



AMERICA'S



**How an independent filmmaker
started out making a movie
about a Dallas Cowboys tailgate,
and discovered a whole
world in the parking lot.**



By Kim Fernandez

PARKING LOT

IT STARTED, AS MANY THINGS HAVE, WITH A BET. Aspiring filmmaker Jonny Mars was tending bar in Texas in 2006 and talking smack with a longtime customer about football. The trash-talk wasn't about the game itself, though. It was about the best way to watch.

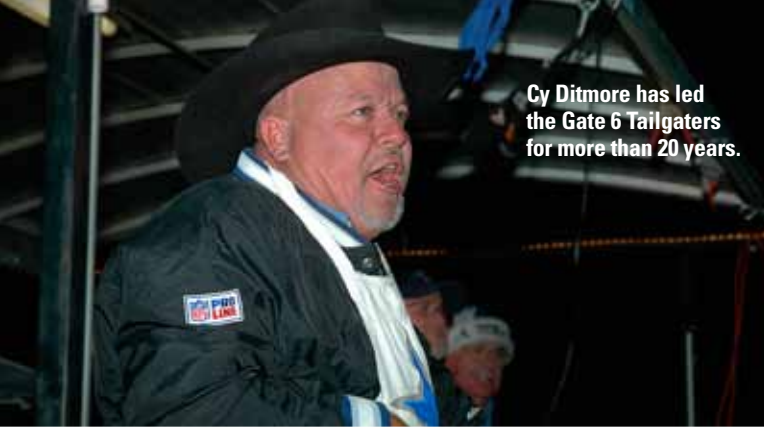
"I'd never been to a game at Texas Stadium," says Mars of the Dallas Cowboys' home. "I think football is easier to watch and follow on TV. I was tending bar and one of my regulars came in and told me I wasn't doing it right, and that I had to go to a game. But I also had to get there four hours early and tailgate."

They made a bet, bought tickets for a game, got there early, and wandered around the parking lot filled with revelers. After about two hours, Mars' buddy introduced him to the locally infamous Gate 6 Tailgaters, with their \$10,000 grilling trailer and their booming chants and cheers and the traditions they'd stuck to over some 18 years tailgating together—every home game, every season.

Mars felt something inside him stir. He knew the stadium was scheduled for demolition and that things would have to change for these guys. Just like that, because of a barroom bet, the next five years of his life were decided.

"I'd been to tailgates before," he says. "But I saw 30 or 40 years of traditions that had blossomed in that parking lot. My hair stood up on end. I had never seen anything like this, and I was blown away. The fact that it was going to go away was an inherent conflict. I decided right then to document the last season and a half."

The independent film, "America's Parking Lot," was conceived. Mars knew he had a great story to tell with the group of 30-plus tailgaters who'd not missed a game together since 1988. But he didn't foresee the turn that would earn critical acclaim and give a movie about a parking lot a solid audience at film festivals and a chance for widespread distribution.



Cy Ditmore has led the Gate 6 Tailgaters for more than 20 years.



Filmmaker Jonny Mars spent five years shooting "America's Parking Lot."

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Making a Movie

Cy Ditmore makes a living selling computer equipment and software to school districts. But his real life is out in the parking lot during football season. It's his mega trailer the Gate 6 Tailgaters feast from before every home game, and he's the guy who secured them the same spot for every game years ago. The film focuses on him and tailgating partner Stan "Tiger" Shults over four years in the parking lot.

The Cowboys know Ditmore and the media knows him; he's been sought out many times for interviews before big games. But he wasn't sure what to make of a film director when Mars first asked if he could make a movie about the tailgate.

"He was very nice about it," says Ditmore of Mars. "He came up and said this fascinated him, and that he made movies. I kind of went, 'Sure, whatever,' but the next game came and lo and behold, he showed up again."

This year marks—as he puts it—Ditmore's "24th year with the Cowboys." He wasn't so sure a movie about tailgating had a real market, but he and Shults agreed to be filmed and went about their business when Mars showed up with cameras. Things were going along swimmingly when a bomb dropped that changed just about everything.

In 2007, the Cowboys announced that season ticket holders would have to purchase "personal seat licenses" (PSLs), at a cost of up to \$150,000 on top of their actual ticket prices. On top of that, rumors started flying that there would be no tailgating allowed at the new stadium. For Ditmore, Shults, and their tight-knit crew, it was devastating.

"There's not a lot at stake in America that's life or death," says Mars. "Most of us don't have those worries

or those fears. That doesn't mean you can't experience loss. This decision was tragic to those guys. This was ripping apart a family."

"Everybody was upset," says Mars. "No one wanted to leave that parking lot. Some of those guys had been in the same spaces for 30 years."

"America's Parking Lot" takes an in-depth look at what those decisions meant for run-of-the-mill fans, breaking down the cost of football and what rising costs and prices have meant for working-class families who want to go to games. The film follows the Gate 6 Tailgaters through the last game at Texas Stadium and into the first two seasons at the new Cowboys Stadium, when Ditmore and Shults were assigned parking spaces at almost exact opposite ends of the huge campus (they, happily, were reunited with the rest of their regular crew in one lot after the first season thanks to Ditmore's intervention with team management). It also shows the neighborhood that forms in the hours before football games, out in the parking lot.

