical instruments in Mass Animation's crowd-sourced short film "Live Music."



# JM



When the short animated film “Live Music” premieres in movie theaters on November 20 with Tri-Star Pictures’ feature animation *Planet 51*, few people in the audiences will know they’re seeing a revolution in production: crowd-sourced animation managed via a Facebook application.

The five-minute short film about a rock guitar in a musical instrument store that falls in love with a classical violin features the work of 51 animators from 17 countries who created the 98 shots. Guitarist Steve Vai played the lead character Riff; violinist Ann Marie Calhoun played Vanessa. It’s the first work from the virtual studio appropriately named Mass Animation, founded by Yair Landau, the former vice chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment and president of Sony Pictures Digital. Landau produced and directed the film; Alan Cohen and Alan Freedland wrote the script.

“At Sony, I saw where the game world was going online and saw the complexity of what users were creating in the game space,” Landau says. “I realized there was a lot of raw talent out there. Meanwhile, Imageworks was expanding by opening satellite facilities in New Mexico (Albuquerque) and India. I thought, ‘If we’re connecting with people online, why not put the whole thing online and allow people to connect in?’ [Mass Animation] is a way to get people who want to be involved in making a movie involved,

regardless of where they live.”

Landau decided to open his idea to the world via Facebook, with support from Intel and help from Autodesk, Dell, Reel FX, and Aniboom. He started with a script and characters that would need little translation.

“I tied the story design, characters, and conceit to the development of the project,” Landau says. “I wanted to tell a music-based story. And, by going with inanimate objects, I had characters that would be ‘what you see is what you get in animation.’ Like the early Pixar films.”

## Group Performance

To design and model the characters, Landau worked with Reel FX and Gentle Giant; Reel FX rigged the characters and provided animation tests. Mass Animation designed and created the Facebook application with help from Noise and other user interface designers, and from Aniboom, which provided the technology infrastructure and technical support. With all that in place, Landau could solicit and collect animated performances for the characters from Facebook friends.

Anyone could pick any shot or shots to animate from the 107 posted online. When someone downloaded a story reel, they received fully modeled and rigged 3D assets, the environment, an animation test—walk cycles that showed the style of animation Landau wanted—and the PLE version of

Autodesk’s Maya. The animators in return submitted playblasts.

“It was like, ‘Here’s a shot, here are the boards, here are the assets, now you interpret,’” Landau says. “They would block out the animation and the camera, perform the characters, and shoot the scene.” All told, 124 people submitted shots. Approximately 40 percent of those animators have work in the film, which Landau pared down to 98 shots.

“Initially, we limited people to 20 shots, and then we expanded it to 25,” Landau says. “One person, an animator from Sao Paulo [Brazil], had 10 shots in the final.”

Each week, people commented and voted on their favorites, and the weekly winners received a Dell computer. A jury of animators, animation directors, and Landau chose the performances that appear in “Live Music.” All told, 58,000 people from 101 countries participated in the process.

The animators who made it into “Live Music” range in age from a 14-year-old boy in San Antonio, Texas, to a 48-year-old woman in Bogota, Colombia. Some had worked with the software before, others hadn’t.

“I’d say of the 51 [animators whose work appears in the project], a dozen were experienced and a dozen had never done any animation,” Landau says. “There were a lot of students and recent graduates. We had Ash Brannon [*Surf’s Up* director], Jay Redd [*Monster House* VFX supervisor], and



Reel FX refined and rendered performances created by animators from 17 countries who initially participated in the process via Facebook.

Chris Bailey [Oscar-nominated short film director] on the jury, and they interacted with the animators, which was wonderful. They really enjoyed giving people pointers and ideas about their submissions.”

Once the jury and Landau picked the winners, Landau and an animation director at Reel FX in Dallas worked with the animators to refine the performances and make them consistent. Reel FX also handled final rendering and compositing.

“We plugged them into Reel FX’s pipeline remotely, and spoke with everyone by phone,” Landau says. Some animators needed to do multiple iterations; others had simpler shots or a better sense of how to use the animation software. Translators were on hand when needed.

