

LA WEEKLY



FOOTBALL * FEATURE

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Super-8 Man

Norwood Cheek gives shelter to shorts

film

by Paul Malcolm

Deep beneath the trumpeting of the digital-cinema revolution, beneath the bone-shaking soundtracks pumped through the Dolby or THX systems of sterile multiplexes and screening rooms, and way under the buzz of the Hollywood PR machine, the sound of lo-fi cinema can be heard in Los Angeles. It's the steady click-clack-click of Super-8 and 16mm projectors at Flicker, a bimonthly showcase of short films at the Silver Lake rock club Spaceland.



Photo by Debra DiPaolo

For filmmaker Norwood Cheek, who brought Flicker to L.A. from his native North Carolina in 1997, mounting projectors in the room with the audience is an integral aspect of the atmosphere he's trying to create. "There's a weird appeal to that clicking of the projector," says Cheek, a red Boy Scout patch ó No. 8, after his favorite film gauge ó prominently pinned to his light-blue shirt for the interview. "To hear that clicking, to see a film thrown up there with that subliminal flicker on the screen, really does create this atmosphere of sitting by the fire telling stories. There's something timeless about it, and beautiful."

Cheek has two requirements for a work to be screened: It has to be 15 minutes or under, and it has to be shot on film. These minimal criteria ó Cheek refuses a more curatorial role ó guarantee an array of projects and intriguing juxtapositions at every two-hour show, with linear narratives butting up against radical experiments, polished productions followed by earnest first efforts. Highlights of one recent program included Jonathon Bussí *Express Aisle to Glory*, a playful spoof of television sports coverage complete with cameo by Bob Costas, and Naomi Umanís *Removed*, a hand-tinted collage of sequences taken from European hardcore films that doubles as a savage commentary on the dehumanization inherent in porn and a brilliantly subversive liberation of the female form from male fantasy.

Flicker contributors range from film students to junior ad executives, but they tend to have the same modus operandi. "The

Glamour guys: John Patterson takes a hard look at the soft side of Eastwood's Space Cowboys.

Empty dumpty: F.X. FEENEY on Paul Verhoeven's vacuous *Hollow Man*.

Flicker: Norwood Cheek's lo-fi, super-8 cinema. By Paul Malcolm

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mindset is that they're making these films for themselves," Cheek says, adding that he was surprised at having to hunt for filmmakers in Los Angeles. "Super-8 filmmakers can be very shy about their films. The environment at Spaceland is very informal."



Having shot numerous music videos, appeared in a few commercials (including one for Sony digital cameras) and directed an episode of the cable show *GvsE*, Cheek knows his way around the industry. For him, though, Flicker is a creature apart, his good work. (You can hear it in the animated, almost apostolic reveries he slips into when describing its attraction.) Even if some Flicker films do make it to major festivals (*Removed* went on to play at Sundance), at Spaceland it's not about putting the filmmaker on a pedestal, it's about films that ordinary people can make.


For some, the requirement that Flicker works be shot only on film (Cheek will screen films transferred to VHS if that's the only way they can be shown) might seem limiting, if not outright snobbish or shortsighted given the growing popularity of digital video. They'd be hard pressed to change Cheek's mind. He's a Super-8 partisan who self-publishes a Super-8 guide (called *Flicker*) and regularly lobbies Kodak to keep making its few remaining varieties of Super-8 stock. Accordingly, Flicker isn't just about getting the work seen and encouraging others to do it themselves. (Cheek uses part of the \$5 ticket price to fund a \$100 film grant awarded after each program.) It's about being close to celluloid from production to exhibition. It's about preserving and celebrating the craft of filmmaking at its most physical level. "I enjoy editing on a computer, and I'm doing some stuff for a Web site now," says Cheek, "but it's not as gratifying as working with film. I love the graininess of film, it's like a pointillist painting. It's organic, you can treat it like a plant. You can set it out in the sun for weeks and let it bleach. I can make a bath of tea, put my film in, and I can't shower for three days because my film is staining. It's more of a hands-on experience."

Whether as a backlash against digital cinema, a retreat into nostalgia or, most likely, a case of L.A.'s underground film culture warming up to the idea of a regular home, the Flicker experience is one that more and more people seem to want to be a part of. The next Flicker will be the 10th in Los Angeles; Cheek gets more submissions every month and predicts that the event may soon outgrow even the roomy Spaceland.

When Cheek first started his own festival in Chapel Hill in 1994, inspired by a Super-8 program called Flicker in Athens, Georgia, he decided to use the same name in the hope, he says, "that maybe one day there would be Flickers all over the place." With Flickers already going in Chapel Hill, Athens and Richmond, Virginia, and the Los Angeles chapter taking root, he just may be succeeding.

†

The next Flicker will play Sunday, August 6, 9:30 p.m., at Spaceland. For more information, call (213) 833-2843.

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