



Slamdance Brings the Wu

by Josh Grossberg

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PARK CITY—Slamdance is free-stylin'.

The festival world's David to Sundance's Goliath, the 2007 Slamdance Film Festival kicked off its Bar Mitzvah year this week with a slate of narrative and documentary flicks challenging its better known rival's claim for being the indie film mecca.

Among the 2007 highlights is *Rock the Bells*, a concert documentary from up-and-coming filmmakers Casey Suchan and Dennis Hennelly chronicling the difficulties promoters faced in organizing the historic 2004 reunion of hip-hop superstars the Wu-Tang Clan at a music festival in San Bernadino, California.

The film also features the last filmed performance of Ol' Dirty Bastard, who died several months later of an accidental drug overdose in a New York studio.

"This film to us was always a Slamdance film because Slamdance is about the indie do-it-yourself mentality, and that's really what our film is about in a lot of ways," Suchan told E! Online.

In contrast to Sundance's increasing programming of more polished, star-studded fare geared toward studio bidding wars, Slamdance's cofounder and president, Peter Baxter, says his 13-year-old event continues to celebrate more freewheeling films.

"If you look at the kind of films we showed back in '95, it's pretty much exactly the same. The big change now is unlike then when we had 48 films submitted, we now have over 3,600 submissions," Baxter said.

With two screening rooms at the Thunder Mountain Inn on Main Street, Slamdance has established itself as something of a complementary little sibling to Sundance, serving as the launch pad for a new generation of filmmakers, including Mark Forster (*Finding Neverland*) and [Christopher Nolan](#) (*Memento*, *Batman Begins*), and such acclaimed documentaries as *Mad Hot Ballroom*.

"One of the things that has happened is that audiences really want to see these types of personal independent films," Baxter said. "I know in the beginning of Sundance, that's indeed what they believed, but as Sundance has matured...they are now not so much independently made films." The seat-of-the-pants experience endured by the codirectors of *Rock the Bells* is typical of Slamdance entries.

"We had 20 cameras rolling continuously at the show and there was a lot going on," Suchan noted. "There was a near riot at the gate. And ODB decided at the last minute that he didn't want to leave his hotel room and come to the show. They also had a venue that was oversold and probably 105 degrees in there. It was hot and people were passing out while waiting for Wu-Tang."

After syncing more than 200 hours of raw footage, Suchan and Hennelly had to edit it down into a coherent story, which took on added weight after ODB's passing.

"Suddenly, ODB died so now we have a movie that represents the last time he was ever on stage with Wu-Tang," Suchan said. "It didn't change our movie that much but we had to address it so we talk to his mother and interviewed people closest to him and tried to get at what was really going on with him on the day of the show."

Another Slamdance doc generating heat is *Red Without Blue* by Todd Sills, Benita Sills and Brook Sebold. Three and a half years in the making, the film takes a frank look at human sexuality and the bonds that hold a family together as it follows Montana-born identical twins Mark and Alex and the evolution of their relationship after the latter transitions from male to female.

***Red Without Blue* has sparked the interest of a number of film buyers.**

"Because it is our first film and because it takes place at the same time as Sundance, it's a bit overwhelming," Stills said. "But Slamdance is a great way to meet fellow filmmakers who are in the same position you are while experiencing the Big Show at the same time."

Another documentary, *The King of Kong*, which follows a middle-school science teacher and a hot-sauce mogul jockeying for the Guinness World Record for the classic arcade game Donkey Kong, just became the first documentary snapped up at this year's Slamdance, said Baxter. Slamdance isn't completely bereft of name talent, though.

Weirdsville, a dark comedy from *Pump Up the Volume* and *Empire Records* director Allan Moyle stars [Scott Speedman](#), Wes Bentley, [Taryn Manning](#) and Matt Frewer in the story of three stoners on the run from Satanists and a sadistic drug dealer. *Homo Erectus* is a caveman comedy headlined by Adam Rifkin, Ali Larter, David Carradine and Ron Jeremy. The fest is hosting the world premiere of *Dante's Inferno*, an innovative retelling of Dante's fable using paper puppets and featuring voice work by [Dermot Mulroney](#), James Cromwell and Martha Plimpton. And *You Are Here*, a *Rashomon*-like story about a group of twentysomethings who try to figure out exactly what happened to them the night before, stars Michael Biehn, Bijou Phillips and *That '70s Show*'s [Danny Masterson](#).

While Slamdance has enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Sundance, Baxter said the festival will continue working to set itself apart. He not only plans to increase his fest's presence in Park City, but also is launching a number of new programs.

"Slamdance is becoming a year-round organization," said Baxter. "There's a popular screenplay competition and we're working with Fox 21 to independently produce a teleplay. And the last few months we've started a horror competition. We're going to be doing additional smaller events throughout the summer."

For the TV script competition, judges will select a handful of finalists from entries and Fox 21 will choose the winner, who will up to \$40,000 in prize money and will have their script made into a Fox pilot. For the horror contest, Slamdance will solicit submissions, produce the winning screenplay and show the finished product at the festival.

Meanwhile, after a slow start, the film sales are heating up at Sundance.

Grace Is Gone, a drama with [John Cusack](#) as a dad who takes his two daughters on a road trip to tell them their soldier mother was killed in combat in Iraq, was acquired over the weekend by the Weinstein Company for \$4 million.

Then on Monday, Fox Searchlight snapped up the dramedy *Waitress* starring [Keri Russell](#) for about \$4 million and *Joshua*, a family drama that stars Sam Rockwell as a wealthy father whose young son has difficulty accepting his baby sister, for \$3.7 million. Warner Independent Pictures anted up \$4 million for the relationship drama *Clubland*.

Finally, Magnolia Pictures has purchased the distribution rights to the documentary *Crazy Love*, about a dysfunctional couple's romance, for the mid-six figures.