

Keeping it Real Weird

AUSTIN'S SXSW FEST IS LIKE NO OTHER

By Laura Nathan

Long gone are the days when Austin, Texas was merely a breeding-ground for progressive types, presidential hopefuls, and music junkies. As home to the South-by-Southwest Film Festival (SXSW), Austin has become the independent filmmaker's Eden. As first time filmmaker Allison Berg explains it, "I thought [SXSW] was one of the best festivals for my film to get into . . . I think you have maybe a more laid-back crowd, but a great attendance in getting your film going. I think everyone applies to all the big

film school to finding funding to the digital revolution. Meanwhile, SXSW helps "Keep Austin Weird" by preserving its creative, anti-corporate aura, and celebrating films that go where no filmmaker (and, in many instances, no other festival) has gone before.

For instance, in Nakajima's *After the Apocalypse* (for which he serves as writer/editor/producer/director/co-star), SXSW attendees were taken to a new realm of living. Featuring five characters' struggles to satiate their most basic needs after hazardous gases deprive them of their voices, this virtually silent black-and-white film invites viewers to imagine what life might look like if the contemporary prophecies of nuclear or chemical war came true. The world that the characters live in might not be pretty, but Nakajima's film beautifully captures human abilities to communicate even in the absence of speech.

Similarly, *Witches in Exile*, a brilliant documentary directed by Berg, introduces viewers to a land and plight that seem as foreign to the film industry as they do to most Americans. Filmed in Northern Ghana, *Witches* features interviews with four women who have been accused of witchcraft, banished from their homes, and subsequently sent to witch camps where they know no one. Winner of SXSW's Special Jury Award for a Documentary Feature, the film and its award are a testament to Berg's skill as a filmmaker, SXSW's refusal to judge solely on either experience or subject matter, and the desire of the SXSW audience to be challenged and educated.

This audience is, in fact, one of the primary reasons why Kris Lefcoe chose SXSW as the festival at which to premiere his film, *Public Domain*, a very smart satire of reality television shows. "SXSW seems like exactly my speed of festival . . . everyone is really cool. Austin and the audience here," she explained. "[*Public Domain*] is a very music-themed movie. Though the concept isn't about music, I think music fans will get a kick out of it." But like many other films screening at SXSW, that kick doesn't divorce the audience from questions about larger social issues.

Like *Public Domain*, Morgan Spurlock's hilarious but disconcerting film, *Super Size Me*, found its perfect match in an audience committed to keeping Austin weird by preventing corporate colonization of the city's independent spirit. Divulging what happened when an otherwise healthy Spurlock ate nothing but McDonald's food three times a day for one month, *Super Size Me* screened at Austin's Paramount Theater before 1,200 viewers.

While both Berg and Spurlock's publicist, Nicolette Aizenberg, likened the energy level at *Super Size Me*'s first screening in "the live music capital of the world" to that of a rock concert, Austin lived up to its name several other times during SXSW. That is, SXSW featured an abundance of highly acclaimed music documentaries, which explored genres such as pop, blues, and hip-hop. Topping this list was George Hickenlooper's *Mayor of the Sunset Strip*, which uses pop impresario Rodney Bingenheimer and his friends (ranging from David Bowie to the band No Doubt) as a case study to critique the role that fame and celebrity play in Western culture. Leaving his Austin audience deep in awe and contemplation, Hickenlooper ensured that music and film fans alike had something to chew on for some time to come.

The same could be said for the vast array of political documentaries that



ones, and I think this one, especially after last year, is getting right up there."

In its eleventh year, SXSW is in the top five on *Film Threat*'s Chris Gore's list of festivals where filmmakers and their films need to be seen. But unlike other more elite festivals, SXSW's reputation derives from its independent, friendly spirit and its interest in catering to both first-time filmmakers and veterans. Industry veterans participate in panel discussions that offer aspiring and burgeoning filmmakers like Yasuaki Nakajima advice on everything from