

Matt Smith: Movie-house Maverick



Independent theater owner Matt Smith has been doing things his way since he was a teen

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DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

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"I want to be a white trash millionaire." - Black Stone Cherry

Matt Smith is an enigma. He's endearing but frustrating - cooperative, but only to a point. He owns his successes, preaches responsibility and skirts blame if, as in the case of Market Street Cinema, a business sours. ("I simply rented that venue. It wasn't my venue, so I had very little control," Smith says.)

As successes go, he has had more than many people realize. He programs movies for seven theaters and owns four of them. He lives in a 10,000-square-foot house in North Little Rock, hires a petting zoo for parties, vacations in the tropics, drag-races European sports cars, and decks his walls with candy-colored guitars (all gifts, he says) signed by virtually every notable metal or hard rock band of the past three decades.

Strangers might assume that Smith, 43, is in a band. He's told he resembles Nikki Sixx from Motley Crue and Jesse James Dupree from Jackal. He's usually clad in black and has long black hair that he's forever fumbling with when forced to sit still because, without a movie screen in front of him, Smith is hyperactive.

In some ways, he's more *Magnolia* Tom Cruise than Gene Simmons Family Jewels. He chugs Muscle Milk, lifts weights, has a personal trainer and jogs to motivational speakers (Zig Ziglar, Anthony Robbins, Les Brown and the ilk). In his Cadillac Escalade, he blasts rock music. Sometimes he listens to Black Stone Cherry and Hinder. He claims the members of these bands as friends. Occasionally, their tour buses park in front of his mansion, and they lounge in his pool, work out in his gym or watch movies in his home theater with a dozen leather recliners, stadium seating and Dolby picture and sound.

"My heart's like an open book." - Motley Crue

The largest room in the Smith house ("the great room," his Realtor called it) belongs, de-facto, to the toddler. Danielle Rae (named for Matt Smith's

only brother, who died at age 18) points to Smith and stakes her claim. "Dad-dee, Dad-dee, Dad-dee," she chants.

For toys, the room rivals FAO Schwarz. Blown-up baby photos dot the walls and a singalong plays on TV. Only the furniture - leather, metal and gigantic, including a sofa that splays about 20 feet - hints at what this room used to be. "You think you know, right? And people will try to tell you how it's going to be, and you'll get advice, right? You just don't know, man," Smith says, tearing up. "When that kid shows up? Jack, it is over. Your whole life changes ... In the past I'm like, man, can't wait to hang out backstage with KISS, or whatever. Now I'm going to Sesame Street Live, and I'm fired up about it."

"Been dazed and confused for so long, it's not true." - Led Zeppelin

Smith was born in Brooklyn under circumstances he keeps vague. He may or may not have graduated from an Arkansas high school. "Don't want to get into high school. Miserable all the time," he says.

He attended a handful of colleges before finally earning a business degree from Harding University in Searcy. He "kind of went to school depending on where [he] was working and what [he] was doing with movie theaters."

Smith has worked with movies since he was 14. He got his start in Arkansas' Rand chain, before working in theaters in Michigan, Louisiana and Texas. He opened his first theater, the long-shuttered Searcy Cinema, in college. He was "the janitor, the manager, the projectionist...mowed the yard, ran the film, popped the popcorn, did everything."

When things got busy, his friends helped out. He paid them in movies and concessions. These were the pre-Ferrari 458 Italia days. These were the days he walked from home to school to work, before buying a \$200 Buick Skylark that was as much rust as auto body. He caught oil in a pan and dumped it back into the engine before cranking it up.

"You've got great expectations, then you feel these eyes from the stage." -
KISS

"People only know me for Market Street. But really, that was the only business I had that wasn't a home run," Smith says.

Smith completed his master's in finance at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's business school and met his wife, Mandi Smith, there. Now she handles accounting for his businesses. Smith expanded the reincarnated Searcy Cinema from five to eight screens and had side gigs: booking movies at other theaters, selling flashy car accessories and promoting bands.

In 2002, he reopened Market Street Cinema, a theater that had been around from the mid-'80s until closing in November 2001. It was a regular first-run theater, then a second-run joint, before Smith transformed it into an art-house venue. "For as long as I can remember, I was hunting a different film," Smith says. "I'm going to see X-Men, I'm going to see the new Transformers, but those guys can't fool me ... I know the A and B plot for those movies."

The day Smith re-opened Market Street, it showed *Mulholland Drive*, *Iris*, *Waking Life*, *Kandahar* and *No Man's Land*. Radio talk show host Dave Elswick ran a classic movie series there. One year, he showed only films from 1939 (*The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind* among them). Another year, the series showed nothing but '80s films. There was another monthly series that showcased films with local connections.

