Some of today's Native American storytellers are giving their ancient tradition a new twist by telling their tales on the big screen. This month, more than 30 indigenous filmmakers from across the country will screen their films at the Native Cinema Showcase at Santa Fe Indian Market.

ASHLEY M. BIGGERS spotlights the locals to watch.

In *Shimásání*, a young Native American woman gazes over New Mexico's isolated, desolate plains, dreaming of attending Indian Boarding School.

In *Last Trek*, a 70-year-old Navajo woman arduously herds her churro sheep to a grazing pasture 23 miles away—the last time she is physically able to complete this dying cultural tradition. In *Rez Ball*, star athletes soar above the basketball court in one of the few ways they feel they can make names for themselves.

Films such as these, from Native American artists Larry "Blackhorse" Lowe, Ramona Emerson and Kelly Byars, and Donavon Barney are continuing the Native American storytelling tradition in the modern age—and with a whole new slate of digital tools and tales to tell of indigenous peoples' quests to bridge the gap between Native and non-native communities, preserve their cultures, and heal from previous abuses.

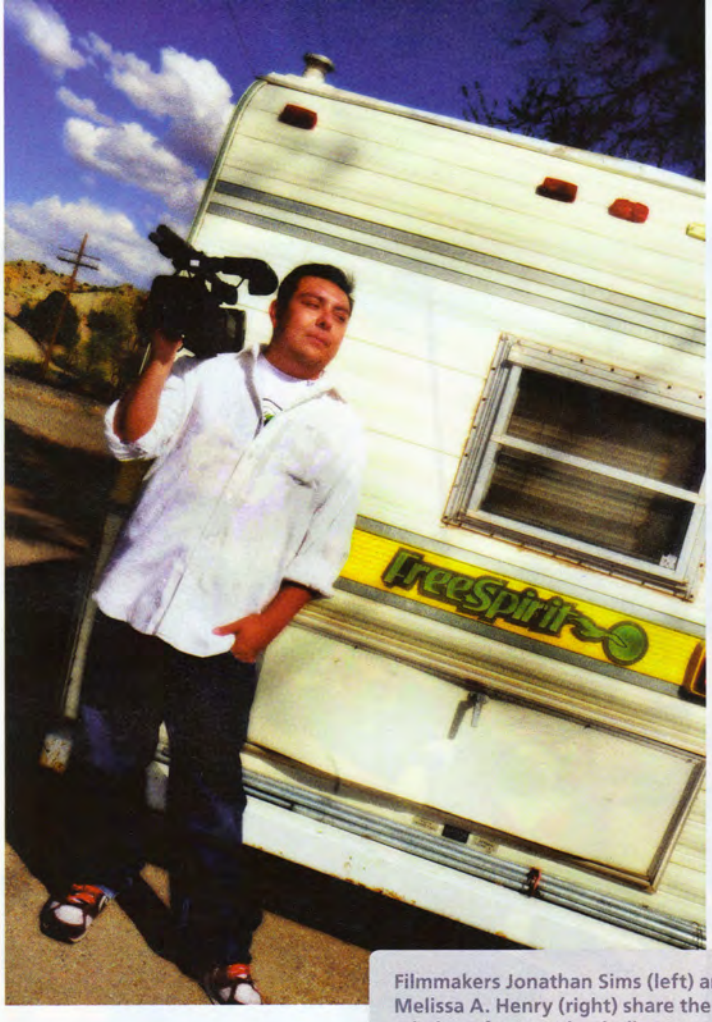
Films like these will hit the big screen during the four-day Native Cinema Showcase, held in conjunction with Santa Fe Indian Market. Nine years ago, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington, D.C., and the Center for Contemporary Arts, in Santa Fe, established the showcase to give media artists a presence alongside more traditional artists, such as potters and jewelers. In 2008, the Southwest Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA), the Market's sponsor, integrated the showcase into its program and began screening films in a second venue, just off the Plaza in a tent in Cathedral Park.

