

FLICK CHAT

12th Annual

Urbanworld Film Festival has jazzy opening and *bee-utiful* closing....

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The 12th annual Urbanworld Film Festival (UFF) presented by BET Networks, the largest international competitive festival of its kind today, took place in New York City from September 10-14. UFF — founded in August 1997 by Stacy Spikes, a former executive at Miramax — is one of the most successful outlets for the urban filmmaking community.

This year's selection showcases New York-based films and filmmakers celebrating local artists and communities, as well as a strong representation of international filmmakers from around the world. "These are really exciting times for the festival," admits Spikes. "On display we have films of nearly every genre, created by filmmakers of nearly every background. This robust selection of cinema, together with our new partnership with BET Networks, promises to make this the best Urbanworld yet."

All festival screenings were held at the AMC Loews 34th Street Theaters and hip-hop royalty presided over the event with Queen Latifah — whose movie closed the festival — serving as honorary chair of the festival which was dedicated to the exhibition of independent and mainstream cinema by and about people of color.

The five-day long festival consisted of a number of big name screenings including "Steve Harvey: Still Trippin'"; "Wu: The Story Of The Wu-Tang Clan" directed by Gerald Barclay; "Tennessee" starring Mariah Carey and directed by Aaron Woodley; and "Zane's Sex Chronicles." The premiere of urban documentary "Jazz In The Diamond District" directed by Lindsey Christian got the festival off to a great start.

The urban documentary film which tells the story of Jasmine "Jazz" Morgan who, after losing her mother to cancer, pursues a singing career entrenched in the D.C. underground hip-hop scene starred Wood Harris and D.C. native Clifton Powell and introduced native Washingtonians Monique Cameron, Erica Chamblee and Andre Strong.

The film was co-edited by Daniel Rezende and featured an original score composed by super-producer Chucky Thompson, also a native Washingtonian. An exciting invitational only soundtrack listening session and reception followed.

A total of 85 films were screened at this year's festival including 16 narrative features, 40 narrative shorts, 19 documentary features and 7 documentary shorts, as well as panel

discussions, live staged screenplay readings and the celebrated Actor's Spotlight, featuring Queen Latifah to be aired on BET, with previous honorees including Vondie Curtis Hall, Samuel L. Jackson, Billy Dee Williams and Rosie Perez.

"Great festival, probably the best we ever had," Spikes stated. "The movies make everything and [we had] closing night with 'Secret Life Of Bee's' and opening with Steve Harvey and we've had the most films [this year]. We had 85 films."

The festival also included a number of other films by up and coming filmmakers including the urban drama *Streetballers*. "It was a great experience overall. I learned a lot. I was basically just impressed with the professionalism as a whole and I think it's an event that's going to be able to compete with the top festivals soon," observed Craig Thomas, one of the producer's of *Streetballers*.

The exciting 2008 UFF culminated in the special closing night premiere screening of "The Secret Life of Bees" starring Queen Latifah, Sophie Okonedo, Alicia Keyes, Jennifer Hudson and Dakota Fanning, written for the screen and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood.

The film, which is scheduled for nationwide release on October 17, 2008, is a poignant love story about family and redemption centered on an undeniable desire for a sense of belonging and the often daunting journeys that we must navigate to achieve it.

This year's UFF roster of marquee sponsors included HBO returning for the 12th year as the founding sponsor. Time Warner Cable joined the festival as a prestige sponsor and Grey Goose served as an official sponsor. Principal sponsors included The Weinstein Company, WNBC, Black Enterprise, *Essence*, *Vibe*, and Power 105.1. The Directors Guild of America and AMC Theatres returned as benefactor sponsors.

Sponsoring studios include Fox Searchlight and the Weinstein Company. The Hilton Times Square — where registration and panels took place — served as the host hotel of the festival. Over the past eleven years, UFF has presented approximately 700 features, shorts and documentaries, with estimated attendance reaching in excess of capacity crowds.

Now in its 12th year, the UFF is the largest internationally competitive festival of its kind having re-defined the competitive film festival landscape with its fresh and necessary approach to spreading the voices of a multicultural world. UFF is an initiative produced by the Urbanworld Foundation, a non-



"The Secret Life of Bees" attendee Tracee Ellis Ross



"The Secret Life of Bees" director Gina Prince-Bythewood



"The Secret Life of Bees" star Queen Latifah with Stacy Spikes



"The Secret Life of Bees" star Sophie Okonedo



Mariah Carey with producer Lee Daniels at "Tennessee" screening



Mariah Carey attends "Tennessee" screening with hubby Nick Cannon

profit organization dedicated to implementing programs and events that support the development and success of the urban filmmaking community. Stacy Spikes serves as chairman emeritus and Gabrielle Glore serves as executive producer.

Beginning this year, BET Networks, a division of Viacom Inc., has signed on for a three-year strategic partnership to present the UFF. The unique partner-

ship, strengthened by BET's position as the nation's leading media and entertainment provider for African Americans and consumers of Black culture will further establish the festival as one of the world's largest competitive film festivals designed to redefine and enhance the roles of multicultural constituents in contemporary cinema.

The primary BET channel

reaches more than 87 million households according to Nielsen Media Research, and can be seen in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean. "The exciting lineup of cinematic talent rounds out our mission to embrace and support the new wave of filmmakers of color through our partnership with Urbanworld," stated Alvin Bowles, senior vice president, integrated marketing, BET Networks.

(Photos: Ronnie Wright)