

# Red Rocket (film)

***Red Rocket*** is a 2021 American black comedy drama film directed by Sean Baker, who co-wrote it with Chris Bergoch. It stars Simon Rex, Bree Elrod, and Suzanna Son. The film stars Rex as a middle-aged, newly retired porn star who leaves Los Angeles for his small Texas hometown, plotting his way back to the life he once had. Along the way, he begins dating a seventeen-year-old girl.

The film premiered at the 74th Cannes Film Festival in competition for the Palme d'Or on July 14, 2021. It was released in limited theaters on December 10, 2021, by A24. It received praise for its direction and Rex's performance and received a variety of awards and nominations. The National Board of Review listed it among the top ten films of the year. Rex also won Best Actor awards from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and the Independent Spirit Awards.

## Plot

After a 17-year absence, Mikey "Saber" Davies returns to his hometown of Texas City, Texas. Badly bruised and destitute, he arrives at the modest home shared by his estranged wife Lexi and her mother Lil, begging them to let him stay. They reluctantly agree but insist that he get a job and do household chores. He tries to find work at a diner and Dollar General store, but is hindered by a long gap in his résumé. After he admits to potential employers that he spent those years working as a porn star in Los Angeles, they refuse to hire him. Desperate, he persuades drug dealer Leondria to give him back his old job selling marijuana. Leondria and her daughter June suspect that Mikey will smoke it himself, but their business arrangement continues after he returns with his earnings.

After sleeping on the couch for several nights, Mikey starts having sex with Lexi. Eventually, she invites him to share her bedroom. Mikey gives Lexi and Lil a month's rent in advance and takes them to a donut shop to celebrate. He becomes smitten with Raylee, a 17-year-old girl who works at the counter and goes by the name Strawberry. He returns and persuades her to let him sell marijuana to the construction workers who frequent the shop. They soon start a sexual relationship.

### Red Rocket



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	<u>Sean Baker</u>
<b>Written by</b>	<u>Chris Bergoch</u> <u>Sean Baker</u>
<b>Produced by</b>	<u>Sean Baker</u> <u>Alex Coco</u> <u>Samantha Quan</u> <u>Alex Saks</u> <u>Shih-Ching Tsou</u>
<b>Starring</b>	<u>Simon Rex</u> <u>Bree Elrod</u> <u>Suzanna Son</u> <u>Brenda Deiss</u>
<b>Cinematography</b>	<u>Drew Daniels</u>
<b>Edited by</b>	<u>Sean Baker</u>
<b>Production companies</b>	<u>FilmNation</u> <u>Entertainment</u> <u>Cre Film</u>
<b>Distributed by</b>	<u>A24</u>

Mikey befriends Lexi's neighbor Lonnie, who is intrigued by Mikey's stories about his porn career and sexual encounters. They visit a strip club and spend time together, but Mikey becomes upset when he discovers Lonnie pretending to be an Army veteran at a local mall. Mikey causes Strawberry to break up with Nash, her high school boyfriend, after finding out she was not single when they met. Nash and his parents confront Mikey in the donut shop parking lot and beat him up.

Mikey repeatedly tries to persuade Strawberry to travel with him to Los Angeles to pursue a career in pornography. She and Mikey grow closer, causing him to grow more distant from Lexi. When he disappears for a weekend with Strawberry, Lexi grows suspicious and they get into an argument. Mikey berates her and brags about the \$3,000 he made selling drugs. While riding in Lonnie's car, Mikey causes Lonnie to swerve across traffic at a highway off-ramp, creating a multiple-vehicle collision which results in several injuries. Mikey and Lonnie flee the scene of the accident, and Mikey begs Lonnie to hide his involvement. Mikey is anxious but Lonnie assumes responsibility for the crash when he is arrested.

