

HOLLYWOOD

TO GLORIOUS



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Have you ever been watching an old car chase movie and thought to yourself “Gee, there sure are a lot of skid marks right there...” just as the good guy’s car fishtails its way onto the asphalt exactly where you spotted the skid marks? Until the advent of computer graphics technology, long black trails of rubber were a thorn in the side of action film editors. These days you can hire a skilled computer artist to erase all those pesky skid marks over a long lunch. I personally never gave car chase skid mark continuity a thought until working 2nd unit with my prop master friend Joe Connolly on a wreck of a movie named “Black Dog,” back in 1997.

Our job on that film was simple: personal props and vehicle props. The personal props were easy, just catch a stuntman on his way to the stunt vehicle and give him a watch, a ring, maybe some glasses or a gun... you know, little stuff. The vehicles were more difficult. There were seven different Trans-Ams on 2nd unit, all of them painted to look like the hero vehicle, but made especially to accomplish different stunts. I believe there were three different rigs for the giant hero Peterbilt tractor (four rigs, if you count the special rig used by 1st unit) and several multiples for other cars and trucks seen throughout the movie. Our transportation department was a regular parking lot due to all the stunt vehicles they had to shuttle from set to set.

Annoyingly, the stunt guys all seemed to know the different rigs by sight (since they drove and developed them), but it wasn’t quite as easy for Joe and I. It seemed like we were always running back and forth between Trans-Ams trying to figure out which one was “number 3” so we could jam the one and only CB radio unit that we’d been

given onto the hump in the floorboard in the front seat, then run around to the back and bolt on a license plate. For reasons that continue to baffle me, Raffaella De Laurentiis spent incalculable sums of money on that cursed project trying to buy her way back into Hollywood, but the art department wouldn’t buy us six more freakin’ CB radios to put into the other cars. It’s as if they wanted to ensure that there might be continuity errors in the picture . . .

WHICH BRINGS ME BACK TO THOSE SKID MARKS.

Imagine, if you will, a long straight stretch of county road thirty miles east of Atlanta. A blue Trans-Am hauls ass, leaving distinct black curlicues on the pavement. The 2nd unit director calls “Cut!” and the 1st AD calls the on-set painter over the walkie. A minute later an old white Suburban rolls up to the trail of rubber, a slight man in his 50s climbs out, opens up the back doors of the truck and pulls out a can of latex house paint. He pries open the can and begins pouring a puddle of paint directly onto the road like it was something that he does all the time.

After a few seconds he stops pouring and begins diligently spreading the puddle out along the 30-foot long skid mark with his paint roller. It was absolutely unbelievable.

Beside me, Joe muttered something under his breath and looked away in frustration. Time seemed to stop. Jaws hung agape.

The only noise in the world was the high pitched squeal of a paint roller echoing across the asphalt as sixty people stood watching one sad little man slowly pushing a stick down the highway.

"SQUEEEE...SQUEEEE...SQUEEEE!"



The expression on every crewmember's face framed the same question: "This was a big budget stunts movie? This was the height of our technological sophistication? A little man with a stick???"

Every person watching this scene unfold had already started drawing up mental plans for a spray rig hooked up to a truck bumper and was wondering why the paint department hadn't provided exactly that sort of modern convenience for the little old painter, who was slowly rolling his little grey heart out along the asphalt while swarms of hundred dollar bills with little flappy wings battered the air around the producer's head.

Unable to watch any more of this, Joe sighed and said "I know I'll be sorry for saying this but come on, let's go help him."

And so, for the next 2 or three months, in between the requirements of our own job, we ended up helping the painter paint out skid marks. I sacrificed 6 pairs of jeans, a dozen shirts and at least one good jacket to those cursed black trails of rubber. The funniest part was that the light grey color of the paint was just as obvious as the skid marks... we were just

swapping black rubber for the really light grey of the latex house paint.

By the end of the mountain sequence we were into true winter temperatures and half the production crew had been employed as skid mark painters. It didn't matter because the paint was freezing on the road instead of drying, creating greater hazards for the stunt guys on the twisty mountain roads north of Helen. I developed a really nasty cold and can't remember the last time we helped paint the highway, which suits me just fine.

To this day I still look for skid marks in movies but I find them less and

less because they can now pay a perky computer artist to paint them out with her stylus while she drinks a latte and thinks about what color she's going to paint her bedroom.

You know, with a roller.

"THIS WAS A BIG BUDGET STUNTS MOVIE? THIS WAS THE HEIGHT OF OUR TECHNOLOGICAL SOPHISTICATION? A LITTLE MAN WITH A STICK???"