

# BACK TO THE GRIND

## HARDACRE FILM FESTIVAL

### "American Grindhouse" documentary to screen at Hardacre Film Festival

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Growing up in Cedar Falls, Iowa, Eljah Drenner learned the craft of filming and editing in junior high, putting together short films for the local public-access cable channel. "I always loved movies," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Los Angeles, "but really when I started doing stuff in junior high that we put on public access in Cedar Falls, that's when I started progressing my interest into actually making things." Drenner will be at the Hardacre Film Festival in Tipton, Iowa, at 9:45 p.m. Friday to screen the film he directed, "American Grindhouse," a documentary about such rise of exploitation through the history of the film industry, from early films such as Tod Browning's "Freaks" (1932) to Quentin Tarantino's "Grindhouse" (2007).

Drenner will be available after the screening of "American Grindhouse" for a question-answer session.

Exploitation is a term used to describe movies depicting lurid scenes

—HARDACRE IHS

# AMERICAN GRINDHOUSE

ON PAGE 115: Read Linda Cook's reviews of "Ballhaws" and "World's Largest."

**WHAT:** Hardacre Film Festival  
**WHEN:** Friday-Saturday, Aug. 6-7  
**WHERE:** Hardacre Theater, 112 E. 5th St., Tipton, Iowa  
**DETAILS:** Admission to any of the Hardacre's three programs — Opening

IF YOU GO

Night, Saturday Day or Closing Night — is \$8. An all-festival pass can be purchased for \$20. Films begin at 6 p.m. Friday. On Saturday, screenings will run all day, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** A movie schedule is on Page H15. For more information go online to [www.hardacrefilmfestival.com](http://www.hardacrefilmfestival.com).

## HARDACRE

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that may include explicit sex, violence, physical deformities and other social taboos. Examples include African-American urban movies, also known as blaxploitation, and rape/vengeance films such as "Last House on the Left." Grindhouse is a term used to describe 24-hour, inner-city movie theaters showing exploitation movies from the late 1960s to early '70s.

"To describe a movie as a grindhouse movie isn't accurate," Drenner explains. "They would show, in these inner-city, urban movie theaters, everything. They would show Howard Hawks Westerns. It didn't matter. They were open 24 hours, so they had to show anything and everything just to stay open."

The seed for "American Grindhouse" began to germinate about 10 years ago, when, during film school in Denver, Drenner began working on a documentary about Jack Hill, the director of "Blood Bath" (1966), "Coffy" (1976) and "Foxy Brown" (1977).

"I wanted to make a documentary about his life story and why he vanished because he just made one last movie and then, bump, off the map," Drenner said. "I was exploring that story, and that story, that mystery, wasn't that interesting. But I got to know Jack very well, and he and I are still very good friends."

Originally, the concept for "American Grindhouse" was to highlight various exploitation filmmakers and their careers, but the film had to switch gears part-way through. "That just wasn't strong enough, so we had to go back and start all over again," Drenner said. "We just decided to make a documentary that detailed the history of exploitation films."

"American Grindhouse" illustrates that history while drawing a distinct parallel to the mainstream world of cinema.

"When someone goes into it, they think of exploitation movies as being bottom-of-the-barrel and that their marketing tactics weren't the

same as mainstream Hollywood," Drenner said. "By the end of the movie, I think you realize that there's not a whole lot of difference. Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil B. DeMille, they were all doing the same thing as these low-budget filmmakers. They were just doing it on a much larger scale."

"American Grindhouse" premiered at the South by Southwest film and music festivals March 13 in Austin, Texas. But the Austin festival scene made Drenner very nervous.

"I kind of stayed away from the festival a little bit and was out there wandering around Austin, going to music shops and bookstores, perhaps not taking advantage of whatever there might have been for me," he said. "I didn't exploit myself. Ironically, I make a movie about exploitation, but I don't feel confident or comfortable exploiting myself."

Since South by Southwest is the largest of the festival scene extensively and now makes its way to the big screen in Tipton.

"I'm anxious to see how it plays to a crowd in Tipton, Iowa," Drenner said. "American Grindhouse" will be up for the best documentary and audience awards at Hardacre, festival director Will Valet said.

The festival will present some movies with low ties, but with a low-centric event was never the festival jury's intention. "In terms of Iowa filmmakers, we did lack out 3 and find a few that just submitted some fantastic films that we couldn't pass up," Valet said. "In American Grindhouse's case, when we first heard about it, we had no idea that Eljah was originally from Iowa. It just sounded like something interesting."

Drenner's film faces some competition in the best documentary and audience award categories, but Valet says getting into the Hardacre festival is no easy task and that all of the nominees, including "American Grindhouse" are top-notch.

"Given the fact that we had 150 entries and it made it to the top 25, I hate to see it nominated, but the fact that it won a spot in our festival says a lot for it," he

said. "I really had to narrow down the festival to the best." Valet expects the Hardacre crowd to be receptive of "American Grindhouse."

"Given the crowd that we attract, they're very savvy about movies. They're very smart about the process," he said. "The film is really entertaining, but it looks at this kind of sleazy subgenre of film from a really academic perspective."

"It's a very scholarly look at a sleazy subject, and very entertaining. I think that's why the jury went for it." "American Grindhouse" touches on several different sub-genres of exploitation, reaching out to fans of each.

"I think it's very accessible, I think it's funnier than a lot of other film history documentaries," Drenner said. "We aspire to reach a wider audience than just making a documentary about one of those movies or just one of those filmmakers. I love documentaries... I wanted to make it as accessible as possible."

Fans of "American Grindhouse" won't be able to catch it on the big screen local theaters. Instead, the film will continue touring the festival circuit while being available online via video on demand.

"I see the direct-to-video market being a little more of the traditional exploitation," Drenner said. "American Grindhouse" isn't going to be playing in any of the major cities. It's not going to open on thousands of screens. That's the market now. You play on that checkbox, and you can play on the same checkbox as "Inception." You just can't."

While Drenner anticipates "American Grindhouse" coming out on DVD at the end of the year, the director encourages film fans to watch movies in the theater.

"If you can ever get a chance to see a movie in a theater, do take advantage of it," he said. "I think 'American Grindhouse' plays very well to a crowd."

"It's a lot more enjoyable to see it in a theater environment on the big screen rather than just at home on your computer."

