

## Key Information

A Film by Rod Murphy and Scott B. Morgan

Directed by Rod Murphy

Edited by Scott B. Morgan

Story by Rod Murphy, Justin Earls, Scott B. Morgan

Produced by Kate Murphy, John Hunt

Genre: Documentary

Running length: 85 minutes

Year completed: 2003

Produced by 6:14 Productions

Film website: [www.greatersouthbridge.com](http://www.greatersouthbridge.com)

Short synopsis:

*Greater Southbridge* is an unconventional, independent documentary that dissects a small New England town one peculiar resident at a time. Through interviews with a diverse cast that includes many intriguing, often prejudged and overlooked characters, *Greater Southbridge* gives candid insight into the folks we see every day in small town America, but might not take the time to get to know.

## Long Synopsis

*Greater Southbridge* is an offbeat and oddly humorous documentary about a strange New England town and its bevy of colorful inhabitants. The past, present and future challenges of Southbridge are explored in the daily travails and experiences of its abundant fringe-denzens. Each of the main characters exhibits something specific about Southbridge. Jerry, the stuttering, can-collecting, unkempt star of the film, is the heart and the greatest expression of the untidy town itself. Despite his obvious disadvantages, he continues to be a positive force and inspiration on many levels within the community. Wayne illustrates the town's half-baked provincialism in all of its forms: exaggeration, over-generalization and garden variety racism without purpose. His delusional and outlandish views coupled with an alleged twelfth degree black belt in karate and a direct hotline to the president may be attributed to a recent head trauma. Harry, the beloved Abe Lincoln look-a-like goes missing during production causing town wide concern. His big hearted and easy manner was a link to what was once a simpler and more welcoming small town past. Steve, who transforms over the span of production from a vibrant drug dealer/user into a defeated addict, prone to overdosing and jail time, embodies the disenfranchised and bored youth of Southbridge.

Created by Southbridge native and first time director Rod Murphy, and editor Scott B. Morgan, *Greater Southbridge* breaks the traditional documentary golden rule of unbiased, unattached observation. Rod gives his subjects endless rides, lunches, television sets, radios and literally the coat off his back. Murphys inconspicuous method of production using a handheld camcorder combined with his town-insider status allowed more of an uninhibited glimpse into these often overlooked and intriguing characters lives. The *Greater Southbridge* soundtrack, which includes critically acclaimed indie rock bands Spoon, American Analog Set, Drums & Tuba, +/- and Fivehead, punctuates the films various moods and flow by giving a rhythm to each of these memorable characters and moments. *Greater Southbridge* goes beyond being just a portrait of one small New England town; it thrusts itself into the larger milieu of Americana.

## Crew Biography

### *About the Director*

Rod Murphy grew up in Southbridge, Massachusetts during the 1980 s. After college, he and his wife Gina traveled extensively, searching out their niche. Eventually fate and circumstances brought them back to the Southbridge area with a new perspective on the old town. Fueled by his longtime attraction to people who fall outside the spectrum of normal, Rod began capturing the town and its residents on camera. Murphy has several other documentary and narrative projects in pre-production. He and his wife of 5 years have two children and currently live in North Carolina.

### *About the Co-Creator and Editor*

For over five years, Scott Morgan has been a senior staff editor for a production division of Fox Television Studios in Los Angeles. He s created documentaries and programming for The History Channel, Fox Family Channel, AMC, VHI and MTV Networks, *First Looks* for HBO and more than a dozen A&E Biographies including the Emmy Award winning *Jackie Gleason, The Great One*. He s still best recognized by family and friends alike for his 1995 cameo as the family-slaughtering, wall-of-flames-silhouetted flashback of Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects*. No kidding.

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**SOUTHBRIDGE**  
Right Where You Least Expect It...

6:14 Productions  
in association with  
11th Hour Entertainment  
Presents

**GREATER SOUTHBRIDGE**

Executive Producers: Rod Murphy and Scott B. Morgan

Story by: Rod Murphy, Justin Earls, Scott B. Morgan

Produced by Kate Murphy and John Hunt

Edited by Scott B. Morgan

Directed by Rod Murphy

Featuring:

Adrian Alvarado

Danny Briggs

Wayne Foskett

Mike Fratus

Eric Glass

Fr. Peter Joyce

Albert Maramo

George Marszalkowski

Erica Plouffe

John Recore

Jerry Sciesnewski

Harry Shaw

Thunder & Vincent

Al Venske

Associate Producers

Justin Earls

Gina Murphy

Ursula Murphy

Coordinating producer

Andrew Giacometti

Consulting Producers

J.C. Bouvier

Chris Cole

Micah Forbes

Rod Murphy Sr.

Camera  
Justin Earls  
Ebon Elza  
Gina Murphy  
Rod Murphy  
Scott B Morgan

Production Assistants  
Ebon Elza  
Mike Fratus  
Tim Houde  
Seth Loconto  
Glenn Purcell  
David Sun  
John Williamson

Music Supervisor  
John Hunt

Original Music Composed and Arranged by  
John Hunt

First Assistant Editor  
Emily Aaronson

Assistant Editors  
David Sun  
Cary Devour  
Media Assistants  
Tyrone Richardson  
Alyssa Dressman

Graphics  
Micah Forbes

Online Editor  
Roger Hinze

Re-recording Engineer  
Mike White

Assistant Re-recording Engineer  
Joe Kalish

Post Production Services Provided by  
Post Apocalypse  
SSI Advanced Post Services

Aerial Photography Provided by  
Bill Weedon

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**VISIONFEST 03**  
New York, NY



**Hollywood Underground  
Film Festival**  
Hollywood, CA



**Michigan Independent  
Film Festival**  
Detroit, MI



**Valleyfest**  
Knoxville, TN



**Artsfest  
Film Festival**  
Harrisburg, PA



**Downstream International  
Film Festival**  
Atlanta, GA



**Midwest Entertainment  
Industry Conference**  
Lexington, KY



**F4 Film Festival**  
Fitchburg, MA

**Best American Folk Documentary Nominee 2003**

Dahlonega International Film Festival, Dahlonega, GA

**Honorable Mention**

Rural Route Film Fest, Brooklyn, NY.

**Official Selections**

2004

Tromadance - Park City, UT  
North by Northeast - Toronto, Canada

2003

Asheville Film Festival - Asheville, NC  
Boston Underground Film Festival - Boston, MA  
Dead Center Film Festival - Oklahoma City, OK  
Wilmington Independent Film Festival - Wilmington, DE  
Reel to Real Film Festival - Kings Mountain, NC  
Silver Lake Film Festival - Los Angeles, CA  
Winslow Film Festival - Winslow, AZ  
Mass Bay Film Project - Worcester, MA

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## Quotes

[A] documentary about the quirky, offbeat people of Southbridge, Massachusetts...fascinating. Two of the characters are right out of King of the Hill (Dale and Boomhauer).  
- Sgt Kabukiman, on special assignment for *Aint It Cool News*

This is that movie you and your friends talked and talked about making, but maybe you never did. This movie had like no budget and no big hollywood backing and look how cool it is! *Greater Southbridge* is proof that all you need is a cheap camera, an even cheaper microphone, and a really good attitude. It's genuine, funny, good-hearted, and bad-ass. Everyone should see it.  
- Arthur Bradford, Director of *Hows Your News*

*Greater Southbridge* is a funny, and in the end, touching, celebration of some very unforgettable people.  
- Lee Ellenberg, Writer, *Late Show with David Letterman*

Better than cats, better than Ezra, an amazing look at an unbelievable cast of characters. It gets better and better as it goes on.  
- Paul Soter from *Broken Lizard* and *Super Troopers*

Southbridge...a GREAT fuckin' movie man.  
- Mark Borchardt from *American Movie*

The best film I've seen this year."  
- Gaalen Ebsen, 90.1 FM Vancouver.

