



Still in its
infancy, the
Wisconsin
Film Festival
is filling seats
and earning
accolades.

reel time

By Michael Penn MA'97

OF THE 138 FILMS shown during last year's Wisconsin Film Festival, almost all went off without a hitch. One that didn't was a three-hour story about Inuit life called *Atanarjuat — The Fast Runner*, which accidentally began without sound. For a few minutes, the film rolled wordlessly on, until projectionists got the problem fixed and started it from the beginning.

Remarkably, no one seemed to mind. There were no catcalls or disgusted groans from audience members. "People just took in what was there," says Liesel de Boor, a filmmaker who was in the audience that night. "They were happy to watch it that way. It was almost like it was a treat to get to see it in a different way."

Those few moments of silence say a great deal about the kind of event that the festival has become. Starting in 1999 as a modest on-campus showcase for a few obscure films, the festival has mushroomed into a regional happening, showing more films to more people at more Madison theaters. Last year, about 18,500 tickets were sold for the four-day fete — a 30 percent jump from 2001 and six times the number of people who attended the first year. Local arts writers have described it as a "monster hit," a "critical and audience blockbuster," and "a first-rate Midwestern cultural expo."

But such thesaurus-mining praise only begins to get at the spirit that seems to take hold of downtown Madison during the festival. In short order, the event has become the kind of phenomenon that generates its own buzz. People stop each other in the street to talk about it. Gossip flows. Tickets are scarce. Nearly one-third of the movies shown last year sold out before the first reel ever ran, and many of the rest — like *The Fast Runner*, which nearly filled the Orpheum's Main Theatre — attracted long lines of people who sometimes queued up without knowing what movie they were waiting to see.

Organizers expect similar hordes this year, when the festival takes over six Madison theaters from March 27 to 30. Mary Carbine '86, MA'88, who directs the festival for the UW-Madison Arts Institute, its presenting organization, says she began fielding calls for tickets in December, two months before the festival announced what films it would show.

"There's a real sense of excitement at being able to see all these different types of films together in one event," she says.

But it's the kind of audience, rather than the size, that sets the festival apart from your average trip to the local multiplex. This is no multiplex crowd, and these are no multiplex movies.

In these days of test marketing and targeted demographics, genuine surprise hardly ever enters a movie theater. Major motion pictures are carefully tailored to meet audience expectations, and when disappointments are expensive, spontaneity is expendable. Film festivals, on the other hand, typically piece together variegated rosters of foreign, independent, and experimental film. Surprise is the house special.

"A festival is like a game," says James Kreul '92, MA'96, a film studies graduate student who has had a hand in

programming all five Wisconsin festivals. "The way you pick a [standard] movie is that you wait for a review, or word of mouth, or something to let you know that it's worth your time. At a festival, you can't wait for the buzz. The reason it's fun is because you have to just dive in and take chances. Sometimes you misfire, but sometimes you have this liberating, exhilarating experience, because you had no idea that a film would take you to those places."

It's like a giant, celluloid buffet, where there's every reason to try new tastes. And if the patient way in which audiences digested the unintentionally silent *Fast Runner* shows anything, it's that Madison is ready for the unexpected.

"I just thought it was the most incredible audience I'd seen," says de Boor, a Madison native who came back from New York City to show her film, *Cat Lady*. "I remember thinking that this would only happen in Madison."

Few people will mistake

Madison for a Midwestern tinseltown. Yet the trappings of civic cinephilia are there. UW-Madison hosts frequent film series and owns one of the largest archives of film history and ephemera in



The Wisconsin Film Festival earned its marquee billing last year, drawing long lines of movie enthusiasts at the Orpheum and other downtown venues.

the world. And downtown is home to the gloriously restored Orpheum Theatre, as well as the Four-Star Video Heaven rental shop that Roger Ebert once called “the best video store outside Chicago.”

“There has been a particularly long interest in film here, going back to the time when I was a young assistant professor,” says Tino Balio, executive director of the Arts Institute, who came to Madison in 1966. (See related story, page 27.) “In those days, you could see a foreign film on almost any night.”

The ultimate hallmark of a movie town, though, is a film festival of its own. As many as 1,200 communities around the world have them, from the big and glamorous ones at Sundance and Cannes, to idiosyncratic little celebrations organized around a specific director or theme. (Get your tickets now for the New Orleans Worst Film Festival, devoted to the most dismal in new cinema.)

Ideally, festivals are more than just agglomerations of film. They bring together communities of movie lovers, united by popcorn and long hours of sitting in dark rooms, who give the events ethos and attitude. At Cannes, for example, there’s an overwhelming air of celebrity, and who you see is as important as what you see. At Sundance, industry networking is the name of the game. At Slamdance, an alternative festival that runs parallel to its more famous cousin, it’s about slamming the films at Sundance.

“Festivals are about celebrating the whole idea of film,” says Wendi Weger ’98, one of the Wisconsin festival’s original programmers, who now coordinates the New York Underground and Hampsons film festivals. “There are loads of reasons that films get into commercial theaters, and many of those reasons aren’t based at all on the merit of the films.” Festivals, she says, give films outside the mainstream a chance, while at the same time allowing audiences to appreciate a fuller scope of creative work.

Wisconsin’s foray into that realm began, as do all good Badger ideas, at a tailgater. In February 1997, the Wisconsin Film Office, a division of the state



ERIC THADSEN

A film festival isn’t just about seeing the films — it can also bring chances to see the people who made them. Last year, director Arliss Howard, right, and actress Debra Winger sat down to talk about their movie, *Big Bad Love*, with film critic Michael Wilmington.

tourism department, hosted a party for Hollywood insiders, many of them former Badgers who had gone on to influential roles in movie production and distribution. Because the business of the film office is business — and, specifically, generating some for Wisconsin — its officials were less interested in community-building than in getting the Hollywood film industry to take notice of (and, in turn, make movies in) the Badger state.

Over brats and beer, the partiers plotted an event that would put Madison on the film map. A few months later, state officials initiated the Great Wisconsin Film Festival, an event whose name signaled its optimism. The big draw was to be an appearance by Robert Redford, who had agreed to drop in to accept something called the Cheesehead Award — a self-deprecating honor that promised the sort of klieg-lighted celebrity that was sure to accompany any Hollywood megastar on State Street.

But Redford later backed out, beginning a string of setbacks that threatened to end the event before it could begin. The festival was initially postponed from October 1998 until

April 1999. Then, with two months to go and still no big-name premiere to anchor the event, the state gave up and canceled nearly all its plans.

About all that remained was a schedule of films to be shown on campus, which originally was supposed to be a side dish to the big feast going on up State Street. Sponsored by the Arts Institute and programmed by students Kreul and Weger, the films were mostly off-the-radar independents and documentaries; there were certainly no Redfords among them. But the planners figured that, even if a Great Wisconsin Film Festival was no longer possible, they had a shot at a pretty good one.

“We had a good idea of what we wanted to do, and we thought it would have been crazy to cancel the whole thing,” says Kreul, who was then a program assistant for the UW’s Cinematheque film series. “We knew that if there was no festival at all, if we let the whole thing end, there probably wouldn’t be any film festival in Madison for a long time. We had to take advantage of that momentum.”

Kreul and Weger, then a senior communication arts major who coordinated

the Wisconsin Union's Starlight Cinema, stuck with the goal that guided their campus programming efforts: find high-quality movies that were out of the mainstream and stood little chance of enjoying wide commercial release. "We thought it was very important to build it from within the film community," says Weger.

The festival featured sixteen films, headlined by an eighty-minute, black-and-white comedy titled *Man of the Century*, produced by Adam Abraham, a first-time filmmaker and the twenty-eight-year-old brother of a UW student. The rest of the schedule offered little high-caliber celebrity, but some tantalizing story lines. One film, made by Carrie Ansell '93, revolved around what goes on (aside from the obvious) in the rest rooms of New York City nightclubs. Another was a restored copy of the 1928 Frank Capra film *The Matinee Idol*, which had almost disappeared from circulation. The state film office also came through by landing Jim Abrahams x'66, of *Airplane!* fame, for a lecture on comedy.

The screenings were free, and, although Kreul and Weger had toiled to arrange appearances by filmmakers and participatory discussions, there were few trappings that evoked a "festival" atmosphere. "It felt more like a really great weekend of films," Kreul says.

Opening night was the last Thursday in April, when students were busy with term papers and preparing for spring semester finals. And it didn't help that Mother Nature picked the same weekend for the debut of warm weather.

"It was gorgeous," Kreul recalls. The sun broke through the interminable gray of Madison spring, and temperatures neared seventy degrees. It seemed like the weekend's hottest seat would be a prime Terrace chair, not one for, say, *Outer and Inner Space*, a nearly plotless experimental video shot by Andy Warhol in 1965.

"If you had a choice between sitting outside on the first nice day in a long time, or going inside to watch this minimalist Warhol film, well, I know what most people would do," Kreul says. "I

went with Warhol." To his surprise, so did a lot of other people. Three thousand people attended the festival that year — and almost all thought it was, well, great.

Perhaps the most important

thing that happened during the first festival was that Mary Carbine came. A graduate of UW-Madison's film department, Carbine had been working for Wisconsin Public Television as a fund raiser. But she was fresh from stints in Los Angeles and Chicago, where she worked for a collection of film organizations, including the University of Chicago Film Studies Center, IFP/Midwest, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It seemed obvious to Kreul that she should be involved.

Kreul invited her to take part in a panel on the future of the film festival, which took place on May 2, the last day of the 1999 event.

On May 3, he says, Carbine essentially began running the next festival. "If Mary hadn't been involved, year two would not have happened. There is no doubt about that," Kreul says. "She turned it into a professional film festival."

Carbine has a caffeinated personality that matches the intensity of her blazer-red hair. A fitness fanatic who is training for a triathlon, she had not only the experience, but the resolve, to build on what the students had started. Living inside the Hollywood bubble had taught her not only the operations and language of the movie business, but its often quirky realities. Once, at a Women in Film gala, Carbine was appointed to escort Robin Williams through a back entrance where he wouldn't be mobbed by crowds. That's how things got done out there; most of the really interesting stuff happened in the backrooms.

After the modest success of the 1999 event, the Arts Institute allocated money to hire Carbine half time to coordinate future events. She was, says Tino Balio, the only person who possibly could do the job. Carbine combined the talents of a film programmer, a fund raiser, an event

manager, and a public relations agent in one body — a blessing, Balio says, given the festival's scant budget for bodies.

"Really, we need three people," Balio says, "but we can only afford half of one. Fortunately, Mary gives us about 110 percent."

In her first year as director, Carbine more than tripled the number of films shown, expanded the festival off-campus into downtown theaters, and turned screenings into ticketed events. The planning team also scheduled the festival for earlier in spring, hoping to avoid a repeat of the previous year's crowd-thinning weather. With the event still half a year away, someone noticed that they had chosen the same weekend as the NCAA men's basketball championships.

Kreul recalls dismissing the concern. "I said, 'Don't worry. There's no chance Wisconsin will even get close to the Final Four,'" he laughs.

But, as it turned out, the Badgers tipped off in Indianapolis right in the middle of the festival, competing with at least three movie showings and stealing the spotlight. Walter Mirisch '42, the longtime independent producer who was there to appear at a tribute honoring his career, carried around a portable television, so that he could catch the Badgers between films.

Yet the filmgoing public was undeterred. Even screenings that went head-to-head with the game sold out, and, when the stubs were totaled, the festival had drawn in twelve thousand people — more than twice Carbine's own projections. "I think at that point I realized that this was going to be big," she says.

These days, Carbine has what many people might consider the perfect job, given that a lot of her work is watching movies. But there are so many movies. She sees three hundred films each year, many of them during blitzkrieg trips to film festivals around the country, where she works overtime to recruit films for Madison's event. At Toronto's ten-day international film festival in September, she will take in about fifty screenings. At Sundance, she'll try to catch another

twenty-five. What she hasn't seen herself she gets a read on by working the phones, staying in constant contact with critics, fellow programmers, film professors, and others who closely follow moviemaking.

"Being able to do that is the part that reminds me why I do all the other things," she says.

As the festival has grown, so has the effort needed to pull it off. Carbine manages arrangements for the more than one hundred events during the long weekend, including appearances by some sixty filmmakers and other speakers. She sweats all the details personally, from shipping films to booking hotel rooms to approving marketing materials. Finding money is never far down the to-do list. Last year's festival cost about \$650,000, and ticket revenue covered less than 10 percent of the tab. More than 80 percent of the budget comes from in-kind donations; the rest consists of cash gifts, secured from as many as fifty companies and organizations. "It's not just a matter of getting a bunch of films and showing them," says Balio.

Building the Lego-like structure of screenings, lectures, and other events takes months of viewing, reviewing, and recruiting. This year, Carbine's office received 170 tapes from filmmakers hoping to be part of the festival, and each was screened carefully. Most of the films, though, are solicited by Carbine and a handful of programming volunteers, including several students from the UW's communication arts department. A few themes usually emerge in the final schedule, but films are chosen primarily based on what's good and what's available.

In many cases, the festival organizers try to woo not only the films, but also the filmmakers, to Madison. Screenings are often followed by audience dialogues with the people behind the films, helping to ensure that the festival offers more than just passive viewing. "We always try to find ways to create a filmgoing community so that we can foster a deeper understanding of the film and the process of making it," says Carbine.

Work on the 2003 line-up was ongoing as *On Wisconsin's* deadline arrived. (For a few highlights, see below, or check wifilmfest.org for a full schedule.) But expect the festival to follow the pattern of years past, offering diverse selections encompassing foreign and domestic features, documentaries, new media, animation, and revivals of forgotten classics. There will be some familiar names and faces, including an appearance by Roger Ebert, but most of the films will arrive with more hope than hype, having drawn little attention from mainstream audiences or press.

But that doesn't mean that they won't. Festivals usually operate ahead of the grapevine, often giving audiences their first taste of movies that may go on to bigger things. In past years, Wisconsin's festival has featured such emerging independent hits as *The Straight Story*, *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, and *Y tu mamá también*, as well as dozens of other films on the cusp of notoriety. Typical of this year's crop is *Better Luck Tomorrow*, whose director, Justin Lin, recently graced the cover of *Filmmaker*

magazine. "The fun of a festival is presenting and seeing those films that will be big in the specialty arena ahead of everyone else," says Carbine.

The festival's roots, however, are in the joys of discovering the next little thing — in seeing movies that have only a remote chance of appearing on the radar screen of the wider public. For all its growing pomp, the event is still deeply provincial, with about one-fifth of the films coming from writers and directors with Wisconsin ties. And, as much as the Wisconsin Film Festival is about bringing good movies to audiences, it's also about bringing good audiences to the movies.

