



Crude: Film Review

Monday, September 28, 2009 – By Roy Rogers Oldenkamp, West Hollywood

West Hollywood, California (Monday, September 28, 2009) - "Crude" is anything but. This finely wrought documentary thrusts us in the heart of the ongoing tragedy Big Oil has caused in the Amazon Basin.

A true doc, "Crude" offers a fairly well balanced story of the struggle by indigenous Amazonian peoples to get back their land and health, both contaminated by the effluvial waste of oil development.

Pablo Fajardo is the real hero here, fighting for the rights of the victims, becoming the voice of the people and standing up to Texaco/Chevron.

Attorneys Adolfo Callejas and Diego Larrea of Chevron try to present the company side of the issue, denying the responsibility of Chevron and laying the blame on Petroecuador, the state run oil company who also drilled in the area and may also have left contamination in an area roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island.

Yet there is presented irrefutable evidence that the damage was largely done by Texaco, which merged with Chevron in 2001.

30,000 indigenous and colonial people are plaintiffs in the case, one of the largest and most complex legal cases in the world.

The documentary camera coverage of the ongoing struggle is all-inclusive, covering minute detail and yet never less than transfixing in its depth.

Filmmaker Joe Berlinger (Paradise Lost, Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, Brother's Keeper) has fashioned a worthy drama with some of the most compelling characters on earth.

Pablo Fajardo's fierce dedication is unwavering. Steven Donziger as a foul-mouthed, brilliant, seasoned consulting attorney is magic. The Rainforest Foundation co-founder Trudy Styler-along with her husband Sting-raise the profile to international prominence.

The film includes concert footage of The Police at a rainforest benefit as an added bonus.

The charisma of Rafael Correa, a literate, compassionate el presidente in a long series of Ecuadoran presidents holds the camera like a rock star; well, like Sting.

In "Crude", you feel for the people, you feel for the activists, and, in a way, you feel for the spokespeople, attorneys and corporate shills trying to uphold an untenable position.

Sarah McMillan, Chevron Chief Environmental Scientist, reminds one of Tilda Swinton as soulless attorney Karen Crowder in Michael Clayton, quietly breaking down in a sterile bathroom, suppressing loathing and self-hate as best she can.

Wendy Blackstone offers a soundtrack that never devolves into the expected overt tribal drumming or Orinoco Flow sweetness. The unobtrusive composing never overpowers the ongoing saga.

Since the filming of "Crude", The L.A. Times reports the sixteen-year long legal battle that could assess Chevron with a whopping 27 billion dollar damages amount had a recent setback.

Chevron claimed that the judge in the case (there are no jury trials in Ecuador) had exhibited prejudice by possibly prematurely declaring Chevron guilty in a taped exchange with two oil company employees. It is apparently unclear what Judge Juan Nuñez Sanabria was actually saying. Judicial misconduct seems a stretch, but it may be the only straw left for Chevron to grasp. 27 billion? Isn't that their profit for an entire quarter?

Opens nationally and also locally at Landmark Nuart Theatre 9/18-9/24 with a Q&A with Director/Producer Joe Berlinger on the 18 & 19.

Crude: Eco-crime and the power of celebrity

3.5 stars (out of 4)

By Jason Anderson

In its gripping portrayal of the continuing legal battle between native Ecuadoreans and the oil company that may have caused catastrophic damage to the waters of the Amazon, *Crude* ventures far beyond the parameters of the average enviro-doc.

It's not that director Joe Berlinger neglects to include all the elements that are seemingly required by any film about an ecological crime or crisis. Indeed, there's no shortage of sobering facts about the toll of allegedly cavalier business practices by Texaco during its decades in the region.

If estimates are accurate, the amount of oil and waste dumped into the headwaters of the Amazon from the mid-1960s to the early '90s dwarfs the Exxon Valdez spill.

But *Crude* is just as much about the ways in which the Ecuadoreans' struggle is packaged for the media and cause-conscious celebrities as it is about the specific details of their quest to repair the damage to their indigenous lands.

Berlinger presents the former as a matter of necessity. The underlying implication is that eliciting the sympathies of celebs may be a more effective tactic than seeking solutions through legal systems that inevitably favour the side with the deepest pockets.

After all, the native Ecuadoreans' class-action suit against Texaco – and later Chevron, which inherited the case after buying that oil company in 2001 – was 13 years old by the time Berlinger started shooting *Crude* in early 2006. The corporation's delaying strategies included successfully forcing the suit to be tried in Ecuador rather than the U.S., where it was originally filed.

Early scenes introduce two key members of the plaintiffs' legal team: Pablo Fajardo, a humble but impassioned Amazon-born attorney who fights on behalf of his own people, and Steven Donziger, a more combative American lawyer who often bristles at the Ecuadoreans' less-direct methods of conflict resolution.

It was Donziger who invited Berlinger to document the trial when it finally began in 2006. But as the filmmaker did with his sometime-partner Bruce Sinofsky in their documentaries *Paradise Lost* and *Brother's Keeper*, he has expanded the scope of his film in order to examine the manner in which the details of the case are portrayed (or misportrayed) in the media, thereby serving the various ends of the competing parties. Thus does an article in *Vanity Fair* come to have more importance for the Ecuadoreans' struggle than any tricky legal manoeuvres. Likewise, the team's successful courting of Trudie Styler (wife of Sting and co-chair of their charity, the Rainforest Foundation) may have a greater impact than the support of Ecuador's new president.

Not that these Davids achieve their victory over the corporate Goliath – it may take another decade of litigation to resolve the suit unless a settlement is reached.

Nevertheless, Berlinger provides a bracing and intelligent look at how such battles are (and perhaps must be) fought in a world that's hardly lacking when it comes to tales of injustice.



A Rainforest Fights for Damages

Crude

By Anthony Kaufman
September-October, 2009

Both legal thriller and heartbreaking human rights drama, Joe Berlinger's latest documentary examines the so-called Amazon Chernobyl case, a 16-year-old lawsuit waged by the indigenous people of Ecuador against Chevron for the widespread pollution of their lands and waterways. As with Berlinger's acclaimed courtroom docs *Brother's Keeper* and *Paradise Lost*, the director presents evidence from both sides, but ultimately mounts his own vigorous defense for the oppressed. (Here, an image of a trembling, helpless duck is indelible.) The film's spine belongs to the maneuverings of Ecuadoran lawyer Pablo Fajardo and his rambunctious Manhattan adviser Steven Donziger, who mobilize the media, Ecuador's new president, and even rock star Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, in their fight. By movie's end, David may not have beaten Goliath, but as Donziger says, at least the underdog is in the game.

