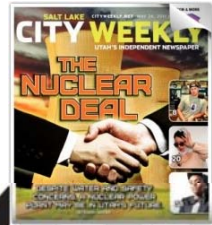


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GAVIN'S UNDERGROUND

# Chris Richard Hanson

by [Gavin Sheehan](#)



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POSTED // 2011-05-31 -CGI may be the dominant source for special effects in multi-million dollar films these days, but for films on a budget or directors looking for something more lifelike, there's still nothing better than physical special effects. For years it's been one of the cornerstones to filmmaking and one of the factors behind the term "movie magic." The art of making the unreal believable and inspiring many to seek a career in various creative fields.



Chris Hanson has been doing special effects and make-up work for various productions since the mid-'90s, having a hand in several prominent sci-fi and fantasy films such as "Men In Black", "Underworld" and "Hellboy". The Utah native packed up his gear just out of high school to learn the craft from some of the best in Hollywood, only to move back and set up shop at Poor Yorick Studios in South Salt Lake. He continues to create various creatures and designs for films, while also lending his skills to some of the haunted attractions in Utah to bring out an extra scream or two. I got a chance to chat with Chris about his career, as well as thoughts on the industry and how it has changed.

[Chris Richard Hanson](#)



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Gavin: Hey Chris, first thing, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Chris: I just turned 43! I've been a Special Effects make-up artist for just shy of twenty years. I'm originally from Utah, I graduated from Murray High, and I love what I do.

Gavin: What first got you interested in film, and more specifically makeup and special effects?

Chris: My story is similar to people my age who do this effects 'stuff' - "Star Wars" was released when I was 10, and the whole world changed. Aliens that move their impossibly shaped heads, talking robots, roaring Wookies and flying spaceships? How could this be? I talked about it constantly and made monsters out of paper bags and mashed potatoes until my parents bought me a Super-8 movie camera, the kind you put FILM into, kids, and it all grew from there. My Mother let me raid her make-up bag and I would become a scarred up bum or a green lizard, whatever colors I could find. My father built Radio Control airplanes as a profession, so I stole his stuff and made spaceships. Its never stopped from there.



Gavin: You said that you took no formal college or classes on the craft and simply headed for Hollywood right out of high school. What made you decide to go for it like that?

Chris: I was honestly pretty advanced, I had sculpted, molded and cast foam latex masks by age 13 by reading some flimsy books on how its done, and had actually made radio controlled masks with moving eyes right out of High school. In fact, Trent Harris, a local filmmaker, made a film here called "Plan 10 from Outer Space". I heard it was in production, and went to visit him. He said ' You do monsters, there's no monsters in my movie. It's a comedy about Mormons from outer space. But... Fuck it... lets put a monster in it!' I ran home and drew a picture of a giant 'Mormon Cricket' holding onto a passed out woman wearing a bonnet. When I showed it to him, he said 'Nah, that's not what I want, I want a Bee Hive man, with one eye! Like the images on the Salt Lake Temple!" So, I asked for some money, he gave me two hundred bucks, I ran home and made a BeeHive mask with a radio controlled eye, with Bee gloves and Bee wings. Like, in three days or some stupid time frame. And it cost me \$400 in materials! So, I paid to work on that film! When the film premiered in Salt Lake, I had an invite, but my parents were turned away at the door, since they didn't have enough seats. The BeeHive guy was the icon on every advertisement and article about the movie. Pictures of it everywhere. I sat in the back of the theatre alone, and when the films credits rolled, I received no credit. I never have received any acknowledgment ever on that film! Recently I was at Redman Movies, the local supplier of movie equipment for all the features shot here, and it turns out the owner played the beehive guy!! The mask sits in his office, and he didn't remember me. That's my first film, and what made me want to move to Hollywood. Should've read the writing on the wall...



Gavin: How did you officially first break into the business with no experience?

