
A “Farm System” in an Emerging Texas Film Festival Circuit

By Ted Fisher

One: Outside and Inside

It's April, I'm in Fredericksburg, Texas, and it's hot and windy.

In another part of the state, 300 miles northeast, tornado conditions are building. It's fine here, however, if you're used to Texas weather. It's high noon, and I'm standing just outside the Fritztown Cinema. I'm nervous and windblown and the sun is at that Texas temperature where you'll be okay if you walk slowly, but don't push your luck.

Our screening is tomorrow. Our short documentary *The Texas Sun* has now appeared at two film festivals. It will go on, after this one, to five more Texas fests. From its premiere (Thin Line Film Festival, in Denton) to its finale (Deep in the Heart Film Festival, in Waco) it will be on a circuit of small Texas film festivals for exactly one year.

28 million people live in Texas, roughly equivalent to the 50th largest country in the world, and the state boasts the 10th largest economy in the world. Major film festivals like South by Southwest Film Festival (SXSW) and a dozen lesser-known Texas festivals provide significant film industry engagement with the region. Yet the most valuable recent development in Texas film culture may be the rapid growth of an interior-facing “Texas-centric” film festival circuit across the immense state, allowing for the development of a unique flavor of independent filmmaking practice.

I take a deep breath and prepare to go inside. I see a shape moving along the side of the highway that runs in front of the theater. It's an armadillo, as if sent by Central Casting, waddling toward the north.

Two: Inside and Outside

My wife and I had come to the Hill Country Film Festival and the town of Fredericksburg via a long and beautiful drive through the blooming Texas wildflowers that cover the rolling hills in spring. Driving in, you get the idea very quickly: it's a town for vacationers. It celebrates the German settler heritage of the region, thriving agriculture, and cultural leisure. The population is 10,000.

There are distillers, vintners, and brewers. This works well for the

filmmakers, as the festival sets up a friendly tent with Shiner beer, Pedernales wine, Texas hot sauces of all kinds, and a high level of attention from the festival programmers, staff, crew, and volunteers. We meet some of the filmmakers: from Austin, an hour away; from New York, a three-hour flight; from Hollywood, a distance measured in dollars rather than miles.

In the tent, we spend our time speaking with Samuel Z. P. Thomas and Louis Hunter, here with a short dramatic film called *The Usual Silence*. The festival hosts several good workshop discussions. At one of these, the duo asks about starting a film festival. The advice: don't do it.

Keith Maitland, a rising documentary star with strong Texas ties, is here with two films. On Friday he shows *Tower*, about a 1966 mass shooting at the University of Texas. On Saturday we also see his Texas-centric *A Song for You: The Austin City Limits Story*. Both have already screened at SXSW, and both will go on to long festival runs worldwide.

Three: Outliers

Maitland's festival experience is worth considering in relation to the idea of how film festival "circuits" function. From a filmmaker's perspective, is a festival run best thought of as distribution, as marketing, or as a quest for credibility? Does the answer change if we compare international circuits against local circuits? Does Texas, being Texas, step outside this established set of ideas in some way?

In "The Film Festival Circuit" Dina Iordanova addresses one aspect of this puzzle: "It is not correct to think of festivals as a distribution network. Festivals are exhibition venues that need sporadic yet regular supply of content. The network aspect only comes later and on an ad hoc basis."[\[1\]](#)

Maitland's festival path with *Tower* makes this experience clear: the film's IMDb page shows screenings at three festivals before Hill Country, and 23 festivals after.[\[2\]](#) That's a tremendous festival run, but a skeptic could argue: from the standpoint of selling tickets, it's the same as a week of screenings in a 200-seat cinema. The cost of traveling to festivals, no matter who pays, may in fact make this effort at best a break-even expenditure, if not a loss-leader.

In terms of marketing and credibility, of course, *Tower's* net result was excellent: dozens of local news articles were generated from these screenings, and in a time-release approach that a single large media event could not equal. As well, strong reviews and festival awards bolstered the credibility of the film and the director. By June, Kino Lorber had purchased U.S. distribution rights for *Tower*, with sales of

international distribution following as the film reached other festivals. Still, Maitland is an outlier, zipping in and out at Hill Country, off to a waiting jet.