The New York Times

In the Snows of Sundance, A Marked Chill in the Air

The 2009 Sundance Film Festival opened with a whisper that grew more hushed with each passing day. It should have been a time for rowdy celebration: this year, after all,

**MANOHLA
DARGIS**

FILM

marked the festival's 25th anniversary, a milestone that was largely eclipsed by the grim economic climate that thinned the crowds and fueled the nervous chatter on the icy streets. Only the presidential inauguration, a few sales deals and a couple of punches thrown by a critic (not me!) who had felt hassled by a film representative disturbed the low-key vibe.

These are, as one distributor blurted out to me seconds after saying hello, "tumultuous times" in the movie business. No kidding. On the eve of Sundance three more movie critics joined the ranks of the unemployed, including Ella Taylor, a longtime and well-respected critic for The LA Weekly in Los Angeles. And earlier this week Warner Brothers



GEORGE FREY/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

The Egyptian Theater on Main Street in Park City, Utah.

Entertainment — which last year dismantled three of its specialty divisions, Warner Independent Pictures, Picturehouse and New Line Cinema — announced that it was laying off an additional 800 workers.

For independent cinema, which relies on reviewers to get the word out because they don't have money to buy their opening weekends, the thinning of the critical ranks is no small thing. The specter of the big studios getting out of the indie business presents a more ambivalent problem, one put into relief by the festival's silver anniversary and the presence of Steven Soderbergh at this year's event.

In 1989, Mr. Soderbergh helped put Sundance on the world cinema map with his debut feature, "sex, lies and videotape." That spring the movie was at Cannes, where it won the Palme d'Or (beating out "Do the Right Thing," among other titles). A hungry little outfit called Miramax

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In the Snows of Sundance, Independent Cinema Feels a Marked Chill

From Weekend Page 1

Films swooped down and grabbed it.

Three years later, Miramax was bought by Disney. Soon every big studio that did not have a boutique division opened one. Prices for independently financed movies skyrocketed. Harvey Weinstein became a media fixture, Quentin Tarantino became a rock star, and Parker Posey and Zooey Deschanel became Indie It Girls, while character actors like Sam Rockwell and Paul Giamatti became headliners. Sundance veterans like Bryan Singer, Christopher Nolan and Mr. Soderbergh signed on for blockbuster duty. Sponsors like Entertainment Weekly (and The New York Times) slapped their brand on the event, and the crowds poured in as the festival chatter shifted from questions of art to matters of industry. For 10 days a year, Sundance turned into Hollywood in the snow, and real independent spirit seemed on the wane.

The industry was still in attendance this year, but the high-roller fever that has gripped the festival for the last decade has cooled. Although this made for the most pleasant Sundance in memory, it also presents a host of unknowns. If the studios don't buy independent films, fewer investors in turn may be inclined to bankroll projects, particularly those with bigger budgets. Yet it is precisely those movies with heftier budgets, and the glossier production values and marquee-ready performers that can come with those budgets — like the ready-made entertainment and 2006 Sundance success story "Little Miss Sunshine" — that distributors believe can help bring in the increasingly finicky audience. If the investors don't invest and the buyers don't buy, will the movies still be made, and what kind?

Films with no-name actors are a tough sell, as is anything considered too arty, brainy, bleak or

dark, which is why much of the best work produced today either goes without American distribution or is released by smaller companies that don't require huge returns. This was true when "sex, lies and videotape" hit, and it may be even truer now. That doesn't mean that you won't see some of the best work from this year's Sundance, including "Unmade Beds," "Big Fan," "Big River Man" and "In the Loop," but it might mean that you'll see these titles only if you live in a large city, or when (if) they're re-released on DVD. That is, if someone picks them up for American distribution.

The scathingly funny "In the Loop" stars a clutch of familiar and somewhat familiar actors, including a very good James Gandolfini and a barely recognizable Steve Coogan, in a political satire about the behind-the-scenes power plays in Washington and in London that preceded the Iraq

war. Directed at a breakneck pace by Armando Iannucci, the movie essentially restages this tragic chapter as a screwball comedy: I haven't heard dialogue this fast since Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant traded zingers in "His Girl Friday." Although "In the Loop" brought down the packed house during at least one screening, it remained up for grabs by Thursday, because these days even a smart, sophisticated (English-language!) comedy isn't a sure bet.

All the pretty bodies rolling around, under and over the sheets in "Unmade Beds," an intimate, tender feature about two young Europeans adrift in and out of a London squat, similarly failed to rouse interest among American buyers. The second feature from the Argentine writer and director Alexis Dos Santos, (his first was "Glue"), this beautifully shot movie has a level of formal ambition — the narrative



'UNMADE BEDS' Déborah François and Fernando Tielve star in a film by the Argentine writer and director Alexis Dos Santos.



'BIG FAN' Patton Oswalt plays a 35-year-old parking lot attendant who is devoted to his beloved New York Giants.



'IN THE LOOP' James Gandolfini in Armando Iannucci's political satire about the power plays that preceded the Iraq war.

is as elliptical as the lives it concerns, and even seemingly throwaway moments catch your eye — which was generally absent from most of the American fiction films I saw. Though he has clearly watched his share of French New Wave movies, Mr. Dos Santos has absorbed rather than merely parroted his inspirations.

Straight out of Staten Island comes the aggressively grubby, often darkly funny “Big Fan,” the very fine feature directing debut from Robert Siegel, who wrote “The Wrestler” and was an editor at *The Onion*. A cautionary tale about the limits and perils of love, “Big Fan” centers on Paul (Patton Oswalt, terrific and fearless), a 35-year-old parking lot attendant who lives with his mother and whose every waking hour is devoted to his beloved New York Giants. That love takes an unexpectedly dramatic turn when Paul and his closest (only) friend, Sal (the Sundance fixture Kevin Corrigan, priceless), have an unexpected late-night encounter with Paul’s favorite Giants quarterback, who does not return his fan’s love in gentle kind. Unlike many hapless American movie characters, Paul comes with a personality rather than a character arc.

The pivotal figure in the excellent American documentary “Big River Man,” from the resourceful young director John Maringouin (his only other feature is “Running Stumbled”), has so much personality it’s a wonder he fits on the screen. The big man in question is the Slovenian long-distance swimmer Martin Strel, an extraordinarily larger-than-life, stranger-than-fiction member of the species who, for murky reasons, had decided to promote environmental awareness by swimming some of the world’s longest rivers, including the Mississippi and the hideously polluted Yangtze. The movie tracks Mr. Strel — who is accompanied by a small entourage that includes his

son, who also narrates the movie — as he attempts to swim and survive the Amazon while trying to dodge parasites, piranhas and madness.

