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**PRODUCTION CENTER**

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# Soundman Starts Arts Channel

by Doniphan Blair



**Darcel Walker, opening the doors on a proposed art and music channel on Oakland's Embarcadero. Photo: CineSource**

Throw a stone in Oakland and you will hit an artist, musician, or filmmaker, but few will be quite as amazing as Darcel Walker, who is all three, as well as a visionary. And not just of the "I have a screenplay" kind. Walker has half built and fully proposed a 24-hour all-arts television channel, replete with trailers, business plan, and 2000 sq ft broadcast studio with a newsroom, teleprompters, lights, mikes and green screen.

Welcome to AMN (art and music news), the potential CNN of the arts, replete with text crawl on the bottom of the screen. It will feature an indie film every night, a fully staffed news room doing three half-hour broadcasts of art news daily, shows on everything from dance and theatre, to art law and sales, and filmmaking techniques. Walker also happens to be an expert on film audio.

"No one takes art seriously unless there is money involved," opines Walker, an impish, youngish gentleman, despite his graying dreads, making him the very picture of an arts statesman. "It comes down to money. Money is not a bad thing, of course, it is the love of it that is the problem." As any filmmaker knows, money plus vision equals film, but that is also true for the arts in general. "When a kid says 'I want to be an artist,' I don't want people to say 'You are in for a hard life.' I want to change how art is viewed, give it the respect it deserves."

"My goal is to bring the entire artistic community together - there is artistic flair in all of us - to where commerce happens. I don't leave anyone out. I even want to do things for the artisan community. AMN's Art Auction will reach way beyond the booth at the farmer's market. It could start as a 30 minute show but expand and give Home Shopping Network a run for its money. Bay Note will survey local entertainment. Little Town Revue would showcase stuff specific to LGTB community. Entertainment Contracts with Michael Ashburn, an East Bay arts attorney, would prepare you for big money."

"I'm trying to reach those who don't watch TV," says Walker with a smile, "An ad might be: I don't watch TV... but I watch AMN."

Walker is also an A-list soundman, or person, if you prefer, who has worked for the History Channel, Discovery Channel and the BBC, among others. But he is dedicated to indie film, to which he is god's gift, literally. Although he would never say that, and didn't mention his faith, I couldn't help but notice a Bible on his coffee table and an advanced community spirit in his business plan. But his religion is also the arts, which, according to the Sufis, bring you closer to god. It worked in Walker's case. When bass playing didn't go as far as he wanted - an upright bass in his loft indicates he is continuing, however - so he switched to questing for excellence in audio.

"I was the first - me and the guy at Lucas Films - to go tapeless in the Bay Area using Fostex gear. I had just gotten out of school." Walker knew about mixing from being behind the mix board in his bands, but he also enrolled in the California Recording Institute, graduating 2002, to tweak up his knowledge of the latest gear and techniques. "I try to combine the right attitude with the right skill. There has to be a good vibe on the set, I don't care what the budget is."

Evidently, that also worked. Right out of school, until the recent economic downturn, Walker was averaging twenty days a month. His indie filmography includes California Tango, Village Barbershop, President's Hotel and the Sorcerer (all still in post); Umi's Heart, 6 Films in 7 Days, and The Drug Dealer (from 2008); Shadows, The Loaner and Wonderous Woman (from 2007) among many others as well as Vegetarian Cooking with Compassionate Cooks (2004) which he also helped produce. Walker is a vegan.

"Sound is the indie filmmaker's Achille's Heel," insists Walker. "It might have a good story, talent, everything, but sound is weak. My belief is they should be able to play your movie back-to-back with anything out of L.A. and no one will be taken out of the narrative, consciously or



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subconsciously."

"My gift to indie film is I am a good price point and that there will be no ADR (automated dialogue replacement) on my watch. Either you get the shot with flawless sound or the director knows why but decides to move on. But I don't pick projects where the director is going to accept bad sound."

"I had all my mics modified. They are all Lectrosonics, 400 series, top-of-the-line wireless mics, Sennheiser MKE-Gold. My boom mic is the same they use at the Olympics. I have a 6-track recorder, so I am giving you discrete tracks, and dual miking for that rich, theatrical sound. I like to mix 20% boom and 80% lavalier, so it doesn't sound like you're right in front of the speaker. It will compete with any multimillion-dollar production. I send a safety to the camera when possible, but sometimes they use the camera track to avoid the trouble of synching, even though I have a 'smart slate'."