I adored it! It's a roller coaster ride filled with laughs and heartache.  
- Chris Engle WFXT, 100.1 FM, Worcester, MA

Far from being exploitative, *Greater Southbridge* is more concerned with the humanity of its mentally ill, down-and-out subjects, treating each with respect, humor, and concern. Influenced a bit by Errol Morris' *Vernon, Fla.*, it's an offbeat doc, edited with precision by Scott B. Morgan.  
- Dahlonga International Film Festival Program Guide, Dahlonga, GA

This documentary stood out to committee members for the uniqueness of the people featured.  
-Paul Foster, Marketing Director, Real to Reel Film Festival

For those who take the time to learn about and know these people, they might be able to see another side of themselves.  
- Mark Carron, Massachusetts State Representative

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## Press

There was the Sholem Aleichem *SHTETL* where G-d forgot to supply brains, and Errol Morris's minus-IQ *Vernon, Florida*. Add to the mix Rod Murphy's *Greater Southbridge*, an amusingly horrific home-movie documentary. It's also an affectionate homage to the filmmaker's dim-bulb Massachusetts home town... check it out!

- Gerald Peary, *Boston Phoenix*

A strangely captivating documentary about the folks left behind when the American Optical Co. deserted this once-bustling Massachusetts city.

- Lawrence Toppman, *Charlotte Observer*

*Greater Southbridge* (★★★) pays homage to the colourful citizens of a hard-luck town in New England. Though the filmmakers occasionally come off as condescending jackasses (note: mentally ill people are not automatically cute or funny), it becomes clear that their subjects are not the outcasts of this community—they **are** the community.

- Jason Anderson, *EYE Weekly*, Toronto

In Rod Murphy Jr.'s *Greater Southbridge* the filmmaker returns to his dirt-poor hometown in Massachusetts to catch up with the large assortment of odd characters there. It starts out in the same half-condescending, half-fascinated tone as Errol Morris' *Vernon, Florida*, but as Murphy digs deeper, the film shades from voyeuristic to deeply felt.

- Wendy Banks, *NOW*, Toronto

Murphy found his true calling when he returned to his hometown in 1998 and started filming stories of the many colorful and eccentric characters from his small, economically challenged central Massachusetts hometown.

- Jose Franc, *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*

An engaging look at the lives of some people outside the mainstream...surprisingly poignant, politically incorrect and humorous...a funny, frank, sometimes edgy, positive film about the town's downtown legends and the town.

- John Dignam, *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*

A funny, sad and moving look at some of the town's eccentric people...rather than ridicule its subjects, this film gives them voice, showing them to be vulnerable, honest, earnest, funny, opinionated and, above all, as human as the rest of us...the pain in the eyes of Danny, who is being harassed by passers-by as Rod Murphy interviews him, is poignant and distressing...it's also not just a feel-good movie. It's a piece of Southbridge with honesty, humor, heart - and an edge

- *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*

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Right Where You Least Expect It...



There is such a pure generosity of spirit in Rod Murphy's new documentary *Greater Southbridge* that it becomes impossible to avoid embracing it. What threatens to become a parade of the people that God forgot, the kooky characters that inhabit almost every small town in America- here the focus is on Southbridge, Massachusetts- eventually blossoms into a life-affirming labor of love, and, if that's in spite of itself, who cares? The film follows, for the most part, the daily life and self-induced complications of Jerry Sciesnewski, a man of questionable mental adroitness but undeniable tenderness, a soul blowing in the wind as the town experiences the inevitable ups-and-downs of most small cities in the industrial Northeast. Director Murphy must have discovered, during the half-dozen years it took to make *Greater Southbridge*, whether through serendipity or design, that there is value to every human being and what is prime mock fodder to the superficial, becomes something vital. *Greater Southbridge* triumphs throughout its 86 minutes by molding amusement into compassion and by Murphy's skill in stepping aside and allowing these nowhere men to earn an oddly scared identity. Humanity becomes *Greater Southbridge* and it is a valuable investment of time.

- Jake Jacobson, *Westwood One/CBS Radio*



Murphy takes a loving, warts-and-all look at the small Massachusetts town of Southbridge, which has more than its share of coots, kooks and cranks. [It] shows considerable affection for the town's homeless odd-balls, drug users and conspiracy nuts.

- Curt Holman, *Creative Loafing*, Atlanta



It was well past midnight in Asheville's River District when Rod Murphy, armed with a guitar and a set list of gritty, soul sucking tunes, hopped onto a makeshift stage in a cavernous sculpture's studio. The brief one-man show—where Murphy seemingly channeled an amalgam of Buster Poindexter and Iggy Pop—was yet another unscripted bit of the performance art that cropped up here and there throughout the first annual Asheville Film Festival. Outside, in the crisp autumn night, film makers, distributors and a gaggle of artists, actors and film buffs swapped tales around a crackling bonfire. Around the corner, locally brewed ale flowed freely while a glass blower awed all by shaping molten silica into a multi-hued wonder.

The scene in its sum was a slice of the artistic synergy that can imbue a fledgling film festival with a red hot reputation.

Earlier that day, Murphy and his film making partner Scott Morgan screened their edgy documentary *Greater Southbridge* to a packed theater. We had over two hundred film loving people there, Murphy noted, adding with a grin, It was incredible - and a real testament to this town. I've been all over the country with this film and this was the best run festival I've been in.

- Brian Sarzynski, *Mountain X*, Asheville

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Documentaries have long been a favorite of film buffs. This past year has been especially fertile for these true-to-life releases, including Academy Award<sup>®</sup> winner *Bowling for Columbine* and underground smash hit *Spellbound*. *Greater Southbridge*, a cinematic portrait five years in the making, reaches for these heights and dare I say, nearly attains them. This documentary proves that sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction.

Murphy works hard to show that underneath Jerry's stuttering speech and hulking demeanor is a kindhearted man who's just trying to make ends meet, as well as make his town a better place, a move that's earned Sciesnewski the name Mr. Southbridge.

What could have been a horrible display of immature mockery of a disadvantaged population is uplifted into an enlightened portrayal due to the evident connection between Murphy and his subjects. The audience learns alongside Murphy and his crew that those strange folk most of us have been guilty of ridiculing at some point or another aren't all that different from the rest of us.