The documentary veteran Joe Berlinger (“My Brother’s Keeper”) adopts a straightforward reportorial approach for “Crude,” a forceful, often infuriating story about Big Oil and little people. The story here involves the protracted legal battle between 30,000 Ecuadorean plaintiffs and Chevron, one of the largest oil producers in the world. Mr. Berlinger traces this story from the jungle to the concert stage, as the lawyers representing the Ecuadoreans employ every conceivable tactic — ground-level protests, news stories about victims that verge on the exploitative, a feature in *Vanity Fair* magazine and even Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler — to fight their multinational opponent. Among other things, the movie makes clear that while it’s easy to laugh at celebrity do-gooders, they have access to real power unavailable to the merely mortal.

Other high points include “Cold Souls,” the keenly intelligent, gravely humorous English-language feature debut from the French writer and director Sophie Barthes, about an actor (Mr. Giamatti as an actor also named Paul Giamatti) who decides to put his troubled soul in cold storage. Just as appealing is Oskar Roehler’s visually flamboyant “Lulu and Jimi,” a period romance set in Germany during the 1950s. An outstanding Jennifer Decker, in a star-making turn, plays Lulu, the rebellious daughter of a proper bourgeois family, who falls in love with Jimi (Ray Fearon), an American who’s a one-man advertisement for black cool. Though Mr. Roehler borrows heavily from David Lynch’s “Wild at Heart” and Francis Ford Coppola’s “One From the Heart,” he makes this freaky joy ride his own.

I wish I could be enthusiastic about “The Girlfriend Experience,” the latest nonstudio venture from Mr. Soderbergh. The movie, a work in progress that was shown as a sneak preview on Tuesday, is the second in a series (the first was “Bubble”) of high-definition digital features he is making for 2929 Entertainment, which will be simultaneously released on different platforms. This newest addition to what is shaping up as a rather joyless experiment from Mr. Soderbergh involves a high-end Manhattan escort called both Christine and Chelsea (Sasha Grey, a porn actress), who lives with her boyfriend, a trainer with muscles and no personality, Chris (Chris Santos), and sells her body, and perhaps her soul, to whoever can afford her price.

Shot by the director himself, the movie looks as beautiful as its star and comes across just as cold and flat as she does. Though Mr. Soderbergh name-dropped Michelangelo Antonioni during the question-and-answer session after the movie, “The Girlfriend Experience” is very much under the thematic influence of Jean-Luc Godard.

Mr. Soderbergh, who is clearly far more interested in the metaphorical usage of flesh peddling than its impact on real bodies, turns prostitution into an allegory about moviemaking in which the whore is the filmmaker, her clients are the producers and the scum of the earth is — you guessed it — the critic who reviews her work (negatively). He shot the movie in October, which suggests that he still wasn’t over the bad notices he received for “Che” when it played at Cannes last May.



Crude

By Noel Murray
September 10, 2009

For more than a decade, a group of Ecuadorian citizens, backed by American lawyers, have been suing the Chevron corporation for what they see as an environmental catastrophe wrought by Texaco's operations in the Amazon rainforest. The plaintiffs claim that from the '60s to the '90s, Chevron/Texaco dumped 18 billion gallons of oil and toxic waste into a region the size of Rhode Island, poisoning the water and spawning an epidemic of cancer and other illnesses. Chevron counters that it followed a rigorously audited process when it closed up its oil pits, and that the Ecuadorian government granted it a release from all potential lawsuits. As one of Chevron's local lawyers explains, this isn't a case of contamination, but "industrial exploitation permitted by law."

Joe Berlinger's documentary *Crude* isn't like most films about aggrieved, impoverished people rising up against corporate malefactors. Yes, Berlinger serves up enough shocking images of black soil, murky water, and dying children to convince nearly anyone that something's wrong in rural Ecuador, and yes, the multiple Chevron spokespeople whom Berlinger interviews change their stance so much—arguing first that the water is fine in Ecuador, then adding that if it isn't, that's somebody else's fault—that it's hard to consider the corporation a victim. But in keeping with Berlinger's excellent documentaries *Brother's Keeper* and *Paradise Lost*, *Crude* is as concerned with the culture surrounding a legal action as it is in making a case. *Crude* is so crammed with facts and figures that it can be a little dizzying, but what's more important is what Berlinger records between all the talking-head interviews and vérité footage.

Specifically, Berlinger makes *Crude* about the strategies of prosecuting a case like this. While Chevron seeks to keep the media coverage and legal action confined to Ecuador, where they have agreements already in place, the plaintiffs are busy landing their story in *Vanity Fair* (which draws the attention of celebrity environmentalist Trudie Styler), and trotting out charismatic, even-tempered local lawyer Pablo Fajardo. Berlinger doesn't shy away from showing the American lawyers holding a meeting about whether they're going to recoup their investment, and he doesn't ignore the accusation that Ecuador's own, less-deep-pocketed oil industry may be more liable than Chevron. And on repeated occasions, Berlinger shows how the plaintiffs shape the testimony of the people who become the public faces of their case. *Crude* is remarkably clear-eyed in the way it shows how even people on the right side of a cause only succeed if they're willing to play a little dirty.



The Best Documentary Films of 2009

By Jennifer Merin, About.com

The best documentary films of 2009 use a wide range of cinematic techniques and effects -- including infra red cameras, animation and graphics -- to present compelling stories elucidating the pressing issues of our day, including environmental and social issues of global importance. Many are enlightening travelogues that take you to Earth's remote areas to bring home the point that we must be more respectful of our planet and each other. They cry out for social justice, reveal ways in which we can improve our attitudes and behavior. These must-see documentaries of 2009 will last through the ages.

Anvil - The Story of Anvil

Anvil! The Story of Anvil tells the story of Toronto-based musicians Steve 'Lips' Kudlow and Robb Reiner, two humorous guys who've been best friends and played together in Anvil, the heavy metal band, since they were in their teens. Their debut album, Metal On Metal, took the music world by storm, and Anvil was credited with setting the trend that boosted other metal bands--Anthrax, Metallica and Slayer--onto the charts, while poor management decisions pushed Kudlow and Reiner into the background. This is their revival. Great music. Great fun. Film was finished in 2008, released in 2009.

