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Sky's the limit: Missoula documentary film festival gets bigger, better

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By JOE NICKELL of the Missoulian | Posted: Friday, February 12, 2010 7:45 am | No Comments Posted

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[Buy this photo](#) Ken Furrow, technical director for the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, sets up the tape machine and projector on which films will be shown on Wednesday in the Wilma Theatre's projection room. This year's festival features 138 films from 30 countries. Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian



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Go to the movies

The Big Sky Documentary Film Festival runs from Feb. 12-21, with screenings taking place at the Wilma Theatre, 131 S. Higgins Ave., and other special events at several downtown venues. Admission to individual screenings is \$6 for screenings before 5 p.m., \$7 for screenings after 5 p.m.; full festival passes are \$100, or \$150 for all-access passes to parties and special events. For a full schedule and other information, visit www.bigskyfilmfest.org.

Recently, Big Sky Documentary Film Festival director Mike Steinberg received a phone call from filmmaker Robert Drew. You might not recognize Drew's name; but to a documentary aficionado like Steinberg, there are few bigger names in America.

"He's really the grandfather of the modern American documentary," said Steinberg. "He's huge."

Drew, whose landmark 1960 film, "Primary," is often cited as the first important work of the so-called "cinéma vérité" (literally, "truthful cinema") movement in America, was calling to ask if Steinberg might be interested in presenting the world theatrical premiere of his film, "The Sun Ship

Game."

Shot in 1969, the documentary about competitive glider pilots had never been officially screened due to copyright issues related to music featured in the soundtrack. With those issues finally resolved, and with his own reputation by now legendary in the world of documentarians, Drew could have chosen from any number of festivals around the world to premiere his film.

"It was a real surprise for him to call," said Steinberg, noting that Drew will also attend the festival. "It's an amazing windfall for us."

It's a poetically fitting tribute to the soaring trajectory of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, now in its seventh year. Boasting a who's-who list of modern documentary filmmakers, corporate sponsorship from the likes of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences and HBO Documentary Films, and some 138 films from 30 countries, this year's festival is bigger by almost any measure. And, ventures Steinberg, it's better as well.

"It does continue to get bigger and better, and largely that's because of the support the community gives us," he said. "I often hear people say that it's their favorite thing in Missoula. Even as someone who loves this festival, that's kind of shocking to me because there's so many great things here. It's an amazing honor to see how much people value and support this festival in Missoula."

As the crowds at the annual festival have grown, filmmakers have taken notice. This year's festival, which opens with a free screening of Greg Barker's "Sergio" at the Wilma Theatre at 6:30 p.m. Friday, will feature some 30 world premiere theatrical screenings; almost none of the films have ever been screened in Montana before. Steinberg said he is expecting between 50 and 75 of the filmmakers to attend the festival, plus dozens of industry professionals.

Among those visiting professionals is Richard Saiz, senior program manager at the Independent Television Service, the funding arm of PBS. On Friday, Saiz will participate in a unique, daylong pitch session in which filmmakers can present their ideas to him while audiences listen in. Steinberg said that unique session has drawn filmmakers from as far away as Israel, solely for the opportunity to have an audience with Saiz; at the same time, it will allow festival-goers who are interested in learning more about the workings of the film industry to get a glimpse of the process firsthand. The following day, Saiz will offer a 2 1/2-hour workshop, open to all festival-goers, focused on how to create a strong film proposal in the first place.

"These filmmakers will have the opportunity to get some extremely valuable face-time with someone very high up in the ITVS ranks," said Steinberg. "They'll get their project in front of him. That one event has added a lot of work for us, but it's really moved us in a direction toward adding more of a conference-market aspect, to make it more attractive for the film industry as a whole, which is where we'd like to see this festival go in the future."

This year's festival will feature several themed mini-festivals, or "sidebars," focused on specific types of films. The biggest of these is "Indigenous Visions," a multi-part program focused on Native American documentaries and filmmakers. Funded through grants from the Academy Foundation, Humanities Montana, the University of Montana's Native American Studies department, ITVS, Native American Public Telecommunications and the Silver Foundation, "Indigenous Visions" will feature a panel discussion about issues facing Native American filmmakers on Monday, plus screenings of nine documentaries by Native American filmmakers.

Other sidebar programs include "Natural Facts," which focuses on films about the interactions between people and wildlife; and "Troubled Water," focusing on films about worldwide water quality issues.

In addition to the appearance by Drew, this year's festival will feature two other legends in the documentary filmmaking world.

Doug Pray, whose films have focused on unique American subcultures from long-haul truckers to turntablists, will be feted with a career retrospective featuring eight of his films.

And Rick Prelinger, founder of Archive.org, will appear to host "Mr. Prelinger's Amazing Archive," a sampling from his unique collection of 60,000 advertising, educational, industrial and amateur films.

"Rick Prelinger is a hero in the documentary film world, because he has collected this extraordinary archive of films and made them available to the public and to filmmakers," said Steinberg. "I don't have an exact count but we're talking at least 50 of the films screened this year have a connection to him through those clips. So it'll be great to have him here and be able to present some of his own work that he's done with those archives."

Throughout the week of the festival, numerous special events and receptions will take place at locations scattered around downtown Missoula. One of the most intriguing will be a screening of "Man with a Movie Camera," a 1929 silent film by Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov. The film will be accompanied by live music by the Alloy Orchestra, a three-piece band from Massachusetts that Roger Ebert once called "the best in the world at accompanying silent films." The group returns to Missoula after appearing at last year's Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, where it

performed music to accompany the 1919 silent film, "South: Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition."

"These guys are amazing," said Steinberg. "Last year's screening was really one of the highlights of the whole festival. ... I can't wait to see them again."

All in all, it adds up to a diverse and jam-packed festival this year.

"The festival has grown every year," said Steinberg, "but even so, it feels like we're really taking a step up this year. People are recognizing it as a viable place to premiere and screen films and network with other professionals, and that's really cool to see and be a part of."

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