- Regina Robo O'Brien, *Boston Metro*



Take a look beneath the surface of any small town and you are sure to encounter plenty of bizarre characters. The award-winning documentary *Greater Southbridge* features more low-life loonies than an Eric Bogosian monologue. One-time Southbridge resident Rod Murphy, armed himself with just a hand-held camcorder and a well-developed sense of the absurd to capture the gritty humor and warmth of the underside of life in his former hometown. Witness the woman who can pop out one of her eyes, or the film's central character, Jerry, a civic-minded bum who collects cans and talks incessantly about putting together an all-girl rock group. Another resident confides his entirely plausible theory that Paul McCartney had both John Lennon and Linda McCartney killed. You could not make this stuff up.

- David Wildman, *Loonies in the Boonies*, *The Weekly Dig*

## **HOLLYWOOD BITCHSLAP**

Very funny, very heart-felt and as good a first-time directorial effort as you could ever hope for. The homeless seem to be the happiest homeless folks around. The insane seem to have their heads occasionally better screwed on than you and me. And the drunk and drug dependent... well, at least they smile a lot.

Jerry is at once the place where *Greater Southbridge* becomes worrying and interesting. When we're introduced to he and his compadre weirdos, the first impression is that we're about to watch a film that laughs and points at local freaks - almost a low budget reality show. But credit Jerry himself for turning this project into something far more important, and memorable.

Over the course of six years spent getting to know these people, the odd exterior is worn away to reveal the heart beneath, and to Murphy's credit, he shows that heart - in spades - on the screen. To be sure, everyone on screen is made fun of - crazies, non-crazies, oldies, youngsters, even the filmmakers themselves. But for every moment of laughter, there's another moment of introspection. When Jerry tells Murphy, "even smart people have problems, it's not a perfect world you know," it's very hard not to notice that there's intelligence and faith and pain and love trapped in that malfunctioning body. Worth A Look

Chris Parry - April 22, 2003  
hollywoodbitchslap.com

## **WORCESTER** MAGAZINE

The shooting took an incredible five years, thought such a long time span ultimately gave the story its dramatic arc, making the film less of a snapshot of Southbridge and more of a family album.

Like the insane town in *King of Hearts* (1966), *Greater Southbridge* celebrates the town's divergence from the norm. While the film laments the demise of a once-prosperous town like Flint, Michigan, in *Roger & Me* (1989) it does so with more heart and without the blanket disdain that the film's director, Michale Moore seemed to have for his hometown denizens.



Edited brilliantly...the film is at time humorous, heartbreaking, and disturbing, but always real. [It] delves into such deep topics as racism by talking to actual racists and members of the Puerto Rican population who say it is definitely a problem. The crew had little trouble finding young and older people who admitted to being hard drug users. These people's stories are difficult to watch, but add to the realness of the film.

- *Southbridge Evening News*

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Right Where You Least Expect It...

austinchronicle.com

## Phases and Stages

BY MICHAEL CHAMY

May 23, 2003

### *Greater Southbridge Soundtrack*

(Tight Spot) Like so many absurd little outposts in America, Southbridge, Mass., is defined by its yokels -- the town jokers, derelicts, and uh, Abe Lincoln look-alikes. Having grown up in Southbridge, Rod Murphy is more than familiar with the town's collection of endearing oddballs, and his award-winning documentary *Greater Southbridge* stands for more than just one tiny dot on a map. That's why he put his Austin buddy John Hunt, frontman for local indie rockers Fivehead, in charge of the film's music. The assembled collection of Austin musicians and extended family reflect the "heartfelt handshake with small town America" Hunt refers to in the liner notes. Each track opens with nigh-unintelligible conspiracy theories and beer-can monologues lifted from the film. Musically, the soundtrack comes charging out of the gate with the Skynyrd-meets-"Cotton-Eyed Joe" of "Peelin' Out in Zeus' Yard" by Li'l Cap'n Travis, small-town heroes trapped in a midsized Austin. The ensuing Americana travelogue "Red Carpet Ride" from Ohio's Tiara is both memorable and definitive. The rousing "Long Fence" by Hunt's old band Silver Scooter strolls into a town square populated by Austin's Kiss Offs, Spoon, American Analog Set, Centro-matic's Will Johnson, and of course Fivehead (the reflective "Hard Luck Skanks"). Just as good are two USPS-friendly songs by scratchy-voiced Northeasterners: "252 Elm" by the Richard Buckner-like Dan Cray and My Brother Zebulon's Southbridge anthem, "01550." *Greater Southbridge*: Austin meets Boston at an Eastside yard sale with whiskey flowing from the jar.

Rating: ★★☆☆

## Update!

**The *Greater Southbridge Soundtrack* makes onto the Austin Chronicle's list of BEST COMPILATION/ SOUNDTRACK of 2003.**

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Soundcheck: Album Review

*Greater Southbridge* Soundtrack

By Jay Hardwig

Scan the back of the *Greater Southbridge* soundtrack and you'll find a virtual roll-call of the Austin indie rock scene, from Li'l Cap'n Travis and Fivehead to Spoon and Sin Pelo. If it seems odd that a movie about a fading industrial town in Massachusetts is essentially scored by upstart Austin scene-sters, allow me to connect the dots: when time came to lay music on his film, Southbridge director Rod Murphy turned to his old friend John Hunt, guitarist for Fivehead and hash-slinger to the Cen-Tex stars. An arranged marriage, then, but not as strange as it might seem. The gritty, independent nature of the music befits the gritty, independent nature of the movie's subjects: sometimes messy, sometimes beautiful, not quite ready for prime time and proud of it. Both are infused with the spirit of those who have not sold out—whether on principle or because there were no buyers, hard to say. Some shine brighter than others. On a disc full of aggressive, often sloppy distorted bass and electric guitar rawk, perhaps it's not surprising that the best efforts come from those showing a little more restraint. Spoon's *All the Pretty Girls* turns a playful, almost childlike piano line into an intriguing piece of alterna-pop. On *Dr. Small*, *Drums & Tuba* deliver a live take on what might be called tuba casserole, a filling blend of nimble guitar vamps, spot-on drumming, and that big bass horn, all of it layered, looped live, and brought to a satisfying finish. The moody, contemplative *Yellow Signals*, from Will Johnson, has a certain affecting charm, while bedbug's *Battle Hymn of the Czech Republic* lays the clean caterwaul of electric guitar over a propulsive, vaguely martial figure. Murphy's own *01550*, recorded with his band *My Brother Zebulon*, is a raspy-voiced love song and lament, with Southbridge as its subject (*Sometimes this whole place seems hostile/Sometimes I swear the whole town's drunk*). Where the restraint fades, the disc is less compelling: the Kiss Offs' *Love You Hardcore* and the Applicators' *Action Anthem* both feel like they could have been left on the basement four-track and the world would not have suffered for their loss.

Despite the occasional misstep, the Southbridge soundtrack is an overall success, an affectionate snapshot of the Austin indie music scene, circa 2000. In his liner notes, producer Hunt compares the streetwise Southbridge community with the musical community in Austin, seeing the strength in unspoken bonds. Like the film, the *Greater Southbridge* soundtrack serves as an extended family portrait: the subjects are a bit scruffy and the shirts sometimes untucked, but the spirit shines through just the same.

