



2 December 2021

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BYRON BAY INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL DELIVERS CHRISTMAS GIFT OF INSPIRING AND UPLIFTING FILMS

The Byron Bay International Film Festival (BBFF) returns this month with a condensed program of eight feature-length films and a range of shorts designed to inspire hope and strength in a wider Northern Rivers community wearied by nearly two years of COVID-19.

"We are screening several films that carry a strong positive message – of courage, resilience and optimism, that inspire faith in the power of people to get through challenging times. Conversely, some also shine a light on the shadow side and fragility of humanity, prompting us to self-reflect and re-examine our attitudes and behaviours around concepts such as injustice," says long-term BBFF director J'aimee Skippon-Volke.

Providing a welcome diversion from the stress of Christmas busyness, they're a satisfying alternative to the Christmas blockbusters.

Themed 'Shining Light in Darkness', BBFF's 2021 offering includes a mind-expanding documentary about the nature of consciousness, a study of young American men who resisted conscription to Vietnam, the story of one woman's courageous battle against genetically modified crops in India, a candid portrait of Lennox Head artist Mark Waller and a chronicle of how a top Australian metalcore band took up the climate change challenge.

Originally scheduled for October, the 2021 festival has been tailored to restrictions imposed due to the pandemic. The revised format allows filmmakers to connect with cinema audiences while giving film lovers the pleasure of watching their works on a full-sized cinema screen once more.

"COVID-19 has devastated the local arts industry and our aim is to keep creativity alive in a safe and enjoyable way," Skippon-Volke says.

Among the films is *Aware – Glimpses of Consciousness*, a work of such startling beauty that it provides something of a psychedelic experience in itself.

Diving deep into the great unknown of the human mind, it introduces viewers to brain scientists, a Buddhist monk, Mexican shaman, psilocybin researchers, and evolutionary ecologist Monica Gagliano. A research associate professor at Southern Cross University, Gagliano demonstrates that trees 'speak' to each other, learn from experience and consciously respond.

There is consciousness, she says, though not as we know it.

Gagliano travels to Mexico to take part in peyote rituals, while other investigators from esteemed institutions including John Hopkins University discover psilocybin's potential to open the door of consciousness into a spiritual plane.

Also celebrating the infinite and mysterious wonder of plants, *The Seeds of Vandana Shiva* tells the remarkable life story of eco-activist Dr Vandana Shiva and how she stood up to the corporate Goliaths of industrial-scale agriculture. Dr Shiva became Monsanto's worst nightmare as her activism inspired an international crusade for change.

While exposing the horrors of the mass food production industry, the film also offers a vision for food and farming in which we can regenerate the environment and human democracies.

Dr Shiva's life embodies the notion that "one person can make a difference". Multiply that number and you can make a war-mongering regime change its ways, as a group of draft resisters found during the Vietnam War.

Burning their draft cards en masse at rallies and shaking up the murderous Nixon regime, their story is told in *The Boys Who Said No*.

Despite suffering beatings and prison time for their stance, the young men were inspired and emboldened by the civil rights movement. Supported by Martin Luther King, their resistance helped shorten the war.

Closer to home, BBFF presents the NSW premiere of *Meet the Wallers*, a portrait of Lennox Head painter Mark Waller and his family.

Meet the Wallers is a close-up, courageous study of Waller the artist and the man, his occasionally despairing wife Nicole, and their two daughters. A film about artistic drive underpinned by spiritual intention, it is a light-filled meditation upon facing extraordinary adversity and growing from it.



The responsibility that goes with creativity is a theme that resonates with the members of popular Byron Bay based metalcore band In Hearts Wake, who are as committed to the environment as they are to making music.

Upon realising their touring and extravagant live shows were contributing to climate change, they resolved to record, release and perform their 2020 album *Kaliyuga* in a radically new and sustainable way – entirely carbon-free. And they succeeded.

The process was caught on film and in the pandemic-induced lull following the album's release, frontman Jake Taylor and Caleb Graham lovingly crafted *Green is the New Black* – a story of passion and purpose.

Another music documentary follows Tamworth's self proclaimed 'Queen of Honky Tonk' Wanita, hellbent on travelling to Nashville to record an album and fulfil her childhood dreams of stardom. Leading a complicated life which includes moonlighting as a sex worker, director Matthew Walker crafts a fascinating portrait examining themes of talent, struggle, self-belief and neurodivergence.

Also included in the program is ensemble film *Only Human (Homo)*. Equal parts black comedy, thriller and deep social drama, Ken Loach meets Quentin Tarantino as award-winning Macedonian director Igor Ivanov explores concepts of humanity, personal and societal values, connection, identity and self determination.

The time is right for such films which provide uplifting feelings of hope and possibility following over 20 months of disturbance, division and despair.

"They are celebrations of the human spirit, and we are looking forward to our community coming together once more to join in that celebration," Skippon-Volke says.

"In 2020 we successfully modified our format to hold a safe and entertaining festival, and are confident we can do so again."

BBFF2021 opens with *Meet the Wallers* at Lennox Head Cultural Centre on Friday, December 17, and continues for another four days at Palace Cinemas in Byron Bay. For more information and tickets, visit bbff.com.au and Palace Cinemas.

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About BBFF

Established in 2005, the Byron Bay International Film Festival exists to empower creatives and expand audience horizons, fostering connectivity and innovation. Its mission is to provide audiences and global industry professionals access to the best film and immersive experiences which move, motivate and resonate with viewers. Showcasing a mixture of mediums that incorporate the latest cinematic and immersive technologies, it connects passionate filmmakers and audiences while pushing cinema's technological boundaries.

Ticketing

Meet the Wallers Opening Night Event:

Friday 17 December 2021 at Lennox Head Cultural Centre
<https://www.trybooking.com/BWCOY>

Palace Cinemas Byron Bay Screenings:

Friday 17 to Tuesday 21 December
<https://www.palacecinemas.com.au/events/bbff2021/>

BBFF Online

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