TV

Bricklin's Wild Ride

A new documentary about New Brunswick's luxury car, the Bricklin

By Andy Pedersen
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It's the fuel that drives many of the best documentaries: outrage. Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*) is outraged by fast food. Mark Achbar (*The Corporation*) is outraged by corporate law. Michael Moore (*Bowling For Columbine, Fahrenheit 9/11*) is simply outraged.

Christien LeBlanc is a young French filmmaker from New Brunswick, and he's outraged, too. Outraged that the Bricklin – his home province's audacious stab at automotive stardom – is the butt of jokes instead of the most famous sports car on the road. "It should have been huge," says LeBlanc from his editing suite in the little Acadian town of Tracadie. "It should have been everywhere. It should have been the time machine in *Back to The Future*, not that piece of crap DeLorean."

Like Spurlock, Achbar and Moore before him, LeBlanc is determined to change our minds. To make us take another look at one of the "trippiest" chapters in New Brunswick history with a doc called *Plan B: The Bricklin Legend*. "I love those cars and I'm fascinated by the story, and I hope I can get other people to see it that way, too," he says. "Bricklin is a bad word in the Maritimes, and right across the country. It's used as a warning to entrepreneurs not to dare to dream. That's terrible. I think the word should be associated with daring, with having balls."

LeBlanc's documentary – it's almost a manifesto, really – has balls, too. "We pulled off some wild stuff shooting this one," he says, laughing. "We had a 50-foot blue screen for special effects. We crashed a Bricklin right through a big

garage door. We've got stunts, we've got drugs, we've got Playboy bunnies. And we've got it all in a low-budget documentary."

He finished the principal photography in December, and is just now getting down to the editing: his favourite part of the process. ("I get to sit around, take on some weight, smoke a lot of smokes.")

When it goes to air this fall on Radio-Canada (CBC's French-language network), it won't adhere to a standard chronological narrative. LeBlanc's made those kind of documentaries, too. His last was about a 19th-century leper colony in northern New Brunswick – "all tragedy and death and disease." Now he wants to shake things up. "History documentaries are always so tame," he says. "But this wasn't a tame story. When Bricklin came here back in the '70s, it was like an alien had landed. It was *Boogie Nights* in this conservative little corner of the country. I want to capture that feeling."

One other thing: there's time travel in LeBlanc's documentary. Not just flashbacks – though there are going to be plenty of those, too – but some honest-to-goodness, getting in a time machine and going back into the past. But before we get to that, some background.

Malcolm Bricklin (inside car), being directed by Christien LeBlanc. Courtesy Christien LeBlanc.

The Bricklin was named for its designer, an American named Malcolm Bricklin: a natural, even manic, entrepreneur, who has been hustling his entire life. He tasted his first real success setting up a chain of hardware stores in the American southeast. But he loved cars – both as a business proposition and for their raw, sexual energy – and in the early 1970s, turned his attention to breaking Detroit's stranglehold on the industry.

Malcolm was a handsome young man at the time, and was blessed with both ambition and showmanship qualities. He

was a friend of Hugh Hefner and a regular guest at the hottest Los Angeles parties. But when he decided to make a brash stab at the sports-car market, economics drove him to Canada. The Quebec government was entranced by his idea of setting up a car factory there, but after careful consideration, decided to pass. Undeterred, Malcolm kept looking for other Canadian investors, and found a sympathetic ear in an unlikely place called New Brunswick.

The premier at the time was a man named Richard Hatfield, the coolest Canadian politician you've probably never heard of. Like Trudeau, Hatfield had traveled the world; a sense of fun and adventure lurked beneath his small-town image. He loved the idea of building a sports car – "building the American dream right there in New Brunswick," as LeBlanc put it – and quickly agreed to front Malcolm more than $2 million of taxpayers' money to establish two factories there.

The car Bricklin envisioned was a saucy little number. Low-riding and sleek, it had none of the curved lines or ornamentation of domestic cars. The pièce de résistance was the doors – they wouldn't swing open to the sides, but up like wings. Bricklin printed thousands of sumptuous brochures and hit the road. Before the first car had even rolled out of the factory, he'd sold more than 5,000 of them.