Rating: ★★★★★

## **HOLLYWOOD BITCHSLAP**

**Tromadance Pre-Production: Greater Southbridge Creative Team Rod Murphy & Scott Morgan**  
by Chris Parry

**THE GREATER SOUTHBRIDGE PITCH:** Middle america used to be a vibrant, booming economic love story between cities and their people, but invariably nowadays the cities of yore have bailed on their population, leaving only Dear John letters, unpaid phone bills and half a four-day-old pizza in their wake. *Greater Southbridge* is the very funny and heartfelt story of the many colorfully eccentric characters from one of these oases of Americana, the small and economically challenged central Massachusetts town where the director grew up. Watching these marginalized people go through their daily routines, challenges, and victories, we see a mirror of our own problems and triumphs.

Coots gone wild or Small town, big freaks, bigger heart.

**Q.** Will this be your first time at Sundance? If not, what else have you been to Park City with?

**Rod:** First time at Sundance, but not Park City. Back in 1995 when our 1980 Toyota Corolla's clutch burnt out on a cross country trip, my wife and I lived in SLC for 5 long months doing temp jobs. We made it up to Park City a couple times and saw how the beautiful people lived.

**Q.** When you were 14 years old, if someone asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, what would your answer have been?

**Rod:** I wanted to be Fonzie I think, either him or Ralph Macchio. I am not sure if either is a profession though.

**Scott:** President of IBM.

**Q.** How did you get started in filmmaking?

**Rod:** Location, location, location. My wife and I moved back East to Southbridge where I grew up. To distract myself from the crushing boredom we started going out and meeting all the folks on the street corners that I'd seen for years but never knew on a personal level. Then, after 5 years of shooting I think it turned into something pretty great.

**Scott:** I studied film at Hampshire College and after getting an internship, I moved to L.A. where I eventually became an editor.

**Q.** How have things changed for you since your film was accepted into Tromadance?

**Rod:** Since everybody in the whole world who has anything to do with entertainment will be in Park City that week, we actually have several scheduled meetings with potential distributors.

**Q.** When you were shooting the film, did you have Sundance in mind?

**Rod:** Of course.

**Scott:** I kind of wondered if this would be an inside joke for about six people that we'd pull out to watch at Christmas and barmitzvahs.

**Q.** How did you get your film started? How did you go from script to finished product?

**Scott:** There was never really a script, per se, but once Roddy started sending me footage, there were a lot of emails and a lot of conversations about what we wanted to accomplish. We wandered down lots of different paths before we found the through-line, and the real heart of the story.

**Q.** What's the one glaring lesson you learned while making this film?

**Rod:** Persistence is key.

**Scott:** Appreciate your team! We've gathered an incredible group of friends and family for 6:14 Productions and the project really started to find its wings when Kate (Murphy, Roddy's sister) came on board as Producer, Micah (Forbes) and Ursula (Kate's twin) took over the publicity, and John (Hunt) charged in with the entire Austin indie-music scene for our soundtrack.

**Q.** Did you find yourself watching other great movies in preparation?

**Rod:** Half way through the filming I saw *American Movie* and *Hands on the Hardbody* and I realized that we weren't alone out there. We knew that Southbridge wasn't gonna be your grandfather's PBS doc, but thanks to movies like those as well as *R.Crumb*, *Hows Your News* and *Bowling for Columbine* we knew there was an audience for quirky docs.

**Scott:** I had seen a few, but I actually tried to avoid them while editing, so the material could present its own style.

**Q.** Two partner — which actor would you cut off an arm to work with, and which relatively unknown actor on your own film do you want the world to start recognizing sooner rather than later?

**Rod:** My wife would cut my arm off to work with Christopher Walken. Peeps should rally round our star Jerry, and make him the next Larry Bud Melman.

**Scott:** Benicio D el Toro. Best actor in years.

**Q.** The festival circuit: what could be improved, and what couldn't be?

**Rod:** I think a lot of fests could follow Tromadance's example. They really get it right. It seems they are in it for the right reasons. They really watch all the submissions. They don't charge a fee to submit or to attend. They are very filmmaker and fan friendly. Which are all rare qualities for a film festival.

**Q.** Have you made it yet? If not, at what point will you be able to say yes?

**Rod:** I was cleaning out my desk last week and I found myself leafing through all the articles and festival stuff that we've amassed during the last year and I was amazed and proud of what a few knuckleheads accomplished. At one point I was pumping my fist in the air shouting YEAHHH.

**Scott:** In my head I think we made it on some level. 12 festival wins, lots of good press, a few meetings in Park City and a bunch of fervent fans. Pretty good for a bunch of nobodies with a video camera.

**Q.** A film is made by many people, as well as the director, but often films will open with a credit that says a film by — Did you use that credit in your film? If so, defend yourself! If not, what do you think of those who do?

**Scott:** We did use it. Documentaries are very different from narratives and our roles in creating *Greater Southbridge* were kind of hard to define. Admittedly, a lot of people contributed to the quality of the finished product, namely Kate and John, Justin and Gina among others but Roddy and I felt Directed by Roddy, Edited by me and a film by the two of us underscored the creative collaboration of our partnership.

**Q.** If a studio said we love this, we love you, you can remake anything in our back catalogue for \$40m — what film, if any, would you remake?

**Rod:** *Gigli* or *Breaking Away*. Actually *Breaking Away* could never be improved on so, just *Gigli*.

*Greater Southbridge* (which kicks much ass, both in terms of soundtrack and the film itself) will be playing at Tromadance in Park City while Sundance happens across the street. Thus far during their, eight-month festival run, *Greater Southbridge* has won 12 awards and has been compared favorably to *Roger & Me*, *American Movie* and *Hows our News*. And around my place, it's become the pre-party beer-drinking movie of choice. Seriously. You can find more information on the film at <http://www.greatersouthbridge.com>.

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**RAG PROFILE: Seeing More of Greater Southbridge**

by J.C. Bouvier

Not so long ago, *The Festival Rag* received an email from indie-doc director Rod Murphy asking for some indie film props. [Cue Rod's e-mail:]

I am (was) a first-time filmmaker...My film *Greater Southbridge* has been out on the festival circuit for about 7 months now and has won more than ten big awards. But despite the great reactions and some critical praise, a lot of indie film sites and publications won't give us the time of day... Maybe you'll be the exception?

Our Managing Editor Dave Roberts immediately fired back a reply:

Dear Rod...the current time of day is 4:46 PM (Eastern Standard Time). Please purchase a chronometer.

This exchange is a perfect example of the can-do attitude we apply on a daily basis here at *The Festival Rag*. Our shoulders are firmly and constantly pressed against the indie filmstone. Yes, it is a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. In this case, that somebody is *Rag* correspondent J.C. Bouvier.

I recently sat down with Rod Murphy and his producer/editor Scott B. Morgan to chat with them about *Greater Southbridge*, their feature documentary about the peculiar lives of a collection of citizens from Southbridge, Massachusetts. The film has been an award-winning favorite of festival audiences for the last eight months, and Rod and Scott are actively seeking a distributor for it.

**J.C. Bouvier:** How important is staying objective while shooting a documentary?

**Rod Murphy:** From the amount of time we put into this film and with the precarious situations that our subjects endured we couldn't stay objective and still feel like human beings. I don't know how some documentarians remain objective and not feel as though they could have helped on some level, especially if they live in the same community and really like whom they are filming.