Chris: I did have some experience in cheesy local movies, plus I worked for two years at a medical prosthetics lab making limbs out of fiberglass; they just needed a guy to spread the toxic stuff in molds for 6 bucks an hour, but I discovered silicone rubber material there, and made molds at night of my hands and developed a way to make realistic limbs just by screwing around. I sent all those pictures to FX shops in Hollywood, and just drove there one rainy day with my friend Ryan Peterson, an amazing sculptor who had been hired to work at a big FX studio. I lucked out and got a job making plaster molds on 'The Santa Clause' three weeks later. It only lasted like three weeks, and on my birthday, I was abruptly laid off, the show was over. The guy who laid me off laughed and said 'Happy Birthday! Welcome to Hollywood!!' again, I should've learned...

Gavin: What was it like for you learning the skills and essentially starting from scratch with people who had been doing this kind of work for years?

Chris: Not to be snotty, but, I knew a lot more than many people who move there and were already working in lower rung positions at the FX studios. I had practiced a lot my whole childhood, so, a had a chip on my shoulder I suppose, because many basic tasks were old news to me, but, nothing in this world beats repetition, and I had to jump in and prove myself. It took about a year before I was on set applying prosthetics to actors on big films. But luck is a huge factor, and I met many kind people who helped me, like Michael Burnett who brought me on David Lynch's "Lost Highway" and other shows. There are good people who recognize talent, and when they can get it for a good price! Without that, I would've gone nowhere. I'm very grateful.



Gavin: What was the experience like working for The Jim Henson Company, and learning skills from a production outfit with such a rich history for visual effects?

Chris: Weird, very surreal at first. I came home from Michael Burnett, who I had just been laid off from after 18 months of employment, and in one day my old tape deck answering machine was filled, with all these messages from the big guys, including the Hensons! The message said "were doing 'George of the Jungle', the movie, and need you to come in and sculpt Gorilla heads" I was stunned. When I went in the next day with my sculpting kit, The place had no Muppets, no "Dark Crystal" creatures or "Labrynth" stuff, they kept saying "oh that's all over in England, buddy!" And word came down that the 15 gorillas had been cut down to three, so I sculpted gorilla feet and a giant snake. There was a guy there named Jim Ensign, I believe, and it sounded so much like Jim Henson when he paged him on the speaker my first day. I panicked! "He's alive!? How??" But, like everything in that town, it was just a wishful thought with a goofy truth behind it... But seriously, it was a beautiful shop and I felt like I had arrived. My family even knew the Henson name, so now I seemed legit! Now if only Rick Baker would hire me my life would be complete!

Gavin: You said you also learned a lot from Rick Baker, who's own resume is beyond impressive with everything he's done. When did you first meet him and how did you get the opportunity to learn from him?

Chris: To clarify, I worked for Rick Baker, at his very elaborate and gigantic shop, so I spent very little time next to Rick, he's been a figure head at his studio for years, and sculpts in his office when he has time. I learned so much from every artist there, and every shop I ever worked at. My friend Bart Mixon is a supervisor for Rick, and he brought me on "Men in Black", both of them. Rick would bring his lunch over to Bart's shop on the first film, where we built several aliens including one on Vern Troyer, aka Mini Me, and Rick would sit and tell funny "American Werewolf" stories and eat everyone's fries. I've never formed any real friendship with Rick, but he recognized me when I came back for "MIB 2" and "Hellboy". When people mention that talented guy from Utah that worked for him, he goes " Oh... Ryan Peterson? "





Gavin: What was the first big film you worked on, and what was it like for you seeing your work on a successful movie?

Chris: Hmmmm, I worked in some background facet on big films right away, but it wasn't until David Lynch's "Lost Highway" that I saw make-ups I had sculpted and applied on the big screen. It was bizarre. When I went to the premier I sat next to Marylyn Manson and his Mom. Very weird.

Gavin: You've had a hand in a number of sci-fi films. "Men In Black", "X-Files", "Galaxy Quest", "Underworld", "Hellboy", I could go on. How has it been for you taking part in, and leaving your mark, on films with such distinct looks and artistic emphasis?