In “The Cinema Planet” Jean-Michel Frodon gets to a more specific marketing/credibility hope held by filmmakers, especially those less established than Maitland: “At a time when regular distribution circuits tend to exclude at least eighty per cent of contemporary film production, it has become apparent that festivals, together with other alternative distribution tools, may economically support the worldwide artistic dynamism of cinema.”[\[3\]](#) Addressing the “tension between *films being made* and *films being seen*, or at least seen by an appreciable number of viewers”, Frodon pushes back against the idea that simply making a film available (think of Amazon Prime, for example) allows it to be discovered and viewed by enough people to make it, eventually, profitable.[\[4\]](#)

In contrast to the simplistic belief in the mechanical efficacy of technology’s and of the market’s invisible hands, a device like a film festival can be understood to bring together what is necessary for the building of an alternative to mass marketing. It takes, and I believe this is the most important aspect here, *programming*. Programming means that there is someone there, someone who has made choices—and for various reasons a large amount of people trust these choices, and these people wish to follow the propositions of the programmer.[\[5\]](#)

Obviously, again and again Maitland’s film was “programmed” – but what about the work of the other filmmakers in the Hill Country courtesy tent, or those in the “green room” at Thin Line Film Festival, or those grazing at the snack table at Lionshead Film Festival in Dallas? How does becoming an Official Selection in a festival differ from simply posting a film online? We screen *The Texas Sun* in Block 13 of the Hill Country Film Festival, a program of documentary shorts. There are six films. Ours is the shortest, at six minutes. The longest is 27 minutes. In fact, we are all outliers. Everything programmed in the fest has beaten out – somehow – literally hundreds of films. We’re inside, in the air conditioning.

Four: Insiders

Hundreds of films? More. The small festivals that fill up the Texas map are driven by filmfreeway.com and festival acceptance emails cite the amazing number of submissions received from that platform, from all over the world. Festival rejection letters often lead with this fact as well, so you’ll understand your film was certainly good, but your hopes were capsized in the cinematic flood.

The economic viability of small Texas film festivals now relies on a

reasonable revenue stream from these submissions. It's nothing to the largest fests, but 2,000 films submitted at \$25 is significant, perhaps one pillar of a festival budget augmented by support from local businesses, city agencies, or a board of benevolent funders. In this model, ticket sales can be less important than submission fees.

Who is making all these films, fueled by the hope of being programmed?

Start with the map of Texas and add a layer showing universities and community colleges with film programs, then another with commercial hubs employing corporate videographers dreaming of proving themselves. There's an immense pool of talent looking for an outlet, but frustrated with the odds at Sundance, Slamdance, or Raindance.

Who is watching all these films, and why aren't they at home with Netflix?

Banish, please, your prejudice that second-tier Texas festivals will be unsophisticated. Read again that the filmmakers are from contemporary academic filmmaking programs, and that there is a massive pool of film submissions available to the programmers. These conditions push toward a surprising atmosphere for fest curation: to get people in the door, the program must be more interesting than your streaming queue, and the Q&A session needs to feel like an event.

One surprise from our run in the Texas fests: some programmers reveal an awareness of trends just emerging in the most adventurous European and Asian fests, and sometimes pull in short films of note for their "North American Premiere". At two Texas fests, we see the Norwegian short *Tre dalmatinere* and the jokes go over just fine. The village of Gran looks surprisingly like the Hill Country landscape. One programmer tells me of a wave of animation submissions from Iran, where some film school must have cited his listing on Film Freeway. The border between Texas and the world is porous.

This curatorial sophistication and surfeit of available films, however, bumps up against local realities. "As a festival programmer, I am always listening to what the audience would like more of", notes Robert Perez, Jr., co-founder of the South Texas Underground Film Festival. "Sometimes it can be a mini-struggle with the festival mission, since we have programming that can be challenging for the general audience."[\[6\]](#)

The smaller fests I've attended, especially those in their early years, host an audience that is often 33% filmmakers and their friends and family. The more established fests reach out and lay down a root system. In Texas, this often means "family film" blocks filling challenging

programming slots (like early morning) and a few slates of local history or community-based films. Late night slots shift to genre films. Films with a built-in audience screen in prime time, like Chip Hale's *Sweethearts of the Gridiron*, which filled Thin Line Film Festival's Campus Theater with past, present, and future Kilgore Rangerettes in uniform, and included an enthusiastic performance from the famed drill team.