**Scott Morgan:** It's important to stay balanced and not try to manipulate the truth of the story too much. However, I agree with Roddy, that it's impossible and I think dishonest to pretend you're somehow not present and involved.

**JCB:** How do you keep level heads from direction to editorial?

**SM:** You work on different coasts (laughter). Lots of emails and phone calls. Communication is key. And you trust each other's skills and what the other brings to the collaboration creatively.

**JCB:** Will you stay with the documentary format?

**RM:** I can't imagine trying to do a drama or a narrative at this point, but since our success with *Southbridge* a lot of folks have approached us with all kinds of projects ranging from grant funded serious docs to sketch comedy to cable T.V. commercials. Never say never, yo.

**SM:** Right. We've also talked with some folks about an animated piece. We just want to keep working on projects that interest us, whatever form they might take.

**JCB:** Any advice for first-time filmmakers hitting the festival scene?

**RM:** After the after parties, drink lots of Gatorade and eat a big bag of Funions to avoid hangovers and missing your plane.

**JCB:** What things would you have done differently while on the road with the film?

**RM:** We've done around 20 festivals in eight months and I wish that the whole production crew could have come to more of them. Many of the real small ones I experienced on my own and had a blast, but it could have been better if Jerry [Sciensnewski, a.k.a. Mr. Southbridge, the star of the film], Scott, Justin, Gina, John, Kate and Ursula [of the film's crew] were alongside.

**JCB:** From the collaboration and success on this first work, where are you heading now?

**RM:** We have two other docs in production, with a couple other projects mulling. The one we are very excited about is a story that has been going on for decades in the mountains of Western North Carolina. This great old woman and her family put on a potluck dinner and bluegrass jam every Thursday night for over 50 years and it's become a cultural phenomenon. Many great musicians/characters come out of the hills and hang out every week.

**SM:** It's kind of like the Appalachian *Buena Vista Social Club*.

**JCB:** What kind of research have you done exploring various distribution options?

**RM:** We've met other filmmakers who've shared their distribution experiences with us. But like everything else with this movie we've learned by doing. By calling, emailing, sending packages, reading and meeting distributors at festivals we understand the process a little now. We've been contacted by various distributors - Miramax even called us! - and we are about to make a big push. We're hopeful that we'll get something done soon.

**SM:** And I gotta add, our company, 6:14 Productions, is really fortunate to include a lot of good friends and family that have been wonderful at contacting the press and promoting the film. You can't underestimate the value of having a great production team behind you.

*Greater Southbridge* can next be seen in Park City during the Tromadance Film Festival on January 21st at Ciseros. Info on the film can be found in many places on the Web, primarily at [www.greatersouthbridge.com](http://www.greatersouthbridge.com).

*J.C. Bouvier is a sometime filmmaker and constant wag. He is the managing director of the F4 (Free Film Festival Fitchburg) in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and can be reached at [kingfish@mac.com](mailto:kingfish@mac.com).*

# greater SOUTHBRIDGE

Right Where You Least Expect It...

## CinemaSpeak.Com

Rating: ★★★★★

Review by: Warren Curry

March 2, 2003

Some viewers will have a tough time discerning if director Rod Murphy's documentary *Greater Southbridge* is an in-poor-taste black comedy or a sensitive vehicle of social concern. At first glance, either reaction would appear to be valid, but the more one truly thinks about this film, the more one is inclined to arrive at the latter conclusion. Armed with an old home video camera (as the opening title cards state), Murphy initially embarked on this project in hopes to better understand the hometown he never completely grasped, Southbridge, Massachusetts. As with most documentaries, a point-of-view is firmly established, and the aspect of Southbridge that Murphy is most interested in exploring is the apparently large population of mentally ill and downtrodden who reside in the community of 17,000, which lies 90 minutes southwest of Boston.

Utilizing the talking heads approach, the film uncovers a small town in financial remission, where the residents don't have much else to look forward to except getting drunk and/or stoned on the weekend. Southbridge, the film conveys, is an easy place to remain stuck, and the subjects interviewed seem divided on whether the town is a good or bad place to live. We're exposed to a bit of the town's history and learn that a good deal of the economic hardship is due to eyeglass manufacturing giant, American Optical, closing their Southbridge factory in the late 1980s. The town also has seen a recent spurt in racial diversity, as a large Puerto Rican population has settled in and has been met with some expected hostility.

What makes *Greater Southbridge* so unique is the colorful array of characters who share their views about the town. Two people in particular, Jerry Sciesnewski and Wayne Foskett, are the main subjects in the film, and learning about these people can inspire sorrow and laughter, but is always quite fascinating. Wayne a.k.a. "The Lone Wolf," a Vietnam vet, who includes his likes as Chuck Norris and conspiracies, provides wildly offbeat humor in his ramblings in which he claims, among other things, that he is a member of an organization of "12th degree black belts" which also includes Paul Newman and Robert Redford, and that back in 'Nam, he could crush a bullet fired from a .357 with his palm. His views on race relations in Southbridge are a bit stinging, as he shows blatant contempt for the Puerto Rican population, warning to even watch the nice ones or you'll wind up with "a blade stuck in your back."

An infinitely more sympathetic and congenial figure, Jerry a.k.a. "Mr. Southbridge" is a genuine man about town, who elicits the help of many of the locals. Aside from the government check he receives every month (which leaves him with \$30 after he pays his rent), Jerry makes ends meet by taking advantage of the state's bottle return law, collecting large quantities of empty cans and bottles, while repeatedly admonishing that, "five cents is not a joke. Money doesn't grow on trees."

Undoubtedly, there will be those who scorn this film for being nothing more than the filmmakers trotting out and exploiting a collection of helpless people. I can understand this assessment, but feel it's a decidedly incorrect perception. Aside from the filmmakers coming to the aid of Jerry at the end and delivering to him a literal truckload of empty cans, Murphy and crew deal with these people like few others are willing to -- as human beings. While it's true that those afflicted with mental illness should be treated with an extra amount of sensitivity, most people would rather not encounter them that all; almost as if neglect is the proper treatment. Murphy shows that he's truly a friend to Jerry and respects the man enough to not handle him exclusively with kid gloves.

The soundtrack is a huge bonus, with the music setting a bright tone. Scott B. Morgan's (who I should note shares the "a film by" credit with Murphy) dynamic editing keeps the film focused and progressing at a nice pace. Murphy and Morgan toy with the low budget nature of the project, purposely including "amateurish" moments that most would have left on the cutting room floor. It definitely adds charm to this movie.

*Greater Southbridge* is a fun, entertaining film, which also has something to say, even though the message may not be comfortably spelled out enough for some. Love it or loathe it, it's a solidly assembled documentary that I can easily envision gaining a cult-type following, although its appeal should transcend such limitations.

# greater SOUTHBRIDGE

Right Where You Least Expect It...



Asheville Director Documentary To Show  
By Chuck Waters

Rod Murphy didn't expect to spend five years and umpteen hours documenting *Greater Southbridge*, but that's the way things turned out. The documentary, which chronicles some of the quirkiest denizens of the small Massachusetts town, is just one of 51 films to be screened at various venues during the Asheville Film Festival.