Using the crash as an excuse, Mikey visits Strawberry at work and asks her to come to Los Angeles with him and start her porn career. She agrees and quits her job. That night, Mikey tells Lexi that he is leaving for Los Angeles in the morning. Lexi and Lil convince Leondria to send June and her brothers to seize the \$3,000 that Mikey earned from selling pot. Leondria's children confront him while he is sleeping and take the money. June forces Mikey to leave naked out of the bedroom window and he runs to Leondria's house, begging her to return his money. She gives Mikey \$200 and tells him to leave or face violence. Humiliated, he leaves with a few possessions in a trash bag. After traveling all night on foot to Strawberry's house, he imagines seeing her dressed in a bikini in her doorway as his eyes well with tears.

<b>Release dates</b>	July 14, 2021 (Cannes) December 10, 2021 (United States)
<b>Running time</b>	128 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$1.1 million
<b>Box office</b>	\$2.3 million <sup>[2][3]</sup>

## Cast

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- Simon Rex as Mikey "Saber" Davies
- Bree Elrod as Lexi Davies
- Suzanna Son as Strawberry / Raylee
- Brenda Deiss as Lil
- Judy Hill as Leondria
- Brittney Rodriguez as June
- Ethan Darbone as Lonnie
- Shih-Ching Tsou as Ms. Phan
- Parker Bigham as Nash Parker

## Production

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The low \$1.1 million budget that the film was able to secure forced Baker to abandon a larger project and devote himself to *Red Rocket*.<sup>[4][5][6]</sup> Baker and Bergoch conceived of the idea for the Saber character while researching the adult film industry for their film *Starlet* (2012), during which they met a number of men who fit the archetype of a "suitcase pimp," which Baker defines as "male talent who lives off a female talent in the adult film world."<sup>[7][8]</sup>

With regard to casting, Baker had Simon Rex in mind five years previous to shooting but had never introduced himself. On October 23, 2020, Baker called Rex and convinced him to send an audition tape via iPhone, giving him just five minutes to prepare.<sup>[9]</sup> Rex drove to Texas to avoid post-flight quarantine rules relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, as filming was set to begin in three days.<sup>[9]</sup> David Rooney, writing for the *Hollywood Reporter*, referred to the casting of Rex as a "winking joke" as he had starred in solo masturbation videos for a gay pornography company before establishing himself in his career.<sup>[10][11]</sup> Baker had asked Rex to trust him, so Rex did not tell his agent about the film until after shooting had ended.<sup>[12]</sup> Baker first approached Suzanna Son in 2018 after a screening of *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot* 10 days after she moved to Los Angeles, then did not call her for two years.<sup>[13]</sup> Darbone was a waiter at a restaurant in Nederland when Baker approached him because he "liked his look". Rodriguez, who had been a regular at the Donut Hole location which was near the plant she worked at before she was laid off, was walking her dog when Baker pulled over to ask her to audition.<sup>[14]</sup>

Principal photography ran in Texas from October 26 to November 19, 2020, with rigorous safety protocols being implemented due to the pandemic.<sup>[15][16]</sup> *Red Rocket* was shot on 16 mm film by an Arriflex 16SR3 camera with Panavision 1.44x Auto Panatars, Zeiss Super Speed, Iscorama 54 and Canon Lenses.<sup>[17][18][19]</sup> The film had a crew of 10 people, no rehearsal time and mostly non-actors.<sup>[12]</sup>

Filming locations included restaurants in Texas City and Nederland, a donut shop in Groves, as well as the Kemah Boardwalk and Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier in Galveston.<sup>[14][20][21]</sup> The Donut Hole was open for business in the morning while filming took place in the evening.<sup>[22]</sup>

Securing the rights to the song "Bye Bye Bye" was not part of the initial budget. All five members of NSYNC had to approve its use.<sup>[23][24]</sup> Actress Suzanna Son recorded a cover version of the song for the official motion picture soundtrack.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Creative influences

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Baker has "devoted [his] career to tell stories that remove stigma and normalize lifestyles" of sex workers through his films.<sup>[26]</sup> Baker stated that in *Red Rocket* he wanted to pay homage to "Italian eroticism" and sexploitation films by directors from the 1970s like Fernando Di Leo and Umberto Lenzi. He was also inspired by Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express* for the outdoor scenes.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Release