“It was interesting that since we didn’t assign shots and everyone could pick the shots they wanted, the strongest animation submissions we got were around the two leads,” Landau says. “The moments where the characters connect were the moments we saw the animators most strongly connecting to the story.”

### Ready for an Encore

Landau plans to repeat the performance with another Facebook contest scheduled to start in November. This time, he’s working with a game company, and the hive mind will create a short film that will also

be an in-game animation. “From the animation challenge standpoint, it’s a step forward,” he says.

Landau is also planning to shop a script to distributors for a feature film based on “Live Music” that he hopes to create using the same process. And, he’s looking at creating shorts for mobile platforms.

“I’m putting my efforts into [Mass Animation] because it’s a chance to direct and produce and do my own thing without a giant studio,” says Landau. “I think this idea

can go in any number of directions on a continuing basis as a personal creative platform and as empowerment for other people.”

Some people, however, take exception to the idea and charge that Landau is exploiting animators by asking them to produce spec work and then paying relatively little for a final product that he accepts. Mass Animation paid the animators \$500 per shot.

“The animation guild has posted unflattering pieces, and people have attacked me personally,” Landau says. “They misconstrue what we’re providing.”

When Landau began getting negative reactions, he surveyed the people involved in the project. “The response was overwhelmingly positive,” he says. For students, the credit on a theatrical release would be a powerful addition to a demo reel—and a clip for which they even received payment. For others, the motivation varied.

“A freelance artist in Chicago said he did the math, looking at the time he spent and how much we paid him, and this wasn’t the most he’d gotten per hour, but it was far from the least,” Landau relays. “He sub-