"It's just a thrill to show your movie to audiences like the ones in Madison," says Liesel de Boor, who has screened *Cat Lady*, a dark comedy, at festivals throughout the country. "I got to sit in the audience and hear people laugh at my movie. And that's kind of the whole reason you make movies — for audiences like that." 🍿

Michael Penn MA'97 is senior editor of *On Wisconsin* and not the brother of Sean, although he loved his work in *Sweet and Lowdown*.

ON THE MARQUEE

More than one hundred films are on tap for the fifth annual Wisconsin Film Festival, representing the usual eclectic mix of independent, world, and experimental film. Movies will be shown March 27–30 at the Orpheum Theatre, the Bartell Theatre, the Club Majestic, and the Madison Art Center, as well as University Square Theatre, the Memorial Union Play Circle, and the Cinematheque screens on campus.

A few of the films likely to be talked about include *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, and *Satin Rouge*. The festival will also highlight new African films from Tunisia, Senegal, Rwanda, the Ivory Coast, and beyond, as well as profile works dealing with science in culture.

Another showcase will be experimental and avant-garde film, including an appearance by influential filmmaker Michael Snow, who made the 1960s film *Wavelength*, widely considered a classic of the genre. Snow will show selections from his digital work, as well as a new feature film.

"There are just so few opportunities to see films like this," says Carbine of Snow's work. "But really, I think these films are more accessible than people may realize."

For ticket information and show times, visit wifilmfest.org or call (877) 963-FILM (3456).

A GOLDEN AGE

THE WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL REVIVES MEMORIES OF MADISON'S LONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE MOVIES.



A campus kiosk advertises a typical night at the movies during the 1970s.

By Michael Wilmington x'68

When I got a call several years ago inviting me to attend the first Wisconsin Film Festival — as a representative of Madison's "Movie Golden Age" — I was happy to accept. But why had it taken so long?

The Madison I knew — where I came at the age of seventeen to study English, where I acted onstage in the Wisconsin Union Theater and elsewhere, where I went to the Field House and Camp Randall for sports and to the Majestic, Orpheum, and Memorial Union Play Circle for movies, where I marched against the Vietnam War, wrote for newspapers, and became a certified member of the notorious Madison Film Mafia — no longer really exists. Some of my old film friends are still in town, but most have scattered to the far corners of the country. I see them only rarely now, when my job takes me to the coasts or when I bus back to Madison.

And the Golden Age, as I knew it, is long gone. The city seems less volatile and exciting, the student body more

complacent. And that wonderful treasure trove of movies on campus, which marked Madison in the sixties and seventies, has largely vanished — except when the festival and a few other venues try to bring it back. Once, there were dozens of movies shown every week, and passionate buffs arguing about them everywhere. Now, the campus kiosks are bare of the movie posters that once crowded them top to bottom. The movies have largely ended.

The Golden Age overlapped the Vietnam War protest years and was, in many ways, part of the same cultural ferment. During those years, amazingly, in addition to everything else happening, the UW played host to a film culture and community that matched the activity, intensity, and productivity of the more famous film communities at UCLA or NYU. Movies were critiqued, movies were shot, and most of all movies were shown — an endless stream every week, not just in the regular theaters, but in campus auditoriums and classrooms, and off-campus

student centers and hangouts (like the Green Lantern Eating Cooperative), where sixteen-millimeter films were screened every night. It was a fabulously eclectic bill of fare, from *The Battle of Algiers*, *City Lights*, and *Wild Strawberries* to *Bringing Up Baby*, *Notorious*, and *Duck Soup*.

We were crazy about movies. And we all seemed to know each other. We wrote about films, studied them in classes, and joined film societies and selection committees. When you're young, you're often poor in money (as I was), but rich in acquaintance — and you often make the friends and enemies who will haunt your whole life.

Once, I could walk down State Street and almost immediately bump into someone I knew — or two or three. Sometimes, since it was an age of student protest, we'd emulate Barry Fitzgerald as Michael O'Connell in *The Quiet Man*, and "talk a little treason." But more often than not, we would talk movies — talk about John Ford and Jean Luc Godard, and the morality of tracking shots, and the truth twenty-four times a second, and whether Ingmar Bergman was really a better director than Don Siegel. We would pore over the latest issues of the various journals, for which most of us wrote: *The Velvet Light Trap*, a homegrown independent film magazine with an international reputation; the *Daily Cardinal*, which, from 1971 to 1973, may have had the best student film reviewing staff ever assembled; or *TakeOver*, a proudly sensational underground paper of alternative culture and outright scandal.

At night, if there wasn't an uprising somewhere, we'd settle down to another movie in another classroom, put on by one of the many film societies that flourished on campus then. There were several dozen societies at one time or another, with names like the Fertile Valley Film Society, the Praetorius, El Dorado, Phoenix, Green Lantern, and, most venerable of all, the Wisconsin Film Society — the one film group that predated all the others, and, sadly, the last to fall, after home video killed them all.

Why did this campus film culture spring up so suddenly and why did it dis-

appear? For years, I was so caught up in that world that I couldn't have analyzed what made it special. But it's obvious that the terror and turbulence of those years had a lot to do with its birth. Violence in the world and on campus made people want to gather together, to retreat into fantasy. There was also a specific chemistry to the student body — the mix of kids from the Dairy State and kids from the East. The city kids were more fluent in art-film lore, but the country kids (like me) may have been more passionate about learning it. All of us were predisposed to the easy, cheap entertainment of movies. We sopped it all up.

Certainly I did. I came to Madison from the village of Williams Bay, Wisconsin (population: 1,114 or so, at the time), from a high school graduating class of twenty-eight. We were tiny; in the fifties and sixties, the only movie theater in the Bay was the Lakes Outdoor Theater (since demolished and replaced by a compost field) on the outskirts of town. I grew up going to see movies in the surrounding towns, becoming a devotee of Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, David Lean, and Elia Kazan. But I longed to see the more unattainable ones — the movies with subtitles that were written about in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. When I went to Madison in 1964, I had seen only two foreign films — *Rififi*, from France, and *The Magician*, from Sweden — both dubbed.

In Madison, things changed. I became active in student theater and the student paper, and I saw two movies every week, and sometimes more. Eventually, I dropped into the Wisconsin Film

Society, then ensconced in the basement auditorium of the Commerce Building (now known as Ingraham Hall). In 1967, I began writing movie reviews for the *Daily Cardinal*, an association that continued, off and on, into the seventies. That same year, I befriended Joe McBride, a tall, bespectacled Milwaukee guy who also contributed to the *Cardinal*, under its old film critic-editor Larry Cohen. The first time I saw Joe (outside of Professor Richard Byrne's film history class) was on the day of the Dow Chemical demonstrations, when he raced into the Play Circle during a showing of *They Were Expendable* to announce that students were being gassed on Bascom Hill.

Joe and I began staging plays, shooting movies, and writing film articles together, which we got published in national or international magazines. Through him, I met other Mafiosi: the darkly comic cynics Tim Onosko and Mark Bergman, and John Davis and Tom Flinn, who ran the Fertile Valley Film Society and also turned out killer riffs with the White Trash Blues Band.

It was also through Joe that I became involved with the film societies. Movies could be rented cheaply and shown cheaply; you could set up two Kodak Pageant projectors at the back of a classroom and show the films on the pull-down screens. Joe was chairman of the Wisconsin Film Society as a freshman, and he was succeeded by Wayne Merry, a frizzy-haired guy who later worked for the State Department. Bergman succeeded him, and he was followed by skinny, little Reid Rosefelt, who became a well-known film publicist, whose com-

pany, Magic Lantern, bears the name of the school's then most successful society.

Up to then, the world of student theater had eaten up most of my after-school life. But I gradually became consumed by film, as we all did. I joined the Memorial Union film committee, a contentious group that picked the films for the Play Circle. The film committee attracted all kinds of movie buffs, and it brought me in touch with faculty such as Tino Balio, D. W. Griffith scholar Russell Merritt, and David Bordwell, the ubiquitous author who shared the pages of *Film Comment* with Joe and me and later became the country's foremost academic writer on film.

Thanks to Balio and others, the university's Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research acquired the film collection of United Artists, which included movies made at Warner Brothers, RKO, and Monogram studios from the thirties through the early fifties. Inspired by the accessibility of the collection, a bearded, lanky graduate student from New Zealand named Russell Campbell started *The Velvet Light Trap*, which he typed by hand on an old manual typewriter. Russell looked something like a Hammer Studio horror movie Rasputin, but was probably the gentlest and most collegial of all of us — and his magazine gradually became world famous.

TVLT, as we nicknamed it, published thematic issues in which local writers could analyze the films in the UA collection and elsewhere. The Mafia became the staff, and, unfortunately, it was there that our film community suffered a schism that marked the beginning of the

THE MADISON MAFIA

A partial list of Madison's Golden Age vets, and what they've done lately:

Jim Abrahams x'66, co-wrote and directed *Airplane!*, *Rutles*, *Police Squad* series

Tino Balio, professor of communication arts, director of Arts Institute

Andrew Bergman MA'66, PhD'70, wrote *The Freshman*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*

Mark Bergman '69, longtime campus film coordinator; died in 2001

David Bordwell, UW professor of communication arts; author of many film books

Barry Alexander Brown, co-made *The War at Home*; editor of *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *25th Hour*; others

Russell Campbell MA'72, director of film studies, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand

Tony Chase '72, author of *Movies on Trial: The Legal System on the Silver Screen*

Lawrence D. Cohen '69, wrote *Carrie*, *Ghost Story*

Susan Dalton '66, former archivist for Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, American Film Institute

John Davis '67, comic book mogul, musician

André De Shields '70, veteran Broadway actor and director

Sandy Searles Dickinson x'68, acted in movies and television productions

Tom Flinn '66, writer, teacher, musician

Douglas Gomery MA'70, PhD'75, wrote under the alias John Montgomery; now a journalism professor

Bette Gordon '72, MA'75, MFA'76, director for movies and television

Stuart Gordon '69, wrote and directed *Re-Animator* and other horror movies

end of the Golden Age, splitting into two cliques dubbed (by Gerry Peary) the Aesthetes and the Politicos.

The Aesthetes were supposedly devoted to aesthetics above political content; more precisely, we were auteurs, devoted to the directorial achievements of the filmmakers John Ford, Hitchcock, Welles, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir, and others. The Politicos adopted the quasi-Marxist angle then popular in the groves of French academe. The Politicos mostly were film majors, and the arcane theories they studied eventually split the academic film community, as well.

Russell generously tried to keep both groups happy, alternating the magazine's theme issues between the two groups. Although there was no overt hostility at first, there were differences. And they grew. Some Politicos thought some Aesthetes were obnoxious and politically incorrect. Some Aesthetes — myself included — thought some Politicos were uptight phonies. It should have ended at that, with semihumorous clashes, but the arguments eventually broke up the staffs of both *TVLT* and the *Cardinal*, as well as the Union film committee.

When I say broke up, I'm not kidding. There was an actual brawl in the Union between Gerry and me after the Politicos ousted me from my chairmanship of the Union film committee, beginning with Mark Bergman tossing a cupful of coffee in Gerry's face, and ending with Gerry and me wrestling on the floor. Gerry and I are now friends again — I sponsored him for membership in the National Society of Film Critics. Mark, sadly, died of pancreatic

cancer a few years ago. But Tim Onosko and I have memorialized him in an annual film festival event, called "Bergman's Show." There we show the kind of noirish, auteurist cult movies Mark liked and gather to talk about the old days.

But back then it seemed deadly serious. And, actually, it was. We wrangled about movies, obsessed and fought about them, because we loved them so much. Yet, though most of the group succeeded as writers, historians, and critics, few actually achieved their real goal — which was, of course, to make films. Instead, a bunch of Madisonians not quite at the heart of the Mafia made it in Hollywood. (See the box below for details.)

The seventies were in many ways a terrible time for me. I had left school, I had no money and lived on small-job pitances and money sent by my mother — who, despite having a master's degree in art from the UW, worked in a factory. Violence was always somehow in the air. Both in my undergraduate years and afterward, I often saw my campus aflame and in riot. But I also saw and heard amazing things — and not just at the movies. For me, the whole spirit of that era is summed up by two frantic days back in 1968, when Joe and I and our buddy Steve Wonn traveled to Chicago for the Democratic national convention. In that span, I saw Luis Buñuel's *Belle De Jour* for the first time, lost my virginity, and witnessed the police-and-protestor riots from atop a van where cameramen recorded the carnage for all time.

And I also lost my heart, permanently, to the movies. We were living in

a kind of paradise — but like all false heavens, it was one that would eventually pass away.

Could it all happen again some day? It hasn't yet. Despite the flourishing of programs like the festival and Bordwell's Cinematheque, Madison now seems more an ordinary college film town. Yet there are elements that could trigger another renaissance. Projected DVD is now so refined that students may well be able to show DVDs in classrooms and start up cheap campus film programs again.

I wish they would, because now, when I walk down State Street, as I do when I visit the festival every year, I'm an outsider. I rarely see someone I know. But I do occasionally sight the ghosts. I see them by day, pouring down the sidewalks on Langdon, Mifflin, and State Streets. I watch them at night, settling into chairs at Ingraham or Van Vleck or the Social Science building. I hear the whir of the old Kodak Pageant projectors and see that magical bright beam flooding the classroom screens, and finally, I hear the deep, magical voice from my favorite movie, *Citizen Kane*, whispering, "Rosebud." I settle down in darkness. It's the last picture show all over again, and this time, it can't fade away, because it's playing in my head. It's safe and untouchable, and so are all those people — veterans of the War at Home and the War for Film, children of the Golden Age — watching it with me. ■

Michael Wilmington has reviewed films for *Isthmus*, *L.A. Weekly*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and now is the chief film critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, in addition to teaching and authoring books.

