

Winter 2005

detroit docs international film festival

The Reel News

The Quarterly Newsletter for Members and Supporters

Filmmaker Profile: Kevin Leeser

Filmmaker Kevin Leeser doesn't usually go to screenings of his films. "I get anxious, seeing people's reactions." When he attended his screening *Lily's Detroit* on opening night of the third Detroit Docs International Film Festival, he was relieved to see "older people nudge their partners—people were really getting into it."

Audience Choice Award winner *Lily's Detroit* is part of Leeser's larger work-in-progress, *Detroit: A Documentary*—a pastiche of historical and current, political and personal narratives on Detroit. Interviews with personalities such as Lily Tomlin and Dennis Archer set the tone, but Leeser's inspiration was an early loss.

Leeser, who is from the Metro Detroit area, had family who lived in Del Ray, a once thriving Hungarian community the filmmaker remembers from his youth. "I used to go to these restaurants and now they're all burned out. I don't think I'm that old, to remember this place that used to be there and now it's missing—it's *gone*." Leeser explored this and other "missing" neighborhoods

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Kevin Leeser shooting in Arizona, the primary location of "Renaissance Men"

Third Annual Detroit Docs a Success

100 docs. Seven locations. 5,000 documentary film lovers. One great weekend.

For anyone who missed 2004's Detroit Docs International Film Festival, here's the wrap-up:

This past Fall, a crack team of Detroit Docs volunteers participated in bringing over 100 docs, from 15 countries, to an audience of 5,000 film lovers. To date, this is Detroit Docs' biggest and best festival, and the centerpiece of its programming year.

Festival partners included Wayne State University, which hosted the gala premier party at its stylish new Welcome Center and sponsored numerous screenings; the Detroit Film Theatre at the DIA, which sponsored the shorts program; the Detroit Film Center; Birmingham 8 Theatre; our official media sponsor, the Metro Times; Live 97.1 FM; the Michigan Film Office;

the Detroit Economic Development Corporation; and the Government of Canada – plus many others.

Filmmakers on Filmmaking

Festival events were attended by more than 30 filmmakers from across the continent who—in post-screening Q & A's, panel discussions, and workshops—engaged audiences on topics including cultural context, content, style and technique.

"Detroit Docs has much to be proud of," says award-winning Florida filmmaker, Suzanne Niedland. "I wasn't sure what to expect with a festival in Detroit, but I'm happy to say that your festival was one of my highlights of the year."

Austin-based filmmaker Mark Mederson had this to say: "I can't begin to express how

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Calendar

Ann Arbor Film Festival

March 15-20, 2005 www.aafilmfest.org

Chicago International Documentary Film Festival

April 1-10, 2005 www.chicagodocfestival.org

Detroit Film Theatre www.dia.org/dft

30 years and still going strong! There are several great docs on the current schedule that are more than worth your time:

In the Realms of the Unreal
Feb. 21 (USA – 2004 – Jessica Yu)

Born Into Brothels
Mar. 11, 12 & 13
(USA – 2004 – Zana Briski & Ross Kauffman)

Hearts and Minds
Mar. 14
(USA – 1974 – Peter Davis)

Italianamerican
April 4
Two Documentaries by Martin Scorsese

Moog
April 18
(US – 2003 – Hans Fjellestad)

DOXA Documentary Film and Video Festival - Vancouver, B.C.

May 24-29, 2005 www.vcn.bc.ca/doxa/

East Lansing Film Festival

March 30-April 3, 2005 www.elff.com

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

April 7-10, 2005 www.fullframefest.org

Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival - Toronto, Ont.

April 22-May 1, 2005 www.hotdocs.ca

Tomlin Interviewed in Sweltering Bungalow

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with friends while participating in a local tradition: driving around the ruins of Detroit. "It's what you do when you live in Detroit," the director said. Fascinated by Detroit's dynamic and visually arresting nature, Leeser set out to tell its story.

