

The Motern Method

The Films of Matt Farley and Charlie Roxburgh

BY WILL SLOAN



Heard She Got Married

Full disclosure: I am credited as an associate producer on *Magic Spot* (2022), the latest movie by Matt Farley and Charlie Roxburgh. Lest you think this presents a conflict of interest in writing about them, I assure you that it is only a credit. One day last April, Farley took to Twitter offering associate producer credits for anyone willing to pay, so I sent \$200 for the privilege of seeing my name onscreen in a movie by two filmmakers who I think are among the best working today.

The credit is at least partly a joke: “associate producers” typically have much deeper pockets than me or the nine other Farley/Roxburgh fans with whom I share credit. It is also partly *not* a joke: since 1999, Farley and Roxburgh have made 14 feature-length films and lost money on every single one, so donations *are* appreciated. But, on a deeper level, the credit is not a joke, because the films of Farley/Roxburgh are community enterprises. Between their

first movie, an hour-long comedy shot in their college dormitory called *The Paperboy* (1999), and their most ambitious, a buddy-cop parody called *Slingshot Cops* (2016), their films accumulated an Altmanesque repertory company of family members, co-workers, friends, acquaintances, and anybody else who would agree to join them on a weekend for a few hours’ filming. The filmmakers have also sought to include the audience in that community: their recent films feature characters named after donors to a crowdfunding campaign, and incorporate footage shot with fans at Farley’s annual “Motern Extravaganza” music event (“Motern Media” is the name of the ad hoc company that encompasses all of Farley’s creative endeavours). *Local Legends* (2013) includes a scene in which Farley flashes his actual phone number onscreen and encourages viewers to call him (a scan of the user reviews on Letterboxd shows that many do). Post

about one of their movies on Twitter, and Farley (@MoternMedia) will invariably respond.

From 1999 to 2016, Farley and Roxburgh's films had virtually no audience. In recent years, a small but real following has developed. The cult has been a genuinely grassroots phenomenon, aided by the easy online availability of the films and built through Letterboxd reviews, podcasts, tweets, and old-fashioned word of mouth. Most fans come to Farley/Roxburgh through one of their genre spoofs, such as the slasher pastiche *Freaky Farley* (2007) or the monster comedies *Monsters, Marriage and Murder in Manchvegas* (2009) and *Don't Let the Riverbeast Get You!* (2013). Now, having finally grown an audience, these relentlessly productive DIY filmmakers as an aesthetic are throwing their viewers a curveball with three new features that move sharply away from their previous work, even as they build on ideas that have been developed over the course of a long filmography. The best sales pitch I can give for Farley/Roxburgh's recent run of *Heard She Got Married* (2021), *Metal Detector Maniac* (2021), and *Magic Spot* is to describe them as funny, New England-based spiritual cousins of Hong Sangsoo.

But first, a little more on the filmmakers themselves. Roxburgh (who is typically credited as director) and Farley (the producer, lead actor, and general frontman) met at Providence College in Rhode Island in the late '90s, where their long collaboration began. Neither of them makes a living from filmmaking: Roxburgh has worked as a visual effects artist, while Farley is a musician, notable for having written over 23,000 songs. Over a decade ago, Farley realized that the meagre streaming royalties from one song, multiplied by thousands of songs, could add up to a living wage, and so he got to work pumping out dozens of songs per day. A serious musician when time allows, Farley makes his bread and butter from novelty songs about popular search-engine terms: animals, foods, celebrity names, birthdays, and bodily functions (his "The Poop Song," written and performed under the pseudonym The Toilet Bowl Cleaners, is a big hit with the kindergarten set, with over 4.8 million streams). His absurdly prolific discography has earned him slightly irreverent profiles in venues like *Wired* and *The Wall Street Journal*, a 2016 appearance on *The Tonight Show*, and social media shout-outs from the likes of Billie Eilish and Kris Jenner, as well as the rare privilege of being able to live off his creativity.

From 2000 to 2017, Farley worked around the edges of a day job at a group home for teenagers in Manchester, New Hampshire, a leafy, idyllic-looking town not unlike the nameless one that Calvin & Hobbes used to ride their wagon through, and the backdrop of Farley and Roxburgh's pre-2016 films. While the recent films are largely shot around Farley's current home of Danvers, Massachusetts, several scenes still feature Manchester, where many of the Farley/Roxburgh repertory company still live. Perhaps the most beloved of these is Kevin McGee, Farley's former boss, whose hulking physique and terse, deadpan performance style make him ideal for villains and authority figures. Other recurring players include Farley's wife, Elizabeth M. Peterson; his father, Jim Farley; his uncle Jim McHugh; Farley and Roxburgh's college friend Tom Scalzo; and Scalzo's sister Sharon.