Chris: Its been a wonderful education in how hard one can work at what becomes a normal day job after a while, yet becomes a very heavily talked about movie with people for years afterward. It puts the whole focus of goals for young kids and adults who love movies into a new realm, where people just believe in things in a way that's never really promoted to them, but they've projected their own desires into where its beyond "Wow, that was a cool movie, let's go get a pizza." I mean people tattoo their bodies with images I helped create or watched come to life, and its just a creative business, not a sub culture to lose yourself into. I'm very lucky and very proud to be a part of whats deemed as "important" films, it helps me continue to make a living. But, I love cool sculptures, robotics, even terrible paper mache masks made by kids on Halloween. That's all I want to do and surround myself with and hopefully continue to make a living at. Being important doesn't matter to me anymore, I don't think it ever really did, but I didn't realize that until I got to have my part in it. I just want to enjoy what I've built and hear people say "wow, that is soooo COOL!" When they scream or clap at my work even in zero budget movies or haunted attractions here in town, I'm as happy as one can get.



Gavin: What's the process like for you when you're hired to a new film and create something new?

Chris: It usually starts with an e-mail, or phone call, and the film is much further along than it should be to be looking for an effects artist. I ask for a copy of the script, and I read through it to break down the most cost effective way to show some convincing effects. And usually I provide several versions of each effect in my breakdown. I type it up and e-mail it to the producers. Meetings in person happen shortly afterward and we continue to develop an idea of whats needed until a check is cut, and I start sculpting the creature or lifecast actors if they're available. The budget determines many things, along with the time I have to build it. Most of the time I'm left alone to just make sure it all looks good for filming once that day grows near. Often we don't see the final creation until the day before or the day we film it! That's low budget feature filmmaking here in Utah. I did the Bunny for "S. Darko" the sequel to "Donnie Darko" like that, and Dragons for SyFy channel's "Age of Dragons" and the Yeti for "Snowbeast" and so on with that approach.

Gavin: Is there a lot of trial and error on your part or do you tend to adapt from the first design and keep something from the original concept?

Chris: Absolutely there's trial and error, even with something I've done a million times, you have to line everything up to work in a slightly new way, and that means making a tongue wiggle when the creatures mouth opens based upon the space in that creatures mouth, and the fact your cordless drill died and its four in the morning, you just look around the shop and go... "what would MacGyver do?" It always comes together.



Gavin: What made you decide to come to Utah and set up your studio space here, rather than stay around Hollywood and close to the major studios?

Chris: Honestly, I came here to pursue a relationship and a life in a better, more familiar town than Los Angeles. I didn't want to grow old and die in a place like Hollywood. I made a great choice and I look back on Hollywood with many fun and strange memories. But, there's been so many good times here in Utah these last five years, with a dozen features under my belt as make-up effects supervisor, tons of short films, running the make-up rooms for Rocky Point Haunted House and now The Castle of Chaos. I love my weird career and my great family and friends!

Gavin: What made you decide to move into Poor Yorick Studios for the studio space, and how has it been for you keeping shop there?

Chris: Life moves in funny circles, my friends Ryan Peterson and Grant Fuhst both have studios here, and suggested I drop by. I eventually rented the big one at the front of the building, A-1 and I'm here, it seems 24-7, making monsters.





Gavin: With all the experience you have and work you've done, how is it for you now having people coming to you to learn the craft?

Chris: Flattering, I get to kickstart some amazing natural talent, and it gives me a chance to give some good advice to young people who sometimes have a naive impression of what this craft is all about and be honest about level of skill they're currently demonstrating. I just did this stuff impulsively, obsessively. I had no other choice, and made it really far with my skills before I even asked someone to hire me. These days I hear from a lot of kids who've not even tried sculpting a monkey head or a dinosaur figure, but they believe if someone just trusted them they'd pick it all up. Probably, but not very likely. If you wanna do this stuff, just do it until you reach the level I was at when I was 15, then come to me looking for work and technical advice. Or don't, and pass me by. So far I've only met and helped train less than half a dozen FX artists who now make masks and airbrush creatures on a professional level. But the questions are always appreciated, because many people choose something similar but not exactly what I do, like become an illustrator or digital designer or costume maker, etc.

Gavin: Moving onto the film industry itself, what are your thoughts on the explosion of comic book and sci-fi films over the past decade, and how those films have dominated the theaters?

