

## film

# Jeff Friday on ABFF, premier showcase for black film artists

By **KIMBERLY GRANT**

Special to South Florida Times

Founded by Jeff Friday, Byron Lewis, and Warrington Hudlin as a way to have a black Sundance, the American Black Film Festival (ABFF) has evolved from a small event in Acapulco, Mexico, to a large outing and outlet for independent filmmakers of color to showcase their talents and network with each other.

Now in its 16th year, ABFF is in Miami Beach from June 20-23. This year the festival plans to recognize the Steve Harvey/Rainforest Films produced *Think Like a Man*, and host the southeast premiere of the critically acclaimed independent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

The festival will also host more than 16 short and feature length films, as well as documentaries submitted from the United States, Jamaica, and France.

Among the actors expected to attend and promote their projects are Michael Beach, Nicole Behari, Vanessa Bell Calloway, Rockmund Dunbar, Lance Gross, Eddie Griffin, Christian Keyes, Boris Kodjoe, LaToya Luckett, S. Epatha Merkerson, Mekhi Phifer, Elise Neal, and 2012 ABFF Ambassador, Tracee Ellis Ross.

During an interview teleconference, Friday, CEO of Film Life, Inc., which produces ABFF, spoke candidly about why the festival is still relevant 16 years later.

"After the first festival, in 1996, we realized that there was a need for a showcase for black filmmakers and black artists," said Friday. "There was a huge void of it on a large scale and we all just caught the

bug."

PLEASE TURN TO  
**FRIDAY/8C**

Sponsored by the likes of HBO, Gold Peak Tea, Cadillac and the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, ABFF plays host to Black Hollywood veterans and newcomers looking to whet their appetites for black entertainment.

**KEEP AN EYE ON...**

This year's highlights include the festival opening with Sundance and Cannes darling *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a Conversation with Salim and Mara Brock Akil, a webisode competition with a sneak preview of Film Life TV's *Q & A Show*, as well as panel discussions on digital content and black women in Hollywood.

"ABFF doesn't earn its stripes from breakout films," said Friday, who mentioned radio personality, Russ Parr, and writer/actor/producer Datari Turner, among the filmmakers to watch.

"We really want to break out people. The festival has been a platform for filmmakers, writers, producers, directors, actors and executives to really make contacts to get their feet wet in the business."

Parr's film, *The Under-shepherd*, about clashing ministers, stars Isaiah Washington. Turner's LUV stars rapper/actor Common as the troubled uncle of a shy 11 year old boy.

As up-and-coming Black Hollywood actors, writers, and producers converge on South



Beach, Friday is looking forward to the return of **ABFF** veterans William Packer and Rob Hardy of Rainforest Films. Rainforest's second film, *Trois*, became the ABFF Grand Jury Prize winner in 1999, which is also when Friday forged a friendship with Packer and Hardy.

"I told them many years ago, 'You guys let this business break you up, I'll never speak to either one of you again'," said Friday, with a laugh. "They're still partners and friends."

Friday went on to say: "To have Packer and Hardy back celebrating a film that they produced that made \$90 million is amazing to me in terms of life's cycle. We're celebrating their success in front of the same audience they started with."

## FILM TO DIGITAL TV

Now that ABFF has grown up and become a vehicle for aspiring black filmmakers, Friday and Film Life, Inc. are making moves to branch ABFF into the digital arena. At the end of June, Film Life TV.com, Film Life's new Internet television network, will launch its first web series, *Q & A Show*. He describes *Q & A* as an "edgy and raw sketch comedy series that puts you in the mind of *Chappelle's Show* and *In Living Color*."

## OWN NETWORK

Film Life will also premier its

own network television show, *ABFF Independent*, on Magic Johnson's Aspire Network. *ABFF Independent*, which actor Omari Hardwick will host, will feature shorts, documentaries and independent features of ABFF past and present.

## LOOKING FOR OTHERS

Regarding the challenges filmmakers have in the industry and how ABFF plays a role in giving them options, Friday, who is hoping to one day count Will Smith and Eddie Murphy as active participants in ABFF, said "The reality is that major studios don't acquire independent

black films for widespread distribution. And it's not about race, it's about money.

"We've got to find new ways to get our films out. ABFF's value is based on the people we help. That's how we measure our success."

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## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** American Black Film Festival

**WHEN:** June 20-23

**WHERE:** Miami Beach venues

**COST:** Varies per event; limited passes available

**CONTACT:** Go to [abff.com](http://abff.com)



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Byron Lewis

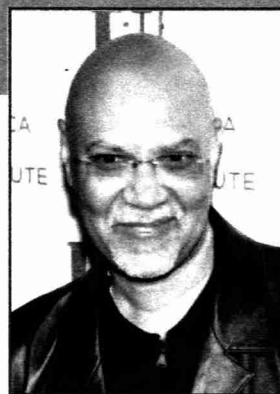


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