"The film and video work these artists are doing is both really innovative but also connects with the traditional work that is celebrated at Indian Market," says Jason Silverman, director of CCA Cinematheque and an organizer of the Showcase. "I'd be hard-pressed to say exactly how, but the two seem of a piece." At the Showcase, just as at Indian Market, the filmmakers will be on hand to discuss their work.

To be sure, most films produced by indigenous filmmakers, including some of the more than 30 films being exhibited at the showcase, aren't Hollywood blockbusters: They're independent films often produced with small budgets, cast with unknown actors, and getting only limited distribution. But for the filmmakers, and perhaps for the audiences who view their work, these films have merits beyond pure entertainment.

"If you are an independent filmmaker of any kind, you need to devote yourself to making your film without expectations of financial gain," says Silverman. "You have to do it as a labor of love. The harder it is to make your film, the more dedicated you have to be. And the more dedicated you are, the more the urgency shows in the work itself. For these filmmak-

Husband and wife duo Kelly Byars (bottom) and Ramona Emerson, of Navajo descent, (top) head their production company Reel Indian Pictures. They are currently at work on a full-length documentary, *Gambling with Our Future*, on casino culture's effects on the Navajo Nation. Though he usually fills the producer role, Byars has also directed a documentary recording the lives of three stone sculptors, including himself.



Filmmakers Jonathan Sims (left) and Melissa A. Henry (right) share the mission of preserving indigenous language but take different approaches to accomplish it: Sims is filming a documentary on the loss of Native language and five of New Mexico's pueblo communities' efforts to save it. Henry creates off-beat, experimental films that incorporate Navajo language into the scripts.

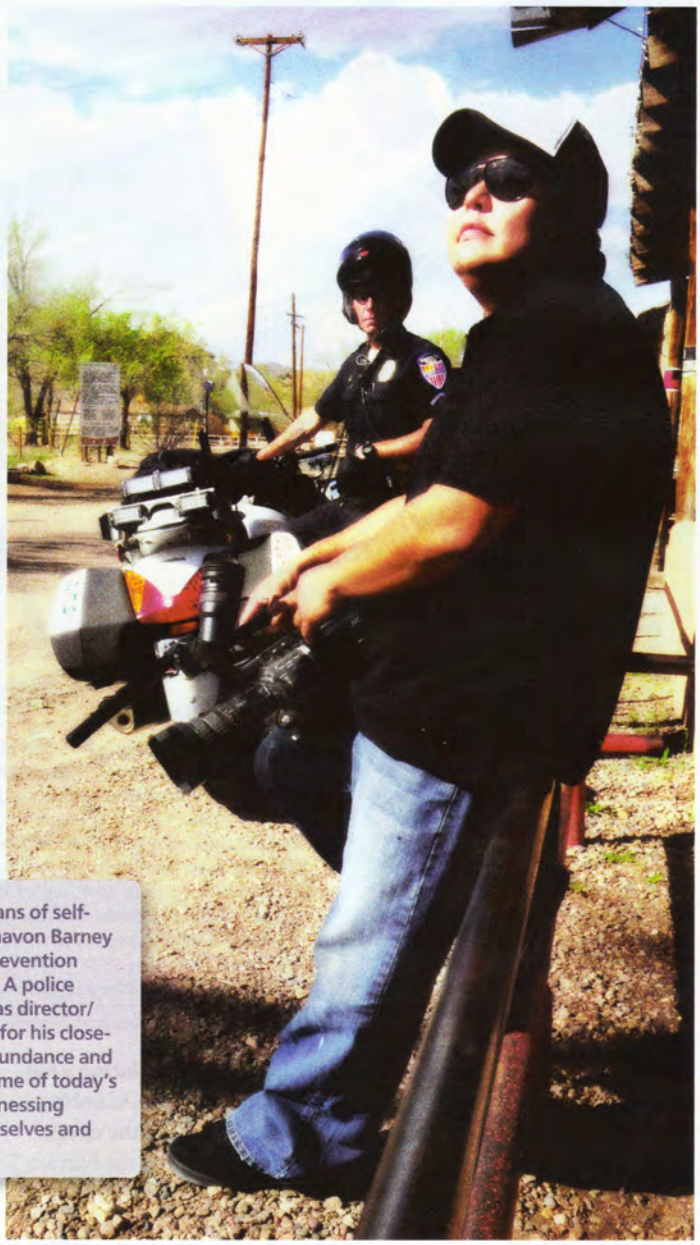
ers, it's a real struggle to tell their stories, but they feel they have to tell them. That type of passion reveals itself onscreen."

