



# Aaron Martin

*Aaron Martin is a student at Brigham Young University majoring in pre-management. He works for both BYU Broadcasting and Mirror Films in a variety of capacities. Interviewed July 10, 2008. Web: [aaronmartin.org](http://aaronmartin.org)*

## How did you start working for Christian Vuissa?

I volunteered at the LDS Film Festival. We were watching his film at the film festival, and the film stopped. I ran upstairs to see what was wrong in the booth. That happened a couple times, and Christian saw me do that, just as a volunteer, making sure things worked out right, and he called me up about a month later and said, “Hey, would you be interested in a job with me?” That’s how it is in the film business—to get your foot in the door, you sometimes have to work for free.

## How did you get started with all this? Back at the beginning.

I was a bored teenager messing with his camera. And I started out on the computer with 3D animation—

the first thing I ever edited was this weird 3D animation of spaceships shooting each other and stuff blowing up.

Then I filmed a football game, the Emotion Bowl, and showed the video at our school talent show. The seminary teacher saw it and asked if I wanted to make a video for the dedication of the new seminary building. I made that video and it was really inspiring for me, because I felt strongly that video and film and media are so important for the Lord’s work. Not only did I want to do film, but I wanted to concentrate on the spiritual side of film. So within the span of my senior year, I decided I wanted to do film and wanted to make Church films, whether working for the Church or for an independent filmmaker.

## During those years, what did you do to develop your skills?

I developed them on my own. I’d sit down at the computer and just play with the footage. I spent a lot of time figuring programs out, teaching myself. I know a couple friends who are really good painters or



photographers, but they never do it. Just going out and doing it is how I developed it.

Having friends who loved making videos helped with that. And adults in my life—like the seminary teacher, and a computer teacher who also taught video—encouraged me. The encouragement, along with feedback and the excitement they brought to me, helped me develop my skills.

#### How did you make time for it?

Not having a girlfriend was really helpful. *[Laughs.]* It's ambition. I didn't look at it as just a hobby but as

something I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing. That sort of ambition and mindset made it easier to make time for it. We all have lots of time; it's just planning.

#### When did you decide to make films, when did it become "This is what I want to do"?

That high school desire to make Church films really solidified on my mission in Berlin, being around that spirit and influence that's so helpful to the spreading of the gospel. I saw lots of great institutional films, and I think there are ways to improve, and I feel I could help with that.

With deciding to make this your vocation and maybe even a calling, in a way, what kinds of opposition and discouragement have you run into?

In the film industry, ninety-nine percent drop out. One of the reasons is money—there's not a whole lot of money out there for independent filmmakers, and you have to be really good and have a lot of ambition to make it. People have to like you, you have to put together a good crew, find good actors, find a good script—all these things need to come together. It's hard. It's grueling and can be really rough. If you're in the middle of production, you'll be on set from seven in the morning till maybe 3 a.m. for three weeks, and you have no other life during production. You may be able to go to church on Sunday. It's pretty grueling with independent filmmaking because they're tight on budgets—it's just way too expensive to spread your production through a couple months. The intense nature of filmmaking is too hard for some to handle. It's a rude awakening sometimes for people.

#### How do you deal with the intensity?

You have to keep your hopes high, never forgetting that you can make it, that you can make a difference in people's lives. One key thing is how you deal with it. If people are impatient on set, it's not personal. You just have to roll with the punches. And when you screw up, take responsibility for it.

#### What do you consider the most valuable traits for filmmakers?

Ambition. Creativity is obvious. An open mind, open to advice and to correction. And from day one, act as if everything you do totally matters. Reliability, too. For those few weeks you're on production, you can't

do anything except dedicate your time to that. If you're not there for a few hours, it's almost like you're not even there anymore, because you've missed stuff. When I think of filmmakers I know—Christian, for example—it's ambition, knowing exactly what you want and being able to make decisions quickly.

**How do you keep the ambition alive? Because certainly there are days when it's hard.**

Some days it's really hard to keep that alive. But there are always things to look forward to when you get discouraged—it may be kind of stressful now in pre-production, but production is next, for example. And there are always opportunities to improve yourself. With filmmaking, it changes every day, so if something's hard now, you'll be doing something different later. It may also be hard, but it'll be different.

It's always good to have a life goal—what you want to be, what you're working for, never becoming complacent with where you're at, and knowing what your end goal is. It's never easy. If your ambitions are high, it's going to be hard no matter what.

