



SOUNDING OFF

The State of Native Cinema



BY SHERMAN ALEXIE

In 1998, after *Smoke Signals* won the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award and Filmmakers' trophy, and then went on to earn wonderful reviews and approximately seven million dollars at the box office, I predicted there would be a sovereign renaissance in Native American film. *Smoke Signals* was the first feature film written, directed, and co-produced by Native Americans to ever receive major national and international distribution (it played over 700 theatres at the same time!) and I thought there'd be a huge wave of other such films.

I was wrong.

Of course, I was biased about *Smoke Signal's* power to change the world. I wrote the darn thing and it's based on my book of short stories, so I was supposed to be biased. But I wasn't the only romantic. Harvey Weinstein predicted the movie was going to make 25 million dollars and wanted to sign me to a three-picture deal. It was a terrible three-picture deal, and I didn't sign it, but Miramax did hire me to write and direct *Reservation Blues*, based on my novel, and I thought all was well with the cinematic world.

I was wrong.

While *Smoke Signals* was a success, it is essentially a middle-of-the-road film with more ethnic ambition than artistic power, and Miramax put *Reservation Blues* into turnaround after I wrote, oh, maybe 37 drafts of the middle-of-the-road screenplay. And though I've written and/or rewritten ten other screenplays for Warner Brothers, HBO, ABC, and others, and have had great "general meetings" with dozens of executives, producers, directors, and actors, I've only been able to write and direct two digital video flicks (one a pretentious feature and other a pretty good short) that both played Sundance,



Writer and filmmaker Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian. As a writer, he has published numerous books of poetry, novels, and short stories. In collaboration with Chris Eyre, he adapted his short story *That is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*, into the film *Smoke Signals*. He lives in Spokane, Washington with his wife and son.

but only received minor releases and were essentially artistic and financial failures. Chris Eyre, the director of *Smoke Signals*, has gone on to direct a number of other features and shorts, five of which have played at Sundance, but none of his films have come remotely close to matching the financial and artistic success of our initial collaboration either. To complicate matters, two of Chris's films were based on novels by Tony Hillerman, a white man who enjoys a tremendous career writing Navajo-themed mysteries, but whose reputation among Native American writers is a combination of righteous anger, anti-colonialism and jealousy. Should Chris have made those movies? Of course.

Did he make serious artistic and ethnical compromises in order to do so? Of course.

We Indians love to talk about and fight for our (artistic) sovereignty, but there can be nothing sovereign or aboriginal about a movie based on a Tony Hillerman book. And there is also nothing sovereign about writing screenplays for Warner Brothers, HBO, ABC and others.

Don't get me wrong. Chris and I get paid to write, direct, and develop movies. That's a huge accomplishment that should be celebrated. Dozens of Native Americans get to work because of Chris. And I venture that 95% of Native Americans have seen *Smoke Signals* and can recite the dialogue from memory like it was an indigenous version of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. But what happened to that Native American cinematic renaissance? Where are the other Native American filmmakers?

Well, until this year, those Native American filmmakers were living on a cinematic reservation called the Sundance Film Festival Native Forum. And now, because of Bird Runningwater's courage, the Native American Forum has rightfully given up its sovereignty and is now integrated into the rest of the festival. Our films will no longer be measured against each other, but against the very best the Festival has to offer. Frankly, I think the Native films will suffer by comparison, this year and next and for a few years after that. But I also believe that competition will force us to get better. I am now hoping (and almost predicting) that in the near-future a Native filmmaker will write, direct, and produce a much better film than *Smoke Signals*, and that new film will be an artistic and financial triumph that will launch a true Native American cinematic renaissance.

The Sundance Institute's Native Initiative supports the development of Native filmmakers and the exhibition of their work. In addition to scouting and identifying filmmakers with potential to participate in the Institute's Feature Film Program and the Sundance Independent Producers Conference, the Initiative develops programming as part of the Festival's Native Forum. This year, the Festival presents 11 films by Native and Indigenous filmmakers in its main program, and presents a series of panel discussions and events.



05 DAILY INSIDER

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Photography generously provided by
WireImage, the Official Photography
Provider of the 2005 Sundance Film Festival

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Volume 2, Issue 9

Printed daily on recycled paper

FREE • Available at Festival venues



Yesterday at the Egyptian Theatre, the Sundance Collection presented the premiere screening of a newly restored print of Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA*. The 1978 Academy Award-winning documentary depicts the harsh working and living conditions of miners in Brookside, Kentucky, and the strike that results from their struggle for a union contract. Following yesterday's screening, a group of coal miners from the Co-Op mine near Huntington, Utah, spoke about their current struggle for union representation. The miners also attended the Conversation with Barbara Kopple at the Filmmaker Lodge, and are pictured here with Hart Perry (far left) and Kopple.