

# Urban heats up with ABFF

Miami-based festival increases awareness for segment

By RYAN MOTTESHEARD

**W**hich film festival's guest list includes Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, Spike Lee and Ice Cube and boasts sponsorship by such industry hitters as Time Warner, Paramount Pictures and Nickelodeon? If you guessed Sundance, Cannes

or Toronto, you'd be wrong. But if you guessed a nascent upstart called the American Black Film Festival, then you are on the same page as the thousands of revelers who flock to Miami every July (July 13-17 this year).

In its ninth year, the ABFF is finally beginning to garner interest outside the (mostly) African-American industry-ites who have supported it from day one.

The fest began in 1997, when co-founder Jeff Friday was contemplating Jesse Jackson's proposed boycott of the Oscars.

"I began to wonder why blacks aren't in the Oscars, why weren't we being nominated," recalls Friday. "I linked it back to the film festivals." Citing the Miramax-Sundance movement and the dearth of "Oscar-worthy" movies featuring African-Americans, Friday sought to "create a place

where people of color could tell their stories, get their movies shown and encourage people to make movies done independent of Hollywood."

The ABFF started out as the Acapulco Black Film Festival and was held in the Mexican resort town for several years before jumping to Miami.

Some filmmakers, such as

*Undercover Brother* producer Damon Lee, were initially wary about the move. "I wasn't sure it would survive in the same context it was when it was in Acapulco," Lee says. But when he attended last year's fest in Miami with the short film *One Flight Stand*, he was pleasantly surprised to find

"the same amount of intimacy and influence coming to the festival year after year."

Friday says the fest truly came into its own with the locale change: "Since we moved to Miami, the buying has been very aggressive." ABFF is still waiting for a breakout theatrical film such as *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* to emerge from the fest, but DVD business has been brisk. "About 130 of the titles that premiered at our festival in the last eight years have gone on to at least have a DVD release, whether it's with an urban distributor or a major like Warner or Lions Gate," he says.

Friday even has a "Best of the ABFF" DVD label in the works.

Although smaller titles at Sundance or Toronto might fall through the cracks, the bustling urban DVD marketplace ensures that more ABFF titles will find their way to your local Blockbuster. "We like to think the success and exposure of some of the independent films that have come through our festival has somewhat contributed to why the urban home video market is doing so well," Friday adds.

Doug Schwab, whose Maverick DVD label picked up *30 Miles* at last year's ABFF, agrees. "We tend to do a lot of business at the market," he says. "It's so important to us that we actually man a suite and have a booth to tell [filmmakers] about Maverick."

One of these filmmakers is Greg Carter, whose *My Big Phat Hip-Hop Family* premiered at ABFF last year. "ABFF is a great way for us to meet talent," Carter says. "A lot of Hollywood talent don't know any independent African-

American filmmakers to take seriously." That building of a community, he says, is important if independent black filmmakers want to achieve the success of their white counterparts. "[The festival] is creating that avenue for us to communicate with each other as filmmakers," Carter says.

Carter's newest film, *Treasure N Tha Hood*, was released on DVD on June 28 by Lightyear Entertainment through its distribution deal with Warner.

## DAILY VARIETY

LOS ANGELES, CA  
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