At the Edge of the Earth

On its third Antarctic Campaign, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an international organization dedicated to preserving Earth's oceans, sent two small, ill-equipped ships to the Ross Sea, an internationally designated whale sanctuary, to prevent the Japanese whaling fleet from killing cetaceans on their huge factory ships. There are storms to survive and gripping face-offs with Japanese whalers and -- surprisingly -- Greenpeace.

The Cove

Using infra red cameras to tell a story that reels out like a spy thriller, Richard O'Barry, the animal trainer behind the phenomenal success of the television show Flipper, and animal rights activist Louis Psihoyos recruit an A Team-like crew of filmmakers and environmentalists to expose Taiji, Japan's fishermen's annual dolphin roundup and slaughter of thousands of dolphins.

Crude

The Texaco/Chevron contamination of the Ecuadorian Amazon, dubbed the Amazon Chernobyl, is a much larger although lesser known calamity than that of the Exxon Valdez. Toxic chemicals have turned thousands of square miles of rain forest into a wasteland where nothing will grow, and several tribes of indigenous people have been brought close to extinction, along with the region's unique flora and fauna. Joe Berlinger's film exposes the extent of the damage and follows the 27-billion dollar law suit that the local people and international environmental and humanitarian groups have brought against Chevron.

Earth Days

To explore the fundamental premises and chronicle the advent of Earth Day, our annual celebration of Gaia and whatever ecological awareness we can muster, documentary director Robert Stone has assembled and interviewed a special tribe of the environmental movement's elders -- Stuart Udall, Denis Hayes, Paul Ehrlich, Pete McCloskey and Rusty Schweickart, among other activists, politicians and forecasters -- who give testimony about advances made by

conservationists during the 1960s and '70s, and lead us to an understanding of what happened to bring us to our current situation -- on the brink of environmental disaster.

Food, Inc.

Food, Inc. is an alarming expose of the way food is produced and distributed in the United States. Interviewing investigators, journalists and farmers, filmmaker Robert Kenner shows how almost everything we eat is produced and distributed by a very few huge multinational corporations, such as Monsanto and Tyson, and that quality of nutrition is secondary to production cost and corporate profits.

Good Hair

Chris Rock was genuinely alarmed when his adorable six year old daughter, Lola, was crying because she didn't have 'good hair.' Set into motion by concerns about his little girl's happiness and self-esteem, Rock investigates American's -- and, in particular, African-American women's -- attitudes towards their hair, and the billion dollar industry that thrives on concerns that it's not 'good.'

My Neighbor My Killer

The 1994 genocide of Tutsis by Hutus left Rwanda physically and psychically bereft and unable to function. The Gacaca Law mandated Tutsis and Hutus to reconcile -- to forgive and move on with the rebuilding of the nation. Anne Aghion spent more than nine years chronicling the peace process to produce this brilliant documentary that brings us to a new level of understanding about the human capacity for creating mutuality.

Unmistaken Child

Filmmaker Nati Baratz's Unmistaken Child follows a Tibetan Buddhist monk on his journey to remote mountain villages, where he seeks to identify the child who is the reincarnation of his recently deceased Lama. The film provides a rare, intimate and very moving look at the processes and rituals observed by Tibetan Buddhists as they carry on the ancient rites of their religion. The film was completed in 2008, released in 2009.

HITFIX

Sundance Reviews: 'Crude'

By Daniel Fienberg

Friday, Jan 23, 2009

Directed by Joe Berlinger, "Crude" is such a classic David vs. Goliath story that you'd swear it was written by a well-meaning liberal screenwriter. It's "A Civil Action: Ecuadorian Edition," with an underdog native lawyer and his brash American counterpart fighting an underdog battle against Chevron, alleging that the oil giant polluted a wide swatch of the Ecuadorian Amazon, destroying the environment and leading to countless deaths. The plaintiffs may have the facts on their side, but the defendants are backed by the wealth of petro-colonialism, but in the Wild West of Ecuador's judicial system anything can happen.

It's a splendid story complete with murder, corruption and political intervention from the highest level. If some studio hasn't already snagged the narrative rights to either "Crude" or the Vanity Fair article on the same subject, I'd do that immediately. Cast Benicio Del Toro as attorney Pablo Fajardo, who worked in the oil field and would eventually lead 30,000 indigenous Ecuadorians in a class action suit against one of the world's wealthiest corporations. Cast George Clooney as master manipulator Steve Donziger. Hire a director gifted in political thrillers -- Fernando Meirelles would be an obvious choice. I smell Oscar bait.

Berlinger's approach is mostly to let the story move forward as the case moves forward. He obviously admires Fajardo without reservation, but he has an eyebrow at least partially raised at Donziger's showmanship. Berlinger never pushes too hard to force the plaintiffs to defend their case and Chevron Chief Environmental Scientist Sara McMillan goes into far more scientific detail (sometimes specious) than anybody on the side of the plaintiffs. Berlinger's approach is quite even-handed and it's impossible not to admire the craft exhibited Chevron's attorneys, especially Adolfo Callejas, who may be working on the side of evil, but he's doing it spectacularly well. Of course, the plaintiffs dominate the human interest side of the story and Berlinger is all for letting the camera linger on a man crying about the death of his children or on a young girl stricken with cancer. Fair and balanced though it may be, "Crude" won't leave many viewers feeling sorry for Chevron.

MOVIE MAKER

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MAKING MOVIES

Joe Berlinger Gets *Crude*

Why we film: Bringing the story of Crude to the world

by Joe Berlinger & Michael Bonfiglio

09.08.2009

We've certainly had cushier assignments. Bouncing along an unpaved Amazon road on the back of a bald-tired pick-up truck in blazing 120-degree heat can lead to reflection on how you wound up in your current situation. Making documentaries, we have filmed all over the world under a variety of conditions. Some places—Maui, Copenhagen, Vienna—have been beautiful and sometimes even luxurious. Others not so much, like this part of the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador. Once a pristine Eden, today this place bears numerous scars and open wounds, both literal and figurative, left by 40 years of oil extraction.

"Let's make the next film be about the Paris Opera House or something," we joke, as we pass a sun-warmed flask of rum around the back of the truck in an attempt to dispatch our splitting headaches. For the past eight or 10 hours we've been breathing noxious petroleum fumes while filming at some of the oil pollution sites that contaminate 1,700 square miles of the rainforest here. The physical effects of even very short-term exposure to the pollution are palpable and unpleasant.