"We did the Rocky Horror Picture Show ... the 48-Hour Film Festival ... the Reel Civil Rights festival ... there was a Black independent film festival. Market Street was the original venue for all that," Smith says. "I was shocked when they made the announcement saying, 'We're going to start a Little Rock Film Festival because these movies don't play in Little Rock.'"

... Market Street had been playing foreign, independent and documentary films, 365 days a year for seven years."

Levi Agee, programmer for the Little Rock Film Festival, calls Market Street "a historical landmark for the film community here. There really weren't any other options."

According to crowdsourced review site Yelp. com, patrons appreciated Market Street's programming but were annoyed by the bad sound system, blurry picture, temperature problems and cranky staff. Smith hounded people to buy concessions, sometimes from the front of the theater before a movie.

Ron Walter worked for Market Street in 2012. He remembers a winter when the heat didn't work, and how employees were instructed to address complaints by saying they would "turn the heat up," or "it's being repaired."

"It was never going to get fixed," Walter says. "Matt said the theater didn't make enough money."

Smith counts Market Street's first five years as good, the second five as mediocre, and the final handful as "a complete wash."

"It's hard to sit there and say, 'All day long two people watched this movie,' [and yet] I need to drop 100-grand in this room to get a better picture and sound," he says. That's what it costs per screen, to transform 35mm projection, which is cumbersome (one movie requires a mile of film) and imprecise (betraying dust, scratches and bad splices), to foolproof digital automation.

In his newest venture, reopening the Riverdale 10 Cinema, Smith has about \$1 million tied up in picture and sound. He's also replaced carpet, renovated restrooms and repaired the air conditioner. "If you want to watch

a movie like *21 Jump Street*, we hope you decide to come here instead of driving past us to go somewhere else. ... And if the independent, foreign, art, documentary fans follow us, then we'll be fine. But we need both."

He plans to continue Elswick's classics and host other events - maybe comedians and bands - while filling the 10 screens with Hollywood and independent fare. "If the problem at Market Street was the building and the sound and the projectors, then we've solved that ... if the problem was, there's not enough people in the Pulaski County area to make this viable, then I'm in trouble," Smith says.

"The prosecution rests." - REO Speedwagon

Smith was able to float Market Street for a decade because, in addition to Searcy Cinema 8, he owns theaters in Cabot and Hot Springs. He worries that video-on-demand is supplanting second-run theaters (something he may attempt at the now shuttered Market Street) and that the plethora of new distribution channels dilutes the quality of independent film—"There's more out there to confuse the viewing audience ... a lot of mush now that you wouldn't have had years ago."

Of course, this is just Smith's opinion. Smith is a man of many opinions. For instance, "You've got to have goals. That stuff's important."

And: "My dad was a cop. My mom was a nurse, just good, standard, blue-collar, hardworking people... I'll race motorcycles, race cars, bungee jump, sky dive, but you're not going to catch me on a golf course."

And: "Go to school every day till you're 30 and work every day till you're 30. Hey, it don't matter if you work the first 12 hours or the second 12 hours, just get you in a half a day. If you do that, you can be or do whatever you want."

On slasher films and dark documentaries: "If it doesn't make you feel good, if it's not an adrenaline rush, I'm not messing with it. There's enough death, destruction, disease, horror stuff in the newspaper."

On his Ferrari: "I'm not going to drive that car to a restaurant, get out of that car and sit down, so you can associate me with that car."

Jeff Twitty, who has known Smith since they worked together in the Rand chain, says the businessman has matured since the days "he enjoyed his cars and girlfriends, rock concerts." Now, "he spends his free time with his family. I think having a little girl helped ground him."

"So this is the life they talked about." - Hinder

At Riverdale, under Smith's watch, the picture is crisp and the staff seems friendly - aggressively so. One weekday morning, a group of two young women and half a dozen children trickled out of a theater, and Smith said, "Hey guys, how was it? That was our first morning cartoon. Thanks for joining us for our maiden voyage! Did everybody get their Pokemon cards?"

The women smiled at him, uttered niceties, like "We did" and "Thanks."

Smith persists. "I love that little baby. Mine's 19 months old. My little girl's 19 months old," he called to their retreating backs.

According to Harding professor Randy McLeod, Smith has always been into customer service. "I remember being aware of Matt long before he became aware of me," he says.

Smith was working at a Searcy grocery store when the woman in line ahead of McLeod wrote a check for what he called "the biggest basket of groceries I've ever seen." There was a problem with the check, and Smith, roughly 19, materialized from somewhere to handle it.

"I saw him talk to that lady, explain to her why they couldn't let her have the groceries," McLeod says. "By the time he got finished, she understood, had a smile on her face, was not upset ... I thought, that's quite a job for somebody as young as he was."

Once he became Smith's college adviser, McLeod realized something else about the former grocery store worker: "I'm not sure I've ever met anyone as goal-oriented as him."