Peter Lehman '67, MA'73, PhD'78, professor and author of film criticism

Richard Lippe x'71, film critic for Canada's *CineAction* magazine

Ken Mate '68, writer, Emmy-winning TV reporter

Joseph McBride x'67, film critic and author of several film biographies

Patrick McGilligan '74, film historian, author of several books

Errol Morris '69, made documentaries *Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*, and *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*

Peter Neufeld '72, screenwriter and lawyer in the O.J. Simpson trial

Tim Onosko x'70, former journalist; now consultant for major studios

Dennis Paoli '69, wrote *Re-Animator* and many other Stuart Gordon films

Gerald Peary PhD'77, film critic for the *Boston Phoenix* and other papers

Danny Peary '71, writer of several books, including *Cult Movies* series

Reid Rosefelt '75, independent film publicist and producer

Mark Rosenberg '79, produced *Bright Lights*, *Big City*; *Major League*; *Presumed Innocent*; died in 1992

Nancy Schwartz '63, screenwriter, critic, historian; died in 1979

Glenn Silber '72, co-maker of *The War at Home*; ABC News producer

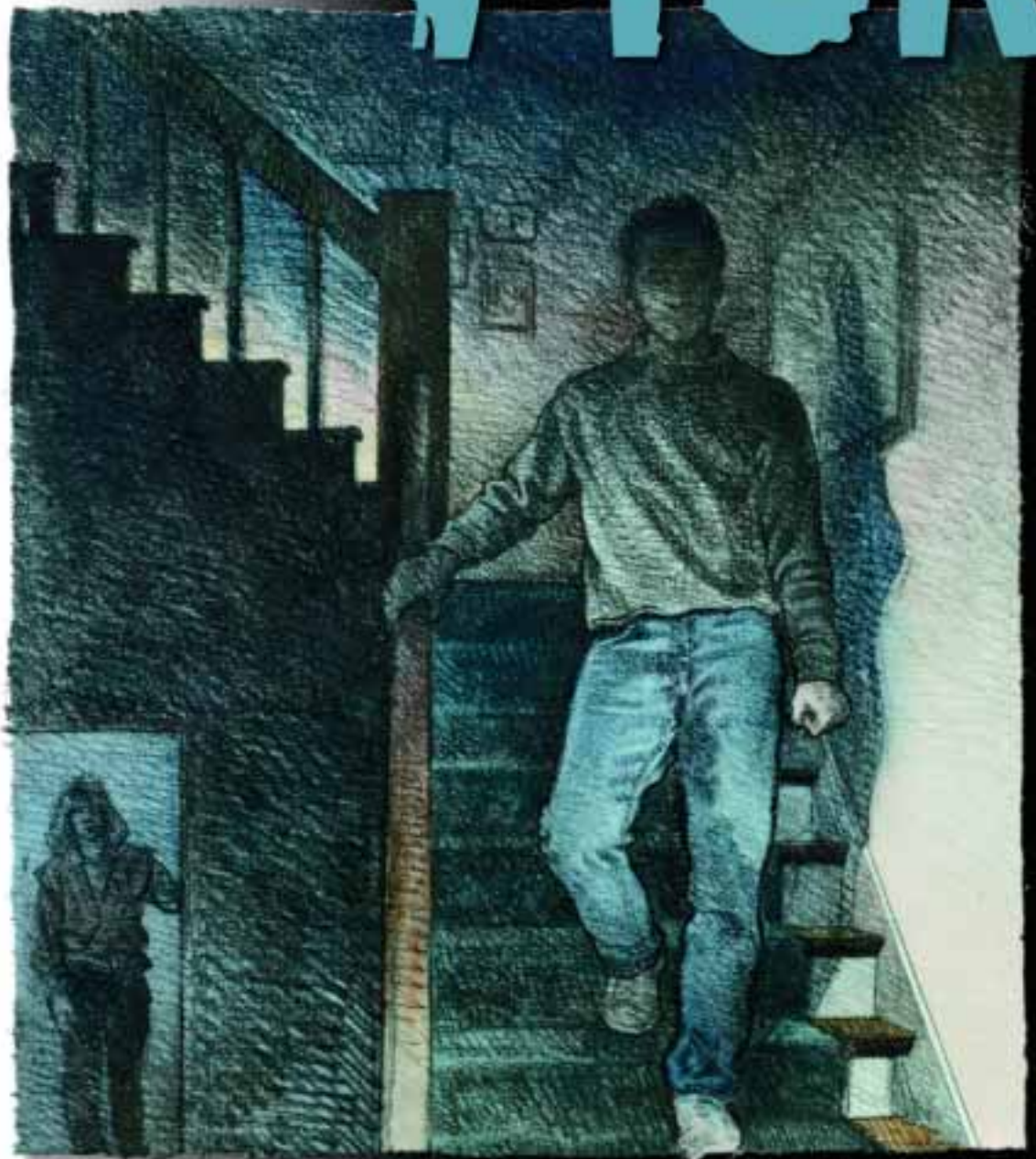
Larry Sloman MS'72, former editor of *High Times*; author of *Reefers Madness*

Kristin Thompson PhD'77, honorary fellow in UW film program; author of *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*

Michael Wilmington x'68, author, teacher, film critic

David Zucker '70 and **Jerry Zucker '72**, made *Airplane!*, *Ruthless People*, many others

calculating risk



JAMES NOEL SMITH

by John Allen

a new look at
rape prevention

As universities across the country try to get a handle on the often silent crime of rape on campus, one researcher suggests that the best way to prevent assault starts with changing the way we look at it. But is it that easy?

Some memories are difficult.

Two years ago, Jennifer Cinelli '04 was raped. Many of the details of that night are still sharp in her mind, but the event itself is a traumatic blur.

"I don't have a clear sense of the sequence of things," she says. "I didn't know what was going on. It just, sort of, happened."

Cinelli remembers the group she'd gone out with that evening — five male students and herself. She had come to UW-Madison for rowing, and she knew four of the men from crew. "They were friends of the guy I was dating at the time," she says. "I knew these guys really well. I was excited that they were living in my apartment complex — we could hang out. It would be great."

The fifth male was a friend of the other four, but a stranger to Cinelli.

She remembers the bars — Amy's Café on West Gilman and Wando's on University — and she remembers drinking far too much. "I couldn't walk, and they literally had to hold me all the way home," she says. "We went to their place for an after-bar, and they gave me a lot of beer, which I probably would not have accepted in a different situation. At the time, I didn't drink beer. We were running around the house and just being stupid."

And she remembers the crucial moment, though it didn't seem so important to her at the time. "One

of my guy friends came up to me, and he said, 'Are you sure you want to do this?' I didn't know what he was talking about."

And then the four men she knew left. She was alone with the stranger. "They all left me with this one guy, and he just shut the door and locked it. And that was it."



"The most dangerous thing I can do," says Douglas Koski '81, "if I am a woman at the University of Wisconsin or any other place, the most dangerous thing I can do is drink alone with a nineteen-year-old male I know little about."

Though Koski is a sociologist and criminologist with the National Center for the Advanced Study of Social Forces in New York City, he talks more like an actuary, speaking in terms of statistics, risks, and probabilities, rather than assigning blame or exploring emotions. His new book, *The Jury Trial in Criminal Justice*, is to be published this month, but he's been examining rape from both academic and nonacademic perspectives for nearly twenty years. "And," he says, "you'd be surprised at how little college women know about what puts them at risk."

According to Koski, identifying risk factors — and helping potential rape victims avoid them — may be the most useful thing universities can do to combat rape on campus.

Sexual assault, he says, is not merely a criminal issue, nor just a cultural and social issue. Bottom line, it's a safety issue, yet the debate about how to address it tends to focus more on agendas than on practical solutions. And while focusing on the various social forces that turn people into rapists may help us understand underlying causes of rape, it doesn't offer much that individuals can do to stop sexual assault today.

"As an individual," Koski says, "I can't reconstitute society. There's nothing I can do about the fact that there are a lot of young males in the world raised in emotionally charged, unstable families, with too much access to alcohol and drugs and not enough money. If you focus on root causes, you can't develop a practical, do-it-now rape prevention model."

And so Koski is turning to a more pragmatic model that he feels may fit with the erratic nature of human society. He's following the example of public health.

A basic presumption of the public health model is that you don't necessarily need to cure a problem if you can successfully avoid it. This view isn't as rose-colored as it sounds. Consider the case of John Snow, one of the discipline's founders.

Snow was a nineteenth-century London physician, and he didn't have any particular concern with rape, or with crime in general. What did concern Snow was cholera, a

disease that, by modern standards, he didn't understand very well at all. He thought it was caused by something bad in water, but he didn't know what, and neither did anybody else. But he did understand that when cholera appeared, corpses followed, and usually in large numbers.

In 1854, there was a cholera outbreak in London's Golden Square. Within ten days, five hundred people had died. As Britain's leading scientists debated what might be causing the disease and how medicine might cure it, Snow pursued a different course: statistics. He catalogued every case of cholera and discovered that almost all the victims had consumed water drawn from one particular pump. Snow couldn't prove that this pump was the source of the disease, nor could he make Londoners change their drinking habits. Still, he talked a good enough game to convince local authorities, who had the handle removed from the suspicious pump. The next morning, residents of Golden Square discovered they'd have to go elsewhere for their water, and within a few days, the cholera epidemic vanished.

Snow's work was proximate, focusing on the exact time and place that people became ill, not on the underlying cause of the disease. He didn't bring medical science any closer to destroying — or even discovering — the deadly bacterium. He merely saved lives — and gave the field of public health its basic tenet: that the one thing better than being cured is never getting sick in the first place.

This is the principle that Koski hopes to bring to the fore on rape. "Perhaps interpersonal violence per se doesn't fall within the public health domain," he says, "but injury is clearly a health issue. And rape causes both physical and psychic injury."

Like Snow with cholera, Koski believes that rape-prevention efforts will be most effective if they focus on the moment of the attack. He hopes to quantify the factors that most commonly surround rape and identify which ones might be pump handles. By giving authorities and potential victims

information about the risk factors, he may well help them to avoid situations in which rape is likely to occur.

And rape happens alarmingly often on college campuses. According to a survey released by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2000, "nearly 5 percent of college women are victimized [by rape or attempted rape] in any given calendar year. Over the course of a college career — which now lasts an average of five years — the percentage of completed or

"The most dangerous thing I can do is drink alone with a 19-year-old male I know little about."

attempted rape victimization among women in higher education might climb to between one-fifth and one-quarter."

UW-Madison's female student population is over 21,000, so if that national survey accurately reflects conditions here, there would be more than a thousand rapes or attempted rapes every year. However, in November 2002, the Madison Police Department released statistics on the city's crime rate: in 2001, Madison recorded only sixty-three rape cases. So what happened to all the assaults the Justice Department says are occurring?

Many, it seems, never reach police files. "There's still a fear out there [among victims] that they won't be taken seriously," says Lori Henn, coordinator for relationship violence prevention at UW-Madison's University Health Services. "For some people, the legal route doesn't bring the resolution they're looking for."

In fact, the Justice Department survey found that only around two-thirds of sexual assault victims ever tell anyone about the incident, and most of those confided in friends, not family or college officials. Fewer than 5 percent of victims reported the incident to law enforcement.

Perhaps with good reason. Rape on college campuses seldom meets the popular conception of strangers lurking in the bushes. The overwhelming majority of cases are so-called acquaintance rapes, in which the victim knows the attacker. These rapes occur most often in a home — either the victim's or the attacker's — and usually both parties arrived there voluntarily. These factors present authorities with uncomfortable uncertainties about whether what took place was actually criminal rape.

"We've gotten much better about stranger assault," says Henn. "I don't think we're quite there with acquaintance assault. We're still willing to purport blame to victims to a larger extent."

Making matters worse is the presence of intoxicants. A survey by the national Core Institute found that in more than three-quarters of acquaintance rape cases, either the victim or the attacker had voluntarily consumed drugs or alcohol before the incident occurred. This figure is repeated in surveys at campuses around the nation, and the intoxicant factor, perhaps more than any other, tends to keep legal authorities from deciding an incident is a criminal sexual assault.

"If a victim was drinking, her ability to recall, relate, and testify about events is diminished," says Koski. "Alcohol decreases the likelihood of reporting and increases the likelihood of delayed reporting. This plays into police refusing to arrest, prosecutors being unwilling to file, and judges and juries being unlikely to convict. It's really a snowball effect."

All of this, he says, "leaves me pretty well convinced that we need to look at alternatives if we're going to reduce the number of rapes. And that's where I think the public health model can help."



Cinelli was raped in the summer of 2001, the year that Madison officially recorded only sixty-three rape cases. Unlike most victims, Cinelli did report her attack to the Madison police, though it wasn't her decision to do so.

PAVEing the way

For Jennifer Cinelli x'04, the story of her rape is more than personal history. It's also the beginning of a mission. Cinelli is the vice chair of PAVE (Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment), and her story holds a message for her UW-Madison classmates.

When PAVE was founded in the spring of 2001, the university already offered a variety of services for the victims of sexual assault. "First and foremost, they can receive counseling and consultation through University Health Services," says dean of students Luoluo Hong. "In my office, the assistant deans can act as victim advocates to advise victims of their rights within the legal system and at the university. And though the Rape Crisis Center is run by Dane County officials, it has a satellite office on campus."

But what PAVE aims at is more than just support for rape victims. Its members are hoping to turn the group into a wider force in Madison. "We want to be more than just a survivors group," says Heather Logghe x'03, the organization's educational outreach coordinator. "We see our role as educating — as promoting awareness of all aspects of this issue."

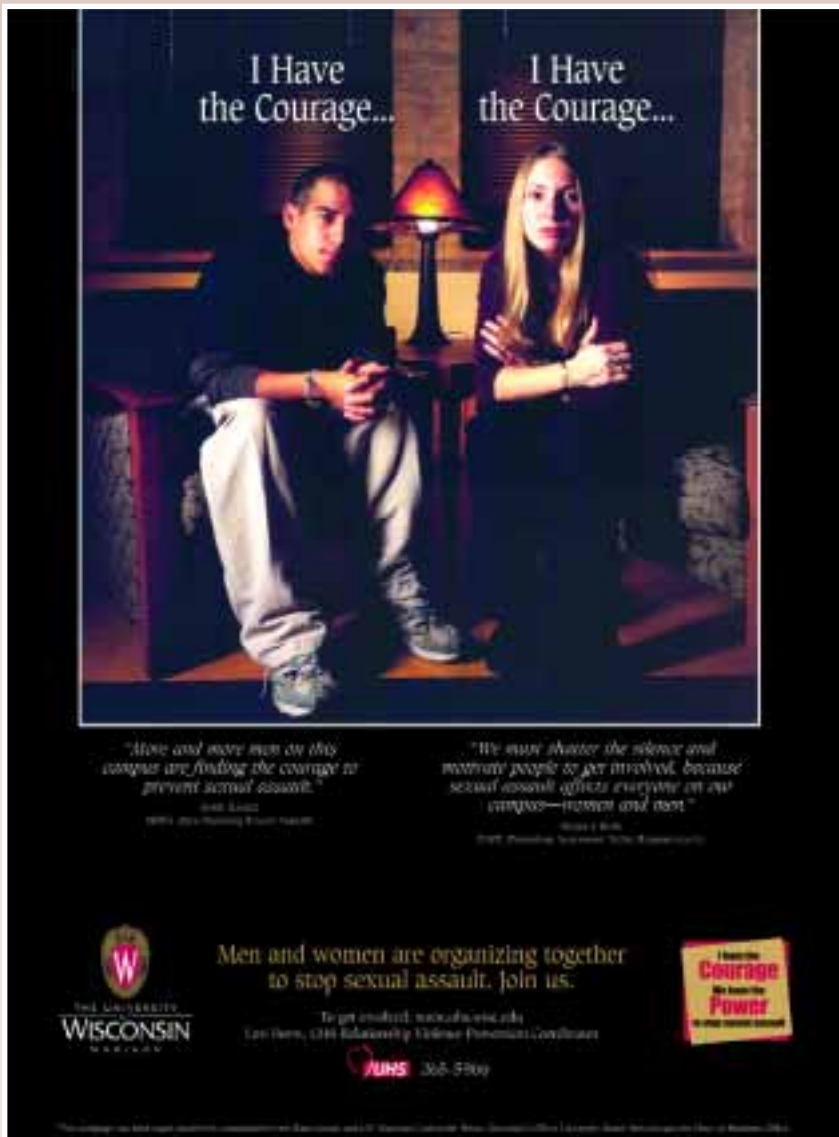
The organization is already widening its network to other campuses, with chapters in Illinois and California, and in April, PAVE is planning a national rally in Washington, D.C.