Crude, the film we are shooting, tells the story of the largest environmental lawsuit on the planet. 30,000 indigenous people and poverty-stricken campesinos (peasant farmers) are suing Chevron for \$27 billion, claiming that Texaco—which was purchased by Chevron in 2001—destroyed their rainforest home and created a "cancer death zone" the size of Rhode Island in one of the most bio-diverse ecosystems on Earth. Known as the "Amazon Chernobyl" case, the suit has been going on since a year after Texaco left the country in 1992, when the local people charged that the American oil company used outdated technology and irresponsible practices in order to save money on their operations in a place they knew no one was paying any attention. We spent three years documenting the case, during the most exciting and dramatic period of what has now stretched to 17 years of epic conflict.

All day and over the course of the past two years, we've heard stories from indigenous people about the health problems they and their families say they face on a daily basis. They've told us about losing their land, their culture, their loved ones and their dignity. Village elders have described this place as a former paradise, before the fish, animals and plants that allowed them to live in harmony with nature were destroyed by oil production. The voices and faces of these people echo in our minds as the breeze on the back of the moving pick-up cools the sweat that seeps through our layers of DEET-soaked jungle clothing, providing a respite from the extreme equatorial heat and the mosquitoes that the CDC label as carriers of malaria.

More than 40 years ago, Texaco began exploring for oil here. Back then, the company made a deal with Ecuador's government, and the first place they struck black gold was underneath territory that belonged to the Cofán indigenous group. "A tremendous noise came from the sky," says Cofán leader Emergildo Criollo, remembering the sound of Texaco's helicopters descending on his village. "We wondered, 'What kind of animal is this?'" He laughs, with more bemusement than bitterness, at his own naïveté. Emergildo was just a boy when Texaco arrived, but his recollections of that first contact are vivid. His stories have the same combination of confusion, indignation and sad resignation as those of the Iraqi civilians we saw while watching CNN International back in Quito just a few days before arriving in the jungle. Later, Criollo tells us that two of his sons died from the effects of oil contamination.

To the Cofán and a number of other indigenous groups in Ecuador, Texaco's arrival was both an attack and an occupation. The native people tell us about their ancestral territories being invaded first by missionaries, then by heavy machinery, explosives, bulldozers, drills, riggers, strange white men and other people from various parts of Ecuador, who came here in search of work. The fertile land once named in the Cofán language of A'ingae was re-christened "Lago Agrio," meaning "Sour Lake," after Sour Lake, Texas—birthplace of the Texaco Petroleum Company.

The villagers recount stories of beatings, humiliation and even murders of indigenous people at the hands of the oil workers. Some of the female elders speak of being raped, and one woman tells us she became a prostitute after being violated, abandoning her community in shame for several years.

The heartbreaking story of indigenous people in this region of Ecuador is not a new one. The treatment of native people in both of the Americas by the "white man" is one of the most shameful chapters in human history. Back home we tend to think that similar atrocities in our own country occurred so long ago that they have lost any real significance. Although this legacy is a

continuing thread in our ongoing American narrative and its effects still reverberate powerfully, we pretend it doesn't matter because it happened so long ago.

But the late 20th-century equivalent of the Trail of Tears, Wounded Knee and countless other crimes of and against humanity are the kinds of industrial practices that have occurred in places like the Ecuadorean Amazon, whether "legal" or not. Working in concert with local governments, private corporations have destroyed the lives and cultures of native people and the environments they thrived in as caretakers and stewards for generations. As in previous eras, the conquest of native lands continues to be rooted in claiming and conquering territory. But in recent years, the invaders have focused primarily on commoditizing natural resources so that people like us can have the cheap gasoline and petroleum products we've grown used to demanding.

In response to the charges of cultural genocide, murder and other abuses the indigenous people have leveled against his company, Chevron spokesperson James Craig recently told the LA Times, "Where are the evidence and witnesses? Where were the police? If you're going to make these types of accusations, you should back them up with something."

While some may view Mr. Craig's statements as callous evasions by a corporate mouthpiece, they also perfectly illustrate a disconnection that lies at the heart of the conflict portrayed in *Crude*. While Chevron's detractors accuse the oil giant of hiding behind impossibly unrealistic and improvable technicalities, in adhering to contemporary legal standards Craig makes a fair point. Without specific standards and concrete evidence, anyone can be accused of any type wrongdoing regardless of whether the claims have any merit. Lawyers for the plaintiffs say they can prove Chevron's legal responsibility when it comes to the pollution, but Chevron claims the opposite. In its PR campaign to win hearts and minds in this case, the fifth largest corporation in the world portrays itself as the victim of a shakedown by a group of "environmental con men."

While it is clear to us where the moral responsibility lies for the irreparable damage to native cultures and human life, it is up to a judge to decide who will win the legal case. We are moviemakers, not lawyers, and *Crude* attempts to tell both sides of the story and allow audiences to make up their own minds about the lawsuit. But while we can't say which side is correct from a legal standpoint, Craig's comments make us wonder whether he has ever actually been to this place.

After a couple of hours in the back of the pick-up, we pull up to our "hotel" on the outskirts of the town of Shushufindi. Not far from the Colombian border, this area is a known "R&R" destination for members of the FARC paramilitary group (the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas). It's a sketchy locale that feels a bit like the Wild West. Given the current state of law and order here—the town of approximately 15,000 clocks roughly 10 murders per week, most of them unsolved—one can only imagine the level of lawlessness that must have existed here 40 even 10 years ago. Although the hotel we've chosen is the most expensive in town and we're on a tight budget (it costs a few dollars more per night than the others in the area, but the price includes an in-room fan!), the peace of mind provided by the walled-in compound of bungalows guarded by a guy with a machine gun seems worth the extra dough.

Exhausted from our long days of shooting and travel, we retire to the hotel's makeshift patio restaurant. The only guests here appear to be our small crew, but before we're able to order a second cold beer the waitress asks us to leave. In an apologetic tone, she explains that someone was shot and killed right in front of the hotel last night, and she and the other employees need to get home before it gets too dark and too dangerous to walk outside. 'Of course,' we say. 'Do you know why they shot him?' The waitress replies with a shrug. "Because he had a watch."

With the safety of the hotel staff and ourselves, as well as the thousands of dollars worth of filming equipment sitting in our rickety bungalows now at the forefront of our minds, we call it a night.

As the sun dips below the jungle canopy, it's easy to appreciate all that has been lost in this part of the Amazon. Squinting toward the empty spaces between the gas flares that spew toxic filth into the air, one can imagine how this place—one of the only locations on Earth to survive the last ice age—must have looked before it was decimated in pursuit of economic "progress." In a couple of days we'll be on a plane home to New York. Tonight we'll try to sleep, with the week's footage tucked under our pillows, knowing that a few weeks from now we'll be back here again.