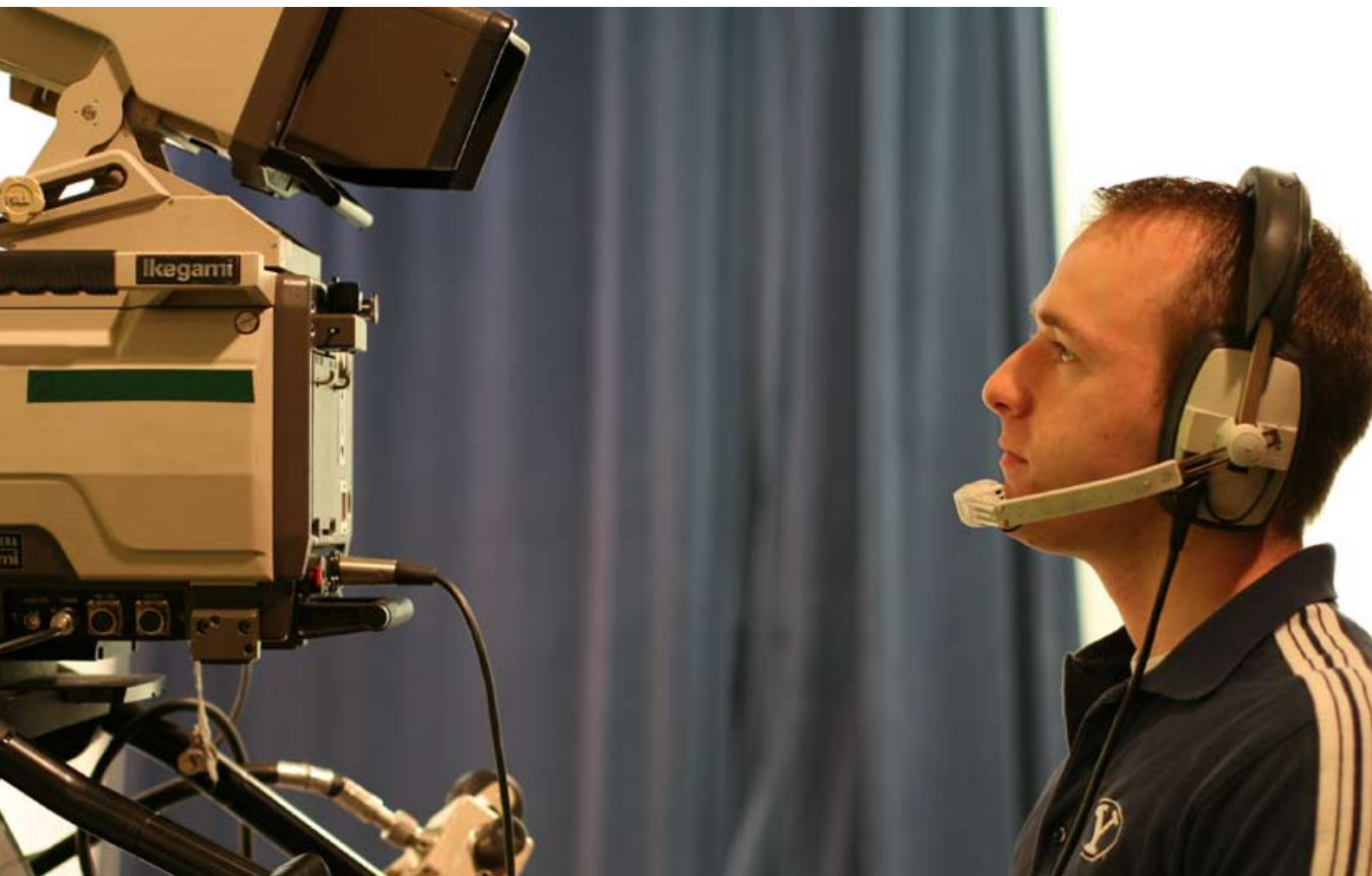
**What projects have you worked on?**

I worked on a couple student films as a production assistant. One was called *To My Future Self*; the other one was *Unhinged*, written and directed by Nick Stencil. Basically, anyone can be production assistants on those, even if you're not in the film major.

On one of them I did continuity, where you make sure that when you do retake or shoot a new scene, things are in the right place when the next scene starts. I also kept track of what was shot, why they didn't like a certain shot, why they did a retake. One of the nights we had to do so many takes that it took from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. And we had church the next morning. It was just ridiculous.

**What was it like filming *Berlin*? (*Berlin* was a BYU-produced musical.)**

*Berlin* was really awesome. It was a mixture of my two loves, film and TV. I was on camera for almost two weeks. The first week I was on this wide camera that was stuck up in the corner in this cramped crawl space.





I couldn't even move the camera that much. It got the establishing shots, not a whole lot of interesting shots. Then the second week I was on a different camera.

The first week we filmed it with an audience, so we had to try to make the cameras be invisible. We had to be back off the stage a lot. It was in the Motion Picture Studio on one of their sound stages, and the set was more stylistic—they had four different sets with a road going in between them, with the sets mainly made out of rusty metal bars. The audience couldn't really see everything, since it was designed to be filmed.

None of that first week was very usable, because we had to cover our cameras in black and you couldn't get a whole lot of shots without seeing the other cameras. The second week was more controlled. We went scene by scene, spending a few hours on a scene, more like a film but still really quick. It was shot on three cameras all at once, which was efficient.

