

Former Hot Docs director of programming, Sean Farnel kicked up a bit of a shit-storm recently by re-igniting the age-old debate on [whether festivals should pay filmmakers for playing their films](#). Soon enough the festival blog-o-sphere raised its head and shot down the argument once again. Tom Hall did a great job of [laying out the economic issues](#) faced by all fests. Heather Croal did a good job of [bringing up the other value](#) a fest brings to filmmakers, and in a brilliant comment to her post from Nick Fraser, we got some finger wagging at some other culprits in the not-paying-the-filmmaker-enough arena.

This argument comes up time and again. I remember my first visit to Sundance as head of the Atlanta Film Festival over ten years ago, when John Vanco (now of IFC Film Center) brought up this argument to great debate at a Slamdance panel, and I'm sure it has come up many a time before and since. Each time, the arguments on both sides of the issue are the same, but I'm left feeling like we're having the wrong debate altogether.

Let me concede that both sides have a good argument. For example, we have ample evidence that some fests can pay fees and thrive: LGBT Fests and Jewish Film Fests are often run by nonprofit, struggling entities, but they routinely pay fair fees for films they program and haven't gone out of business. As Barbara Hammer explained to me in my first programming job, LGBT filmmakers quickly realized that the largest market for showing their films was on the festival circuit, and they organized and demanded screening fees to showcase their films. The festivals responded, and it's now routine to expect fee payments for both short and feature work that shows in such festivals. I happen to have managed an LGBT fest once, Out on Film, also in Atlanta, and while our budget was slim, we managed to make it work. That said, the majority of LGBT filmmakers aren't getting rich from this arrangement, and arguably their work is getting seen less as such festivals must often take less risk to ensure making their money back, and often turn down good works because they can't afford the minimum fee within their limited programming budget.

On the other hand, there are many good fests that provide such a great environment for filmmakers that perhaps the filmmakers should be paying them for the opportunities they're getting. Seriously, people pay a booker to put them in theaters all the time now, and good festivals do your marketing, fill a theater and arguably help drive awareness for good films. While not many people are arguing for this arrangement, the general response to Sean's post is accurate: festivals are usually struggling entities that can't afford fee payments, but good ones provide travel and accommodation, lots of booze and networking opportunities and can be valuable to a filmmaker.

But whether or not a festival can or should pay is ultimately just the first question we should ask, and then we should quickly move on to the deeper, thornier questions that might actually lead to some meaningful change. Such as? Well, such as: why have film festivals at all?

I can tell you this – nine out of ten of them can't justify their existence anymore with a straight face. That still leaves a lot of good ones who can, but having run some fests, and

having studied the history of them (in the US) quite a bit, I can tell you why most of them started: Nearly every festival in the US started because it was the only way that filmmakers in X town could see the work of other indie, art-house and foreign films. It quickly grew to include the lofty mission of presenting such work to the general public in such towns, or bringing economic development to such cities by tourists coming to see all these hard-to-find films, but the usual narrative was this: It's 1975, you're a filmmaker and you shoot film. You need to edit it, which requires a Steenbeck, so you and your buddies form a film co-op to jointly purchase and share one. You get a grant from the NEA (or its precursors) and lo-and-behold, you've got a little film commune going. Soon enough, you realize that it's hard for anyone else to see your films, so you band together and start a festival where you show one another's films, mainly to one another, and this idea slowly leads to the idea that other people might want to see these things. So you start a film festival. Others nearby do as well, and soon you are sharing film prints from Paris, France to Paris, Texas as others get the same idea and open festivals elsewhere (yes, a few started well before the 70s, but most started then).

This was laudable, and it worked. The greatest untold story of film might be just how cinema culture fed by American Film Fests led to the success of Miramax and others (and the eventual bubble and "death of truly indie film"), but that's a story for another time. Most importantly, it was a mission that was absolutely true – without such festivals, many a town would never have seen amazing films from independent and worldwide talent, and festivals could claim that without them, their towns would be a lesser place, and that these films would not get seen.

This is no longer true.

We all know why. The Internet has come along, as well as cable VOD, Netflix and numerous other options for finding films. Smart filmmakers can build an audience there too, and a successful internet short is now measured in the millions of views, an audience about 1,000 times greater than the number of people who might see your short at a few great film festivals. Yes, I know festivals add a lot of other value too, that filmmakers love showing in front of an audience and all that jazz. Having met my wife outside the theater of a regional festival, I can definitely attest to the community building they offer as well. Trust me when I say I am not being anti-Festival when I say that the mission has been accomplished and something needs to change.

So the question isn't whether or not festivals can pay filmmakers or even whether they should pay filmmakers. And it's not whether or not festivals offer lots of other hunky-dory stuff for attendees. The question should be: what do filmmakers need most now? And is what they need something that a festival can help with, or do we need to start something different to solve this need? If filmmakers got together in the same spirit that led them to create film co-ops and festivals (and filmmaker organizations, and magazines, and...) then what would they make together today?