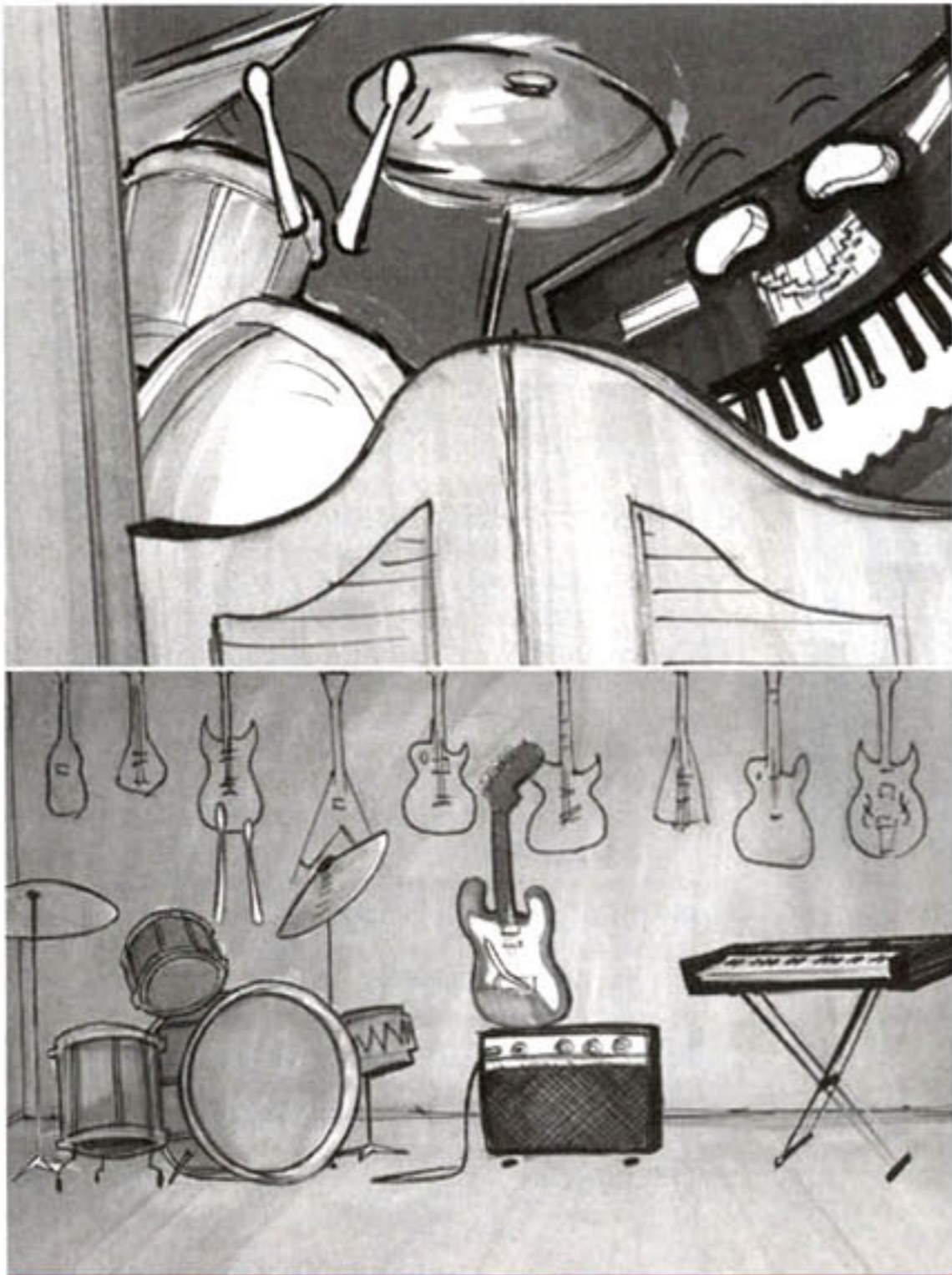
## Global Collaboration

Animators from 17 countries collaborated with producer/director Yair Landau on Mass Animation’s “Live Music.” “We had a huge following in Mexico and Brazil, and in the UK,” he says. “Manchester, England, was our most popular city.” Because the Web site didn’t include translations for Asian countries, few submissions rolled in from the Far East, though.

Among the submissions that came in, Landau spotted some differences in attitudes. “I noticed that the Europeans and Latin Americans responded more to romance and sweetness, and their submissions were more for those shots,” he says. “The Americans leaned more to the comedic beats.”

### Here’s the final list:

Australia	Greece	Russia
Belgium	India	Scotland
Brazil	Indonesia	Thailand
Canada	Italy	USA
Columbia	Kazakhstan	Venezuela
England	Mexico	



When potential animators downloaded a story reel, such as those illustrated here, they received 3D assets, an animation test, and Maya PLE. They submitted playblasts.

mitted five shots and ended up with three in the film.”

And, it gave all the participants a chance to show their work to “Hollywood,” even if they lived in Russia or Venezuela. All the animators now have listings on IMDB, for example.

It’s unlikely that crowd-sourced animation will ever replace the well-honed pipelines at such studios as Pixar, Blue Sky, PDI/DreamWorks, and Sony Pictures Animation, but those studios might learn a lesson from the process, discover talent otherwise difficult to spot, and embrace the global energy and enthusiasm this kind of project can inspire. Shaking up the status quo scares some people, but it motivates others.

“It’s hard to break into animation,” Landau says. “Part of the purpose of this project is to facilitate that for people. Most of the people [with shots in ‘Live Music’] are starting their careers. Three have gotten jobs at more established animation studios already, and another got a job at a visual effects studio based on the shot he submitted for ‘Live Music.’ So, that’s why I keep doing this.”

“We’re in a golden age of animation,” Landau adds. “I felt that when we launched Sony Pictures Animation. What inspires me now is that people can run Maya on their laptops in Kazakhstan and submit full CG animations.”