"They've really taken the university community by storm," says Lori Henn, who acts as UW-Madison's faculty adviser for PAVE. "They're passionate and really have a vision about what can be done."

What they hope to do is twofold. "They want to see that campus takes this issue seriously," says Henn. And then there's their educational work. Like Cinelli, many PAVE members are survivors of sexual assault, and they tell their stories to students to get both potential victims and potential perpetrators thinking about how to prevent rape.

"Just as women don't think they'll be raped by someone they know," says Logghe, "often men don't realize that what they're committing is rape."

PAVE sends members out to classrooms and dorms to do a program it calls "Silent Crimes, Outspoken Voices." Cinelli, who often



works tag-team with Logghe, knows that her story embodies most of the elements common to campus sexual assault. "I'm like a poster child for this kind of thing," she says.

Among PAVE's other activities are legislative advocacy, particularly working with other groups to overturn the Wisconsin law that excludes alcohol as an intoxicant in rape cases. The organization has also run a poster project, spreading information about the link between alcohol and rape at Madison bars, and is conducting training to encourage other students to speak out about rape.

"I can confidently say we're changing a little part of the world," says Logghe. "In small corners, we're making big changes." — J. A.

The day after her rape, she “was just sort of numb,” she says. She told her boyfriend, who encouraged her to file a complaint. “He called the police and my parents. He reported it with me.”

Cinelli’s tour through the criminal justice system was swift and far from satisfying. A detective came and asked her about the incident. She admitted that she hadn’t fought, that she didn’t even say no to her attacker. There was still time to take her to a hospital for a sexual assault nurse exam — a rape kit — but the police decided they didn’t need to collect physical evidence.

“They talked to my attacker, and he said, ‘Yeah, we had sex. But it was consensual,’” she says. And then things went from bad to “horrible. They told the boy I’d been dating — they actually said to him — ‘We think she’s just really upset that she slept with this guy, so that’s why she’s in hysterics.’ Like it’s fun. Like I’d enjoy pretending.”

But in the eyes of the police, there had been no rape, or at least nothing they could prove in court. Under Wisconsin statute, a second-degree sexual assault occurs when an attacker “has sexual contact or sexual intercourse with a person who is under the influence of an intoxicant to a degree which renders the person incapable of appraising the person’s conduct.”

Cinelli had been drunk — in her own estimation too drunk to have sex. But in Wisconsin, intoxication is curiously defined within the context of sexual assault. In 1997, when so-called date rape drugs came to the forefront, state legislators responded by criminalizing certain substances. Yet, they specifically excluded alcohol as an intoxicant in sexual assault cases. No matter how drunk a victim is, Wisconsin law says, she isn’t considered intoxicated unless she’s unconscious. Otherwise, the law assumes the sex was consensual.



For Koski, any mention of drug-related rape that ignores the influence of alcohol is dishonest. “With rape,” he says, “alcohol is the drug.”

It’s the connection between alcohol and rape, in fact, that drove him in the direction of public health. “Alcohol use itself is a health issue,” he says, “and as I looked at the various elements that showed up most often in rape cases, alcohol just rose to the top.”

“We can’t talk about sexual assault without talking about alcohol,” agrees Henn. “We hear stories about people getting really intoxicated and losing control of their ability to make decisions, or of waking up and finding a used condom and that’s how they know they had sex.

“Should we tell new students, ‘Don’t make friends?’ How do you say that to freshmen? They don’t know anybody.”

It would take a very brave D.A. to prosecute a case like that [as rape].”

Koski knows just what kind of mentality it takes to try a rape case. After graduating from the UW, he studied law at Washington University in St. Louis and then became a criminal attorney, first as a prosecutor, then as a defender. “I realized I had a talent for trying rape cases,” he says. “I handled a lot of rapes, and a lot of child rapes, and I’d pick up cases like that, ones that other attorneys didn’t want.” Over the course of his career, he brought more than 150 cases into court and won 80 percent of them.

Even now, as a sociologist, Koski maintains a deep fascination with the jury trial system, even though, he says, it has “assumed the dignity of a Turkish rug market” in which “prosecutors and defense attorneys haggle not about the merits of a given case, but the relative worthiness of the defendant and the victim.” This is especially true in acquaintance rape cases, he says, which often revolve around the question of whether a more-or-less intoxicated victim made a

refusal clear to a more-or-less intoxicated defendant.

In a 2002 study, Koski examined how juries came to their verdicts in such consent-defense sexual assault trials. He divided people into various mock juries and presented each group with evidence that was intentionally ambiguous, as in a genuine trial. In every case, the basic conflict came down to whether the jury believed the victim or the accused. Before the jurors started their work, Koski surveyed them and found that they answered much the way one would expect people to after exposure to years of political advocacy on behalf of rape victims.

“Before they deliberated, most people said they were likely to convict an accused rapist,” even if the only evidence was the victim’s word, he says. “But during deliberations there was a complete reversal. We couldn’t get a single conviction.”

Watching videotapes of the deliberations, Koski began to understand just how much of a problem alcohol presented to those attempting to determine the legitimacy of a rape claim. “Whenever you mix alcohol with sex,” he says, “you get a lot of miscommunication and a lot of confusion. [Alcohol consumption] increases miscommunication about female consent at the time of the event and all through the criminal justice process. And it increases confusion about male intent. Criminal law 101 says that, for a crime to occur, you have to have an act and a requisite mental intent.”

Alcohol, then, is one possible pump handle. “If you remove this element,” says Koski, “and because it pops up again and again in so many contexts, the use of alcohol and drugs is clearly a major risk factor — if you remove alcohol from interpersonal contact situations, rape becomes significantly less likely.”

Koski began looking at other factors that showed up commonly in rape cases, and found that many could be avoided by potential victims. One factor was being with seventeen- to twenty-year-old males who were drinking. Another was being alone with a male the victim did not know very well. Another was dating a number

of different partners. “Each date,” he says, “presents a chance that the person will be raped. So more dates, with more people, create more risk.”

Although Koski focuses on American society as a whole, not on campuses, he points out that all of these factors are common in university communities. “College women are only a tiny percentage of the population,” he says. “Still, they’re a high-risk group.” But being aware of risk opens opportunities for reducing it. By educating potential victims about risk factors, Koski says, a university could help its students avoid dangerous situations.

And by being aware of where and when rapes most often take place, authorities can perform “crime mapping,” which would enable authorities to increase surveillance, not on students, but on the physical spaces in which attackers most commonly operate. This, he says, “allows us to put surveillance where it’s needed most — that is, where crimes have occurred with high frequency in the past.” Either action would take the offender’s opportunity away and eliminate a potential rape.

“It’s not a value judgment; it’s just a fact,” Koski says. “If I spend a lot of time with nineteen-year-old males, sooner or later, I might become the victim of some act of interpersonal violence.” But, he adds, “if you change the environment at the proximate point of the attack, you can make a rape much less likely to occur. Drinking and violence are socially integrated into college campuses. And there’s a hyperglorification of legal remedies and their enforcement to solve problems. But the public health model gives ownership of problems back to potential victims, the people who actually have some control over their environment in the first place.”

However, not everyone sees it that way. Although Lori Henn at University Health Services also speaks of rape in terms of risk reduction (“I don’t talk about rape prevention anymore, because I can’t guarantee prevention. All I say is that we try to help students realize how to reduce risks”), she worries that such

an approach lays too much responsibility on the shoulders of potential victims.

“If someone wants to assault a woman, they’re going to go and get her,” she says. A model like Koski’s “implies that rape can be significantly reduced because a woman doesn’t go and get a beer or keeps her door locked. It’s not about doors.”

Similarly, Koski expects resistance to some of his recommendations, especially as they may impinge on the freedoms that college students cherish. “If someone had said that the university should increase surveillance of its students when I was an undergraduate,” he says, “I would have screamed. But increased police presence and simple things like lighting and video cameras — even if they’re not turned on — these things work. Nobody likes surveillance, but it works.”

Henn, too, is skeptical of the willingness of the campus community to accept restrictions, and she believes the university has to strike a balance between offering students the data that will help them make informed choices and allowing them to be free. “I feel some resistance to continually telling women to curb their behavior,” she says. “Should we tell new students, ‘Don’t make friends?’ ‘Don’t be with people you don’t know?’ How do you say that to freshmen? They don’t know anybody here. We don’t want to instill fear or paranoia,” she says, “but we do want our students to have common sense.”

And so she would keep ownership of sexual assault as much with men — with potential offenders — as with women. “That this is deemed a women’s issue is severely misguided — it’s first and foremost a human issue,” she says. Her office helps connect speakers with residence halls and groups such as fraternities, where Henn hopes the university can find leaders to combat the behaviors that turn men into rapists. She feels that changing male, not female, attitudes is the ultimate key to preventing rape. “After all,” she says, “if I help Jane avoid an assault and not Becky, and then Becky is assaulted, did I prevent an assault? No. I just moved it from Jane to Becky. If we’re going to reduce the number of rapes, we have to look at the source.”

For Koski, too, the struggle is about lowering the number of rapes, even if it means encouraging the innocent to alter their behavior. “Who wants to hear, ‘Don’t date?’” he asks. “But if I don’t want to become the victim of aggression, it’s probably best to avoid the circumstances in which it’s likely to occur — pubs and clubs and places where alcohol is served.”



The question of how to avoid rape is long past relevance for Jennifer Cinelli, who’s still struggling to rebuild her life two years after her attack.

The rape put her through “a list of disorders,” she says. “I had posttraumatic stress disorder. I had horrible nightmares that were always visions of what had happened. I had anxiety if I was walking to class alone — I never wanted to be alone.”

Her grades dropped, and she began seeing a therapist and was put on antidepressants. She gave up rowing and split up with the boyfriend who had helped her report the attack. An eating disorder she’d battled in high school returned.

“Depression gets to be a safe place,” she says. “A really good week was when I would smile once. Somebody would have to tell me to go to class, to go to the library, to eat dinner. I had no ambition. There’s a feeling — even now — that I’m not ready to succeed, that I don’t deserve to succeed.”

But in January 2002, she joined a sexual assault prevention group called PAVE, Promoting Awareness, Victim Empowerment (see sidebar). Since then, “a lot changed,” she says. “It gave me an outlet and let me know that there are other people out there going through the same stuff that I am.”

Even so, she says her healing is far from over, and she has a hard time driving memories of her attacker out of her mind. “I think a lot about him,” she says. “He lives a normal life, and I — well, I wonder if he ever thinks about it. Because I do.” ■

John Allen is associate editor of *On Wisconsin Magazine*.

Mutual Admiration

AN EARLY LESSON FROM HIS FATHER, A FASCINATION WITH NUMBERS, AND THE PULL OF INVESTING REAL MONEY HAVE SHAPED UW GRAD BILL NYGREN INTO ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST SUCCESSFUL MUTUAL FUND MANAGERS.

BY ERIK AHLBERG '97

BILL NYGREN MS'81

was just ten years old when he got his first lesson about the dangers of gambling.

During a family vacation to Disneyland that had a stopover in Las Vegas, his father, John Nygren '51, led him to a slot machine in the entryway of a Kroger grocery store and began a lecture about foolish risks.

Nygren's father took five nickels out of his pocket, smiled at his son, put the first coin into the machine, and pulled the handle. Seven nickels clanged down. The older Nygren frowned. Determined, he dropped the second nickel into the coin slot. Five more nickels dropped noisily into the tray.

"I was begging Dad to stop while he was ahead," the younger Nygren remembers. "It took half an hour, but the smile finally returned to his face when he succeeded in losing his twenty-five cents. The lesson he had hoped to teach me wasn't quite the one I learned — the seed was planted for a lifelong fascination."

More than thirty years later, Nygren now makes a living by betting on the biggest and riskiest slot machine of them all: the stock market. And thankfully, the nickels have continued to fall.

Nygren's back-to-basics approach to investing has made him one of the most successful mutual fund managers around. His name often peppers the pages of publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *TIME*, and his face

often pops into living rooms via the business cable network CNBC. In short, Nygren, a graduate of the business school's elite Applied Securities Analysis Program (ASAP), has become a bona fide celebrity.

"I just feel fortunate that I get to do something I love," he says.

AT FIRST GLANCE,

Nygren looks like a typical, number-crunching finance guy. He's tall and spindly, has a toothy grin, and wears thin wire-frame glasses. His dark, swirling hair looks like it was combed in several directions at once.

But when Nygren speaks, it's with a deep and confident voice. He looks you right in the eye and talks in a matter-of-fact tone that's easy to understand. He uses a constant rhythm and never trips over his own words.

Put simply, Nygren sounds smart. *Really* smart. And in a business that depends on trust and a lot of brainpower, it's clear after just a few minutes that he's got the right tools.

Each day, from his modest office in a shiny downtown Chicago building, Nygren keeps watch over more than \$9 billion of other people's money — an amount roughly equal to 300,000 times the cost for an out-of-state student to attend UW-Madison for one year. Nygren manages two different mutual funds for Harris Associates, Inc., one of which became so wildly popular in May

2001 that he actually stopped accepting new investors.

During the past five years, Nygren's trademark Oakmark Select fund has posted an impressive 13 percent return, compared to a 1 percent loss for the S&P 500 stock index, a common measuring stick for mutual funds.