Then the hard part: actually making them. LeBlanc notes that Detroit usually takes three or even four years to take a car from design to assembly line. In factories built from scratch, Bricklin had to do it in two. And he paid for his haste. The car's problems were legion, many of them having to do with those "gull-wing" doors. "The problem was that he insisted the doors swing up *and* that you could roll down the windows," says LeBlanc. "The engineers could do one thing or the other, but they had a hard time getting them to do both." The doors weighed 90 pounds each; it was difficult to build engines small yet powerful enough to do the job. Many of them simply didn't work.

The Bricklin was no gun registry, but after two years and more than $20 million in public investment (instead of the original $2 million), New Brunswickers lost their appetite for what seemed to be a fool's errand. Under mounting political pressure, Hatfield was forced to abandon the project. And with his major investor gone, Malcolm had to shutter the factories in 1976, having delivered fewer than 3,000 vehicles.

As LeBlanc tells the story, you hear the frustration rising in his voice. Not about Bricklin, though, about New Brunswick. “A lot of people think of the Bricklin as a scandal because of all the government money that went into it,” says LeBlanc. “But I always thought that the real scandal is that we backed out. That we treated Bricklin like a crook when, really, he was just a dreamer.”

The entrepeneur didn’t give up. After the Bricklin, Malcolm made small fortunes importing Subarus and then Yugos into North America. And he’s been making headlines again over the past couple of months for his recently signed deal to bring inexpensive Chinese cars called Cherys into the United States and Canada.

Before this recent Chinese venture, though, he was dabbling in fuel cell technology. It’s against that backdrop that LeBlanc’s documentary begins. Indeed, what happened to Bricklin on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, ultimately kick-started the documentary project.

LeBlanc's movie opens, as the libel lawyers like to say, with facts that are true. As the first jet slammed into the World Trade Centre, Bricklin was aboard another plane, cruising high above the Atlantic Ocean. He was on his way back to his home in New York after a business trip to England. The sun was shining through his window when a flight attendant came over the intercom with a strange announcement: the twin towers had just collapsed. She said the flight might have to be rerouted, but offered no further explanation. “But we knew it was really serious,” Bricklin recalls, “because she told us that they weren’t going to serve any more alcohol on the flight.” What Bricklin calls a “numb silence” fell over the cabin until, a while later, the attendant told them that American airspace had been closed and that they would be landing instead in a place called “Moncton, New Brunswick.” It would be Bricklin’s first visit back there since closing the factories. “As if the whole thing weren’t surreal enough already,” he says. “Then I find out I’ve got to go back there.”

There were no angry mobs waiting for him when he landed, no torch-bearing crowds storming the runway. Bricklin spent a “pleasant” three days in Moncton and, once North America had recovered from the initial shock, continued his trip home. Story finished.

But not in Chris LeBlanc's imagination. In his version of events, Bricklin's return is a prophecy being fulfilled, a cosmic turn of events that gives New Brunswick a second chance to get history right. Like Dr. Frankenstein throwing the switch, Bricklin's surprise arrival in Moncton provides the jolt that animates his creation. As he sets foot again on New Brunswick soil, a dilapidated old Bricklin comes to life, crashes out of the garage in which it's been languishing, and tears off like a horse gone wild. A chase across the province's highways ensues, and Bricklin – playing himself – is recruited to help wrangle the beast and restore order to the highways, to history and, in the time-traveling twist, honour to Premier Hatfield.

What would Donald Brittain say about all this? Fortunately for LeBlanc, he wasn't the commissioning editor for Radio-Canada. Louise Imbeault was. "If we want the documentary genre to appeal to people, we have to improve the way we do documentaries," says Imbeault, the CBC's east coast director of Radio-Canada. "[LeBlanc's film] is courageous. It's innovative. It's also perhaps a little scary, but we'll see with the first edit if it's airtight or not."

Even LeBlanc says he was a little surprised when he was given the green light, but not quite so surprised as when Bricklin himself agreed to participate. "I liked the story," Bricklin says. "It sounded cute." And once they'd met, LeBlanc and Bricklin got on famously. They realized that making movies and making sports cars isn't so different. That the truth often doesn't reside so much in the facts as it does in the feelings.

"When we were on set one day, I said to him, "Malcolm, how are we going to portray your divorce?" LeBlanc says. "He just said to me, 'Look kid, you're never going to figure me out, anyway, so just write your f-----g movie the way it feels right.'"