

Sonny Bono's gift to Palm Springs

The story behind the Palm Springs International Film Festival is almost as interesting as the films it showcases annually.

The Festival was founded by Sonny Bono 21 years ago to revitalize the old town of Palm Springs and bring the stars back to the desert. After his career in pop music ended Bono moved to Palm Springs, owned a popular restaurant, became mayor of the city and then was elected to Congress.

Bono wanted to put the sizzle back in Palm Springs, bring back some of the Hollywood glamour of days gone by and create an attraction that would draw people to the desert. He had a grand vision to create a truly international film festival, but it was an uphill struggle to turn his dream into a reality. Still he persisted and laid the foundation for today's PSIFF, but his early death threatened to scuttle the Festival. Nothing short of a miracle was going to save it.

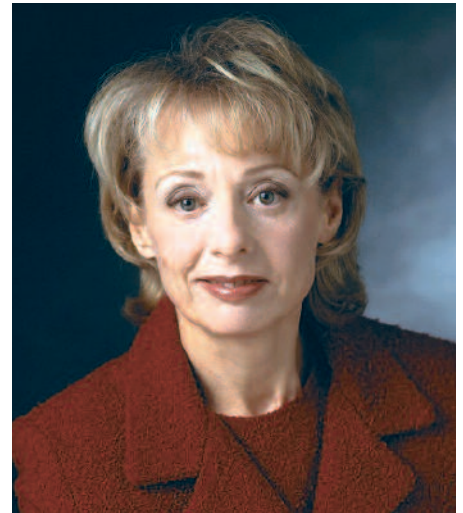
Palm Springs is an unusual city. It is populated by a large group of "super volunteers", people who are prepared to put their time and money behind cultural and charitable events in a big way. Jackie Lee Houston, who owns the local CBS affiliate in Palm Springs, stepped in to take a leadership role, as did current Festival Chairman Harold Matzner and many others, most of whom still serve on the board today.

They knew it wasn't enough just to give time and expertise to the Festival. Nothing short of a large infusion of cash would allow it to prosper, so they personally funded it as well. In 2010 PSIFF Board members gave more than \$1,000,000 in financial support to the Palm Springs Film Society and the Festival, along with the City of Palm Springs and the Aqua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Even Sonny Bono couldn't have imagined the extraordinary success of today's PSIFF.

In 2010 the Festival attracted more than 130,000 attendees and scheduled 450 screenings of 190 films from over 70 countries. A highlight of the Festival is the awards show gala featuring some of the biggest stars and directors in the world including Helen Mirren, Jeff Bridges, Brad Pitt, Morgan Freeman, Clint Eastwood, Quentin Tarantino and more.

The positioning line for the 2010 Festival was *Vision and Persistence* because without an abundance of both the Festival never would have made it this far. Festival Director Darryl Macdonald and Director of Programming Helen du Toit, both Canadians, get a lot of credit for the programming and operational success of the Festival. In a media release Macdonald said "record attendance, supremely smooth operations and enormously positive audience and industry feedback made this year's Festival an un-



qualified success on every level. In a year when so many festivals worldwide are reeling from the double whammy of falling ticket sales and diminishing sponsorships, it's hugely heartening to see Palm Springs reverse that trend and enliven audiences into the bargain."

The Festival programmed 67 films by first-time directors. One of my favourite films by a first-time director was a French film, *Queen to Play*. The film voted best of the Festival, and awarded the John Schlesinger Award, was *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* from Sweden, Denmark and Germany based on the best-selling novel of the same name.

Canada had a high profile at the Festival with nine films, all of which were well received. The two Canadian productions that gained the most favourable response were *Inside Hana's Suitcase* and *Fathers and Guns*.

Each year I buy an affordable pass that allows me to see virtually all of the Festival's films as well as added attractions such as "Talking Pictures" featuring some of the best directors in the industry and their films. PSIFF has managed to keep the Festival accessible and affordable even as it grows and makes a point of showcasing films produced by local desert producers including two of my friends from Women In Film and TV.

The Festival allows me to stay on top of what's happening in the industry locally, regionally and internationally. It is a feast for my senses, an education and an event I look forward to every year.

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