Nygren refutes the common perception that money managers spend twenty-four hours a day locked away in their offices in order to achieve the best results. "That's just silly," he says.

Even though the markets have been roiling over the past year, Nygren, who's single, sets aside plenty of time to attend the sporting events of his thirteen-year-old daughter and fourteen-year-old son. He also blows off steam as a pitcher for the company softball team, The Mighty Oaks.

MUCH OF NYGREN'S

topnotch performance on Wall Street comes from his approach to buying and selling stocks. He is a so-called value investor, which means that he uses a number of basic accounting and financial measures to determine a company's value. Nygren then hunts for good companies that are selling at bargain-basement prices and buys stock before other investors realize the discount. He is always on the lookout for diamonds in the rough.

"One thing you hear throughout the mutual fund industry is that people are

just impressed with how smart Nygren really is,” says Scott Cooley, a senior analyst at Morningstar, Incorporated, a Chicago firm that studies mutual funds.

Cooley talks with Nygren about four times a year to pick apart Nygren’s recent investment decisions and thoughts on where the market may be headed. In 2001, Nygren was named Morningstar’s domestic stock manager of the year for his top-tier analysis and adept stock picking.

What always stands out during the discussions, Cooley says, is Nygren’s levelheadedness and extreme attention to detail. “I don’t think that other managers are quite as diligent as Nygren is — it’s amazing how logically he thinks about everything,” he says.

Nygren’s approach brings frequent comparisons to billionaire investing guru Warren Buffett, often called “the Oracle of Omaha.” Buffett, known just as well for his love of cheeseburgers as his financial know-how, made a name for himself by sticking to a simple but often ignored mantra: buy low, sell high. The philosophy has also worked well for Nygren, dubbed a “Warren Wannabe” by *Fortune* magazine last year. As it turns out, the two often make identical investment decisions, buying shares of the same companies at nearly the same time.

“Buffett’s thinking has helped shape how we approach investing,” Nygren told *Fortune*. “And because of that, there is an overlap — enough of an overlap that it shouldn’t surprise people when we buy the same stocks.”

Nygren’s conservatism, however, can put him at odds with the rest of the market. In the late 1990s, when Internet stocks were booming and investors were swooning, he refused to get swallowed up by the party. The bargain-basement prices were gone, he said, as were many of the fundamental signs of healthy businesses. Some investors complained; others simply cashed out of his mutual funds and starting making their own bets.

But Nygren stuck to his guns, even publishing a sarcastic “Top 10 Reasons to Sell Internet Stocks” list in January 1999. “Catching up by buying hot

performers wins less often than the Chicago Bears do,” he wrote, adding that you know you’re in trouble when “the line for a new Internet initial public offering is longer than the line to buy Furby.

“Our investment approach identifies stocks at substantial discounts to current business value, where we are confident business values grow with time, and

Nygren’s conservatism can put him at odds with the rest of the market. In the late 1990s, when Internet stocks were booming and investors were swooning, he refused to get swallowed up by the party.

where we believe managements will get rich only if the outside shareholders do. The Internet names fail on all measures,” he wrote.

The rest, as they say, is history. The Internet craze turned out to be just that, and Nygren’s Top 10 list is still talked about as one of the first warnings.

NYGREN GREW UP IN St. Paul, Minnesota, and attended St. Paul’s Harding High School. His father was a director of credit for 3M, known for its Post-it Notes and Scotch Tape products, and his mother was a stay-at-home mom.

From a very young age, Nygren had a fascination with numbers. Each day, he eagerly ripped through the St. Paul newspaper in search of sports statistics. A self-acclaimed baseball fanatic, Nygren

would scour columns of data on batting averages and on-base percentages.

In 1965, when Nygren was seven years old, the Minnesota Twins and slugger Harmon Killebrew made it to the World Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers. Four of the games were played at Metropolitan Stadium, located about fifteen miles from Nygren’s boyhood home. The stadium was demolished in 1985, and the site later became home to the sprawling Mall of America.

As it turned out, 1965 wasn’t Minnesota’s year. Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers’ pitching ace, silenced Minnesota’s bats in the seventh game of the series, leading Los Angeles to a dramatic 2-0 victory and the world championship.

Just as his father’s gambling lesson had led to an unexpected result, so, too, did Nygren’s unyielding devotion to balls and strikes. As Nygren grew older, his eyes would often drift from the box scores to the business section’s stock charts, which were located on an adjoining page of the newspaper. Though he didn’t know much about what the numbers and fractions represented, he scanned them anyway.

“I later learned from my dad that these numbers actually meant money, and that made them even more interesting,” Nygren says. “By the time I got into high school, I knew that I wanted to study finance.”

From his mom, Nygren learned how to be frugal. On shopping trips for groceries for her middle-class family, she always looked for price-cuts and coupons, sometimes spending hours driving around town to seize upon sales at different stores. Little did she know that her son was a pint-sized mutual fund manager in training.

“I’m still the same way today — I still buy two cases of soda during a sale and look for buy-one, get-one-free shampoo,” Nygren says.

His hunger for learning about business and the stock market during his teenage years was insatiable. Nygren boasts that he read every book about investing he could find at the neighbor-

hood library, located about one mile from his house — though he admits the selection was limited to a single, four-foot-long shelf space.

Upon graduation from high school, Nygren attended the University of Minnesota, where he obtained an accounting degree in 1980. He was then faced with a tough decision: where to go for graduate school. Though Stanford University’s business school had a trendy, glossy catalog and the pull of a warmer California climate, Nygren had other ideas.

“At Madison, the students were allowed to run portfolios of real money,” Nygren says. “The day I graduated, I moved down there.”

REAL MONEY HAS

been attracting young investment professionals to Madison since 1970, when the business school kicked off one of the first programs in the nation that allowed students to manage real portfolios. Begun with \$150,000 from the Brittingham Foundation, the program allows students to oversee about \$12 million in stocks, bonds, and real estate investment trusts, including about \$10 million belonging to the board of regents.

Each spring semester, about fifteen to twenty students, both undergraduates and graduates, are hand-picked to act as interim portfolio managers of the accounts. The students make all the decisions — what to buy and when, what to sell and why — and take on all of the risks. Only three times in the program’s thirty-year history has the faculty overruled a student investment decision.

The hard work can pay big dividends. ASAP’s roughly four hundred alumni have gone directly from State Street to Wall Street as pension and mutual fund managers for some of the largest and most successful financial firms in the world.

But before their turn with fame and fortune, ASAP students are expected to dedicate at least thirty hours a week to the program — and that’s on top of their regularly scheduled class load, part-time

jobs, and family obligations. It’s a hefty task, as is the responsibility of managing someone else’s money, says ASAP founder Stephen L. Hawk ’63, MBA’64, PhD’69.

“The idea is to get students together each year and start a new investment firm with new rules, new employees, and a new investment philosophy,” he says. “It’s a full-time job.”

And he should know. While leading the ASAP program, Hawk helped start Northern Capital Management LLC, the Madison finance firm where he now serves as chair and chief executive officer. He oversaw ASAP from 1970 to 1982.

Hawk’s background as a teacher and a real-world investor is what drew Nygren to Wisconsin, though after talking to both, it’s unclear who’s more impressed with whom.

“There wasn’t an issue of whether he would be selected for the program. He had all of the qualifications you’d want,” Hawk says.

Upon arriving in Madison, Nygren quickly became a balancing force within the ASAP group, breathing some much-needed perspective into other students with rather wild ideas about where to invest, Hawk recalls. Though the school encourages students to develop an investment style that best matches their personalities, sometimes there’s a big learning curve.

“Nygren was a calming influence on the animal spirits of the group,” Hawk says. “It was a very vibrant and very dynamic group that year.”

It was also very close. Given their daily stress, ASAP students often form relationships that you wouldn’t find in a normal classroom.

“The people I know from Madison are still my closest friends,” Nygren says. He has returned to the school often since his ASAP graduation to be a guest speaker and to hear presentations by current students about the performance of their investments.

Tom Sontag ’81, MBA’82, a former classmate and bond fund manager for

Strong Financial Corporation in Milwaukee, remembers Nygren’s contrarian stance well. Nygren once came upon a complex financial model that, when entered with certain figures and statistics, would spit out a list of companies likely to file for bankruptcy. But instead of letting the model do its job, Nygren started tinkering.

“He was thinking, ‘What about the companies that will survive?’” Sontag says. In the end, Nygren created an entirely new model that helped find companies that would come close to financial ruin, but survive — those were the stocks that Nygren wanted to buy.

The ASAP students’ investments posted a 15.1 percent gain in 1981, according to the annual report published that year, though Nygren says he doesn’t really remember the performance statistics. That’s a typically modest Nygren response, says Mark Shank MBA’81, a vice president at Loomis Sayles & Company in Milwaukee. The two, in the ASAP program at the same time, worked together for more than a year at Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company in Milwaukee upon graduation.

“He hasn’t let his success go to his head — it hasn’t changed him a bit,” Shank says. “There are certain competitive people who will step all over you in their quest to get ahead — Bill’s not one of those guys.”

That’s an important lesson for the young portfolio managers-to-be, says ASAP’s current adviser, Professor Mark Fedenia ’77, MS’79, PhD’87. Students see Nygren on television long before they actually get the chance to meet him. And when they do, they’re usually impressed with his extreme discipline and restraint, Fedenia says.

“He reinforces a lot of the things we hope to emphasize here,” he says. “It’s good to see some homegrown talent out there — it’s what these people should be striving for.” 🍪

A Mountain Music Master

History major Wayne Erbsen has carved out a niche promoting vintage American music and folklore.

BY NIKI DENISON
PHOTOS BY TIM BARNWELL



EVERY YEAR IN JANUARY, WAYNE ERBSEN MA'68 CELEBRATES HIS BIRTHDAY by inviting one hundred of his closest friends to his home in Asheville, North Carolina, for a potluck and jam session. At the height of this year's party, six different groups are playing old-time tunes, and a stream of people comes and goes all evening, despite frigid temperatures and a crippling snowstorm the day before. The living room, the bedrooms, the office, and the dining room are pulsating with the sounds of the fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and bass. Coats and instrument cases are piled high near the front door, on top of the washer and dryer, or anywhere that's convenient.


Women are clogging in the kitchen, young children are chasing each other around, and Erbsen's son and daughter have invited their high school and college friends, one of whom is expertly picking a guitar. Erbsen's group in the living room is playing "Bury Me Beneath the Willow" and "There's a Rabbit in the Log and I Ain't Got No Dog." Friends in the kitchen are playing "Richmond Blues," and from every room comes the driving sound of the banjo or the sprightly fiddles, which only become discordant when the group in the nearest vicinity stops and all the others become evident. The sprawling house, which is reminiscent of a log cabin with fireplaces, quilts, log beds, butter churns, and other Americana, is the perfect setting for the rustic sound.

The scene is a metaphor for Erbsen's life and career, which have been geared toward preserving rural, traditional music and the culture that spawned it. For the past thirty years, his company, Native Ground Music, has produced and sold music and books highlighting American history and rural culture to fans, museums, specialty shops, and other outlets. Party guests attest to Erbsen's influence on the cultural life of Asheville and beyond. In addition to hosting a radio show called *Country Roots* and selling instruction books, he's taught tens of thousands of people to play various string instruments over the years.

It all started when Erbsen walked into Professor William O'Neill's history class in Bascom Hall back in 1967. O'Neill, who soon learned that Erbsen played folk music, suggested that the graduate student bring in his guitar and play labor songs for the class in lieu of writing a paper on labor history.

Erbsen jumped at the chance. He sang and strummed tunes such as "Solidarity Forever," "Union Maid," and "Pie in the Sky" to the delight of instructor and class, and a light bulb went on. For the first time, Erbsen realized that he could combine his passion for music with his interest in American history, and the revelation ultimately led the history major to what he does today.

But Erbsen says that it was a long and crooked road to his eventual business venture. His master's thesis was titled "The Seekers: The Beat Generation and Psychedelic Drugs." He was the last student to be advised by the respected historian Merle Curti, who was in his seventies at the time. "I'm sure this was one of the stranger theses that he had ever supervised," says Erbsen. "For a



Just a touch of the past is all I'm asking

Just a feeling I'm wanting to know

It's a time when my spirit is walking

It's a place that I'm longing to go.

From "Just a Touch of the Past" by Gary L. Williamson

conservative history department to support something like that was pretty outlandish. So I have to give them credit that they allowed me to do my own thing."

Erbsen completed his master's degree in just one year and then returned home to California. He taught American history at a community college and knocked around in various bands for a while, including one called Colonel Sanders and the Southern Fried Chickens. But he eventually decided to move to the southeast to nurture his love for traditional music.

By the time he landed in Charlotte, North Carolina, he had nothing but \$100 in his pocket, his instruments, and a few clothes. He was living out of his car and had to borrow a decent pair of shoes so that he could attend a job interview at Central Piedmont Community College. But, as it turned out, just the mention of Merle Curti's name was an excellent calling card. On the spot, the college hired Erbsen to teach history and Appalachian music. During this stint, he had a second revelation that took him a step closer to his eventual career. He decided to put his banjo lessons in book form for his students, and the result was an informal manual that he called *How to Play the 5-String Banjo for the Complete Ignoramus*. He figured that he might as well try to sell the extra copies to local music stores.

The movie *Deliverance* had just come out, and it seemed that everybody and his brother wanted to learn to play "Dueling Banjos." When Erbsen went to buy an invoice book, the sales clerk saw the manual and asked if he could buy one. Erbsen knew he was onto something. He eventually found a publisher, went on to write other instruction books, and then decided to publish them himself

so that he could have more control over the marketing.

Since then, he's released twenty titles, branching out into almanac-style volumes that focus on themes such as cowboy songs, railroad music, rural America, and the Civil War. They include a mix of rustic stories, jokes, songs, and sayings ("Nostalgia ain't what it used to be," and "Ugly is to the bone; beauty lasts only a day; ugly holds its own"). Erbsen enjoys using the research skills he honed in college to ferret out archival photos, stories, and songs for his books and CDs. He's produced nearly two dozen recordings featuring old-time tunes played by himself and others.

A TOUCH OF THE PAST

What exactly is old-time music? It's the kind of question that people often refer to Bill Malone. Malone teaches courses for the UW Extension on the history of country music and is perhaps the nation's foremost expert on the topic. An emeritus professor of history from Tulane University and the author of *Country Music U.S.A.*, he moved to Madison seven years ago.