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A24 acquired distribution rights to the film in the United States and Canada in February 2021.<sup>[27][28]</sup> FilmNation Entertainment later sold international distribution rights to Le Pacte for France, Roadshow Entertainment for Australia and New Zealand, Lev Cinemas for Israel and Focus Features elsewhere excluding the U.S. and Canada.<sup>[29]</sup>

*Red Rocket* had its world premiere in competition at the 74th Cannes Film Festival on July 14, 2021,<sup>[30]</sup> where it received a five minute standing ovation.<sup>[31]</sup> It also screened at film festivals in Deauville,<sup>[32]</sup> Hamburg,<sup>[33]</sup> London,<sup>[34]</sup> Mill Valley,<sup>[35]</sup> Miskolc,<sup>[36]</sup> New York,<sup>[37]</sup> Telluride,<sup>[38]</sup> Rome,<sup>[39]</sup> Nagpur, San Sebastián<sup>[40]</sup> and Vancouver<sup>[41]</sup> among others.

A drive-in screening was scheduled as part of Travis Scott's Astroworld Festival featuring appearances by Baker, Scott, and the film's cast.<sup>[42]</sup> In the aftermath of a mass casualty event at Scott's concert three days earlier, the event was cancelled.<sup>[43]</sup>

The film had a limited theatrical release on December 10, 2021,<sup>[44]</sup> beginning in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>[45][46]</sup> Lionsgate released the movie on VOD on February 8, 2022,<sup>[44]</sup> and on DVD and Blu-Ray on March 15, 2022.<sup>[47][48]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

*Red Rocket* grossed \$1 million in the United States and Canada,<sup>[49][44]</sup> and \$1.3 million in other territories for a worldwide total of \$2.3 million,<sup>[49]</sup> plus 477,304 with home video sales,<sup>[44]</sup> against a production budget of \$1.1 million.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

In its opening weekend, the film earned \$88,195 from 6 theaters for a per screen average of \$14,699.<sup>[50]</sup> It went on to gross \$1 million in the U.S. and \$1.2 million internationally for a total box office gross of \$2.2 million.<sup>[49]</sup>

### Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 90% of 206 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 7.9/10. The website's consensus reads: "Led by Simon Rex's magnetic performance, *Red Rocket* is another vibrant, ground-level look at modern American life from director/co-writer Sean Baker."<sup>[51]</sup> Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 76 out of 100, based on 49 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews.<sup>[52]</sup>

In *Deadline Hollywood*, Todd McCarthy wrote that "[e]ven before much happens, the sense of a very specific location and cultural mindset [in *Red Rocket*] is very intense." He praised both Baker and lead Simon Rex for their "tremendous energy" and said the film "feels as creatively pure as a novel by a kid just out of college."<sup>[53]</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz of *RogerEbert.com*, on the other hand, described it as a "rambling 130-minute film," calling the middle section "wherein Mikey ensnares [the] freckle-faced 17-year-old donut shop employee... Strawberry (Suzanna Son)" and schemes their escape to Los Angeles so that he can lead her to adult film stardom as "one-note and repetitious" in particular.<sup>[54]</sup> David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* also criticized the film mildly for "prolix stretches", saying "it could have used some tightening. But it's a pleasure to put yourself in Baker's capable hands."<sup>[10]</sup> Said Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*: "With *Red Rocket*, Sean Baker has given us an adult American pastoral, essentially a comedy, and another study of tough lives at the margin, close in spirit to his lo-fi breakthrough *Tangerine*."<sup>[55]</sup> Richard Lawson in *Vanity Fair* wrote, "Baker's choice is a rather perfect one—in contextual terms and actual ones, too. Rex's performance is fleet and nimble, gregarious and shaded in darkness. He and Baker make staccato music together."<sup>[11]</sup>