Contact with Lily Tomlin was made through a friend who was working at a production company in L.A. When Tomlin agreed to do the interview, Leeser had to hightail it to California. "I hired a limo to pick her up and bring her to our location. Here was this somewhat older woman, jumping in a limo to meet strangers—who say they're making a documentary about Detroit—an who must conduct the interview in a sweltering L.A. bungalow." Leeser did not find Tomlin intimidating. "I thought, 'What a cool lady.'"

When Leeser sent Tomlin a tape of the footage three years ago he didn't get a response. Chris Walny, Detroit Docs founder, encouraged him to edit together a trailer for screening at the first Detroit Docs Fest in 2002. It would eventually screen in its entirety at the 2004 festival, obviously to a more than enthusiastic audience. Tomlin said she loved the film and requested copies for her family. Without Walny's encouragement, Leeser said he wouldn't have completed the piece. "Chris is such a good, positive influence. The community isn't always nurturing, and filmmakers can be so competitive."

It should be mentioned that Leeser doesn't make "traditional" documentaries. He's not a big fan of voiceover narration, even though it simpli-

fies storylines. "I don't know why I want to make things difficult for myself," he says of eschewing the convention, describing *Detroit* in contrast as a "nonlinear, stream-of-consciousness" storyline. Leeser tells the story of Detroit by juxtaposing narratives on different subjects, finding unexpected threads.

That these threads are exposed regularly



Kevin Leeser shooting on 16mm during the making of "23 Man"

makes *Detroit* a work in progress. For example, at the Detroit Docs 3 festival afterparty, Leeser was discussing stories he'd captured for *Detroit* about Diego Rivera's period in the city with *Bums' Paradise* codirector Robert "Rabbit" Barringer. "Weird," Barringer said, "I spent a winter in the late '60s living in the Diego Rivera exhibit (in the DIA)." Borrowing festival volunteer Mike Prentiss' camera, Leeser and Barringer slid out to the alley to get the story in the can.

Things got started for Leeser when he transferred to Ferris State and majored in video production. His first feature films work was with people he'd met at Planet Ant, a performance space in Hamtramck. But Leeser soon grew weary of feature films and working with actors. "The first film you make is the coolest project, then it's like: 'I've done this before.'" With a body of work that includes both feature films and docs (see his link on our site for a complete filmography), Leeser is focusing on documentary work.

"Since we moved things have picked up," Leeser said of returning from Chicago to the Metro area in July 2004. He had been teaching at the Columbia (Chicago) video department, but returned so his wife could finish her degree at U-M.

Habitually working on several projects simultaneously, Leeser will continue to shoot for *Detroit*, but he's finished shooting on *Renaissance Men: The Story of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater*, which he began in 1999. The subject is a Renaissance festival performance troupe Leeser describes as "the circus meets a Star Trek convention."

Leeser finds that audiences respond personally to the performers in *Renaissance Men* footage. "I've seen people actually talk to the screen. The film becomes transparent to them, and that's the whole point of documentary."

Check out the link to 3 Alarm Carnival's Films, Kevin Leeser's production company, through www.detroitdocs.org.

DEADLINE:
JULY 30,
2005

CALL FOR ENTRIES!

**4TH ANNUAL DETROIT DOCS
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
NOVEMBER 9 – 13, 2005**

We're searching for the world's best documentaries – those that give our audience a memorable dose of humor, intellect, passion, humanity, the bizarre and beyond. Last year 5,000 filmgoers saw over 100 films from 15 different countries at Detroit Docs.

NEW! JURIED COMPETITION CATEGORIES

- Best Feature Length** (Over 60 minutes)
- Best Mid Length** (30 to 60 minutes)
- Best Short** (less than 30 minutes)
- Best Student Film**

...and don't forget the **Audience Awards!**

Regular Deadline: **July 30, 2005**
Late Deadline: **August 15, 2005**

Entry Fees: \$20 by regular deadline, \$40 by late deadline
Visit www.detroitdocs.org for more information

**TAKE PART
IN THE EXCITING
CELEBRATION OF
DOCUMENTARY
FILM!**



detroit docs
international film festival



Detroit Docs strives to bring you the world's best documentaries and their creators; and to also provide resource support and education for local documentary filmmakers. It's a mission that our team of volunteers works very hard to accomplish, but we can't do it without you. Your donations go directly to helping achieve these goals. Membership fees allow us to run day-to-day operations and to also continue such events as our annual Detroit Docs International Film Festival. Please consider membership in Detroit Docs today. Thanks!