A Southbridge native, Murphy collaborated with editor Scott B. Morgan on what has been described as a strangely captivating documentary (Lawrence Toppman, *Charlotte Observer*.) *Smoky Mountain News* writer Chuck Waters sat down with the aspiring Asheville-based director for a one-on-one about Southbridge and its Asheville debut.

**Waters:** Wow. My first impressions after watching *Greater Southbridge* — you mean these people are still walking around LOOSE? Every small town has its characters, but Southbridge seems to have more than its share. I don't think you could film a documentary like this in Waynesville. Or perhaps you could, and I just haven't met the characters yet. But the bottom line is that by the film's conclusion, you have come to care about these people. *Greater Southbridge* could be *Anytown, USA*, true?

**Murphy:** Yes. This is exactly what my partner Scott B. Morgan (editor/executive producer) and I always wanted to come across, these types of people that live on the margins seem to be in towns/cities all over. All of us know of people like this, maybe we've heard myths something they've done or they are notorious for certain quirks or eccentricities, but a lot of people don't really know this part of the population beyond that surface chuckle. What we wanted to do is show that these folks are kind of wacky, yes, but they are also very similar to everyone and they share the same experience. And, in Jerry's case, contribute more to the community than most. They all have some physical, mental and situational problems, but beyond that they are smart and funny and in touch.

**W:** How long was the GS project, start to finish? Did things go well during the shoot, or were there unanticipated surprises?

**M:** We filmed for over five years and the editing overlapped the filming one-plus years, and then took another full year. There were many surprises that unfolded during the shoot, and some show up in the finished product. Some Southbridge locals didn't like or understand what Justin (childhood pal) my wife Gina and I were doing, filming and hanging out with these people so much. To these closed-minded people we seemed to be some kind of threat, and they made a little noise. I think that because we were there every day for so long that our subjects began to value us and open up and be themselves, whereas if some slick crew came in from NYC or L.A. with professional lighting/equipment and vibe, they probably would not be so lucky. The whole thing almost ended several times because of girlfriends, etc., but somehow, through my close friends and family, we persevered and finished.

**W:** What is the significance of 6:14 Productions? (*Greater Southbridge* is Copyright 2003 6:14 Productions).

**M:** 6:14 is a time that comes up in my life all the time. When I get change from a \$20, it's \$6.14, I wake up at 6:14 a.m. sometimes. My daughter, Veronica, was born at 6:14 p.m. four years ago, and for about five days that was her name.

**W:** You knocked around for 10 years in New York and Hollywood after leaving Southbridge. What prompted you to return, and how did you wind up in WNC?

**M:** When Gina and I graduated from college, we wanted to try a bunch of stuff and hopefully find something dynamic. So we went to Europe and L.A., we tried NYC and then all over the Northwest, but ultimately family stuff caused us to move back East and I took a job with my Dad's company. Once back in the area I had to go to my father's office in Southbridge every day and it was very depressing, so I hooked up with Justin and borrowed some video equipment and started meeting these larger-than-life people that we gave nicknames to a decade earlier. We'd go out during lunch and film and sometimes after work Gina would come by, giving the project some sweetness. We met Scott Morgan when we were in L.A. Being a respected editor for A&E, MTV and HBO, he instantly took an interest, which in hindsight I bet he regrets because the thing dragged on forever and we had 100-plus hours of crazy footage. Then I got word that my job needed someone to move down this way for a couple good accounts and I jumped at it, thus forcing us to finish up. I made a bunch of marathon weekend editing trips to L.A. and everyone involved gave notes and somehow it worked.

**W:** Asheville has long been a popular moviemaking destination. How important is the AFF, and do you think it will be a success?

**M:** Asheville seems so ripe for a film festival. I've been to a whole bunch of festivals this year, and many have no business having a festival for a variety of reasons. The city of Asheville, on the other hand, actually has the feel that I imagine a Sundance/Park City has. Everything downtown is conducive to that Park City-type festival; you can walk everywhere, lots of cool pubs, shops, restaurants and interesting/international people. When we moved here one and a half years ago, we were amazed that it didn't have one and actually thought about trying it ourselves. Knowing some of the people involved with this festival and knowing that the town is behind it, I am sure it will be a very big success for years to come. And Jerry is going to take Asheville by storm!

**W:** *Greater Southbridge* has won numerous awards. What was your inspiration and whom would you say are your major influences? And what is your next film project?

**M:** So far, I think we've won eight or nine awards and had a lot of fun. We are really looking forward to this festival, because it is our Asheville premiere. Jerry and Justin, as well as a small army of Southbridgians, are trekking down from Mass. And Scott Morgan and my wife, Gina, are going to get to see how crowds react to this quirky film of ours. We are having an after-screening party, which should be a great excuse to celebrate our modest victories.

I am not sure what my inspiration is, maybe just to be able to one day show my kiddos that we made a few pretty cool films and had a whole bunch of fun doing it. Many films have inspired me—usually after I watch anything, I am in awe. I do love Michael Moore's movies, even though he bugs me. I love R. Crumb, *Hands on the Harbody* and *American Movie* and others in this new breed of quirky docs. I really dig that with Digital Video anybody can tell his or her story cheaply. DV is taking documentaries away from the stuffy reputations they had when I was a kid.

Our next movie is based here in Asheville. It is a total switch from *Greater Southbridge*. It is a feel-good story about this 86-year-old woman who has been putting on a potluck dinner/bluegrass jam every Thursday night for 50-some odd years. Tons of folks come from all over to attend, clog, pick and eat. The characters are amazing, the music is great, and so is the banana pudding! We upgraded our equipment, we've added a couple of talented friends in the mix, and we are really excited about preserving this great tradition. There is no controversy in this one and it's a lesson in Southern culture and bluegrass/old-timey music.

**W:** What's the best movie you saw so far this year, and who are the best director/actor/actresses working today? And who are some names to watch in the near future?

**M:** Having two small kids, it's hard to get out to see many movies. But my wife and I really liked the new Bill Murray movie, *Lost in Translation*. It made me wanna go to Japan. My favorite director, even though he seems like an egomaniac, is Michael Moore. *Bowling for Columbine* was an amazing movie, totally engrossing, entertaining, button-pushing and very funny. I like almost all of the movies I see. I actually love really bad movies as well and having 250 cable channels, I get to see tons of bad ones anytime I want.

I like any actor that you don't see in every single movie. There are many good actresses out there as well, but right now no names are flowing. My wife's favorite actor and alleged sex symbol is Christopher Walken.

Week of 11/5/03



Shot in the dark  
Filmmaker Rod Murphy is more impostor than auteur  
by Jay Hardwig

"All the people [in film school] were assholes."

There are a few things you should know about Asheville filmmaker Rod Murphy: He's pale. He's funny. He's loud. He was born in Boston, raised in Southbridge, and thinks Grady Little should have pulled the hook on Pedro Martinez in Game 7.

He loves Asheville. He hates Sting. He can get you a Schunterman potentiometer in a pinch. He wants to rehabilitate the expression "douche-bag."