Malone defines old-time music as an acoustic genre that "preceded but at the same time anticipated bluegrass and other old styles." There wasn't any music



Wayne Erbsen's sprawling house turns into Jam Central Station every year when he hosts his gigantic birthday party. This group laid claim to Erbsen's home office, which is the headquarters for Native Ground Music. The company produces books and CDs celebrating rural culture and music.

available to people outside their home communities until the 1920s, when radio and recording came along, he says. Old-time is "an attempt to revive or recreate the sound of that earliest music that was

music, which has now become so mainstream that the *New York Times* dubbed it "the new pop."

Malone says that when musicians play pre-1920s music, such as that found

Generals. A movie producer found his disks in a battle site gift shop and asked if he'd like to perform a song from one of them called "Southern Soldier Boy."

"It's a really haunting, mournful, soul-grabbing piece," says Erbsen. "It's actually an old tune called 'The Star of the County Down,' (star meant a woman), and it's also called 'The Girl with the Auburn Hair.' I could get you a list of a hundred names for that tune. Many people consider it one of the finest Irish-Scottish tunes that was ever created, and there were millions of those tunes, so he made a wise choice." Erbsen recruited some friends to play the song with him, and in September of 2001, they reported to a former battlefield outside of Hagerstown, Maryland.

"They dressed us up in Confederate uniforms," says Erbsen, "and they took these bags of dirt and dust and they banged them on us, so that we were filthy, and then they took this black, tar-looking stuff, and they worked it through our hair so it looked like we hadn't washed our hair in four years. That was pretty entertaining. Then



*Will my soul pass through the Southland? Through the old Virginia grants
Will I see the hills of Georgia And the green fields of Alabam'?. . .
Will you see my little daughter Will you make her understand
Oh, parson, tell me quickly Will my soul pass through the Southland?*

From "Legend of the Rebel Soldier" by Charlie Moore

recorded back in the twenties and thirties." Malone says that Mike Seeger, the brother of folk singer Pete Seeger and an old-time music guru, would probably define it as "pre-World War II rural stringband music."

Between 1944 and 1946, Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass, "took the old sound and converted it into something high-powered and dynamic. He created a really supercharged, high-pitched sound" — the high lonesome sound — that was built on an old-time framework, but became something new. This was eventually superseded by commercial country

on Erbsen's Civil War CDs, "you have to make a bold leap, because there were no recordings back then. You just make an educated guess. But we can assume that what we hear from those old 78-rpm records from the 1920s is probably what it would have sounded like earlier, too."

THEY'RE GONNA PUT ME IN THE MOVIES

One such recording nearly landed Erbsen a bit part in Ted Turner's recently released Civil War movie *Gods and*

they bussed us over to the site." It was nighttime, and the huge Civil War encampment had fog machines, tents, campfires, soldiers, wagons, and cannons. "We sat under a little tarp near a campfire," says Erbsen. They met the director, Ron Maxwell, who is known for creating a friendly working atmosphere on the set, and Maxwell told them that he really loved the piece.

Erbsen was touched when the cast, crew, and cameramen gave them a big round of applause after they had finished filming the song. Unfortunately, the tune was cut from the final movie,

which features an original song written and sung by Bob Dylan, among other music. But Erbsen's scene was retained for the five-hour DVD version of *Gods and Generals*.

Music played a key role in the Civil War, Erbsen says. "Many times, soldiers were ordered to play their instruments while marching into battle with bullets flying around their ears," he says, adding that the bands and the drummer boys often picked up the wounded and the dead. "These people were hurting. Music helped them to deal with the loneliness and pain, and it buoyed up their patriotism and their military zeal. Songs unite people, so you've got soldiers who are united in song as well as spirit. You've got a potent force there."

There were times during the war when the opposing armies were camped close to one another, he says, and the soldiers would hear the other side singing, and they would actually join in and sing the same songs, especially the hymns. "There were some pretty poignant moments."

After a few years in Charlotte, Erbsen moved to Asheville, in part because he felt he would have a greater opportunity to learn from the masters in the Asheville area. And he was not disappointed. "I have met hundreds and hundreds of folk artists and musicians, and I've learned all about them and their lives and their skills, and they've been happy to share them," he says.

He was offered a visiting artist position at a local college and then took a job as the director of the Appalachian Music Program at Warren Wilson College in nearby Swannanoa. Erbsen has taught classes in banjo, fiddle, guitar, and mandolin. When he has a class of adults, he says, "I ask, 'How long have you been wanting to do this?' And often, it's older people who come and say, 'I've been wanting to do this for thirty, forty, fifty years. But I've raised a family, I've had a job, and finally I'm retired.' I've helped a lot of people actualize their dreams," says Erbsen. "To me, that feels mighty good."

THE O BROTHER PHENOMENON

The Coen Brothers movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a goofy tale of three escaped convicts loosely based on *The Odyssey*, grossed \$45 million. But it was the soundtrack to this movie that celebrated American roots music that was a real sleeper. With no marketing and virtually no radio airplay, the CD sold 6 million copies and is still going strong. It won five Grammys, including the one for best album of the year, which was unheard of in an industry where slick country stars usually scoop up all the awards.

How did this roots music CD become so popular? That's one of the questions that Professor Jim Leary poses in his Introduction to American Folklore class, which he teaches every spring. "When there's something that's making a big impact on popular culture," says Leary, "if it has strong folklore elements, I try to work that into the class. I raise the question of why is this happening now, what's been done to this stuff to make it palatable, and what's the relationship between this and original sources, just to give them a heightened awareness."

For instance, he plays a recurring song from the movie, "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow," along with the original recording by Kentucky singer Emory Arthur, a rendition by Bob Dylan, and the Stanley Brothers' 1959 version on which the *O Brother* rendition is closely based. (The song has been recorded by artists ranging from Joan Baez to Jerry Garcia, Tom Waits, and Rod Stewart.) Leary also plays an early version of the unaccompanied song "Oh Death," which has brought down the house for Ralph Stanley at concerts ever since he intoned his version for the movie.

One reason the *O Brother* soundtrack is so popular, Leary says, is because the movie came out at the end of the century and the millennium, and there is a tendency to look back and take stock at such times. He cites numerous boxed sets of traditional music and the 2001 PBS series *American Roots Music*.

But it goes beyond that, he says. "There is clearly this unabated folk revival movement that's been going on with ebbs and flows in a pretty powerful way since the 1930s. Especially in the sixties and nineties, the folk revival has had strong countercultural or antimodern elements to it." One form of opposition to commercial music is punk and indie rock and elements of hip-hop, he says, where proponents define themselves in stylistic opposition to the "mainstream music machine" through sound, dress, and attitude. But another form of opposition is to go back in time and look to rural areas and people on the margins of society. And, of course, there are musicians who are doing both in the alt country movement.

Overall, Leary says, "There is this musical social movement where people are looking away from the mass marketing and the boy bands and the Mariah Careys or the Celine Dions, and looking for something that seems more pure or authentic or gutsy. That's a powerful movement in American society that's had different peaks and valleys, but I think it's pretty strong right now."

Leary says there is always more demand for Introduction to American Folklore than he can fill. This semester, he increased enrollment to ninety-four students, but still had to turn scores away. When he teaches the segment on *O Brother*, the students are "surprised and amazed to encounter some of the other sources and to really get a sense of what the Coens are drawing on," he says. "There are so many rich strands that go into the film, and the students just had no idea." — N.D.





Erbsen's daughter Annie and friend Lief Stevens (left of Erbsen), are examples of the younger generation of fans. Folklore professor Jim Leary (see sidebar) says that one reason for the popularity of roots music is "antiquarianism and connoisseurship: a fascination with rare, residual fragments of older cultural elements that persist at the edges of the mainstream."

THE PLACE WHERE HE WAS BORN AND RAISED

Erbsen grew up in southern California, about as far as you can get from the hills of Appalachia. The son of first-generation immigrants from Poland and Austria, he went to Berkeley for his undergraduate degree. The campus had a thriving traditional music scene at the time, and he sharpened his skills playing with some high-caliber musicians. During his high school days, and whenever he went home to West LA for college breaks, he "practically lived" at a legendary club called The Ash Grove, which was a lightning rod for the folk

pantheon of traditional music. The Ash Grove was a big influence on musicians who were just getting their start in the sixties, says Erbsen.

"For instance, one of my friends was Ry Cooder, and Linda Ronstadt was right around there at that time, as well as members of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. A lot of us were just kind of soaking this all in," he says. "We were just spoiled out of our minds with an incredibly high level of musicianship. The performers not only exposed us to the tunes, but they gave us a wonderful insight into the rural mountain life that produced this music."

Erbsen maintains that there is a strong interest in this type of music

part of it. A lot of people, even if they're from New York or wherever, get a taste of it and really like it."

It naturally appeals to people who grew up in the South and stayed there, he says, as well as to Southerners who moved north looking for work in the factories of Michigan and Ohio. "But there's another group of people like myself who grew up far from the mountains of North Carolina, who had a hunger for something real, something that has roots, that is really American, and that goes beyond the flash and glitter of Hollywood near where I grew up." It was something, he says, "that you could trace back to our earliest settlers, and the songs were about real things — whether it was murder or lonesome mountain life or horses — something that had substance."

Did Erbsen have any problem being accepted as an outsider coming in to teach? Before he even made the move to North Carolina, he says, he discovered that "music is really good at breaking down the barriers. I went to a Bill Monroe bluegrass festival in Bean Blossom, Indiana. Here I was, fresh off the boat from California, and I was playing nose-to-nose, knuckle-to-knuckle, knee-to-knee with these really hard-core, working class, incredible musicians."

Erbsen has a friendly, open, and adaptable nature that probably helped him to fit in. And of course, it doesn't hurt that, after thirty years in North Carolina, he has picked up a Southern drawl. When he prefaces his answers to questions with a thoughtful "Well . . .," it is definitely the two-syllable pronunciation of the word.

"One of my students is an old local mountain guy who is a plumber, and he's just as country as corn bread, and he said, 'Wayne, you're a good ol' boy,'" Erbsen says. "Yesterday, someone from Missouri called me and said that I was a good old country boy. And that was a compliment from them, because it meant that I was someone they approved of and accepted as if I was from their own culture. That means a lot."

DEFINITION OF PERFECT PITCH:

When you throw a banjo into a Dumpster, and it misses the rim and lands on an accordion.

From *The Outbouse Papers, Country Humor and Trivia* by Wayne Erbsen

revival of the early sixties. Performers included Doc Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, Lightnin' Hopkins, Bill Monroe, the New Lost City Ramblers, Mother Maybelle Carter, and just about every name that now looms large in the

worldwide. And "there's something about this Southern, rural music that has a tremendous interest to Americans. It's kind of a contagious music, whether they see it performed or go to a square dance or contra dance and become a

PICKIN' AND GRINNIN'

Gordy (Ralph) Hinners MA'95 is another old-time musician with UW roots. He's known Erbsen for twenty years through a community of people in the Asheville area who play traditional music. "Wayne is one of the few people who's been able to make a living either playing or producing old-time music," he says.

Hinners should know. He dropped out of the UW in the late seventies and spent seven years dancing with the Green Grass Cloggers and playing banjo professionally. But he eventually decided that he'd like to have a family, and that required financial stability. So he finished his bachelor's degree, taught high school for several years, and then returned to Madison to get a master's degree in Spanish. He now teaches Spanish at Mars Hill College, north of Asheville. But he still plays banjo professionally on a part-time basis along with master fiddler Ralph Blizard.

Hinners credits Erbsen with introducing a much wider audience to traditional music and culture. Because Native Ground's sales outlets range from train depots to the homes of six U.S. presidents, rather than just specialty stores for music or dance, he notes, "someone who might not be looking for this might run across it. Wayne's got a really broad view of what this music is."

The music appeals to Hinners for some of the same reasons that it does to Erbsen. "It's fun," he says, "and it speaks to my soul in some way or another. In the seventies, there was a movement of people, predominantly young people, who felt drawn to a simpler way of life, and that included music and dance, and in many cases, doing things for yourself. I think a lot of people got into playing this kind of music partly as a way to entertain themselves. People were looking to participate in something that seemed much more community based."

Hinners thinks the same sort of thing might be happening now. The popularity of the 2000 movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, with its roots music soundtrack



Erbsen, left, and Gordy Hinners paused for a quick duet at Erbsen's party. There is a big old-time community in Asheville, and the members get together frequently. Hinners had recently thrown his own party with the requisite 100 guests and "musicians hanging out the windows."

(see sidebar, page 43), has contributed to a new awareness and popularity of American homegrown music. "It's hard to say whether it's coming out of the same feelings that people felt in the seventies, or whether it's just today's latest fad," says Hinners. But "here's a way that we can really connect on a more soulful level than sitting around the

movie. So I know it's making a big impact, and I think that the impact has yet to be felt all over."

Erbsen is one of those folks who claims that if he won the lottery, he'd still be doing the same thing. The sixties, he says, was a really idealistic generation. "Some people went into politics; other people dropped out and moved to a

*Just at the close of a bright summer day
Just as the twilight had faded away
Soft on the breeze like the coo of a dove
Someone was singing an old song of love ...*

From "Give Me Your Love" by A.P. Carter

water cooler and discussing the latest *Friends* episode. This has the potential to connect in a more visceral way."

While Erbsen says that the popularity of *O Brother* hasn't had much impact on his CD sales, he has noticed an effect on his students. He recently taught a class of twenty beginning guitar students "who are normally interested in rock 'n' roll and reggae and rap and this kind of stuff, and when I asked about their interest in *O Brother*, eighteen out of the twenty people said they were sitting there to learn guitar because of that

commune," he says. "And I guess I've tried to make a difference in my own way by helping to preserve and perpetuate this music. I've taught people to play banjo, fiddle, guitar, and mandolin and to sing the old songs, and I'm honored and proud to help make their dreams come true." 🎸

Visit nativeground.com to hear samples of Erbsen's music and uwalumni.com for related topics. Co-editor Niki Denison has loved old-time music ever since she can remember, for all of the reasons mentioned above, and some she hasn't thought of yet.



Still in its
infancy, the
Wisconsin
Film Festival
is filling seats
and earning
accolades.

reel time

By Michael Penn MA'97

OF THE 138 FILMS shown during last year's Wisconsin Film Festival, almost all went off without a hitch. One that didn't was a three-hour story about Inuit life called *Atanarjuat — The Fast Runner*, which accidentally began without sound. For a few minutes, the film rolled wordlessly on, until projectionists got the problem fixed and started it from the beginning.

Remarkably, no one seemed to mind. There were no catcalls or disgusted groans from audience members. "People just took in what was there," says Liesel de Boor, a filmmaker who was in the audience that night. "They were happy to watch it that way. It was almost like it was a treat to get to see it in a different way."

