



Reel Nashville

Nashville Independent Film Festival

JIM RIDLEY, ANGELA WIRKING, DONNA BOWMAN, SCOTT MANZLER, NOEL MURRAY, AND ADAM ROSS MAY 31, 2001

At year 32, less is more.

On the Nashville arts scene, no turnaround has been more dramatic in the past 10 years than that of the Nashville Independent Film Festival (*né* Sinking Creek). Faced with dwindling attendance in the mid-'90s, the city's 32-year-old showcase for independent film rebounded in 1998 with a new name, new leadership, and a new sense of purpose. And audiences responded, boosting attendance by triple-digit percentages in just three years. Last year's festival drew 10,000 people to Regal's Green Hills Commons 16. This year, the NIFF hopes to give viewers a lot more—by offering them less.

Instead of duplicating last year's backbreaking schedule—275 films in five days—the NIFF has made a series of strategic programming moves. First, the total number of films has been reduced, with an emphasis on quality over quantity. **In the case of the popular Tennessee Film Night program, that means last year's bloated three-hour programming block has been trimmed to just six short films. These include the Sundance prizewinner “Gina, An Actress, Age 29,” by Knoxville filmmaker Paul Harriil, along with shorts by Nashville directors David Johnson, Hammad Zaidi, and Anthony Popolo.**

The fewer selections also permit a major innovation: multiple screenings. In years past, strong films that showed early in the festival couldn't capitalize on their word of mouth, while latecomers missed out on movies that sold out their one screening. While some of the NIFF's big attractions this year are only showing once—like the Billy Bob Thornton comedy *Daddy and Them* and the Nashville-shot music doc *Down From the Mountain*—sleepers such as the Memphis chop-shop drama *The Poor & Hungry* stand a better chance to find an audience with two scheduled shows.

The changes reflect a year of growth and transition for the NIFF. Michael Catalano, the executive director widely credited with turning around the festival, left last fall to become VP of development at Nashville's Mulberry Street Films. His successor, Brian Gordon, spent 13 years at the San Francisco International Film Festival before moving here in January.

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The challenge Gordon relishes, he says, is “trying to get people to take a chance” on the experimental and international films that were SFIFF mainstays—and a NIFF weakness in recent years, especially given its previous support of experimental work under the Sinking Creek banner. “A lot of people coming to Nashville now are interested in non-mainstream film,” Gordon says. More exposure, he reasons, will make viewers more comfortable with avant-garde work such as “Outer Space,” a mind-blowing found-footage horror short by Austrian director Peter Tcherkassky that's one of the festival's most formally challenging—and astonishing—films. The trick is balancing these with pop entertainment, as well as with the stardom that gives festivals their aura of excitement. (Unfortunately, Robert Redford, recipient of this year's Freedom in Film Award, is too busy shooting *The Castle* to attend the festival.)

A sign of how far Catalano brought the festival—and how far Gordon and festival director Kelly Brownlee intend to take it—is the continued upgrade of quality in the NIFF's films, particularly when the festival circuit is so competitive. While the NIFF at present lacks the clout and capital of a fest like Austin's South by Southwest (SXSW), which scored such coups this year as early screenings of *Memento* and *Amores Perros*, it managed to snag at least one major plum SXSW didn't get. Indeed, Kate Davis' *Southern Comfort*, the documentary that took top honors at Sundance this year, represents a new level of prestige for the Nashville festival's offerings. (A related story on the film appears on p. 20.)

Add to *Southern Comfort* the local premieres of other acclaimed, entertaining films—among them Jim McKay's *Our Song*, Mark Lewis' *The Natural History of the Chicken*, and Dominique Deruddere's Oscar-nominated foreign film *Everybody Famous*—and the NIFF has a lineup that should help it advance in the festival-circuit hierarchy. (For more information, consult our festival preview, which begins on p. 23.) And the schedule is augmented by daytime workshops and panel discussions. These include Saturday's powerhouse animation workshop with representatives of Pixar (*Toy Story*), Film Roman (*The Simpsons*), and Industrial Light and Magic (you name it); Friday's meeting with heavyweight film and TV music supervisors; and Saturday's talk with Oscar-winning actress Olympia Dukakis (*Moonstruck*).

At a time of gathering momentum for the arts, fueled by the arrival of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the new downtown public library, and the new Country Music Hall of Fame, the NIFF's progress is a further sign of civic health—not the kind measured in PSLs and political grandstanding, perhaps, but just as encouraging. Everyone who bought a ticket in years past helped transform the NIFF into an exciting and vital event. Now it's time to find a comfy seat, let the lights go down, and enjoy the show.



Jim Ridley

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Tomato Art Fest
Fri, Aug 12, 2022
- Aug 12

Comedy
Pod Save America
Fri, Aug 12, 2022
- Aug 12

Music
Red Hot Chili Peppers
Fri, Aug 12, 2022
- Aug 12

Music
Dehd w/Snooper
Fri, Aug 12, 2022
- Aug 12

Music
...And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead
Fri, Aug 12, 2022
- Aug 13

Music
That Ross Collier Sound Fest
Sat, Aug 13, 2022
- Aug 13

Music
Oh He Dead
Sat, Aug 13, 2022
- Aug 13

Music
Drive-By Truckers w/Wednesday
Sat, Aug 13, 2022



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