Of course, super sound is a little harder than that. Walker records panning the boom hard left and the lavaliers hard right. That way, if there is a clothing rustle or interference on the lavs, it doesn't ruin the take. But in post, you have to mix them together, following the 80/20 formula albeit now distributed to both sides.

"Even if it is low budget, I always give my best. That is my goal, the flame that burns in my heart. But then I thought: Why just help indie filmmakers when you can help all artists?"

Which brings us back to AMN, the CNN of the art world. Walker is building it, brick by mike by office, largely by himself, next door to his own umber-hued and nicely furnished studio on Oakland's Embarcadero, a meandering harbor side street of fish restaurants, boat builders and high-end lofts. The first funding, of around \$60,000, came by chance, as is often the case among visionary entrepreneurs. (If investors knew how to find new projects efficiently, would we be in this current mess?)

"I was playing my promo for a potential investor at an editing suite in Berkeley, when a woman - who wants to remain anonymous - passed by and asked what was going on. Well, the first guy couldn't understand a thing but she jumped all over it."

Soon the first check had arrived and Walker was searching for space, identity and collaborators. He named his production company, Funky Tiki, after an old band; for a logo, he reached out to Conscious Creative of Berkeley, a young, green-certified advertising and design company. Walker became their sound guy, and their co-owner and cinematographer, Mark Arellano, is Funky Tiki's main shooter.

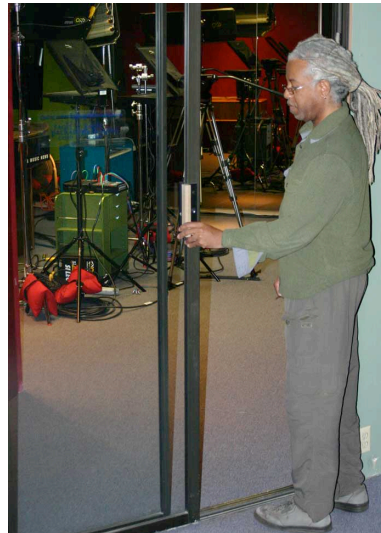
"Another ground breaking technique I would like to have is no commercials as we know them, so you're not taken out of the vibe every ten minutes. Commercials would come at the end, the newscasters mentioning the product, like NPR, or a quality commercial." His proposal includes a Web site, naturally - indeed, there already is one, <http://www.amn.tv> - and a newsmagazine, AMN Today, in development, a weekly covering the site plus a bit more.

Walker has a socially conscious business plan, hiring other artists and providing them full amenities. "By artists, for artists, with health care and profit sharing," he states, rising to what was once a revolutionary but now is patently obvious. AMN would partner with distributors, galleries, and the like.

"We are going to break new ground on all angles. Lets say you have a shooter, at \$400 a day. Do you want the straight pay or one quarter in stock? After doing a certain amount of work, you get credits, like us sponsoring part of your next film or lending you our grip truck or helping get you additional training to diversify your skill set." If things get going, Walker wants AMN to produce its own films and start its own record label.

"We will be here to serve and empower the indie. Not that we will not be a friend to the majors. But the majors will not buy us out. We will own our stuff and maintain creative control. We will see how it plays out."

Lucky on his first round of investors, Walker now awaits take two more, a situation not helped by the current economy. He reached out to Lucas, but struck out; he couldn't get to the Coppola family, whose gate keepers were too tough. In LA, he tried to contact Ebay founder Pierre Omidyar, Will Smith, and Master P. Now, instead of doing all this himself, he is considering





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hiring a firm to help him.

"Movie people are a lot easier to deal with. I talked with Yahoo, but it is hard for them to grasp the concept. I need people who fund \$20 million-and-up films regularly-not much for a big feature, but five years of funding for AMN. And you don't have to wait five years to make your cash back, because it starts coming as soon as you hit the switch. You would have everyone from Rolling Stone to Mix Mag wanting to advertise. Once it gets going here in the Bay Area, we launch in L.A., New York, and Austin, and nationally."

"I did all the research, crunched the numbers, even did focus groups. The market is out there. We have our ducks in a row. We are ready to go," Walker concluded with a smile.

I couldn't believe my ears. I had come to check out a sound person for a one day shoot and stumbled on a massive project, a broadcast station in the making. But seeing is believing. Walker got up and took me next door, the next bay over from his modern, street front loft. There was AMN, about 60% finished, waiting to take off, right on a side street in Oakland.

More info can be found at <http://www.amn.tv> or Darcel Walker at [darcel@funkyтики.com](mailto:darcel@funkyтики.com). Posted on Apr 06, 2009 - 11:32 PM

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