Chris: Its cool, and it's a lot of work for everyone in the business. CGI gets the most of it, but there's still tons of sculpting and physical prop making, make-up etc. going on. I don't like a fair amount of the finished films, but what does that matter, tons of other people do. I'm not an astute comic book fan, so the movies don't offend my memories of the books, because I don't have any! Both "Iron Man" movies were great.



Gavin: What's your take on CGI and how its affected the kind of work you do?

Chris: There's a bitter romance with the CGI process, I'm not gonna lie. The artistic side of CGI is excellent, in its own right, I was blown away from the beginning, especially Jurassic Park. But the mindset it has caused in the industry has taken away from quality physical FX being made, and also its encouraged producers to finance really bad CGI as well. So, I'll defend the artistry of CGI any day of the week, but the mindset in the industry is very insecure during the pre-production stage and terrified of what may happen during principle photography, so the budget and schedule is favoring the post production schedule when every legitimate concern is effectively deferred to a later date when everyone else has moved on. And that's when con men and bottom feeders make bank schlepping out bad CGI for double the cost so the film can make its release date, and pocketing the difference. And people wonder why this keeps happening. If producers had the courage to finance great physical effects, sets, costumes, stunts etc. the film would cost the same and look more tangible. Bad CGI has no staying power, but bad rubber monsters always have an audience.

Gavin: Are you afraid this part of the industry will be phased out at some point, or will there always be a place for the hand-made designs?

Chris: Nothing physical will be phased out, I'm very happy to see that even more clearly these days. Kids 25 and younger grew up with excellent CGI and video games, but they respond incredibly well to live entertainment, and the rustic nature of things simply made by hand. Their opinions aren't based on nostalgia. Computer imagery is a singular process with an inherent "look" to it, and kids are tiring of that. Building things has a much wider pallet, so there's a broad field of things to be made that even the young, fast sell through market will enjoy for a long, long time.



Gavin: For anyone who wants to get into this kind of work and break into the business themselves, what kind of advice do you have for them?

Chris: Develop your skills beyond the compliments from loved ones, actually have an arguable skill that's evidenced in photos and physical examples. Take as long as it takes to do that, and never turn your back on working a good day job to pay for your

living expenses and materials. It can be done, and attending some bogus college for this may make your parents happy, but it wont give you competitive skills, I'll guarantee you that. Its your only and best option to practice hard to be good at this craft or anything else you want to do. Don't worry about Hollywood, its always there. Haunted Houses and short films give you a place to demonstrate your skills and hone them, though they may never finance them. When you can present your detailed masks and props to producers in hopes of being hired on their films, you're one step away from truly realizing what your dreams can do for you financially, its totally up to you to commit to that, or simply do it for fun because you love it. Anybody who tells you anything different is trying to sell you something. Building monsters and make-ups is so much fun you owe it to yourself to practice with basic clays and paints until you get really good at it. Don't worry about expensive silicone and fancy materials. There's always Halloween to show it all off.

Gavin: What can we expect to see from you over the rest of the year?

Chris: Last year I did several fun films that will be released this year, I did Danny Glover's make-up and baby dragon puppets for a film called "Age of Dragons" that will be on SyFy in July. I also did the Yeti for " Snowbeast" that I believe will be on SyFy this year .J.A. Steel shot a cool uber-low budget horror film call "Blood Fare", I made a skeleton demon named Charon, Plus I did a briefly seen but very cool Orc creature for a great comedy made by Brian Leffler called "Unicorn City " its making its way around festivals this year. Robert Hatch and Richard Losee shot an ambitious short called " A Tale of Redemption " where I did my first solo effort in strong character make-ups and disguises. That will be out this year as well.



Gavin: Is there anything you'd like to promote or plug?

Chris: Yes! Jonathan Martin, a talented up and coming filmmaker shot a wonderful Horror short called "An Evening With My Comatose Mother". It's a scary and comedic film filled with excellent production values and a cool story . I did some of my favorite work on this 'little' film, and I helped produce it. Please, Facebook the film, and pick up a copy when its ready for sale, it's a great Halloween treat!!

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