Five: Stakeholders

Ragan Rhyne's "Film Festival Circuits and Stakeholders" cites a complex balance of forces:

[t]he integration of what we call the festival circuit is maintained through the discursive

and economic articulation of a discrete and new cultural industry. It is upheld by the various stakeholders - filmmakers and studios, journalists and press agents, professionals and programmers, local cultural councils and supranational agencies, tourist boards, cinéphiles and others - who have particular interests in seeing the network proliferate.[\[7\]](#)

Does this stakeholder model help us understand smaller Texas festivals? The "players" may match these categories, but the outcomes differ in scale and character.

Filmmakers: Four weeks before our visit to Hill Country, we'd screened at the Interurban Film Festival, hosted in the small town of Denison - population 22,000 — in the North East corner of Texas. The festival handled everything well, but it was impossible to fill the Rialto Theater, a massive movie palace that had lived on Main Street since 1920. The carrying capacity of any festival has its limits, and the moderate crowds meant filmmakers felt little energy returned from the spread-out audience. Yet I heard no grumbling from the filmmakers. We had been given a forum, and that would move us forward on our path.

Journalists: The *Herald Democrat*, which traces its roots back to 1879, interviewed me about the festival. The paper's circulation is under 20,000, so I doubt this created the hoped-for "written festival" Daniel Dayan describes in "Looking for Sundance: The Social Construction of a Film Festival".[\[8\]](#) I did what I could, stumbling a bit over the message:

"Film festivals are very alive," Fisher said. "They are something that a community really needs ... enriching experiences that you need and you don't realize until you walk out of the theater."[\[9\]](#)

Programmers: At a party for the filmmakers in Denison I met people from

Dallas and Austin, but no one from Hollywood. The programmers drew from a pool of Texas filmmakers and provided an opportunity that benefitted us without competition from those already further established. In return, they received enthusiastic makers with content that matched the festival's needs.

Cultural Councils: At Fort Worth Indie Film Showcase films are categorized so that a Texas film is "Domestic" and a film from anywhere else in the United States is "Foreign". (Anything from outside the U.S. is "International".) While the circuit I'm discussing here varies greatly from fest to fest - and some do pull films directly from Sundance or other typical first stops toward theatrical release - this "made in Texas" credo creates strong alignment with those who promote tourism, film production tax breaks, or cinema as part of Texas identity. I have on my desk a pen from the Fort Worth Film Commission. If you tilt it, a tiny parade of Texas Longhorns travels through the Stockyards.

"Supporting local (Texas) filmmakers is a major part of our festival programming strategy", Chad Mathews, Executive Director of the Hill Country Film Festival & Society, tells me.

First, it shows that we care for our community of artists. We want them to succeed, so if programming a number of selections helps those filmmakers get to the next level, we want to do it. Secondly, there is an economic effect of programming local. More than likely a Texas-based filmmaker will be able to attend our festival and that always has a domino effect - cast, crew, friends, and family also attending in support of the film. The third aspect of programming local is our attempt at making the first contact with Texas filmmakers who we think will make larger steps into the industry whether in Hollywood or as a filmmaker remaining at home. If these filmmakers have a great initial experience at our festival, they are more likely to return with other quality projects and they become a festival advocate among people that they meet within the industry.[\[10\]](#)

The specific situation of interior-facing Texas film festivals creates a moment where most interests align, and where an essentially cooperative mood prevails. Is this a sustainable model? Does this collaboration with Texas filmmakers work regarding festival economics, or does it fulfill other aspects of the festival's mission? Robert Perez, Jr. tells me:

This can be a "sustainable" model, because it guarantees a set program of filmmakers that are becoming familiar with your local audiences. This view can translate into more ticket sales, and if the filmmaker comes back to your town it fits various festival missions as far as bringing one-on-one interactions with filmmakers and the community, filmmakers

meeting other filmmakers. But the biggest one thing, I feel, is the chance for the seasoned filmmaker visiting with first time filmmakers and guests to your festival promoting your festival and mentoring the younger filmmakers.[\[11\]](#)