He did not get into Sundance.

He sings bawdy bar songs about breast implants, 900 numbers and getting hit in the nuts. He's 33 years old, 34 if you ask his wife.

Oh, and he's my drinking buddy.

It's true: In the year or so since I first met him, Rod and I have cracked a few cold ones, and watched a few ball-games besides. We've swapped stories, broken bread and been two-fifths of a losing side of pickup hoops. Even so, I'll try to step back, forgo the backslapping, forgive old debts and forget that his son once raked my son across the face in a fight over sidewalk chalk.

This is neither a fawning praise-song (though Rod is generous to a fault) nor a warts-and-blisters expos (he launches too many jumpers from the wing), but rather an honest profile of a fellow who gave up old doubts, ten grand and six years of his life to fling a dream up on the screen, and watched it come home with trophies to spare.

### **Out of the soup kitchen, into the streets**

"I'd like to see his f\*\*kin' movie."

Rod Murphy is reading the Feb. 4 issue of *Mountain Xpress*, and he is pissed.

*Greater Southbridge*, Murphy's documentary about the dim and downtrodden in his Massachusetts hometown, has just been savaged in the letters page by a reader named Allen Thomas.

Calling Southbridge "a distracting incoherency," Thomas accuses Murphy of exploiting his subjects, mining the sad underbelly of Southbridge in a misguided attempt at humor.

It's a passionate letter, if off the mark; around a table at Westville Pub, Murphy's friends try to soften the blow. Some feel that Thomas missed the point of *Southbridge*; others say that all good art provokes strong reaction; still others suggest that Murphy wrote the letter himself to keep his name in the papers.

The moment passes. Before long, the discussion has wheeled and tilted to other topics — DrugMoney, Rev. Al and the small, swirling joys of Gold Bond medicated powder — and Murphy is laughing again, pouring a fresh pint and telling salty jokes in his strong Boston brogue.

Still, the *Xpress* letter must stick in his craw. Allen Thomas is not alone, but he's in a distinct minority. While a few viewers have aired similar complaints, many more have praised *Greater Southbridge* for its obvious heart. Far from exploiting his subjects, Murphy connects with them; rather than scorn or pity them, he gives them a voice.

His film is by turns odd, sad and hilarious, but it never feels cheap: There is more gritty dignity in *Greater Southbridge* than in most of the soup-kitchen sanctimony or averted-glance "I gave at the office" charity that passes for caring these days.

But don't take my word for it. Westwood One/CBS Radio praised *Greater Southbridge* as a "triumph," lauding its "pure generosity of spirit" in affording the down-and-out "an oddly sacred identity." Arthur Bradford, who explored similar territory in the award-winning documentary *How's Your News*, called *Southbridge* "genuine, funny, good-hearted, and bad-ass." The scathing online forum *Hollywood Bitchslap* called it "very funny, very heart-felt, and as good a first-time directorial effort as you could ever hope for."

The film has bagged a dozen noteworthy awards, including "Best Documentary" prizes at festivals in New York, Hollywood, Atlanta, Knoxville, Tenn., Kentucky, Michigan and Massachusetts. Building on that momentum, Murphy's working to sell cable and video distribution rights. Last month, he wrangled some high-profile face time with a few industry suits in Park City during the Sundance craze, and came away encouraged.

This weekend, he's heading up to New York, where he has meetings with the Sundance Channel, the Independent Film Network and *High Times* magazine. If the cards fall right, he'll meet with HBO and Sony Classics as well. Rod Murphy may not be in the same league with the big boys, but in a few days, he'll at least be in the same room.

### **A little help from his friends**

*"I can't say it enough: Ken, Scott, Gina, Kate, and Ursula are big parts of the very meager success and vision we've got for 6:14 Productions."*

That's an e-mail from Rod (6:14 is the name of his production company). Since I started this story, he's been hammering me about giving props to his assorted partners in crime. He's begged me to mention his editor, his producer, his wife, his garbage man, his plumber, his mortgage specialist, the sweet little lady who refills the moo goo gai pan at his favorite local Asian buffet, and the guy with the hairy back at the Y who boxes out well but gets a little aggressive on defense.

For a chap who's spent an awful lot of time churning out press kits, harassing festival directors and cold-calling industry reps, Murphy's surprisingly uncomfortable about his turn in the spotlight.

Not that he minds the glare—heavens no, ladies and gents, Rod Murphy is a veritable media whore—but he does want to share it with his deserving cronies.

As he reminds me often, independent means flat broke; if he had to pay all the folks who have helped along the way, he'd be in debt up to his ears. (As it is, he's only in debt up to his knees.)

Despite his modest success, Murphy takes pains to separate himself from the film industry. He has no desire to be the cineaste, the auteur, the flighty film-school grad wearing smashing scarves and smoking French cigarettes. To hear Rod tell it, he's a schmo, a shlump, an impostor and a rootless, bored vagabond who fell ass-backwards into film, and who made an award-winning documentary in spite of himself.

This much is true: Rod Murphy has never taken a film class. In college, Murphy says, he was a schemer, a drunk and a musician, but not a filmmaker. (He graduated from Fitchburg State with majors in history and political science, and a minor in philosophy.)

"I was around film a lot," Murphy recalls, "but never had much interest in doing it, because all the people who were doing it were assholes, y'know? Pretentious douche-bags who thought they were real important, had some 'vision,' y'know? You'd see their friggin' movie, and it's some black-and-white thing that makes absolutely no sense. It's six seconds long, and it took them all semester to do it."

While he admits he could have used a little more technical know-how when he started *Southbridge*, he's proud of its scruffy, DIY feel.

"If I knew what I was doing, it just wouldn't have been as good," he suggests. "Just like everything else I've ever done, you figure it out when you're in the middle of it. Because you're stupid, you overdo things, you get way more [footage] than you need, and you overcompensate in some areas to make up for the crap that you're not good at."

By that logic, Murphy overcompensated for six years. Shooting at night and on lunch breaks from his job as a machine-parts salesman, he piled up about 100 hours of *Southbridge* tape. He can't count the nights he sat staring bleary-eyed at a video monitor watching raw footage: enough, at any rate, that his friend John Hunt started to call

Murphy's setup *The Neglect-O-Tron 2000* — a seductive but sinister machine that pulled Murphy away from family, responsibility and gainful employment.

To further complicate matters, the documentary's editor, Scott B. Morgan, was based in L.A. Communicating by phone, e-mail and cross-country telepathy, they slowly patched together a film. Several times, Murphy hopped weekend flights for the Celluloid City, where he and Morgan would work around the clock.

"I'd get there on Friday night, and I wouldn't go to bed until I got back on the plane on Sunday night," Murphy recalls. "It was incredible."

By April 2003, they had the final cut: 85 minutes culled from six years' worth of effort — but no one there to watch it. In many ways, their work was done. In others, it was just beginning. I'll spare you the details, save these: Murphy and Morgan submitted *Greater Southbridge* to about 60 festivals last year, at about \$50 a pop. They screened in 28. They won "Best Of" awards at nine, and honors at three more — an enviable record for a small guerilla documentary.