Rex's performance received critical acclaim

Some reactions to the film stirred a debate about sexual morality in film in the post Me Too era. Seitz of *RogerEbert.com* concluded that *Red Rocket* is "the least of the list" of Baker and Bergoch's "impressive library of realistic movies about the rainbow coalition of the American underclass", and went on to question moments in the sexually graphic *Red Rocket* where, "if the filmmakers aren't exactly *endorsing* their

protagonist's middle-aged, borderline pedo-pimp obsession with Strawberry, they're not being as rigorous about mediating it as they should."<sup>[54]</sup> Brianna Zigler in *Gawker* responded: "It was both refreshing and exhilarating to watch an anti-hero go *that* low, during a time where it seems like audiences feel obligated to reject bad fictional behavior that isn't explicitly punished."<sup>[56]</sup> *Variety*'s Clayton Davis said the film's "risqué" subject matter could be a hindrance but encouraged award voters to nominate Rex, Baker, and Bergoch for *Academy Awards*.<sup>[57]</sup> John Waters included *Red Rocket* on his list of Top Ten films of 2021.<sup>[58]</sup>

## Accolades

Award	Date of Ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref
<u>Cannes Film Festival</u>	July 16, 2021	<u>Palm Dog Award</u>	Sophie the Dog	Won	[59]
	July 17, 2021	<u>Palme d'Or</u>	<u>Sean Baker</u>	Nominated	[60]
<u>Deauville American Film Festival</u>	September 11, 2021	<u>Prix du Jury</u>	<i>Red Rocket</i>	Won	[61]
		<u>Critic's Award</u>	<i>Red Rocket</i>	Won	
<u>San Sebastián International Film Festival</u>	September 25, 2021	City of Donostia Audience Award	<i>Red Rocket</i>	Nominated	[62]
<u>Mill Valley Film Festival</u>	October 9, 2021	MVFF Award	<u>Simon Rex</u>	Awarded	[63]
<u>Newport Beach Film Festival</u>	October 24, 2021	Breakout Performance Award	Simon Rex	Awarded	[64]
<u>SCAD Savannah Film Festival</u>	October 26, 2021	Spotlight Award	Simon Rex	Won	[65][12]
<u>Gotham Awards</u>	November 29, 2021	<u>Outstanding Lead Performance</u>	Simon Rex	Nominated	[66]
		<u>Best Screenplay</u>	Sean Baker and <u>Chris Bergoch</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Breakthrough Performer</u>	<u>Suzanna Son</u>	Nominated	
<u>National Board of Review</u>	December 2, 2021	<u>Top Ten Film</u>	<i>Red Rocket</i>	Won	[67]
<u>Detroit Film Critics Society</u>	December 6, 2021	<u>Best Director</u>	Sean Baker	Nominated	[68][69]
<u>Chicago Film Critics Association</u>	December 15, 2021	<u>Best Original Screenplay</u>	Sean Baker and <u>Chris Bergoch</u>	Nominated	[70][71]
<u>Alliance of Women Film Journalists</u>		<u>Most Egregious Lovers' Age Difference</u>	Simon Rex and <u>Suzanna Son</u>	Nominated	[72]
<u>Los Angeles Film Critics Association</u>	December 18, 2021	<u>Best Actor</u>	Simon Rex	Won	[73]
<u>National Society of Film Critics</u>	January 8, 2022	<u>Best Actor</u>	Simon Rex	Runner-up	[74]
<u>Houston Film Critics Society</u>	January 19, 2022	Texas Independent Film Award	<i>Red Rocket</i>	Won	[75]

<u>Santa Barbara International Film Festival</u>	March 5, 2022	Virtuoso Award	Simon Rex	Awarded	[76]
<u>Independent Spirit Awards</u>	March 6, 2022	<u>Best Male Lead</u>	Simon Rex	Won	[77]
		<u>Best Supporting Female</u>	Suzanna Son	Nominated	

*Red Rocket* was ineligible for Screen Actors Guild Award nominations.<sup>[78]</sup>

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## External links

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- Official website (<https://a24films.com/films/red-rocket>) 
  - *Red Rocket* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13453006/>) at IMDb
  - *Red Rocket* (<https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v729305>) at AllMovie
  - Official screenplay (<https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Red-Rocket-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>)
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Retrieved from "[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Red\\_Rocket\\_\(film\)&oldid=1225005766](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Red_Rocket_(film)&oldid=1225005766)"

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