Like John Waters, Farley/Roxburgh have a rich vocabulary and enjoy hearing their non-actor friends recite reams of loquacious di-

ologue in a slightly stilted manner (sample line: "My last instructor was an indecorous deviant who tried to see me and my friends dis-robing"). As with Andy Warhol or Tim & Eric, their use of non-actors in a movie-star capacity carries a trace of media satire. Unlike those artists, however, Farley/Roxburgh code their actors as ordinary, everyday people rather than eccentric showbiz strivers. Importantly, these performers are drawn from the filmmakers' own social circles, thus raising fewer fraught questions about power dynamics and exploitation. At their best, the Farley/Roxburgh movies feel like a neighbourhood barbecue where everyone decided to put on a show. If one of the key ideas in Warhol's cinema was, "What if *this* person starred in a movie?" then Farley/Roxburgh's idea is closer to, "Movies are for everyone."

The filmmakers have described their work as "backyard movies" of the sort that children make with their parents' camcorders. They also draw inspiration from regional horror auteurs of the '70s and '80s, like Bill Rebane (*The Giant Spider Invasion*, 1975) and Don Dohler (*Nightbeast*, 1982), whose low-budget, visibly handmade work often had more sizzle than steak. Like so many of its inspirations, *Don't Let the Riverbeast Get You!* shows its title monster only occasionally, and is interested much more in the lives and loves of its small-town heroes. Because Farley/Roxburgh's run of genre comedies, from *Freaky Farley* to *Slingshot Cops*, play consciously with "bad" aesthetics, I want to take a moment to emphasize that their films are *not* bad-on-purpose larks like, say, *The Lost Skeleton of Cadavra* (2001), but are, in fact, very good movies. The filmmakers are technically capable (two of their films were shot on 35mm, at a time when the technology was nearing obsolescence), possess an ear for funny and unusual dialogue, and consistently develop textured cinematic universes full of details that reward repeat viewings.

Take *Riverbeast*, for example, which follows the travails of Neil Stuart (Farley), famed as the greatest tutor that the sleepy borough of Rivertown, U.S.A. has ever known. The film begins as Neil, who left town in disgrace many years previously after raising a ruckus over an alleged riverbeast sighting, returns to resume his career, win back his ex-fiancée Emmaline, and hopefully prove once and for all that the creature is real. Other characters in the film's busy diegesis include Sparky Watts, muckraking reporter for the *Rivertown U.S.A. Daily Standard*; Frank Stone, "former professional athlete," who is seen playing a different sport every time he is onscreen; and Ito Hootkins, a big-game hunter and reputed ladies' man. Because the Farley/Roxburgh players are so straight-faced and sincere, and because the writing is so sharp and sense of place so strong, there is always a moment about two-thirds of the way through one of these genre parodies when I realize that I'm not just laughing—I actually *care* about these characters.

Farley/Roxburgh's embrace of the horror-comedy template was at least partly pragmatic, as they hoped that the genre hook would make for an easy sell to first-time viewers and potential distributors. Farley made the relationship between art and commerce central to *Local Legends*, his only movie to date without Roxburgh, but one that introduced ideas that have developed in the duo's recent work. Farley here stars as "Matt Farley," a New England-based songwriter who struggles to balance his creative pursuits with a day job at an old-age care facility (an inverse of his real-life job group-home job,



and one of several touches that slightly complicates a direct autobiographical reading of the film). The Farley of *Local Legends* is working to make songwriting his career, and struggling with the cold reality that his hacky novelty songs far outgross his more personal music. In several scenes, Farley splits himself into duelling artist and businessman personae for a series of business meetings. (“Does the world really need a song about gluten?” asks Artist Farley; Businessman Farley replies, “I searched for ‘gluten’ on iTunes, I searched for ‘gluten’ on Spotify—almost nothing came up. When people search ‘gluten’ they’re gonna find this song you’re gonna make about gluten and they’re gonna love it!”)

The story is structured around Farley’s preparation for a concert gig, which, as the film goes on, is downgraded from a 1,500-seat auditorium to a suburban basement with an audience of seven. Crucially, however, this unimpressive-seeming event turns out to be rousing fun for all who attend. The Matt Farley of *Local Legends* is a sort-of digital-age Llewyn Davis, ambiguously talented and destined to never fully “make it” in his desired field. Unlike Llewyn, though, Farley never loses a simmering hope that recognition will come, even as he also comes to accept creativity as its own reward.

In a section of *Local Legends* dedicated to his filmmaking, Farley estimates that each of his movies with Roxburgh costs the price of a used car, but adds, “I’d rather have a bunch of movies than a bunch of used cars.” But 2013 was a different time in their lives, and the battle doesn’t get easier in middle age. Now in their forties, with families and mortgages, the filmmakers and many of their collaborators can no longer spend their savings or sacrifice their weekends quite as easily. The logistics of making *Slingshot Cops*—specifically its centrepiece party scene, which brought together almost the entire repertory company—was a breaking point in the filmmakers’ old working method. For five years thereafter, there were no new feature-length Farley/Roxburgh films.