Those few moments of silence say a great deal about the kind of event that the festival has become. Starting in 1999 as a modest on-campus showcase for a few obscure films, the festival has mushroomed into a regional happening, showing more films to more people at more Madison theaters. Last year, about 18,500 tickets were sold for the four-day fete — a 30 percent jump from 2001 and six times the number of people who attended the first year. Local arts writers have described it as a "monster hit," a "critical and audience blockbuster," and "a first-rate Midwestern cultural expo."

But such thesaurus-mining praise only begins to get at the spirit that seems to take hold of downtown Madison during the festival. In short order, the event has become the kind of phenomenon that generates its own buzz. People stop each other in the street to talk about it. Gossip flows. Tickets are scarce. Nearly one-third of the movies shown last year sold out before the first reel ever ran, and many of the rest — like *The Fast Runner*, which nearly filled the Orpheum's Main Theatre — attracted long lines of people who sometimes queued up without knowing what movie they were waiting to see.

Organizers expect similar hordes this year, when the festival takes over six Madison theaters from March 27 to 30. Mary Carbine '86, MA'88, who directs the festival for the UW-Madison Arts Institute, its presenting organization, says she began fielding calls for tickets in December, two months before the festival announced what films it would show.

"There's a real sense of excitement at being able to see all these different types of films together in one event," she says.

But it's the kind of audience, rather than the size, that sets the festival apart from your average trip to the local multiplex. This is no multiplex crowd, and these are no multiplex movies.

In these days of test marketing and targeted demographics, genuine surprise hardly ever enters a movie theater. Major motion pictures are carefully tailored to meet audience expectations, and when disappointments are expensive, spontaneity is expendable. Film festivals, on the other hand, typically piece together variegated rosters of foreign, independent, and experimental film. Surprise is the house special.

"A festival is like a game," says James Kreul '92, MA'96, a film studies graduate student who has had a hand in

programming all five Wisconsin festivals. "The way you pick a [standard] movie is that you wait for a review, or word of mouth, or something to let you know that it's worth your time. At a festival, you can't wait for the buzz. The reason it's fun is because you have to just dive in and take chances. Sometimes you misfire, but sometimes you have this liberating, exhilarating experience, because you had no idea that a film would take you to those places."

It's like a giant, celluloid buffet, where there's every reason to try new tastes. And if the patient way in which audiences digested the unintentionally silent *Fast Runner* shows anything, it's that Madison is ready for the unexpected.

"I just thought it was the most incredible audience I'd seen," says de Boor, a Madison native who came back from New York City to show her film, *Cat Lady*. "I remember thinking that this would only happen in Madison."

Few people will mistake

Madison for a Midwestern tinseltown. Yet the trappings of civic cinephilia are there. UW-Madison hosts frequent film series and owns one of the largest archives of film history and ephemera in



The Wisconsin Film Festival earned its marquee billing last year, drawing long lines of movie enthusiasts at the Orpheum and other downtown venues.

the world. And downtown is home to the gloriously restored Orpheum Theatre, as well as the Four-Star Video Heaven rental shop that Roger Ebert once called “the best video store outside Chicago.”

“There has been a particularly long interest in film here, going back to the time when I was a young assistant professor,” says Tino Balio, executive director of the Arts Institute, who came to Madison in 1966. (See related story, page 27.) “In those days, you could see a foreign film on almost any night.”

The ultimate hallmark of a movie town, though, is a film festival of its own. As many as 1,200 communities around the world have them, from the big and glamorous ones at Sundance and Cannes, to idiosyncratic little celebrations organized around a specific director or theme. (Get your tickets now for the New Orleans Worst Film Festival, devoted to the most dismal in new cinema.)

Ideally, festivals are more than just agglomerations of film. They bring together communities of movie lovers, united by popcorn and long hours of sitting in dark rooms, who give the events ethos and attitude. At Cannes, for example, there’s an overwhelming air of celebrity, and who you see is as important as what you see. At Sundance, industry networking is the name of the game. At Slamdance, an alternative festival that runs parallel to its more famous cousin, it’s about slamming the films at Sundance.

“Festivals are about celebrating the whole idea of film,” says Wendi Weger ’98, one of the Wisconsin festival’s original programmers, who now coordinates the New York Underground and Hampsons film festivals. “There are loads of reasons that films get into commercial theaters, and many of those reasons aren’t based at all on the merit of the films.” Festivals, she says, give films outside the mainstream a chance, while at the same time allowing audiences to appreciate a fuller scope of creative work.

Wisconsin’s foray into that realm began, as do all good Badger ideas, at a tailgater. In February 1997, the Wisconsin Film Office, a division of the state



ERIC TADSEN

A film festival isn’t just about seeing the films — it can also bring chances to see the people who made them. Last year, director Arliss Howard, right, and actress Debra Winger sat down to talk about their movie, *Big Bad Love*, with film critic Michael Wilmington.

tourism department, hosted a party for Hollywood insiders, many of them former Badgers who had gone on to influential roles in movie production and distribution. Because the business of the film office is business — and, specifically, generating some for Wisconsin — its officials were less interested in community-building than in getting the Hollywood film industry to take notice of (and, in turn, make movies in) the Badger state.

Over brats and beer, the partiers plotted an event that would put Madison on the film map. A few months later, state officials initiated the Great Wisconsin Film Festival, an event whose name signaled its optimism. The big draw was to be an appearance by Robert Redford, who had agreed to drop in to accept something called the Cheesehead Award — a self-deprecating honor that promised the sort of klieg-lighted celebrity that was sure to accompany any Hollywood megastar on State Street.

But Redford later backed out, beginning a string of setbacks that threatened to end the event before it could begin. The festival was initially postponed from October 1998 until

April 1999. Then, with two months to go and still no big-name premiere to anchor the event, the state gave up and canceled nearly all its plans.

About all that remained was a schedule of films to be shown on campus, which originally was supposed to be a side dish to the big feast going on up State Street. Sponsored by the Arts Institute and programmed by students Kreul and Weger, the films were mostly off-the-radar independents and documentaries; there were certainly no Redfords among them. But the planners figured that, even if a Great Wisconsin Film Festival was no longer possible, they had a shot at a pretty good one.

“We had a good idea of what we wanted to do, and we thought it would have been crazy to cancel the whole thing,” says Kreul, who was then a program assistant for the UW’s Cinematheque film series. “We knew that if there was no festival at all, if we let the whole thing end, there probably wouldn’t be any film festival in Madison for a long time. We had to take advantage of that momentum.”

Kreul and Weger, then a senior communication arts major who coordinated

the Wisconsin Union's Starlight Cinema, stuck with the goal that guided their campus programming efforts: find high-quality movies that were out of the mainstream and stood little chance of enjoying wide commercial release. "We thought it was very important to build it from within the film community," says Weger.

The festival featured sixteen films, headlined by an eighty-minute, black-and-white comedy titled *Man of the Century*, produced by Adam Abraham, a first-time filmmaker and the twenty-eight-year-old brother of a UW student. The rest of the schedule offered little high-caliber celebrity, but some tantalizing story lines. One film, made by Carrie Ansell '93, revolved around what goes on (aside from the obvious) in the rest rooms of New York City nightclubs. Another was a restored copy of the 1928 Frank Capra film *The Matinee Idol*, which had almost disappeared from circulation. The state film office also came through by landing Jim Abrahams x'66, of *Airplane!* fame, for a lecture on comedy.

The screenings were free, and, although Kreul and Weger had toiled to arrange appearances by filmmakers and participatory discussions, there were few trappings that evoked a "festival" atmosphere. "It felt more like a really great weekend of films," Kreul says.

Opening night was the last Thursday in April, when students were busy with term papers and preparing for spring semester finals. And it didn't help that Mother Nature picked the same weekend for the debut of warm weather.

"It was gorgeous," Kreul recalls. The sun broke through the interminable gray of Madison spring, and temperatures neared seventy degrees. It seemed like the weekend's hottest seat would be a prime Terrace chair, not one for, say, *Outer and Inner Space*, a nearly plotless experimental video shot by Andy Warhol in 1965.

"If you had a choice between sitting outside on the first nice day in a long time, or going inside to watch this minimalist Warhol film, well, I know what most people would do," Kreul says. "I

went with Warhol." To his surprise, so did a lot of other people. Three thousand people attended the festival that year — and almost all thought it was, well, great.

Perhaps the most important

thing that happened during the first festival was that Mary Carbine came. A graduate of UW-Madison's film department, Carbine had been working for Wisconsin Public Television as a fund raiser. But she was fresh from stints in Los Angeles and Chicago, where she worked for a collection of film organizations, including the University of Chicago Film Studies Center, IFP/Midwest, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It seemed obvious to Kreul that she should be involved.

Kreul invited her to take part in a panel on the future of the film festival, which took place on May 2, the last day of the 1999 event.

On May 3, he says, Carbine essentially began running the next festival. "If Mary hadn't been involved, year two would not have happened. There is no doubt about that," Kreul says. "She turned it into a professional film festival."

Carbine has a caffeinated personality that matches the intensity of her blazer-red hair. A fitness fanatic who is training for a triathlon, she had not only the experience, but the resolve, to build on what the students had started. Living inside the Hollywood bubble had taught her not only the operations and language of the movie business, but its often quirky realities. Once, at a Women in Film gala, Carbine was appointed to escort Robin Williams through a back entrance where he wouldn't be mobbed by crowds. That's how things got done out there; most of the really interesting stuff happened in the backrooms.

After the modest success of the 1999 event, the Arts Institute allocated money to hire Carbine half time to coordinate future events. She was, says Tino Balio, the only person who possibly could do the job. Carbine combined the talents of a film programmer, a fund raiser, an event

manager, and a public relations agent in one body — a blessing, Balio says, given the festival's scant budget for bodies.

"Really, we need three people," Balio says, "but we can only afford half of one. Fortunately, Mary gives us about 110 percent."

In her first year as director, Carbine more than tripled the number of films shown, expanded the festival off-campus into downtown theaters, and turned screenings into ticketed events. The planning team also scheduled the festival for earlier in spring, hoping to avoid a repeat of the previous year's crowd-thinning weather. With the event still half a year away, someone noticed that they had chosen the same weekend as the NCAA men's basketball championships.

Kreul recalls dismissing the concern. "I said, 'Don't worry. There's no chance Wisconsin will even get close to the Final Four,'" he laughs.

But, as it turned out, the Badgers tipped off in Indianapolis right in the middle of the festival, competing with at least three movie showings and stealing the spotlight. Walter Mirisch '42, the longtime independent producer who was there to appear at a tribute honoring his career, carried around a portable television, so that he could catch the Badgers between films.

Yet the filmgoing public was undeterred. Even screenings that went head-to-head with the game sold out, and, when the stubs were totaled, the festival had drawn in twelve thousand people — more than twice Carbine's own projections. "I think at that point I realized that this was going to be big," she says.

These days, Carbine has what many people might consider the perfect job, given that a lot of her work is watching movies. But there are so many movies. She sees three hundred films each year, many of them during blitzkrieg trips to film festivals around the country, where she works overtime to recruit films for Madison's event. At Toronto's ten-day international film festival in September, she will take in about fifty screenings. At Sundance, she'll try to catch another

twenty-five. What she hasn't seen herself she gets a read on by working the phones, staying in constant contact with critics, fellow programmers, film professors, and others who closely follow moviemaking.

"Being able to do that is the part that reminds me why I do all the other things," she says.

As the festival has grown, so has the effort needed to pull it off. Carbine manages arrangements for the more than one hundred events during the long weekend, including appearances by some sixty filmmakers and other speakers. She sweats all the details personally, from shipping films to booking hotel rooms to approving marketing materials. Finding money is never far down the to-do list. Last year's festival cost about \$650,000, and ticket revenue covered less than 10 percent of the tab. More than 80 percent of the budget comes from in-kind donations; the rest consists of cash gifts, secured from as many as fifty companies and organizations. "It's not just a matter of getting a bunch of films and showing them," says Balio.

Building the Lego-like structure of screenings, lectures, and other events takes months of viewing, reviewing, and recruiting. This year, Carbine's office received 170 tapes from filmmakers hoping to be part of the festival, and each was screened carefully. Most of the films, though, are solicited by Carbine and a handful of programming volunteers, including several students from the UW's communication arts department. A few themes usually emerge in the final schedule, but films are chosen primarily based on what's good and what's available.

In many cases, the festival organizers try to woo not only the films, but also the filmmakers, to Madison. Screenings are often followed by audience dialogues with the people behind the films, helping to ensure that the festival offers more than just passive viewing. "We always try to find ways to create a filmgoing community so that we can foster a deeper understanding of the film and the process of making it," says Carbine.

Work on the 2003 line-up was ongoing as *On Wisconsin's* deadline arrived. (For a few highlights, see below, or check wifilmfest.org for a full schedule.) But expect the festival to follow the pattern of years past, offering diverse selections encompassing foreign and domestic features, documentaries, new media, animation, and revivals of forgotten classics. There will be some familiar names and faces, including an appearance by Roger Ebert, but most of the films will arrive with more hope than hype, having drawn little attention from mainstream audiences or press.

But that doesn't mean that they won't. Festivals usually operate ahead of the grapevine, often giving audiences their first taste of movies that may go on to bigger things. In past years, Wisconsin's festival has featured such emerging independent hits as *The Straight Story*, *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, and *Y tu mamá también*, as well as dozens of other films on the cusp of notoriety.

Typical of this year's crop is *Better Luck Tomorrow*, whose director, Justin Lin, recently graced the cover of *Filmmaker*

magazine. "The fun of a festival is presenting and seeing those films that will be big in the specialty arena ahead of everyone else," says Carbine.

The festival's roots, however, are in the joys of discovering the next little thing — in seeing movies that have only a remote chance of appearing on the radar screen of the wider public. For all its growing pomp, the event is still deeply provincial, with about one-fifth of the films coming from writers and directors with Wisconsin ties. And, as much as the Wisconsin Film Festival is about bringing good movies to audiences, it's also about bringing good audiences to the movies.

"It's just a thrill to show your movie to audiences like the ones in Madison," says Liesel de Boor, who has screened *Cat Lady*, a dark comedy, at festivals throughout the country. "I got to sit in the audience and hear people laugh at my movie. And that's kind of the whole reason you make movies — for audiences like that." 🍿

Michael Penn MA'97 is senior editor of *On Wisconsin* and not the brother of Sean, although he loved his work in *Sweet and Lowdown*.

