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AFF 2011 Interview, 'Austin High'

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on October 21, 2011 - 11:30am in [AFF](#) | [Local Indies](#)



The 18th Austin Film Festival is almost here. To help celebrate all the locally connected movies at this year's fest, we've reached out to a number of filmmakers to find out about their Austin and Texas-tied films screening at the fest.

The world premiere of the stoner comedy *Austin High* will take place on Saturday, October 22 at 10:30 pm at the [Rollins Theatre](#) in the Long Center. The film screens a second time on Monday, October 24 at 9:30 pm at Rollins.

At fictional Ladybird High School, Principal Samuel Wilson's ([Michael S. Wilson](#)) clock is perpetually set to 4:20, that is, until a politician from an unnamed city to the north of Austin comes to town. The politician wants to build more condos, turn Barton Springs into a water park and strictly enforce federal marijuana laws.

Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

Local filmmakers [Kirk Johnson](#) and [Will Elliott](#), both University of Texas alumni, set out to make *Austin High* using an entirely local cast, crew and locations.

Johnson said the way he and Elliott wrote the screenplay for *Austin High* was a producer's "nightmare." He said the two wrote scenes with particular locations in mind, some of which they had secured, others they had not. All in all, the movie had 40 location changes.

"Some (locations) we just really liked to drink there, so we just wanted to shoot there," Johnson said. "We definitely wrote it knowing it was going to be kind of an Austin movie."

Johnson and Elliott are the creators of the online sketch comedy series, [Beef & Sage](#) (Johnson, "Beef"; Elliott, "Sage"). They began writing the screenplay for *Austin High* in October 2009. The two continued to write until filming began in the summer of 2010. The film shot on location for 19 days and wrapped in July 2010.

Austin High is Johnson's first completed screenplay and the first to be produced. Johnson said he wrote one screenplay as a Lake Highlands High School student (Go Wildcats!) and two in college. He said he'll probably burn the one he wrote in high school.

I spoke with Johnson on the phone as he was driving from a fishing trip about Austin High.

Slackerwood: How large was the *Austin High* cast? (Read [Jette's casting call](#))

Kirk Johnson: Very large. There were 60 speaking roles and probably 100 roles that were featured, whether they were cut away to a punch line or a group of people that was sort of for a joke. We had a very long casting process.

Can you explain what the casting process was like?

Johnson: We got (local) casting director [Vicky Boone](#). She helped us with the big roles, the ones that had meatier parts. The rest was kind of Will [Elliott] and I knowing people. We worked in Austin a lot before this, so we had some good connections of comedians and actors that we kind of wrote parts for.

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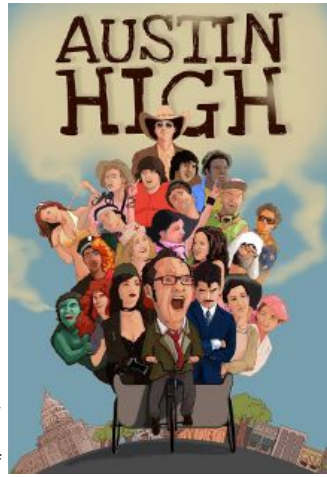
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How did you get involved with *Austin High*?

Johnson: [Will Elliott and I] got approached by one of the producers, Mike Wilson. He had sort of a nugget of an idea: this principal, who's still a slacker and who has never really grown up, sort of arrested development. Him and all his friends went to that school [Ladybird High School] and are still there, kind of smoking and being immature in funny ways. Will and I took it and ran with it.

Why premiere *Austin High* at AFF?

Johnson: We definitely wanted to premiere in Austin because it's an Austin movie. Hopefully, it will get a great response here because there's a lot of inside jokes for Austinites. Which is good in Austin, maybe bad outside of Austin, but that's okay because we like Austin a lot. The Austin Film Festival is a great festival for writers; it's also one of the biggest (festivals) in Austin.



When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

Johnson: I've always really loved comedy and trying to make people laugh. When I got into high school and college I really dug into film and started watching as many films as I could; (I got) really interested in all kinds of creative writing. I didn't have a moment where, "I need to write." I just always liked making up stories, but I'm not a liar.

Best moment on the *Austin High* set?

Johnson: The first week or so (Will Elliott and I) were sort of in shock that this many people were working on a film that we had written four months prior in our room. It was all pretty surreal. When Dog the Bounty Hunter (**Duane Chapman**) came, that was pretty magical.

How long was Dog the Bounty Hunter on set?

Johnson: Dog came out for one day for seven hours. He was the coolest guy I've ever met; he's so nice. He would ask us for our opinions on his performance. He got really into it. He had a story about George Clooney. He had just met George or something, I don't know how, but he asked him, "Hey, I'm in this movie. Can you give me any tips?" And he said George told him, "Just go for it, man." And he did. You could see him up on stage, he was sort of nervous, but when the cameras started rolling he was definitely going for it.

What should audience members expect from *Austin High*?

Johnson: Just know that it's a very goofy comedy. Go in to laugh. Sometimes at these festivals you get your scoffers and your guffaws at the screenings, (but) our sole purpose is to make you laugh.