Of course, persisting in making movies for no audience also takes its toll. This is why a key moment in Farley/Roxburgh’s creative resurgence came in the pandemic summer of 2020, when Brooklyn’s Spectacle Theater and Toronto’s Laserblast Film Society collaborated on an online retrospective via Twitch. Here, Farley and Roxburgh were able to revisit their early work while directly interacting with their growing fanbase, which they found was comprised more of omnivorous cinephiles than strict genre buffs. On his *Motern Media Information Podcast*, Farley announced his and Roxburgh’s intention to make ten movies in five years; since 2021, they have already produced self-distributed three films (a fourth, *Boston Johnny*, is promised for later this year). The results are an impressive step forward for the filmmakers, harnessing the offbeat acting, dialogue, and storytelling style of their earlier movies to create a mood that can be odd and unsettling in addition to being funny.

As with the work of Hong Sangsoo, Farley/Roxburgh’s filmography has become like a long conversation in which themes develop over time. *Heard She Got Married*, which functions as something of a downbeat counterpoint to *Local Legends*, stars Farley as Mitch Owens, a singer-songwriter who achieved some middling success as a touring musician, but is now returning to his hometown with a vague whiff of unfulfilled potential. The friends with whom he once dreamed of conquering the music industry have now receded into quiet domesticity, and relations are especially strained with Tom Scalzo (Phil Kelhofner), the onetime Garfunkel to his Simon. As noted above, Tom Scalzo happens to be the name of Farley’s real-life friend, collaborator, and frequent co-star, who appeared in *Local Legends* as himself, still jamming in the basement; here, the two men have been through a bitter falling-out that led Kelhofner’s “Tom Scalzo” to abandon music and marry Mitch’s onetime girlfriend, Tara Edwards (Elizabeth Peterson). “He didn’t believe in the music the way that I did,” says Mitch. “To him it was just like a fun

thing to do on the weekends. To me, it was everything.” But everywhere he goes, Mitch is reminded that assimilating into the adult world often means giving up on our dreams.

Into Mitch’s life enters Van Hickman (Chris Peterson), an amateur bassist eager to collaborate on new music. Their work together seems poised to spark a creative rebirth, until Mitch learns that Van Hickman has been snooping on people from Mitch’s past. If Van Hickman represents the future, then why is he dredging up these people? By the end of the film, it is uncertain if Van Hickman existed at all. Perhaps he is the part of Mitch that hangs on to the dreams he had in college; maybe it’s time for Mitch to reckon with the reality that those dreams can never be fulfilled—or at least fulfilled in the same way.

In contrast to its predecessor, *Metal Detector Maniac* is a straight comedy that stars Farley and Tom Scalzo (the real one this time) as versions of themselves, in a scenario in which their real-life college-era band Moes Haven—which split up due to its lack of popularity—has paved the way for its former members to find success as esteemed college music professors. The story begins with the duo on a research sabbatical, where they quickly become obsessed by a man with a metal detector at their local park. They agree he seems creepy, and decide to alert the authorities. When the cops refuse to investigate, they take matters into their own hands, launching an all-consuming investigation into the stranger. Does this sound like a funny premise to you? No? Well, Farley/Roxburgh insist that it is, and single-mindedly continue down the shaggy-dog path until you start laughing helplessly.

The film, which ultimately reaches a conclusion that can only be compared to *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), climaxes with Farley and Scalzo presenting the fruits of their “research”: a long, improvised rock album in which they sing every detail of their investigation. Funny as it is, the film’s climactic scene also articulates something of Farley/Roxburgh’s artistic philosophy, which places more

value on the act of creation than the end result, and allows for a free interplay between art and life. In his self-published 2021 book *The Motern Method*, Farley describes a typical college songwriting session with Scalzo: “Tom and I would prepare by making a huge list of song ideas. There were no rules. The topics could be deep and philosophical or silly and nonsensical. Then we’d race through the list in a weekend, just making up a new song for each topic, one after another.” The results: “Some of the songs would be awful. Some of them would be weird. A few were simply brilliant. We eventually learned that this method worked for us.”

All of Farley/Roxburgh’s ideas coalesce in the surprisingly moving time-travel movie *Magic Spot*. The setting is another fictional New England town; the inciting incident is the discovery of a “magic spot” in the woods that enables time travel, but, if used incorrectly, will consign users to an otherworldly realm called “the Beyond”; and the characters are a variety of local creatives of varying levels of fame, all of them longing, to one degree or another, to live in another time. The complicated plot is dense with sci-fi jargon (the main source of humour is hearing the actors spout their tangled dialogue so nonchalantly, which, once again, is very funny), but it ultimately leads to a simple, resonant point about the importance of living in the present. This point encompasses the act of creation, with Farley/Roxburgh celebrating art and artmaking as something for the moment rather than for posterity. Life becomes complicated, circumstances change, but the ability to make art is always with us.

Most movies we see are by people who have “made it.” There are many reasons to love the films of Matt Farley and Charlie Roxburgh, and chief among them is how they articulate both the struggle and the necessity of remaining creative even when any hope of “making it” falls away. The “art for art’s sake” ethos doesn’t get easier when you get older, but to stop creating is to die. On his podcast, Farley promises he will slow down his filmmaking if he’s still not breaking even in five years. We’ll see about that.



Metal Detector Maniac