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COLUMNS: Martin Grove

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'Electric Car' could wind up in Oscar race

By Martin A. Grove

**Electric entertainment:** Whodunits have long been a popular Hollywood genre, but until now they shared a common denominator in having dead bodies at the heart of their stories.

That's not the case, however, with Sony Pictures Classics' "Who Killed the Electric Car?" Directed by Chris Paine, "Electric" is a documentary whodunit whose murder victim is an automobile -- General Motors' EV1 pioneer electric car. "Electric" was produced by Jessie Deeter and executive produced by Dean Devlin, Tavin Marin Titus and Richard D. Titus. The film, which is narrated by Martin Sheen, starts its theatrical release June 28 via SPC in Los Angeles and New York and will roll out across the country over the next month.

An early look at "Electric" left me thinking it has a well-deserved shot at getting into this year's best documentary feature Oscar race. It's a seriously shocking tale that Paine and his team tell about the demise of the electric battery powered automobile that briefly represented an affordable way for America to overcome its addiction to Middle Eastern oil. Having interviewed Devlin in the past and enjoyed films like "Stargate," "Independence Day" and "The Patriot" that he'd made with director Roland Emmerich, with whom he was partnered at the time in Centropolis Film Prods., I was happy to be able to focus with him now on how "Electric" reached the screen.

"My father had one of the very first EV1s that were brought to California and I got one a couple of years later," Devlin explained. "About six years ago when my father passed away was about the time I was leaving Centropolis and starting my new company. In honor of my father's passion for the electric car I named my new company Electric Entertainment and every week in our agenda list I always wanted to make this documentary (about the demise of the electric car). Since I'd never made a documentary before, I didn't really know how and my staff didn't really know how."

ABOUT MARTIN GROVE

Web exclusive: Martin Grove looks at the business of film via conversations with directors and producers. Grove also reports for CNN and KNX-AM Los Angeles. Posted Wednesdays and Fridays.

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Was there a pitch or a screenplay that was up for consideration then? "No," he replied. "I had just lived through the experience of having the electric cars and having them taken away from me (after their leases were up by General Motors, which ultimately destroyed them). I kept waiting for someone to tell the story and no one had. So I said, 'We've got to make this documentary. There's a great story here.' And then one day, a former assistant of mine who's now a producer and a producer on (this) film, named Tavin Marin Titus, called me up and said, 'You've got to meet this guy Chris Paine. He's working on a documentary I think you're going to be interested in.'

"So Chris came in. He'd been using his home video camera and he'd been taping all these things (about GM and the electric car) and said he wants to make this story of the electric car. I nearly jumped out of my chair. I said, 'We're making it. Right now! Done.' And he goes, 'How are we going to raise the money?' I said, 'I'm writing the check. Let's go and do it. This story has to get told.' And that began a couple year journey. It's just been a very exciting and fulfilling time."

Asked how a great idea that he was passionate about managed to be turned into a movie, Devlin told me, "Well, Chris had also lived through this experience from the beginning. He was also a very early EV1 user. And both he and I continue to drive electric cars today. We both drive (Toyota) RAV4 electrics and we're both very passionate about the subject matter. He had filmed several events that had taken place, including this funeral that the activists (seeking to stop GM from destroying all its electric cars) had thrown for the EV1 when the Zero Emissions Mandate (in California) had been overturned. So he had these random interviews and he had filmed these different events and we really wanted to do this. But I thought, 'Listen, let's try to do this as a (theatrical) film, not just something for DVD that gets handed out to activists.'

"So we immediately threw out the crappy home video camera and we got high end digital HD cameras. We got a great DP on board (Thaddeus Wadleigh) and we went out and continued to do the interviews. The more interviews we did, the more the story grew bigger than we thought it was. It was a very different experience from making a film where you've got your script and you know exactly the story you want to tell (because in this case) the story kept expanding and suddenly it wasn't just about the part that we experienced, but it was about this other part and then this other part and this other part. It really became clear that there was a lovely murder mystery here. And that's when we started shifting the tone of it to really being a whodunit."

Although there wasn't a traditional screenplay the way there would be for a fiction film, he noted, "We had an outline of the story we wanted to tell. But as we would do interviews we would learn new bits of information and it would constantly reshape the story we were telling."

It's only in the last few years that Hollywood has come to see the potential of documentaries as films with the capacity of attracting a wide audience. "Well, obviously, Michael Moore had a huge influence on this (with the success of 'Fahrenheit 9/11' in 2004) and 'Super Size Me' (Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary about the perils of eating fast food) had a big influence on it. But ironically, I think, reality television also had an influence on this because suddenly audiences were more accustomed to seeing unscripted material. So suddenly making a documentary is a viable product to bring to the market. But before it was so specialized and really you needed to get grants because there was no way to recoup any money and it would play on PBS at 4 in the morning. Now you can actually put it in a theater and if the subject matter is appealing enough you can get at least a big enough audience to support the venture. And that's really kind of the first time that you can do that."