Murphy says it was fun, fascinating, thrilling, educational, grueling and expensive. He figures he spent more than \$5,000 on promotion, spread between entry fees, press kits, travel and lodging.

"A lot of [the festivals] don't even send you a reject letter," Murphy grumbles. "Or if they do, it says, 'We had a record year at the Douche-bag Film Festival this year: 1,100 submissions.' Which means that all they did was open your freakin' package, get the check out and throw it in the barrel." Case in point: The Sundance Film Festival got more than 2,400 feature-length submissions this year, including 540 documentaries. They accepted 16 documentaries and about 50 features overall. *Greater Southbridge* was not one of them.

But Murphy will get his revenge: He's been selected as a programmer for two different festivals for 2004. One is the Dahlenega International Film Festival in Dahlenega, Ga.; the other is "some jackass one up in Boston."

"I don't even know what they're calling it," Murphy admits, before allowing himself a free shot at his old stomping grounds: "The Shiny-Foreheaded Pinned-Pant Meathead Festival, I think is what they're calling it this year." He stops and corrects himself: "Independent Meathead."

While he relishes the chance to get on board and "start the revolution," Murphy is amazed that anyone asked him on a panel to begin with. "Make a movie, man, and people think you're important. They think you're a filmmaker."

OK, then, filmmaker: Props are due.

The Scott listed in Murphy's e-mail is *Southbridge* co-producer Scott Morgan, a truly gifted editor who pulled golden threads from a hundred hours' mess. He still lives in L.A., and is a senior staff editor for a production division at Fox TV.

Gina is Rod's wife, Gina B. Murphy, his partner, adviser and muse; she's the sounding board for his ideas, the first filter for the streams of sludge that dribble ceaselessly from his mouth.

Ursula and Kate are Rod's twin sisters, who took the titles of producer and associate producer on *Southbridge* and put in hundreds of hours in a dozen capacities, from editing to Web design to festival submissions.

Ken is Ken Abbott, the well-groomed West Asheville wag who took the pictures that accompany this story. He's working as a producer on 6:14 Productions' next project, a homegrown documentary about the local folks who've been gathering for food, fellowship and flat-picking at Nelia Hyatt's house on Brevard Road for better than 50 years, making it the longest running bluegrass jam in the state.

But before we ramble up the hill to Mrs. Hyatt's house, a question: What's this rough-tongued Massachusetts Yankee doing in the Carolina hills to begin with? What brought *Southbridge* to Asheville?

## **A vision in blue**

That question has two answers, and the first is work.

Yes, work. Rod Murphy still sells machine parts for a living. Potentiometers, yes, and clutches and switches and spray guns. He's a traveling salesman for the company his father helps run; Partsource International specializes in replacement parts for European machinery. Brands like Schunterman, Schmersal, Takt-O-Mat. (Don't laugh: When you need a Schunterman, a Flender-Himmel won't do.)

When Partsource needed a sales rep to handle its growing Southeastern accounts, Murphy volunteered. While most of his contracts are in South Carolina, he chose Asheville as his base; he and Gina had long admired the mountain city's mix of independent arts, progressive politics and glorious scenery. They moved here in July 2002 and promptly fell in love with the town: They recently bought a house in West Asheville, with no plans to sell.

The second reason Murphy came to Asheville was to make another movie. A few years back, he read about Mrs.

Hyatt's weekly potlucks in the travel section of *The Boston Globe*. The next time he came through Asheville, he found the Hyatt house and poked his head in on a Thursday night.

"Oh, man, this place is great," he remembers saying. "I'm gonna do the next movie here."

True to his word, Murphy is about five months into a planned 12-month shoot. He and Abbott head out most Thursday nights, just as Mrs. Hyatt's friends have been doing for years. They come for the potluck, stay for the picking: They've recorded about 25 hours of rambling recollection and spontaneous songs.

This month, they're installing an upgraded sound system and two fixed cameras to better capture the jam sessions. While there are some talented pickers at Mrs. Hyatt's — bluegrass w nderkind and Asheville native Bryan Sutton honed his chops there — Murphy is drawn to the people.

As many as 50 folks show up on a given night, and the sense of camaraderie and community is palpable. (Editor Scott Morgan likes to call the project "The Appalachian Buena Vista Social Club.")

"There's a great feel to that place," Murphy says. "It's some kind of throwback, y'know? People just getting together and hanging out. They're kind of like extended family. They all know each other, they pull for each other, they pitch in if someone's sick. ... You leave there and you're like, 'Wow ... everything could be like this. People could actually like each other.'

"It's kind of like that in Asheville anyway," he goes on, "but not as rich as it is in there. You walk in there and everybody sort of knows you, and if they don't really know you, they sort of adopt you."

They've adopted Murphy, at any rate. Walking in for a recent week's filming, he worked the room like a long-lost uncle, shaking hands, slapping backs and laying a series of gentle pecks on the cheeks of the old ladies. In a few short months, he's become a part of the community, an outsider embraced.

It doesn't hurt that Murphy is eminently approachable, blessed with the gift of gab. Despite a thick Boston accent and a well-worn Red Sox hat, he seems at home here. Murphy knows that his ability to relate to his subjects is the key to his filmmaking success.

"I might not be the best cameraman, and I don't mike things right, and I don't light things right, but I think if I'm talking to someone repeatedly, I'll get their story out. In a conversational way, instead of one-word answers."

On the night I visit, the conversation is with 75-year-old Tommy Farmer, who's been coming to Mrs. Hyatt's for years. As he talks, he keeps slipping into the past tense: Like many of the people Murphy interviews, he's afraid that Mrs. Hyatt's potlucks may soon be a thing of the past. Developers are lurking on all sides of her Brevard Road spread; her house looks almost out of place in the growing retail corridor near the junction of I-26 and I-40.

What's more, it's not getting any easier for Mrs. Hyatt. She's 86 now, and while she's quick with a smile or a seat, she's not as quick around the house as she once was. No one knows how long the tradition can last, but this much is sure: If it moves out of Mrs. Hyatt's garage, it won't be the same.

But if the regulars are worried, you can't tell it on an average Thursday night. The music still plays, the coffee still flows and 94-year-old Jenny Robbins still gets up to dance when she gets the notion. Murphy and Abbott intend to capture what they can. It's a big shift from Murphy's days filming the drug addicts and welfare cranks of downtown Southbridge, but he says it feels right.

"It doesn't have the edge that Southbridge has, but there's some good stories. Folks know how to tell stories down here. A lot better than they know how to tell 'em up North."

He'll get another shot of local color on his third project, a documentary on the local roots of NASCAR inspired by Brian Sarzynski's *Mountain Xpress* article "Tradin' Paint" (Sept. 24, 2003). Sarzynski is on board as a field producer; shooting started last month.

For now, though, Rod Murphy's concentrating on Mrs. Hyatt's, and he can't help but marvel at the hospitality they've shown him.

"None of 'em have a bad bone in their body," he muses. "When I come home with Ken, sometimes, after we leave there, we have to start cursing just to get back in our old self — just let 25 swears go. It's so nice there, everybody's so friendly and genuine." He pauses, grins a wicked grin. "I've got to get back to reality."

February 18, 2004

[Jay Hardwig is a freelance writer living in Asheville.]

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