I asked Perez if I'm right to picture this emerging circuit as a sort of parallel to the "farm teams" that so many sports organizations use, nurturing developing players and creating a "proving grounds" without the immense pressure of the major leagues. Just a few miles from where Perez screens films, the Corpus Christi Hooks play baseball at Whataburger Field, capacity 7,050. The Hooks compete in the "Texas League", serving as the farm team for the Houston Astros, the 2017 World Series champions - the current top team in professional baseball.[\[12\]](#)

I believe I have seen this "farm team" aspect in various festivals around Texas and I do believe it could be an accurate way to look at it. I have seen this at a lot of genre fests (Horror, Sci-fi, LGBTQ). One example that comes to mind is Texas Frightmare Weekend, which is in its 13th year. I had a producer/actor/screenwriter friend who had his first experience of the fest as a fan of the horror genre. He got to meet the festival organizers and made friends. He was part of a production, as an actor, screening the following year and he reconnected with everyone again. The years to come, which became annual visits, were as a screenwriter and producer of his own short films and eventually feature films. As the festival grew, he was developing as a filmmaker with it.[\[13\]](#)

Six: Come and Take It

With Hill Country in our rear-view mirror, we move on through the circuit with *The Texas Sun*. We've stolen this strategy of staying on the circuit from Samuel Z.P. Thomas and Louis Hunter, the two men who were told not to start a film festival. This is Texas, so of course they started a film festival.

The 2017 Deep in the Heart Film Festival is probably the best organized first-year festival ... ever. Samuel and Louis took notes on everything other fests did right, then smoothed the rough edges. They've focused on local roots by building a deep festival staff, connected with the community in ways that go beyond donated food and scattered window posters. They integrate everything with the Waco Hippodrome Theatre, which is about the right size for this type of fest. The screenings go at a good pace, avoiding dead time or overloading, and these are punctuated with Q&A sessions. The fest is well-programmed, accessible but adventurous enough.

Waco, Texas, has a population over 100,000, and sits metaphorically in the middle of everything. It's between Dallas and Austin, and it's somewhere between a good economic outlook and a bad one depending on the time of day and who you ask. These conditions position it as a place that can support a film festival ... possibly. A strong argument can be made for the benefits a thriving festival could bring.

The fest hosted its second event in 2018, and, watching from a distance, I think it's a success. I'm hoping to send a film there in 2019, if they can hold off all those forces that can take down a festival. There's a long tradition of that kind of last stand in Texas, for better or worse. I'm rooting for them.

Notes

[1] Dina Iordanova, "The Film Festival Circuit," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 113.

[2] *TOWER* (2016), IMDb, accessed April 1, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5116410/releaseinfo>.

[3] Jean-Michel Frodon, "The Cinema Planet," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina

Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 206.

[4] Italics in original. Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 207.

[6] Robert Perez, Jr., email correspondence with the author, March 29, 2018.

[7] Ragan Rhyne, "Film Festival Circuits and Stakeholders," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 135.

[8] Daniel Dayan, "Looking for Sundance. The Social Construction of a Film Festival," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013), 45-58.

[9] Ted Fisher quoted in: Kim Burdi, "Interurban Film Festival Offers Rewarding Experience to Viewers, Filmmakers," HeraldDemocrat.com,

April 2, 2016, <http://www.heralddemocrat.com/news/local/interurban-film-festival-offers-rewarding-experience-viewers-filmmakers>.

[10] Chad Mathews, email correspondence with the author, April 6, 2018.

[11] Robert Perez, Jr., email correspondence with the author, March 29, 2018.

[12] "List of Minor League Baseball Leagues and Teams," Wikipedia, last modified April 3, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Minor_League_Baseball_leagues_and_teams#Texas_League.

[13] Robert Perez, Jr., email correspondence with the author, March 29, 2018.

Notes on the Contributor

Ted Fisher is an American director specializing in arts and culture documentaries. His short films have screened at over 30 festivals around the world. He produced 32 episodes of the "Frugal Traveler" series for The New York Times, winning the Webby Award in the Travel Category for Online Film & Video in both 2008 and 2009. He earned an M.F.A. in Photography in 2003 from Claremont Graduate University. In 2017 he returned to school, attending the Filmmaking M.F.A. program at the University of Edinburgh. Filmography: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3299032/>

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