

Producer/director McG says his time at UCI is proving priceless in Hollywood

The name McG may bring to mind vintage British sports cars or a place for a quickie lunch, but in Hollywood it evokes images of flashy hit movies and popular TV shows.

McG (christened Joseph McGinty Nichol) is the director of the "Charlie's Angels" films starring Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore and Lucy Liu, and executive producer of "The O.C." television series. But years before he opened Wonderland Sound & Vision, his production studio on Sunset Boulevard, McG was a Newport Beach guy searching for his way.

That search took him from Corona del Mar High School to UCI, where he studied psychology during the late 1980s. McG was prepared to pursue medical school and a career as a psychologist, but soon detoured, following his love of music. He started a tiny record label and began working with Mark McGrath, lead singer for the band Sugar Ray, a friend since elementary school. That led to directing Sugar Ray's music videos. That led to guiding videos for other bands like Korn, Mase, Barenaked Ladies and Cypress Hill. That led to directing commercials, which led to the Angels and the stars of "The O.C."

"It's been an interesting trip, going all the way back to being a kid in Orange County and then to UCI," says McG, whose hip-sounding handle is actually a family nickname from childhood. "I loved my UCI experience; it really changed my life. I responded to the freedom there and that helped open the door to my pursuing music and film."

BRINGING OUT THE BEST

McG was like many freshmen entering UCI, insecure but eager to grow. High school, he recalls, didn't always nurture his creativity or independence. But once at UCI,

things changed. His major helped – psychology stimulated McG to understand himself and others.

That insight has proved useful on the set, whether directing a movie or shepherding "The O.C." "Sure, you meet someone like Drew Barrymore and know right away how special she is, but you also want to be able to bring out the best in her personality," he explains. "I've taken what I learned studying psychology and use it to interface with actors and everybody else. I want to keep everyone stimulated and get the most out of people."

McG has a reputation for connecting with cast and crew and bringing trademark verve to projects. That energy and wit charmed Barrymore and co-producer Nancy Juvonen when they interviewed him for the first



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"Charlie's Angels." McG was barely known, and then for only his videos and commercials, when he arrived at the Le Colonial restaurant in West Hollywood. He had to impress, and fast.

"He said every single thing we wanted to hear," said Barrymore shortly after the film opened in 2000. "We had no choice but to choose him for the job. When we got to the car, Nancy and I looked at each other and said at the same time, 'Done.'"

The movies ("Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle" was the 2003 sequel) had box office clout – the original represented the biggest opening ever by a first-time director – which made it easier for McG to pursue other directions, including prime-time television. When he hired



McG, above second from right, shows his trademark intensity while shooting on the set of "Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle" and, left, checking the dailies with stars Lucy Liu, Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore. Between projects, the UCI alum is more laid back.

creator Josh Schwartz to develop a show about a Newport Beach enclave of the wealthy and often-troubled for Fox, McG was in familiar territory.

"The O.C." follows idealistic lawyer Sandy Cohen's family and those who circle it. That includes Seth, Cohen's awkward son. Many young fans pushing through their own growing pains identify with Seth, even as the world around him turns soapy. This doesn't surprise McG, who admits to special affection for Seth because he reflects much of his own teenage years.

"I had some pain and uneasiness, like Seth, but like him I was also very happy to be a part of what was going on in the county," McG says. "I felt a bit like the outsider looking in, and there's something of Seth in that."

SCOUTING NEW TERRITORY

McG isn't too surprised that "The O.C." has become popular. He points out that interest in Southern California has always been strong, going back to the surfing '60s and Huntington Beach, and a TV audience was ready to revisit

Orange County. He just shrugs when asked if "The O.C." is an accurate view of the region.

"There's a lot that comes right from my experience, so it's true in that sense," McG says, "but, you know, it is television, after all."

One thing is certain, interest in the county doesn't seem to be waning, at least not yet. MTV now has "Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County," a so-called reality series exploring one of the area's most beautiful, and affluent, beach towns. McG is amused that he might have helped start a TV trend.

"I suppose it's flattering in a way, but I hope everyone realizes that "The O.C." and other shows only present a part of Orange County," he says. "There's a whole world going on east of the San Diego Freeway that's not as much the beach and board culture, but is still intriguing. Who knows, maybe I'll take a look at that sometime."

– Mark Chalon Smith

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