The short *A Return Home* was a labor of love for filmmaker **Ramona Emerson**. The film documents Emerson's mother, who has become a stranger to her people, as she reassimilates into reservation culture after years of city living. "She's ostracized because she's been away and does a nontraditional art style—plein-air painting," says Emerson, who in 2007 received a $10,000 Governor's Cup Award from the New Mexico Film Office to assist with the film's production costs. *A Return Home* was screened at the 2008 New Mexico Filmmakers Showcase and, recently, at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C.

Emerson, a Navajo from the Tohatchi area, teams with her husband and producer, **Kelly Byars**, of Choctaw descent, to head their production company, Reel Indian Pictures. The creative duo is currently producing a full-length documentary, *Gambling with Our Future*, on the effects of casino culture on the Navajo Nation. "I'm looking forward to letting the Navajo people have their say, to let them talk about how they *really* feel about gaming," says Emerson. The film, which also enjoyed funding from the New Mexico Film Office, is slated to premiere in 2010.

"Nobody on the rez ever says, 'I want to be a filmmaker when I grow up.' That was something that was out of our reach," says documentarian **Jonathan Sims**. *Sundown*, a Hollywood film made in 1941, inspired the Acoma native to pursue a film career. The production used Sims's family home as an office during the filming. Seeing photographs showing the way the production transformed his familiar pueblo haunts into the African plains—complete with lions and giraffes—introduced Sims to film's transformative power.

Sims hopes to harness that power in his documentary *A Race Against Time: The Fight to Save NM's Native Languages*. The film chronicles the loss of the native languages of five New Mexico pueblos, and each community's strategy to resuscitate this fragile part of their culture. "If you start losing the language, everything else starts unraveling around it," Sims says. "It's a story that I'm deeply entwined in. I myself am not a fluent speaker of my own language. I hope that bringing light to the story will help these communities get support from the outside world and within their own communities."



Left—Drawn to filmmaking as a means of self-expression while in the military, Donavon Barney has filmed documentaries used in prevention programs. *Right*—Talent on Wheels: A police officer drops in on our photo shoot as director/producer Blackhorse Lowe prepares for his close-up. Lowe has screened films at the Sundance and Tribeca Film Festivals. *Opposite*—Some of today's Native American storytellers are harnessing modern technology to express themselves and their cultures on the big screen.

In 2007, the New Mexico Film Office awarded Sims a $20,000 New Visions/New Mexico Contract Award to support the completion of the film, which is still in production. As Sims continues to work on it, he also continues his mission to preserve indigenous languages by training Tesuque Pueblo teachers to use digital video technology in their classrooms.

Filmmaker **Donavon Barney**, of Navajo descent, has a goal beyond financial gain for his films. "Western/Hollywood films are linear," he says. "They just go from one point to the next. Native American films have more of the concept of a circle—what you expose people to comes back around. It's a more holistic approach. For me, filmmaking is a method to heal my people."

The bright-eyed, 29-year-old former Marine's narrative short, *One Step Left*, depicts an indigenous family as they relearn stories from their culture's oral tradition. The film was nominated for a 2009 North American Indigenous Image Award. Barney has also filmed documentaries on methamphetamine addiction and suicide that are used in prevention programs in Native communities.

The films these artists create, along with those screened at the Showcase, depict the broad scope of the indigenous experience. "There is a sense in these films of aboriginality—of being here from the beginning of time—but there's also a sense of humor and irony that is specific to them," says Elizabeth Weatherford, head of the Film and Video Center for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, and a Showcase organizer.