And, Landau can help show their artistry to the world. ■

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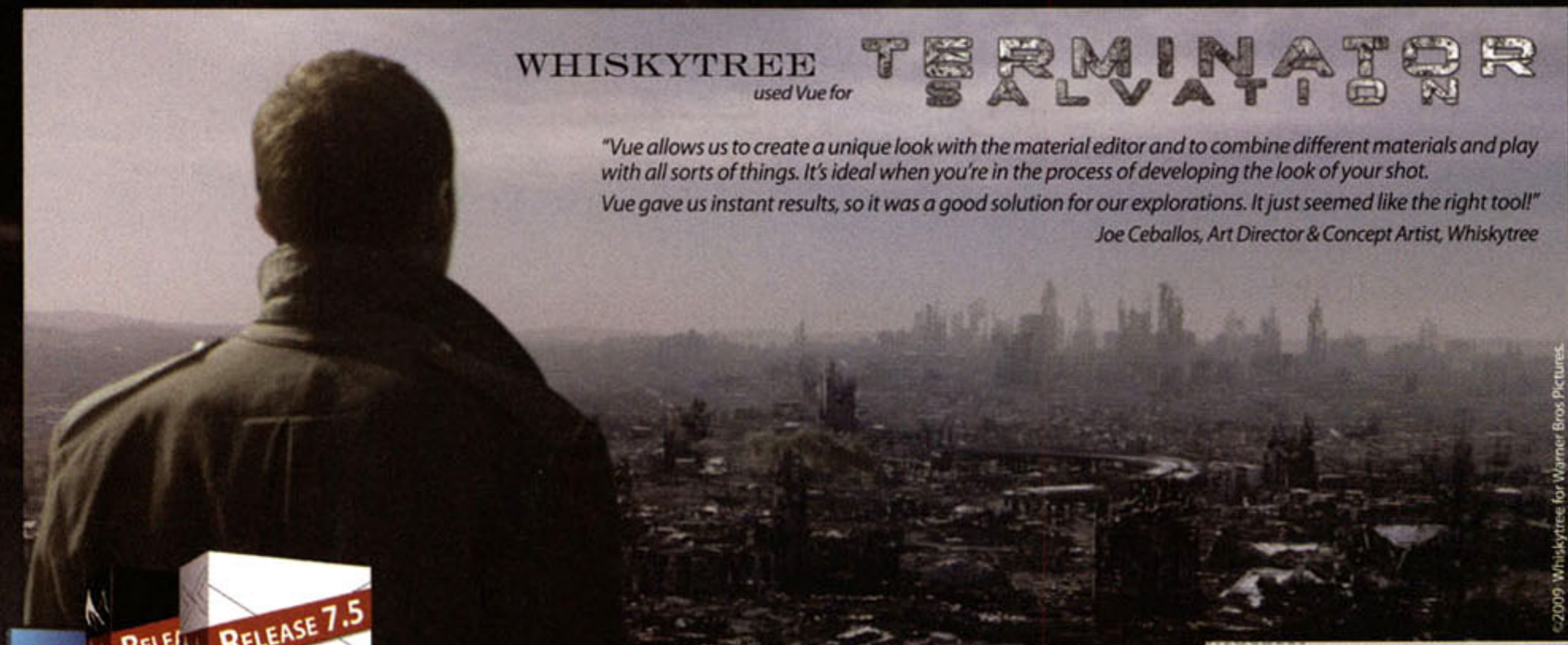
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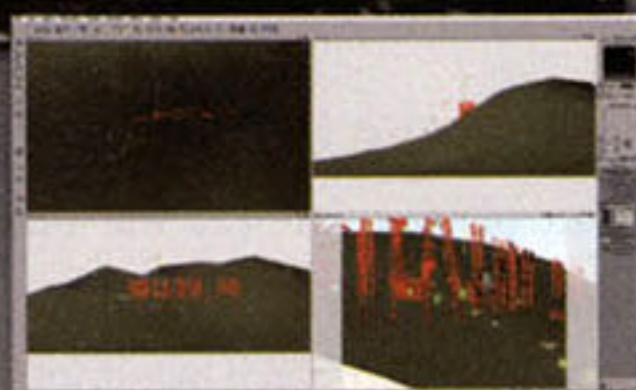
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