We have certainly had easier assignments, but in shedding light on a story that has been swept under the rug for decades, we remember why we got into this business in the first place.

Joe Berlinger (Brother's Keeper, Paradise Lost, Metallica: Some Kind of Monster) is the producer and director of *Crude*. Michael Bonfiglio is the film's producer and 2nd unit director.



Crude

By Fernando F. Croce

Posted: September 8, 2009

At the center of Joe Berlinger's *Crude* are distressing images of Ecuador's Amazonian soil and water turned sludgy and toxic from foreign oil drilling. Concisely and infuriatingly illustrating the link between ecological devastation and corporate colonialism, these scabrous views of rainforest-turned-waste-pits are the starting point for the veteran documentarian's tough-minded chronicle of a court case that has spun decades and showcased the most viscous effects of conglomerate interest. The protracted tug of war depicted is between Ecuadorean activists (led by lawyer Pablo Fajardo and environmentalist Luis Yanza) and Chevron over the contaminating effects of the oil company's maneuvers on the land. Despite 30,000 indigenous people acting as plaintiffs and Chevron's own estimation of 17 million gallons of spilled petrol, the class action lawsuit endures endless delays, judicial labyrinths, and prevaricating officials.

Following a still-unresolved case over the course of three years, Berlinger gives voice to both sides of the conflict. As personal accounts of birth defects and cancerous deaths contrast with Chevron spokespersons denying effects and passing blame, however, the outraged compassion in the filmmaker's reportage becomes evident. A polished and haunting work of humanistic journalism, the film is passionate enough to follow its subjects in the ground-level combat of street demonstrations and office showdowns, and astute enough to understand the important roles a *Vanity Fair* article or a Trudie Styler endorsement can play in a cause. *Crude* is both a tribute to human-rights tenacity and a sobering account of the multinational-Moloch greed that can keep justice in limbo.

Will Ecuador's Indians bankrupt Chevron?

Documentarian Joe Berlinger on the amazing Amazon pollution case in "Crude" -- and its link to the West Memphis 3

Interview by Andrew O'Hehir
Sep. 10, 2009



salon.com

Joe Berlinger is such a tireless talker -- a spinner of anecdotes and theories, and alternately an ardent defender and harsh critic of his own work -- that I should let him explain "Crude" in his own words. Briefly, though, this new documentary from the co-director of "Paradise Lost," "Brother's Keeper" and "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster" explores the epic-scale, endlessly complicated story of one of the largest lawsuits in history. It's the suit in which the indigenous inhabitants of Ecuador's Amazonian jungle are on the verge of winning a massive judgment from Chevron -- a court-appointed expert has suggested \$27 billion -- for the poisoning of their homeland, previously among the most pristine and biodiverse rain forest regions on the planet.

"Crude" sometimes seems like improbable fiction, a story co-authored by Charles Dickens and Che Guevara in which a former oilfield worker named Pablo Fajardo, who still lives in the two-room house where he grew up, is now the plaintiffs' lead attorney, threatening to bring the world's fifth-largest corporation to its knees. One of the story's many oddities is that Chevron was never involved in Ecuadoran oil exploration, or in the alleged systematic and deliberate discharge of oil sludge and contaminated water that has sometimes been called the "Amazon Chernobyl." But when Chevron acquired Texaco in 2001, it also took on that company's assets and liabilities, and now must defend itself in a case that has had many unexpected twists and turns.

After lawyers for the 30,000 or so Ecuadoran plaintiffs filed suit in the United States, Chevron fought for years to have jurisdiction returned to Ecuador, probably assuming that that country's traditional pro-business oligarchy would make the whole thing go away. Sometimes you need to be careful what you wish for: Now Ecuador has a left-leaning president, Rafael Correa, who is allied with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and openly sympathetic to the anti-Chevron case. As Berlinger's camera captures, the trial was largely conducted outdoors, on the site of the alleged contamination, with soil samples taken in public with the cameras rolling. Chevron's attorneys respond with various contradictory claims: That sludge in the ground isn't dangerous; it isn't ours; it wasn't taken from the right place; people shouldn't be living here anyway.

Over the course of four years in diverse and difficult conditions, Berlinger captures Fajardo and his American consultant, Steven Donziger, as they travel from Ecuador to New York to Houston and back. He meets residents and nurses in the Cofan indigenous community who discuss the cancer clusters and epidemic skin diseases found in the area around the contaminated waterways. He follows Trudie Styler, the jet-set fashion-plate spouse of Sting, as she tours the region and renders it an international cause célèbre. At the last minute, just as Berlinger was preparing the film for Sundance this year, he was granted interviews with a senior Chevron scientist and a corporate counsel, who assured him that A) everything is fine in the affected region, and B) we're off the hook, legally speaking, even if it isn't.

Berlinger is a leading practitioner of the *cinéma-vérité* method, which avoids voice-over narration or other devices aimed at directing the reader toward a specific conclusion. This is somewhat unusual in a film that seems so clearly a work of advocacy, but as he explained during a phone call that was scheduled for 15 minutes and stretched to 45, his job is to convince the uncommitted viewer that what Texaco did in the Amazon was an immense moral crime -- not to create agitprop on behalf of the plaintiffs in a specific lawsuit. First, here's the official trailer for "Crude":

Joe, I was thinking that the *vérité* method must have posed a special challenge in this case. You're not in the business of telling the audience who is right and who is wrong, and that comes with certain advantages and certain disadvantages for a storyteller.

Definitely. I don't believe in voice-over narration, but voice-over narration helps you speed the story along and gets you through difficult moments you may not have coverage on. This film was one of the hardest editing challenges I've ever faced, because there's a complicated 13-year history behind this lawsuit, which you have to dole out to the audience so they understand the context. Then you can get to the present-tense story.

I think my point of view is all over this film. This film has been criticized at film festivals by more activist-oriented folks, who think I've given Chevron too much screen time and think that I need to have a clearer point of view. But I have a certain view of how to engage an audience. I'm a pretty active television producer and executive producer, and I see a lot of environmental and human-rights films that have this style of banging a singular message over somebody's head. That's a very different theatrical experience from engaging the audience to be a judge or a juror, to weigh the pros and cons of all the issues.

I think it makes a more persuasive film, and, ironically, a more effective advocacy film, if you allow people to arrive at a point of view on their own. When you whitewash certain troubling aspects of a situation because you think, oh, it takes away from the main point of view that Chevron is evil -- that makes the film less honest and less interesting and less real. You end up just preaching to the converted, when the mission ought to be to bring people who aren't sure about what they think into your camp. A non-narrated approach, a warts-and-all portrait of all sides, is to my mind a more persuasive moviegoing experience.