It was about two years ago that Devlin and Paine began working on the project. "At one point last year we were at a stage where

we had a very, very ugly rough cut with no narration," he recalled. "We were still really working on the narrative form of the story. Tom Bernard (co-president of SPC with Michael Barker), who's a dear old friend I play hockey with, had heard about me working on the film. They had just come back from the Toronto Film Festival where they had not found a documentary they wanted to buy. And they called and said, 'What about your doc?' And I said, 'Well, we're a long ways off. We're not ready to show it.' And they said, 'We want to see it right now.' I said, 'It's not ready to be seen.' They go, 'We don't care. We want to see it now.' And they flew to Los Angeles and they saw it in a very rough stage. In fact, the film broke twice as we were showing it. But they got it. They got the message.

"They said they believed in it. They said, 'We want to do this. We want to put this in theaters on a national level. This was around November last year. They were fantastic partners because they wanted to (proceed that way). They introduced us to Alex Gibney, who had (written, produced and directed) 'Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room' and he became a fantastic asset for us (and is credited on 'Electric' as Consulting Producer). He came in and looked at our material and discussed it with us. To really have an expert (on making documentaries) in the room -- and such a collaborative person -- was just fantastic."

The film, Devlin added, "all really kind of evolved from that. We took it to Sundance in a very rough cut. Out of four screenings we had three standing ovations and we thought we might have something here. The fourth one was a high school crowd and they loved the film. But it was very interesting (as to) where they laughed and where they didn't laugh and what they responded to. We learned a lot from that screening and it actually helped us clarify the message later."

In terms of how he worked with Paine, Devlin explained, "Like me, Chris had been sitting around waiting for the '60 Minutes' piece or the book or The New Yorker article or the 'Frontline' piece (about the death of the electric car). He was waiting for somebody to tell this story. Since we had lived it, we knew the story was there and we couldn't believe that no one was doing this story. All we heard was the oil and car companies' spin on the story. No one had actually told the story so he was dying to tell the story as was I. So it wasn't really very hard for us to kind of come together on what we wanted to do. We wanted to get the information out there. I mean, it's a story that at first glance it's easy to disbelieve because at first you say, 'Well, they built this wonderful car. They're a car company -- of course, they want to make profits. They wouldn't intentionally destroy their own car. Clearly, they must not have been able to make any money from it.' But that's not the true story.

"The real story is they never wanted to make this car. They were forced to make this car because California passed a law. It was called the Zero Emissions Mandate and it passed in 1990. What it said was, if you want to sell cars in California by this year 2% of all the cars you sell have to be zero emissions, by the next year 5%, by the next year 7%, by the next year 10%. So they made the car because they had to make the car. But ironically they ended up making the best car they'd ever made, a car so good that it threatened the status quo. It threatened a lot of things. It threatened things beyond the car companies. So suddenly there were many suspects in this murder. And that's what made the story so fascinating."

Among the film's many on-camera interviews are those with GM communications spokesman Dave Barthmuss; Jim Boyd, executive officer (1981-96) of the California Air Resources Board; Alan Cocconi, drive system engineer for the EV1 prototype; former GM EV marketing director John R. Dabels; former GM board member (1989-2002) Tom Everhart; S. David Freeman, former energy advisor to President Jimmy Carter; Frank J. Gaffney Jr., Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (1983-87) in the Reagan Administration; superstar Mel Gibson, a passionate EV owner-driver; Alan C. Lloyd, chairman (1999-2004) of the California Air Resources Board; California State Sen. Alan Lowenthal; Edward H. Murphy of the American Petroleum Institute; consumer advocate Ralph Nader; Iris and Stanford Ovshinsky,

founders of the Energy Conversion Devices and Ovonic Battery Company and inventors of the nickel metal hydride batteries that powered EV1 cars starting in 1999; Chelsea Sexton, former EV1 sales specialist and a key EV activist; Jananne Sharpless, chairwoman (1985-93) of the California Air Resources Board; and R. James Woolsey, CIA Director (1993-95) in the Clinton administration.

How did they manage to assemble so many notable interviews on the subject? "It was really a case by case situation," Devlin said. "Very often, people would cancel on us at the last minute when they got under pressure. But we were very surprised at how much people wanted to do these interviews. I think a lot of people have been involved in this car and they wanted to tell their story. It was also interesting how few knew the whole picture. So often we would find people who knew this one little slice (of the story), the slice they'd been involved in, but didn't really know the other slices. I think the most fascinating part of making the film was seeing all the pieces come together because no one else had ever put them together."

Looking back at the interviews they did, Devlin recalled, "One of the things that was very sweet was that there's a wonderful man and his wife in the film named Stan Ovshinsky. He was the creator of the advanced battery that really gave the electric car enough mileage to make it a viable car. He's very involved with the automotive industry and the oil industry owns part of his battery technology. So he was very reluctant to do an interview for our film and had actually passed on the film a couple times. But when he found out that I was Don Devlin's son he remembered my father from their correspondence about the electric car over the Internet and he had a great fondness for my father. So he agreed to do the interview purely in respect to my father's memory and that was really a touching and beautiful moment for me."