The first week, we'd come in at 5 p.m. and have a crew dinner, discussing what happened the day before, even watching the footage. The director would say what could be improved on and what he wanted for that day. A couple hours later, after everything was ready to go—tapes were in, the director was ready, and the audience was there—we'd start rolling. The audience had plasma

screen TVs in front of them, so what we were doing live with the cameras, they were seeing live on their TVs.

The second week we'd be there from morning till evening and shoot a few different scenes each day. We'd shoot a scene and then the director would say, "We need to move the cameras," or "Let's do it again because I didn't like how the camera moved." We'd wait till we had one good take—just like a film.

The rush of the camera rolling, the fun people you're around, and the fun that you have doing the productions—that's what makes it the coolest college student job in the world.

**Tell us more about your work with Christian—what you do, what projects you're working on, etc.**

When I started out, he was thinking I would be an editing assistant, overseeing a little of the post-production of this last film, *Errand of Angels*. I told I could do finances, so I started doing finances. I told him I could do computer stuff, so I started doing all the computer stuff for him. And then he said, "Okay, maybe you can be production coordinator." So now I'm doing film calls. We're in pre-production for this next film, *Father in Israel*. It's a charming film about a Mormon family where

the dad's called to be a bishop. It has a bit more humor than *Errand of Angels*, and it addresses some cultural differences—for example, one of the daughters is marrying a convert, and the parents aren't members and so they can't go in the temple—but in a very positive way.

We just got done with casting. We probably auditioned 400 different people. We're going to be filming in Provo and in Salt Lake, and we want to have it ready by the LDS Film Festival in January, then release it to theaters by Father's Day.

### What's a typical day like with Christian?

Every day is different. Some things are consistent—like finances and administrative stuff—but you just go along the process of a film. You start out with nothing in pre-production, you have to organize the casting sessions, you're on the phone a lot, talking with people, organizing things. And organizing meetings for other things, like the LDS Film Festival.

We have a script competition at the festival where the three winning scripts will be produced. Christian picks the filmmakers he wants to produce the scripts, and they pick the scripts. Then the directors and the screenwriters collaborate to make the film work. That's the process they're in now, and their short films will be produced in the fall.

I only work like four hours a day, still part-time. Christian's a very driven person, and we like to discuss exactly what's going to be done every day. With the project we have right now, *Father in Israel*, we have all these things that need to be done, and you just have to figure out the next thing that needs to be done for each item. Once that's done, you cross it off. And when it's all done, you start producing another film.

It kind of reminds me of my mission a lot because he's Austrian, so he speaks German, and I'm working in an office doing accounting stuff. And random things like calling up renting vans.

### What are your long-term goals?

I've always wanted to become a producer. The director directs the actors during production, but the producer has more of a hand in the whole thing—picking the director, picking the script, picking the crew, even. He has more influence over the whole production, whereas the director has influence just when the camera's rolling.

So, my goal is to become a producer for the Church. I'm not sure exactly where the road leads for me right

now, but that's my life's goal, and I really, really want that.

I was entertained by films like *Singles Ward*, but I don't want to make films that make fun of ourselves. I want to make films about accepting what we are—what it is to be Mormon, not trying to be anything we're not. We're not trying to make films to make other people think we're cool or that they should join our church because we're awesome. But our way of life makes us happy. We also have difficulties, but I want to focus more on displaying the positive side of things in film, not too negative—not like *God's Army* where it's ridiculously negative in a lot of different ways, although I applaud Richard Dutcher for his courage to show things that have never been shown before on film. But I think better films are more accepting of what we are and focus more on the positive.

I can't really see myself being an independent filmmaker. I think it's because I know I want to make institutional Church films, not really blazing my own trail like Christian Vuissa is. He's redefining LDS cinema and blazing the trail for a lot of really good Mormon films. I remember on my mission, people would ask what I wanted to do, and I'd say I wanted to be a filmmaker. They'd ask what type of movies I wanted to make. I'd say church films, and they'd say, "What? Are you kidding me?" Sometimes I feel like I have to defend myself. People say, "You're not going to get big," and I say, "I know." People who become seminary teachers aren't in it for the money, and I'm not either. I want to provide well for my family, but I'm not in it to become a millionaire.

That's another thing about redefining LDS cinema—in just about everything, we can't really compete with Hollywood. They have better stories, better actors, better everything. But the one advantage we have is that we're Mormon, and they can't tell Mormon stories as good as we can. I think that's the problem with the Mormon market right now. We're losing our sights a little bit, trying to please more than just the Mormon audience, which is difficult. They spent around \$7–8 million on *The Other Side of Heaven* and it didn't make that much, whereas this new *Errand of Angels* film shot for under \$200,000 and looks just as good if not better than *The Other Side of Heaven*.

I don't know if I would have ever gotten into film if I was born maybe twenty years before. There are so many opportunities out there for aspiring filmmakers—almost everyone has access to the equipment—and if you have the ambition to go out and do it, to get people to notice you and not get discouraged, you can make it. Anyone can. ■