ON THE MARQUEE

More than one hundred films are on tap for the fifth annual Wisconsin Film Festival, representing the usual eclectic mix of independent, world, and experimental film. Movies will be shown March 27–30 at the Orpheum Theatre, the Bartell Theatre, the Club Majestic, and the Madison Art Center, as well as University Square Theatre, the Memorial Union Play Circle, and the Cinematheque screens on campus.

A few of the films likely to be talked about include *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, and *Satin Rouge*. The festival will also highlight new African films from Tunisia, Senegal, Rwanda, the Ivory Coast, and beyond, as well as profile works dealing with science in culture.

Another showcase will be experimental and avant-garde film, including an appearance by influential filmmaker Michael Snow, who made the 1960s film *Wavelength*, widely considered a classic of the genre. Snow will show selections from his digital work, as well as a new feature film.

"There are just so few opportunities to see films like this," says Carbine of Snow's work. "But really, I think these films are more accessible than people may realize."

For ticket information and show times, visit wifilmfest.org or call (877) 963-FILM (3456).

A GOLDEN AGE

THE WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL REVIVES MEMORIES OF MADISON'S LONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE MOVIES.



A campus kiosk advertises a typical night at the movies during the 1970s.

By Michael Wilmington x'68

When I got a call several years ago inviting me to attend the first Wisconsin Film Festival — as a representative of Madison's "Movie Golden Age" — I was happy to accept. But why had it taken so long?

The Madison I knew — where I came at the age of seventeen to study English, where I acted onstage in the Wisconsin Union Theater and elsewhere, where I went to the Field House and Camp Randall for sports and to the Majestic, Orpheum, and Memorial Union Play Circle for movies, where I marched against the Vietnam War, wrote for newspapers, and became a certified member of the notorious Madison Film Mafia — no longer really exists. Some of my old film friends are still in town, but most have scattered to the far corners of the country. I see them only rarely now, when my job takes me to the coasts or when I bus back to Madison.

And the Golden Age, as I knew it, is long gone. The city seems less volatile and exciting, the student body more

complacent. And that wonderful treasure trove of movies on campus, which marked Madison in the sixties and seventies, has largely vanished — except when the festival and a few other venues try to bring it back. Once, there were dozens of movies shown every week, and passionate buffs arguing about them everywhere. Now, the campus kiosks are bare of the movie posters that once crowded them top to bottom. The movies have largely ended.

The Golden Age overlapped the Vietnam War protest years and was, in many ways, part of the same cultural ferment. During those years, amazingly, in addition to everything else happening, the UW played host to a film culture and community that matched the activity, intensity, and productivity of the more famous film communities at UCLA or NYU. Movies were critiqued, movies were shot, and most of all movies were shown — an endless stream every week, not just in the regular theaters, but in campus auditoriums and classrooms, and off-campus

student centers and hangouts (like the Green Lantern Eating Cooperative), where sixteen-millimeter films were screened every night. It was a fabulously eclectic bill of fare, from *The Battle of Algiers*, *City Lights*, and *Wild Strawberries* to *Bringing Up Baby*, *Notorious*, and *Duck Soup*.

We were crazy about movies. And we all seemed to know each other. We wrote about films, studied them in classes, and joined film societies and selection committees. When you're young, you're often poor in money (as I was), but rich in acquaintance — and you often make the friends and enemies who will haunt your whole life.

Once, I could walk down State Street and almost immediately bump into someone I knew — or two or three. Sometimes, since it was an age of student protest, we'd emulate Barry Fitzgerald as Michael O'Connell in *The Quiet Man*, and "talk a little treason." But more often than not, we would talk movies — talk about John Ford and Jean Luc Godard, and the morality of tracking shots, and the truth twenty-four times a second, and whether Ingmar Bergman was really a better director than Don Siegel. We would pore over the latest issues of the various journals, for which most of us wrote: *The Velvet Light Trap*, a homegrown independent film magazine with an international reputation; the *Daily Cardinal*, which, from 1971 to 1973, may have had the best student film reviewing staff ever assembled; or *TakeOver*, a proudly sensational underground paper of alternative culture and outright scandal.

At night, if there wasn't an uprising somewhere, we'd settle down to another movie in another classroom, put on by one of the many film societies that flourished on campus then. There were several dozen societies at one time or another, with names like the Fertile Valley Film Society, the Praetorius, El Dorado, Phoenix, Green Lantern, and, most venerable of all, the Wisconsin Film Society — the one film group that predated all the others, and, sadly, the last to fall, after home video killed them all.

Why did this campus film culture spring up so suddenly and why did it dis-

appear? For years, I was so caught up in that world that I couldn't have analyzed what made it special. But it's obvious that the terror and turbulence of those years had a lot to do with its birth. Violence in the world and on campus made people want to gather together, to retreat into fantasy. There was also a specific chemistry to the student body — the mix of kids from the Dairy State and kids from the East. The city kids were more fluent in art-film lore, but the country kids (like me) may have been more passionate about learning it. All of us were predisposed to the easy, cheap entertainment of movies. We sopped it all up.

Certainly I did. I came to Madison from the village of Williams Bay, Wisconsin (population: 1,114 or so, at the time), from a high school graduating class of twenty-eight. We were tiny; in the fifties and sixties, the only movie theater in the Bay was the Lakes Outdoor Theater (since demolished and replaced by a compost field) on the outskirts of town. I grew up going to see movies in the surrounding towns, becoming a devotee of Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, David Lean, and Elia Kazan. But I longed to see the more unattainable ones — the movies with subtitles that were written about in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. When I went to Madison in 1964, I had seen only two foreign films — *Rififi*, from France, and *The Magician*, from Sweden — both dubbed.

In Madison, things changed. I became active in student theater and the student paper, and I saw two movies every week, and sometimes more. Eventually, I dropped into the Wisconsin Film

Society, then ensconced in the basement auditorium of the Commerce Building (now known as Ingraham Hall). In 1967, I began writing movie reviews for the *Daily Cardinal*, an association that continued, off and on, into the seventies. That same year, I befriended Joe McBride, a tall, bespectacled Milwaukee guy who also contributed to the *Cardinal*, under its old film critic-editor Larry Cohen. The first time I saw Joe (outside of Professor Richard Byrne's film history class) was on the day of the Dow Chemical demonstrations, when he raced into the Play Circle during a showing of *They Were Expendable* to announce that students were being gassed on Bascom Hill.

Joe and I began staging plays, shooting movies, and writing film articles together, which we got published in national or international magazines. Through him, I met other Mafiosi: the darkly comic cynics Tim Onosko and Mark Bergman, and John Davis and Tom Flinn, who ran the Fertile Valley Film Society and also turned out killer riffs with the White Trash Blues Band.

It was also through Joe that I became involved with the film societies. Movies could be rented cheaply and shown cheaply; you could set up two Kodak Pageant projectors at the back of a classroom and show the films on the pull-down screens. Joe was chairman of the Wisconsin Film Society as a freshman, and he was succeeded by Wayne Merry, a frizzy-haired guy who later worked for the State Department. Bergman succeeded him, and he was followed by skinny, little Reid Rosefelt, who became a well-known film publicist, whose com-

pany, Magic Lantern, bears the name of the school's then most successful society.

Up to then, the world of student theater had eaten up most of my after-school life. But I gradually became consumed by film, as we all did. I joined the Memorial Union film committee, a contentious group that picked the films for the Play Circle. The film committee attracted all kinds of movie buffs, and it brought me in touch with faculty such as Tino Balio, D. W. Griffith scholar Russell Merritt, and David Bordwell, the ubiquitous author who shared the pages of *Film Comment* with Joe and me and later became the country's foremost academic writer on film.

Thanks to Balio and others, the university's Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research acquired the film collection of United Artists, which included movies made at Warner Brothers, RKO, and Monogram studios from the thirties through the early fifties. Inspired by the accessibility of the collection, a bearded, lanky graduate student from New Zealand named Russell Campbell started *The Velvet Light Trap*, which he typed by hand on an old manual typewriter. Russell looked something like a Hammer Studio horror movie Rasputin, but was probably the gentlest and most collegial of all of us — and his magazine gradually became world famous.

TVLT, as we nicknamed it, published thematic issues in which local writers could analyze the films in the UA collection and elsewhere. The Mafia became the staff, and, unfortunately, it was there that our film community suffered a schism that marked the beginning of the

THE MADISON MAFIA

A partial list of Madison's Golden Age vets, and what they've done lately:

Jim Abrahams x'66, co-wrote and directed *Airplane!*, *Rutles*, *Police Squad* series

Tino Balio, professor of communication arts, director of Arts Institute

Andrew Bergman MA'66, PhD'70, wrote *The Freshman*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*

Mark Bergman '69, longtime campus film coordinator; died in 2001

David Bordwell, UW professor of communication arts; author of many film books

Barry Alexander Brown, co-made *The War at Home*; editor of *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *25th Hour*; others

Russell Campbell MA'72, director of film studies, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand

Tony Chase '72, author of *Movies on Trial: The Legal System on the Silver Screen*

Lawrence D. Cohen '69, wrote *Carrie*, *Ghost Story*

Susan Dalton '66, former archivist for Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, American Film Institute

John Davis '67, comic book mogul, musician

André De Shields '70, veteran Broadway actor and director

Sandy Searles Dickinson x'68, acted in movies and television productions

Tom Flinn '66, writer, teacher, musician

Douglas Gomery MA'70, PhD'75, wrote under the alias John Montgomery; now a journalism professor

Bette Gordon '72, MA'75, MFA'76, director for movies and television

Stuart Gordon '69, wrote and directed *Re-Animator* and other horror movies

end of the Golden Age, splitting into two cliques dubbed (by Gerry Peary) the Aesthetes and the Politicos.

The Aesthetes were supposedly devoted to aesthetics above political content; more precisely, we were auteurs, devoted to the directorial achievements of the filmmakers John Ford, Hitchcock, Welles, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir, and others. The Politicos adopted the quasi-Marxist angle then popular in the groves of French academe. The Politicos mostly were film majors, and the arcane theories they studied eventually split the academic film community, as well.

Russell generously tried to keep both groups happy, alternating the magazine's theme issues between the two groups. Although there was no overt hostility at first, there were differences. And they grew. Some Politicos thought some Aesthetes were obnoxious and politically incorrect. Some Aesthetes — myself included — thought some Politicos were uptight phonies. It should have ended at that, with semihumorous clashes, but the arguments eventually broke up the staffs of both *TVLT* and the *Cardinal*, as well as the Union film committee.

When I say broke up, I'm not kidding. There was an actual brawl in the Union between Gerry and me after the Politicos ousted me from my chairmanship of the Union film committee, beginning with Mark Bergman tossing a cupful of coffee in Gerry's face, and ending with Gerry and me wrestling on the floor. Gerry and I are now friends again — I sponsored him for membership in the National Society of Film Critics. Mark, sadly, died of pancreatic

cancer a few years ago. But Tim Onosko and I have memorialized him in an annual film festival event, called "Bergman's Show." There we show the kind of noirish, auteurist cult movies Mark liked and gather to talk about the old days.

But back then it seemed deadly serious. And, actually, it was. We wrangled about movies, obsessed and fought about them, because we loved them so much. Yet, though most of the group succeeded as writers, historians, and critics, few actually achieved their real goal — which was, of course, to make films. Instead, a bunch of Madisonians not quite at the heart of the Mafia made it in Hollywood. (See the box below for details.)

The seventies were in many ways a terrible time for me. I had left school, I had no money and lived on small-job pitances and money sent by my mother — who, despite having a master's degree in art from the UW, worked in a factory. Violence was always somehow in the air. Both in my undergraduate years and afterward, I often saw my campus aflame and in riot. But I also saw and heard amazing things — and not just at the movies. For me, the whole spirit of that era is summed up by two frantic days back in 1968, when Joe and I and our buddy Steve Wonn traveled to Chicago for the Democratic national convention. In that span, I saw Luis Buñuel's *Belle De Jour* for the first time, lost my virginity, and witnessed the police-and-protestor riots from atop a van where cameramen recorded the carnage for all time.

And I also lost my heart, permanently, to the movies. We were living in

a kind of paradise — but like all false heavens, it was one that would eventually pass away.

Could it all happen again some day? It hasn't yet. Despite the flourishing of programs like the festival and Bordwell's Cinematheque, Madison now seems more an ordinary college film town. Yet there are elements that could trigger another renaissance. Projected DVD is now so refined that students may well be able to show DVDs in classrooms and start up cheap campus film programs again.

I wish they would, because now, when I walk down State Street, as I do when I visit the festival every year, I'm an outsider. I rarely see someone I know. But I do occasionally sight the ghosts. I see them by day, pouring down the sidewalks on Langdon, Mifflin, and State Streets. I watch them at night, settling into chairs at Ingraham or Van Vleck or the Social Science building. I hear the whir of the old Kodak Pageant projectors and see that magical bright beam flooding the classroom screens, and finally, I hear the deep, magical voice from my favorite movie, *Citizen Kane*, whispering, "Rosebud." I settle down in darkness. It's the last picture show all over again, and this time, it can't fade away, because it's playing in my head. It's safe and untouchable, and so are all those people — veterans of the War at Home and the War for Film, children of the Golden Age — watching it with me. ■

Michael Wilmington has reviewed films for *Isthmus*, *L.A. Weekly*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and now is the chief film critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, in addition to teaching and authoring books.

Peter Lehman '67, MA'73, PhD'78, professor and author of film criticism

Richard Lippe x'71, film critic for Canada's *CineAction* magazine

Ken Mate '68, writer, Emmy-winning TV reporter

Joseph McBride x'67, film critic and author of several film biographies

Patrick McGilligan '74, film historian, author of several books

Errol Morris '69, made documentaries *Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*, and *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*

Peter Neufeld '72, screenwriter and lawyer in the O.J. Simpson trial

Tim Onosko x'70, former journalist; now consultant for major studios

Dennis Paoli '69, wrote *Re-Animator* and many other Stuart Gordon films

Gerald Peary PhD'77, film critic for the *Boston Phoenix* and other papers

Danny Peary '71, writer of several books, including *Cult Movies* series

Reid Rosefelt '75, independent film publicist and producer

Mark Rosenberg '79, produced *Bright Lights*, *Big City*; *Major League*; *Presumed Innocent*; died in 1992

Nancy Schwartz '63, screenwriter, critic, historian; died in 1979

Glenn Silber '72, co-maker of *The War at Home*; ABC News producer

Larry Sloman MS'72, former editor of *High Times*; author of *Reef Madness*

Kristin Thompson PhD'77, honorary fellow in UW film program; author of *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*

Michael Wilmington x'68, author, teacher, film critic

David Zucker '70 and **Jerry Zucker '72**, made *Airplane!*, *Ruthless People*, many others