When I asked Devlin how he got Mel Gibson to participate in the film, he replied, "Well, when we were making 'The Patriot' together I was telling him about my electric car and he couldn't believe me that it was actually as cool as I was saying it was. When we got back to L.A. I said, 'Let me take you for a little spin in it.' So we got in the car and I hit the gas and he could not believe how fast this thing accelerated. He said, 'I've got to get one.' It took a lot of wrangling, but we were finally able to get him one. So he was also an EV1 driver -- and just like the rest of us it was taken away from him."

Why were the cars taken away? "They wouldn't sell you a car. They would only lease the car," Devlin said. "And we suspect they would only lease the car because they were just waiting till they could overturn the law and take the cars back because that's precisely what they did. The minute the Zero Emissions Mandate was rescinded they immediately stopped leasing cars and as soon as the leases were up they demanded the cars back. There was no purchase option whatsoever no matter how much you offered. In fact, in my case I offered \$200,000 for the car and they still wouldn't sell it to me."

"So they had no intention of letting anyone have the car because that would be the evidence (of how good it was). And to this day, they still spin these stories about the car that are simply untrue. As long as the car is not here to prove them liars, they can say anything they like. They destroyed all the cars and the cars that do exist don't run. In other words, they donated some to museums, but they gutted them so you can't turn them on and drive them."

Shooting the film, he said, represented "about a little over a year's worth of interviews and traveling around trying to get people to talk on camera. Some were more willing than others. There was (a great deal of footage to edit). And that's probably the hardest part because it was a story that took place over 10 years and we needed to cut it down to 90 minutes. So often as we show this to experts in the field they say, 'Well, you left this part out' or 'You left this part out.' Yes, we couldn't tell the entire story. You just simply can't in 90 minutes. There's too much."

"For instance, a very interesting part of the story is that when they did take these cars back they did these inspections and they

charged you for every scratch. Like in my case, they charged me \$4,000 for what they perceived as damages to the car, but then they immediately took the car and crushed it. Why are you charging people for scratches if you're simply going to put it into a crusher? There was never an answer. And remember, at the time they were denying that they were crushing them. At the time, they said they were taking them to be reevaluated in cold weather. They said they were going to give (them) to scientists and to universities so they could study the technology and build from the technology. They absolutely denied that they were going to take these out into the desert and crush them."

As for where things stand today now that GM's out of the electric car business, Devlin told me, "There are smaller car companies doing it and in fact they're showing off the advances that have happened outside of the mainstream. There's a new car coming out next year that actually gets 300 miles to the charge, which was the magic number that people had always said you needed to make these cars viable. But the truth is this won't come back unless the government mandates it, the car companies have corporate wisdom and consumers demand it. Without those three things coming together we're not going to see the electric car. My greatest hope is that the Zero Emissions Mandate comes back and not just in California, but in every state of the union because if those laws had passed we would have an enormous amount of electric vehicles on the road today -- enough that it could actually make a difference."

Times have, of course, changed significantly since the mid-1990's and today gasoline prices are through the roof and supplies are sometimes too low for comfort. Are those issues likely to work in favor of developing electric cars now? "I'm hoping it's kind of the perfect storm of events coming together," Devlin observed. "I mean, on the one hand, you have people on all sides of the spectrum finally admitting that there is such a thing as global warming. No matter what your political preference is, nobody likes to pay \$4 a gallon for gas. And regardless of how you feel about the war in Iraq, I don't think anybody is happy about our involvement in the Middle East being tied to our addiction to oil. So I think when you have that kind of agreement across political party lines you can suddenly look at this without it being a left or right issue and just say, 'This is something that could actually affect all of those issues and make a really dramatic impact on our lives and our children's lives.'"

**Filmmaker flashbacks:** From Sept. 3, 1987's column: "'The Fourth Protocol,' Lorimar's first release since entering the domestic distribution business, premiered last weekend with a \$3.6 million gross that just missed taking third place by about \$30,000.

"Not only did the picture perform well, but I was most delighted that an entire system was put together in less than six months from ground zero to a working, breathing, muscle-flexing organization that got its first picture off without a hitch,' Lorimar Film Entertainment marketing and distribution president Ashley Boone told me Tuesday.

"It's an expensive venture, but it is in the long run a lot cheaper than paying someone else the fees. We will recapture the cost of running the operation probably spread over four movies. So if you're going to make and distribute the number of movies we're going to, it's kind of silly not to have your own distribution company.'

"Just what does going into distribution entail? "You have to establish a base in which to do business in 50 states in the United States and in the country of Canada simultaneously. You have to get your offices established -- which means office leases, telephones, computers, stationery, addresses and all sorts of machinery and furniture and human beings, who have to be trained or brought up to speed as to what the company is about. You have to establish everything from payroll systems to local bank accounts. There are legal problems. There are local ordinances that have to be observed.

"Then, on top of that, you have to get your customer base, which is all of the exhibitors in the United States and Canada. They have

to know that you're alive, and you have to aggressively go out and try to get playdates just as if you were a company that's been around for 75 years or longer..."

*Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel [updatehollywood.com](http://updatehollywood.com).*

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