Tailgating

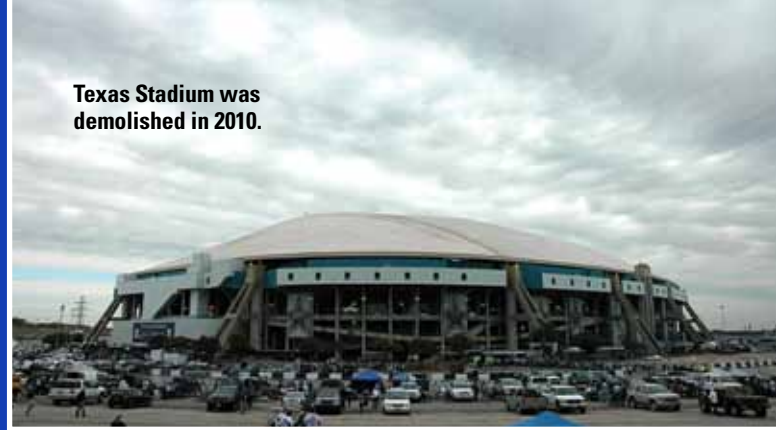
"People joke about it, but this is a family," says Ditmore. "One of the guys who hooked up with us after we moved to Cowboys Stadium has become one of my dearest friends—him and his wife and his beautiful family. They are moving today to Minnesota for a job. I was depressed all day yesterday, and I've delayed calling him today. We've all been through births and deaths and weddings, and people in our little neighborhood have passed away. It's a very close-knit group."

Mars says that's the part that made his hair stand up on end during his first visit in 2006, even before there was drama over PSLs and parking lot restrictions. The





Stan "Tiger" Shults leads a cheer on game day.



Texas Stadium was demolished in 2010.

community that had been born in that lot, he says, was the original story he planned to tell.

"People take painstaking care to re-create their living rooms in the middle of that parking lot," he says. "There's a lot of effort that goes into those La-Z-Boys and big-screen TVs I've seen refrigerators out there. The only thing I haven't seen is a washer and dryer."

He'd never put a lot of thought into the tailgating phenomenon before his first Cowboys game, but says now that it makes perfect sense.

"People want to be out there," he says. "The parking lot gives you a surface, but there are no walls. It's indicative of American culture—we spend too much time behind closed doors in front of computers. I know I never have the opportunity to get out as much as I want. Latching on to these people in parking lots is a way to connect with people. It's funny how connected we are electronically, but how disconnected we are physically. These parking lots, you can bring your family out there. There's so much room."

Ditmore agrees. "This started out in the very beginning with you opening your trunk and getting out a cooler full of beverages and maybe a bucket of chicken or something," he says. "The first couple of years after Jerry Jones bought the Cowboys, the city of Irving had a no-open-flame policy. You couldn't cook at the stadium, so you had to bring food you'd made the night before. It was very simple."

Ditmore was assigned to Gate 6 after his first two years of regular tailgating. Soon after, the rules changed.

"Jerry Jones went to the Irving City Council and said he wanted his fans to be able to tailgate. He got the ordinance changed. And we started meeting people a little here and four cars away, and it grew. Has it gotten out of hand? Probably, but I enjoy doing it. We have a faithful group of people."

Mars says he felt bonded to them over their dedication.

"These guys pour an incredible amount of time and money into tailgating. It will never give anything back to them in economic value. It's an endless black hole," he says.

That said, he understands. "They get emotional value out of it," he continues. "They get these relationships. I wanted to build a mirror for those guys and try to understand what tailgating meant to them. This was clearly a family, whether they were related to the people next to them or not."

At the Credits

By the end of filming in 2010, the Gate 6 Tailgaters had settled into their new home in Lot 4 of Cowboys Stadium. Ditmore says they now get about 25 guests who come to games just to tailgate and never enter the stadium.

"My trailer has satellite TV," he says. "They sit in the lot and watch the game and watch over our stuff. And then some of the guys you'd have to shoot to keep out of that stadium." All seems well, but that doesn't mean they don't miss their old home.

"I miss Texas Stadium," he says. "I don't miss the physical building so much, but I had 20 years of experience over there. I spent 20 years in that parking lot, and it's not just tailgating. It's my friends and my family there."

He still won't watch video of the stadium's implosion, turning his head away at film viewings and other events when it's on the screen. And he still leads the Gate 6 Tailgaters, who still go by that name.

"That's what we're known as," he says. "That's what the Cowboys know us as. The Dallas Cowboys didn't change their name to the Irving Cowboys when they moved. I put a note out to our email group thinking there would be pressure to change the name, and I didn't get one piece of positive feedback about that. We are who we are."

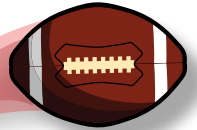
The film opened in Dallas to rave reviews earlier this year. Mars says he's signed on with a distributor to distribute it by video on demand in November and streaming after that. At press time, he was in talks with a major network to air it in early 2013, and planning an 11-city viewing tour in Texas.

"The film has exceeded my expectations in a lot of ways," he says. "I thought we'd be going into that parking lot and selling DVDs out of my trunk. I knew someone would want to see it."

And for his part, the independent filmmaker says his view of watching football has changed, but his opinion of that stadium parking lot has been turned upside down.

"It's funny how a space becomes a home without walls," he says. "It doesn't need walls. It doesn't need roofs. It's an open space. It's a parking lot. But these guys bring the walls and the roof with them. It's a foundation, and that's a metaphor for a parking lot. It's a solid surface that this group of people used as a foundation to create a home."

For more information, visit www.AmericasParkingLot.com.



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