Right. I mean, just in terms of the lawsuit, I didn't come out of this film absolutely sure who was going to win, or who should win. The issue of liability seems immensely complicated, and I'm not sure if anybody really understands it.

People have said to me, "You give Chevron too much airtime. You don't seem utterly convinced that they should lose the lawsuit." Well, I'm not utterly convinced that they should lose the lawsuit, because I'm coming at it from a different perspective. Specifically, I'm not smart enough or well enough equipped -- I'm not a judge or a scientist, and I haven't read the 100,000 pages in binders in that judge's office. I can't tell you whether Chevron has wrapped itself up in enough legalese to prevail in that lawsuit. But I can tell you that some things are larger than the lawsuit, and that the moral responsibility lies at their door. You don't go into somebody's backyard and treat it the way they treated it. I don't care about the legality. Manifest destiny was a legal philosophy that justified all sorts of terrible acts in this country. The Nuremberg racial laws made discrimination against Jews legal in Germany. So I can't tell you whether Chevron should win or lose in this lawsuit, but I don't think they have morality on their side.

The film to me is not about the lawsuit. After having spent almost four years on this situation, I see a certain inadequacy to the legal structures in place to deal with these human rights and environmental crises. It has taken 17 years to get to this point, and it will probably take another 10 or 15 years for the whole thing to be appealed and counter-appealed and worked out, and then God knows how long before payment is made. That's just too long. Generation after generation are suffering. While this legal proceeding goes on, people are dying and generations are being affected.

So I'm comfortable showing both sides of the lawsuit, to show how messy it is and how long it takes. Also, I think truth rises to the top. No matter how much corporate-speak legalese they wrap themselves up in, the ultimate message of the film is that for 600 years white people have treated indigenous people abysmally. It's a part of our history we really don't grapple with. I mean, at some level we know, in the back of our heads, that that Jack in the Box over there used to be a Cherokee village, and we moved these people out of sight.

Here was the big epiphany for me in making this movie -- it seemed like that was something that happened in the distant past, but the reality is that multinational corporations of the late 20th century, particularly in the extractive industries, are just the modern-day continuation of this shameful treatment of indigenous people. The Chevron lawyer in the film says, "People shouldn't be living here. This is an industrial zone." No, sorry. People have been living here for millennia. So I think this is an advocacy film. It's an advocacy film on behalf of indigenous people who were fucked over by Catholic missionaries, and then by their own governments, and then by the oil companies.

On one side you have this enormous oil company, and on the other side you have this former oilfield worker just out of law school, and they're fighting it out in the legal system of a country that, let's face it, has a long record of cronyism and corruption. It doesn't seem like a fair fight.

Chevron fought for years to get the case moved to Ecuador, and I don't think they ever imagined it would go to trial. At the time Ecuador was run by a military junta that was very pro-business, run by the Spanish-descended oligarchy. It was a very comfortable and cozy relationship: extracting minerals and fucking over the indigenous population. I don't think they counted on a couple of things that have taken place that happened that, luckily for me, were very cinematic. One of them was the emergence of this local populist hero, Pablo Fajardo. A local oilfield worker, impoverished but horrified by the humiliation of the workers and the environmental degradation, pulls himself up by the bootstraps and gets educated, gets a law degree, and his very first

legal case – which gains traction and results in at least a moral victory -- is against the fifth-largest company in the world. You simply couldn't make that up.

Chevron also didn't count on the emergence of a global environmental movement and the rise of mistrust of large corporations and their way of doing business, of pursuing profit at all costs. Then there was the change of regime in Ecuador, the election of Rafael Correa, who gets a bad rap in this country as a left-wing, anti-corporate protégé of Hugo Chávez. And a lot of that is accurate, to be fair. But he's the first president to visit the region, the first one to have some sympathy for the indigenous people and the first one to eschew cozy relationships with the extractive industries. Ecuador actually passed certain constitutional rights for flora and fauna last year, as a demonstration of their new commitment to the environment. Correa is having mixed results, but instead of extracting the oil, he wants to sell the oil rights to people who will keep it in the ground.

There are a lot of fascinating characters in the film, but I was really interested in Sara McMillan, the environmental scientist Chevron supplied to you at the last minute. She says everything is fine in Ecuador, there's no problem, if people are getting sick it's not our fault. She's very reassuring and comes off as really sincere. If she's lying, she's doing an extraordinarily good job of it.

She does come across as sincere, and I think she is. That's one of the deeper and more troubling aspects of those interviews. I think she believes every word coming out of her mouth. She's been down there, but she's drunk the Kool-Aid.

It reminds me of our earlier film, "Paradise Lost" [about the dubious conviction of the "West Memphis 3" on murder charges], when co-director Bruce Sinofsky and I were so flabbergasted at what was going down that we'd pull the judge aside, or the prosecutor, and ask them, "Are you guys kidding?" It became very clear that the judge, the prosecutor and the chief inspector had utterly convinced themselves of the righteousness of their mission and the evilness of Damien Echols [accused of masterminding the killings]. It's not that they were covering something up. It's more difficult to change that mind-set than it is to expose a coverup.

It's the same thing with this woman from Chevron. I believe she believes every word that comes out of her mouth. That to me is scary, and it's a signal of institutional denial. We're not talking about bad individuals, we're talking about an institution with no regard for indigenous people.

Another ambiguous area in "Crude" is the presence of Trudie Styler, Sting's wife. On one hand, she's clearly done a lot for the Amazonian people, and has raised the international profile of the case tremendously. On the other hand, you've got the bogus architecture of celebrity, and this beautiful, well-mannered English lady showing up in an outfit that cost more than every physical object in the Cofán village, all put together.

Absolutely. I have tremendous regard for Trudie and Sting. The only tangible benefit these people have received in 17 years of outside involvement are the water-filtration systems Trudie brought to the region. She and Sting have been talking about the rain forest and the rights of indigenous people for many years, long before celebrity drive-by cause-embracing had become favorable.

But the film is observing and commenting upon that uncomfortable intersection between celebrity culture and social activism. It is a shame that only when the wife of a rich and famous rock star comes to town, this case gets kicked up a notch. There are many places around the world that don't have a film and don't have a rock star or a celebrity to help them.

To go back to "Paradise Lost," Damien Echols is alive today -- and I don't say this arrogantly -- because the film produced a great outpouring of support from people like Eddie Vedder, Johnny Depp and Norman Lear. There were a tremendous amount of people who saw that movie and joined an international movement. The film came out at just the right time, just when the Internet was becoming a communication device in a big way. Lots of money has been raised, and if it hadn't been for that outpouring of support, Damien might not be alive today. I don't think the state of Arkansas has the balls to inject the guy, because of all the international attention and celebrity involvement.