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Detroit Docs relies on support from public and private grants, as well as individual and corporate contributions.

2005 Membership Application

Full Member Benefits:

- Access to our library of films - currently comprised of over 300 documentaries
- An all-access pass to the 2005 Detroit Docs International Film Festival
- 50% off tickets for all Detroit Docs year-round events
- 25% off all Detroit Docs merchandise
- One Detroit Docs t-shirt
- A one-year subscription to our quarterly newsletter
- 501(c)(3) tax deduction
- The warm feeling of knowing you are part of something wonderful!

2005 Membership Levels

- _____ \$25 Individual
- _____ \$15 Student & Seniors
- _____ \$10 Limited Membership (does not include all-access festival pass or t-shirt)

Yes, I would love to support Detroit Docs! (information will be kept confidential)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State: _____

Email/Web: _____

Phone: _____

Please make check or money order payable to: Detroit Docs. Mail payment and membership application to: Detroit Docs, 5200 Lannoo, Detroit, MI 48236 or visit our website www.detroitdocs.org and presto, become an instant member!

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Award Winners Abound!

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filmmaker friendly your event is. Your staff was amazing and the festival's atmosphere was very down to Earth. I will be back!"

To further the Detroit Docs mission to provide resources to the film community, six workshops and panel discussions were held at WSU locations, with topics including Final Cut Pro tips, labor organizing, copyright law and public domain from a producer's perspective, and others.



Harvey Ovshinsky receives his Career Achievement Award

Audience Choice Award Winners

The Audience Choice Award winners (chosen by audience ballots) were *Lily's Detroit* by Kevin Leeser (best short), *Bums' Paradise* by Tomas McCabe and Robert Barringer (best mid-length), and *Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power* by Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts (best feature-length).

Michigan Student Competition Award Winners

With a mission to give up and coming filmmakers airtime, Detroit Docs includes a paneled student film competition. Filmmaker Natasha Beste won with her short, *Pottinger*, a story about a young artist.

Career Achievement Award

Harvey Ovshinsky, "one of this country's finest storytellers," (*Detroit News*), received an award for his significant contributions to documentary film. A Detroit native, Ovshinsky was a young underground intellectual when he started *The Fifth Estate*, one of the nation's oldest underground papers. After experiences in radio, film, video and television, Ovshinsky began HKO Media, Inc.

It was truly a great weekend, and without question we certainly walked away with some ideas and lessons that will allow us to really put Detroit Docs on the map as one of the premier festivals of its kind in the country.

We thank all of you who attended, as well as those who worked so hard as volunteers throughout the weekend. We are already fast at work on planning for 2005 and will have much to report in our spring newsletter, which will be out in mid April. Stay tuned!



The Festival Kickoff Party packs a crowd at Wayne State University



Detroit Docs staffers Tod Hardin, Chris Wainy & Lucie Bourgeau with Wayne State University President Irvin Reid



Best Feature-Length: Negroes with Guns

Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts



Best Short: Lily's Detroit
Kevin Leeser

2004 Detroit Docs Audience Award Winners



Best Mid-Length: Bum's Paradise
Tomas McCabe and Robert Barringer

Detroit Film Office Forum

On Thursday, March 10, from 6 to 8pm, the Detroit Film Office is introducing their first forum/workshop of the year – The DFO "Show & Share" Networking Forum. The event is a networking opportunity for the Detroit film community and will be held at the Charles M. Wright Museum of African American History. Call Satina Maddox for more details (313) 224-6999.

Detroit Film Center Open House

Have you been wondering about the DFC? Where they're at downtown and who's running the show? If so, we recommend attending their Open House on Friday, February 25th. Staff will be on hand to demo equipment, provide a tour, talk about classes, workshops and other activities, convince you to become a member and generally just hang out and chat. PLUS, don't miss their Monthly Mixers beginning in March. For more details, visit www.detroitfilm.org or call (313) 961-9936