

'Veronica Mars' campaign rattles movie industry

March 22 2013, by Jake Coyle

(AP)—After years of hope, stalled efforts and studio frustration, "Veronica Mars" creator Rob Thomas watched a long-held dream come to fruition in a sudden digital rush.

"There were a few minutes of nothing happening," he says. "Then in an hour, watching that ticker go was mesmerizing. I had an attention span of, like, four seconds because everything on my computer screen I wanted to look at at the same time. The Twitter feed was going crazy, the emails were going crazy and then watching that Kickstarter total go up."

Thomas last week launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a movie of his cult TV show, which was canceled after three seasons in 2007. It met its stated goal of raising \$2 million in less than 11 hours, meaning it would be greenlit to begin shooting this summer. It's surpassed \$3.7 million with more than two weeks still to go.

The resounding, immediate success of the crowd-funding campaign sent shockwaves through the movie business. Films had found much-needed financial support on Kickstarter before, but "Veronica Mars" is different. It's a studio project, owned by Warner Bros., which produced the show.

The money given by the fervent fans of "Veronica Mars," which starred Kristen Bell as a teenage private eye, will go not to a filmmaker operating on his own, but one with the distribution and marketing muscle

of a very large corporation—just one that hadn't previously been convinced to bankroll a "Veronica Mars" film.

Were donating fans spurring a goliath to action, or its unwitting pawns?

The wide majority of "Veronica Mars" fans couldn't care less. They will get the movie they craved, as well as the proud feeling of having played an essential role in the show's resurrection. Maryland fan Matt Clipp typified the eager contributors, writing: "I am MORE than happy to donate \$100 to this project. This movie has been a dream of mine ever since the series ended back in 2007. ... LET'S GET THIS THING MADE, 'VERONICA MARS' FANS!"

While the emotional side is surely the biggest motivation for most donors, they're also paying for tangible goods. Rewards range from an emailed copy of the script (\$10 contributions), all the way up to a speaking part in the film as a waiter who says, "Your check, sir," (a single \$10,000 donation). All money is refunded if for any reason the film doesn't get made.

"Most of the people who are pledging are getting in at the \$35 and \$50 range where they're getting a download of the movie, a T-shirt, a copy of the script at \$35, and all of that plus the DVD and the making-of documentary at the \$50 price point," says Thomas. "So I don't think anyone's being taken advantage of. I feel like the rewards are worth it."

Typically in film financing, any investor has the chance to earn his money back and potentially share in the profits. Slate claimed the "Veronica Mars" project sets a "terrible precedent."

Joss Whedon, whose devoted fanboy following is similar, if larger, than Thomas', said that he reacted in "unfettered joy" at the "Veronica Mars" Kickstarter campaign. But Whedon, who realizes he'll now be hounded

to follow suit with another movie of his canceled cult TV series "Firefly," acknowledged some trepidation about the financial arrangement for fans.

"I understand that it feels not as pure, and that the presence of a studio makes it disingenuous somehow," Whedon told BuzzFeed. "But people clearly understood what was happening and just wanted to see more of the thing they love. To give them that opportunity doesn't feel wrong. If it was a truly wrong move, I don't think it would have worked."

Thomas says he's been in daily contact with Warner Bros., which approved the plan in advance. The studio hasn't sought to flaunt its involvement. Executives for its digital wing, which is planning a limited theatrical release followed by video-on-demand early next year, declined to comment.

Kickstarter co-founder Yancey Strickler, too, declined to comment when asked through a spokesman about whether corporate involvement compromises Kickstarter's mission. Kickstarter takes a 5 percent fee from money raised for successful projects.

Since being founded in 2009, Kickstarter has raised more than \$500 million for some 35,000 creative projects. The "Veronica Mars" film is far and away its most lucrative movie project.

Earlier this year, the documentary short film "Inocente" became the first Kickstarter-backed Oscar-winner, having raised about \$52,000 on the platform. Kickstarter has drawn several big Hollywood names, including David Fincher (a producer of an animated project that raised more than \$440,000) and Charlie Kaufman (whose short animated film "Anomalisa" brought in \$406,000).

Some have derided Kickstarter's growing influence (Gawker lamented

its "online panhandling"), but few would argue it's been a positive force for getting dozens of films made in an industry landscape that can be brutal for independent filmmakers.

Thomas admits some of the talk of the "revolutionary" impact of the "Veronica Mars" Kickstarter campaign has been "an overreach," but he hopes it leads to more low-budget films finding their way in the world.

"I don't know that I would bet that a Kickstarter model starts to work across the board and that everyone who wants to make a \$3, 4, 5 million movie can expect to go to Kickstarter and get financed," he said. "When there is a brand name product that people have responded to and want to see and there's already a built in following for it, people can be very successful. I hope that in that respect we are pioneers and we see more of them."

Many are already seeing new potential to capitalize on small but dedicated fan support. (On the CW, "Veronica Mars" averaged less than 2.5 million viewers.) Shawn Ryan, whose FX drama "Terriers" was canceled in 2010 after one season, tweeted that he was "very interested" in the "Veronica Mars" Kickstarter campaign. "Could be a model for a 'Terriers' wrap up film," he said.

Thomas also co-created another canceled show—the Starz cult comedy "Party Down"—that may be reborn as a film. He's still hopeful that will happen, but says funding is already lining up more traditionally.

In the meantime, he's hoping the Kickstarter contributions keep coming. More money means being able to shoot in Southern California (where the show was set) and gradual boosts in production value. The screenplay, of which he has 37 pages written, features a 10-year high school reunion for Mars' Neptune High—a gathering that will include inevitable strife.

"In the barebones version, angry words would have been exchanged," says Thomas. "We're now starting to look comfortable enough to say there will be a brawl."

It already promises to be a different kind of filmmaking experience. He'll have 100-plus Kickstarter contributors to use as extras. A documentary on the making of the movie has begun tracking Thomas with cameras. And the production schedule has been built to include two days purely for Thomas, Bell and others to sign the thousands of movie posters and other items they've promised their Kickstarter backers.

More information: [www.kickstarter.com/projects/5 ... a-mars-movie-project](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/5...a-mars-movie-project)

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