Blackhorse Lowe, a trucker hat-wearing hipster who grew up in Nenahnezad, near Farmington, on the Navajo Nation, often takes an alternative, even irreverent approach, in his films: "Usually, my films deal with issues [Native] youths face, like whether to live in a traditional society or break out and become a global citizen. How do you find that balance, or do you have to choose?"

The young director-producer has met early success. Along with his appearance at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival, his short drama *Shush* and his first feature, *5th World*, were screened at the 2004 and 2005 Sundance Film Festivals, respectively. In

the narrative short film *Hey Indian*, Lowe inverts a standard theme of Native American films: Instead of an indigenous person on the outskirts of mainstream society, Lowe depicts a white man in a desperate quest to embrace a Native culture when his Indian girlfriend breaks up with him for not being "Indian enough."

Lowe's narrative short film *Shimásání*, inspired by his grandmother's experience, also tells a story that bucks convention: Rather than seeing boarding school as an experience that will disconnect her from her people, the young woman in *Shimásání* dreams of departing for the exotic unknown. The film, which Lowe shot in June 2008 in New Mexico, was screened at the Tribeca Film Festival this year.

Like other indigenous filmmakers, Lowe carefully considers whether to show sacred ceremonies on the big screen. Although some filmmakers do disclose such ceremonies, Lowe chooses not to show prayers in his films. "To me, it depends on the ceremony and the sacredness of it. I think holy things should be kept holy, and not put on celluloid for people to see." In *Shimásání*, Lowe represents the end of a puberty ceremony with women running from a hogan into the sunlight, but doesn't disclose the actual rituals of this rite of passage.

Melissa A. Henry, of Navajo descent, is an experimental filmmaker and a lecturer at the University of New Mexico who also takes an alternative storytelling approach in her offbeat, surrealist films. "When I first started filmmaking, I felt obligated to present a certain set of issues in my films, like abortion, domestic violence, and cultural differences," she says. "But now I feel I'll make more of an impact by making a hopeful film using the Navajo language." In her 2007 short *Horse You See*, Ross (a horse) explains his essence in Navajo—a creative choice Henry hopes will help preserve the language. The film was screened at several festivals in the U.S. and Canada, and at the National Museum of the American Indian in August 2008.

Thanks to 2007 and 2008 New Visions/New Mexico Contract Awards, Henry is planning two more short films that will use the Navajo language. In *Blue Heeler*, the protagonist is a dog with attention-deficit disorder; in *Navajo Wool: As Told by Baa Baa*, a churro sheep tells the history of Navajo wool. Both films are slated to debut in 2010. *Blue Heeler* is also receiving funding from the competitive National Geographic All Roads film project, which supports indigenous filmmaking.

Henry, whose own struggle with dyslexia inspired her to begin experimenting with film, says that "In experimental film, I feel like I don't have to follow a narrative structure. I feel like I'm freer to create the film to match how my brain works."

Those who see these filmmakers' creations, and those at the Native Cinema Showcase, will get an insider's view of the indigenous experience. Showcase organizer Elizabeth Weatherford notes, "There are characters in these films that people may not ordinarily meet if they don't live in Native culture. Or if they do live in a Native community, they may find characters that resonate with them. There are characters that, even though they may not always speak to shared experiences [with the audience], they give us access." Jason Silverman agrees: "These personal stories provide a window into different cultures that we wouldn't get if we just watched TV or went to the local cineplex."

Perhaps most important from the filmmakers' perspectives, this artform is a means of self-expression. Melissa Henry notes that "Hollywood mainstream films usually generalize all indigenous people into one 'Hollywood Indian.' Now Native communities can tell their own stories, instead of Hollywood telling their stories for them."

IF YOU GO: The Native American Cinema Showcase will screen films August 21–23 at two Santa Fe locations: the Center for Contemporary Arts (1050 Old Pecos Trail), and in Cathedral Park, near the Plaza. Buy individual tickets on-site or advance passes online. For info and film schedule: CCA, (505) 982-1338, www.ccasantafe.org; or Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, www.americanindian.si.edu. Watch trailers of some of the films featured here on www.nmmagazine.com.