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INTERNATIONAL

10 To Watch

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Johnston & Halbrooks: Texans parlay Sundance short into feature

10 Producers to Watch 2012: James M. Johnston & Toby Halbrooks

By TODD LONGWELL

Toby Halbrooks was in Los Angeles pitching TV projects and spinning his wheels.



James M. Johnston & Toby Halbrooks

A former member of the rock band Polyphonic Spree, the Dallas native had enjoyed some small-scale success making commercials and as one of the producers of fellow Texan David Lowery's feature debut as a writer-director, "St. Nick," which had played film festivals around the world and earned raves from the New York Times and Wall Street Journal. But as he and Lowery made the rounds in Hollywood, they could never quite score a deal.

"It kept being almost, almost," recalls Halbrooks, who earlier had collaborated with Lowery on series musicvideos for artists such as School of Seven Bells and Sarah Jaffe.

Then one night Halbrooks received an email from Lowery, upstairs in the same building, containing a script he had just written for the short film "Pioneer." "I was like, 'Let's do this,'" Halbrooks recalls.

The duo returned to Texas and reconnected with James M. Johnston -- who had produced all of Lowery's films, as well as Yen Tan's award-winning 2008 film "Ciao" -- and shot "Pioneer" over the course of three days. It world premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and went on to win top prizes at SXSW Film Festival.


The trio was subsequently invited to develop their next project, "Ain't Them Bodies Saints," about a Bonnie & Clyde-esque pair of Texas outlaws, at the Sundance Institute Feature Film Program.

"Part of it is that you go to Sundance and they have strategic meetings set up for you," explains Johnston, also a vegan chef who operates two successful restaurants with his wife.

One of those meetings was with Craig Kestel of WME, who took on the project and set up a series of meetings with financiers and actors. By July, they were in Louisiana, shooting Lowery's script with Rooney Mara and Casey Affleck in the leads.

With that feature on its way to Sundance, the producers hope to keep moving forward with a mix of indie and studio projects, including writer-director Alex Ross Perry's next film, "Listen Up Philip."

Says Johnston: "A lot of luck's been involved, but we have been working real ly hard towards this for a really long while."





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