I bring that up because that's an example of a guy being lucky, because a film was made. I can't tell you how many letters I've gotten over the years from wives or mothers or girlfriends of people on death row who claim they're innocent. Of course, not everybody is innocent, I'm not that naive. But those people don't have a film or a celebrity, and it's the same thing with these human-rights cases and pollution cases. This is just one part of the world that's been ravaged by the oil industry. They happen to have a celebrity involved and a film being made. The film is definitely a comment on that -- not just on Trudie's involvement but the film's involvement. It's a shame that that's what it takes to move the needle.

THE LANCET

Something in the water?

By Talha Khan Burki April 11, 2009 Volume 373, Issue 9671



In 1993, 30 000 Ecuadorians filed a class-action suit against Texaco, alleging that the oil giant's activities in the Amazon had spilled contaminated water over vast swathes of the rainforest. This part of the rainforest was no longer habitable, the plaintiffs said: the rivers had been poisoned. Indigenous tribes, such as the Cofan and Secoya, joined the lawsuit, which was inherited by Chevron when they merged with Texaco in 2001.

The defendants countered that the lawsuit was spearheaded by a “group of conmen”. Texaco was invited into Ecuador by the Government, they pointed out; and after the company handed over operations to PetroEcuador in 1992, they did a thorough environmental remediation approved by the Ecuadorian Government. The case still continues.

Joe Berlinger's enthralling *Crude* tells the story of the long-running lawsuit. Although he follows events from the perspective of the Ecuadorians, Berlinger maintains a refreshing and clear-sighted intellectual honesty: Chevron's representatives are allowed plenty of space to make their arguments.

Key to the plaintiff's claim is the notion that Texaco directed production water and toxic waste into the regions' waterways. One participant explains how two of his children died, apparently poisoned, within 24 h of drinking from the same river. Later, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa visits the area; he remarks on how the groundwater carries the odour of gasoline.

Cancer rates have increased, particularly among those in their late teens, say the plaintiffs; a claim that Chevron flatly denies. Maria Garafola and her daughter both have cancer. Maria says her daughter, who has liver cancer, must travel 18 h to reach the hospital: “she arrives in worse shape than before”. It costs US\$500 per treatment. “Mother, father and children have to work to afford cancer treatment”, adds Maria.

This case is, the film acknowledges, a knotty issue. The Ecuadorian authorities handed over the territory knowing thousands of tribes-people would face enormous disruption. Chevron's representatives note that many of the health issues could be attributed to poor sanitation, and that PetroEcuador has been responsible for oil exploration for almost 20 years. But perhaps the most telling remark is that of Chevron's Managing Counsel: “this is industrial exploitation permitted by law, not contamination” he says confidently, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the one need not preclude the other.



Joe Berlinger, “Crude”: Returning To One’s Artistic Roots

EDITORS NOTE: This is part of a series of interviews, conducted via email, profiling dramatic and documentary competition and American Spectrum directors who have films screening at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival.

Filmmaker Joe Berlinger’s latest documentary picks up the thread of the infamous “Amazon Chernobyl” case, a 13-year-old battle between communities nearly destroyed by oil drilling and development and one of the biggest companies on earth. In a sophisticated take on the classic David and Goliath story, Berlinger took three years to craft a cinema verite portrait centering on the charismatic lawyers in the U.S. and Ecuador who have doggedly pursued the case against all of the forces a corporation can bring into courts of law.

Crude Documentary Competition Director: Joe Berlinger Producers: Joe Berlinger, Michael Bonfiglio, J.R. DeLeon, Richard Stratton Editor: Alyse Ardell Spiegel U.S.A., 2009, 100 min., color

Please introduce yourself..I am Joe Berlinger... once a young filmmaker, but now firmly rooted in middle age. I have been a working filmmaker for 20 years. In addition to making feature length films every few years (“Brother’s Keeper”, “Paradise Lost”, “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster”), I have a fulfilling career as a nonfiction television director and producer, and TV commercial director. I also occasionally executive produce films for first-time filmmakers whose stories I believe in. How did you learn the “craft” of filmmaking? I began my career in 1983 in advertising, working in the Frankfurt (Germany) office of Ogilvy & Mather (because I spoke German), a big New York based multinational ad agency. After getting transferred back to New York City in 1985, I hired the Maysles Brothers (“Gimme Shelter”, “Grey Gardens”) to shoot an American Express commercial that I was producing. David Maysles (who died in 1987) and I hit it off, and he invited me to work at their company to develop their TV commercial business, which I did for 5 years, using my time there as a working film school. At Maysles, I met Bruce Sinofsky, who was an editor there for commercials. Together, we went off and made “Brother’s Keeper” using 10 credit cards and second mortgages on our homes. Ultimately, it had a happy ending—the film won the Audience Award at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival.

How or what prompted the idea for your film and how did it evolve? I met the plaintiffs’ consulting attorney Steven Donziger (who is one of the central characters in “Crude”) in the Fall of 2005, through Richard Stratton. Richard is a screenwriter I’d known for a while through our mutual friend, the late Eddie Bunker. Steven told me about the case and it sounded interesting, so I went down to Ecuador to check it out. When I saw the devastation in the Amazon and heard stories from the local people, I was shocked, disturbed and profoundly moved. Plus, it seemed like a huge story that at the time no one was really paying any attention to. Although I’m always on the lookout for stories as potential film subjects, I didn’t immediately see this as a feature documentary. Despite being deeply affected by what I saw in Ecuador, it didn’t strike me that it would translate into something other than a news story or some kind of one-sided environmental expose, neither of which interested me. But I did feel like I wanted to help these people in some way. I was haunted by images of the people I saw in the Amazon, suffering from disease, eating canned tuna because the fish are gone from the once-pristine river in a place that used to be a paradise. This location, after all, was once of the few places on earth that survived the last ice age, yet it is struggling to survive industrial development.

Please elaborate a bit on your approach to making the film...“Crude” was a conscious attempt to return to my roots making “Brother’s Keeper” almost 20 years ago (made with my frequent collaborator Bruce Sinofsky). As we did back then, I just dove into a subject that I wanted to film without worrying about how we were going to pay for it or who was

going to show it. (“Crude” didn’t get funded until we’d been shooting for nearly a year). The last few years of my career have been marked by bigger budget projects like “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster” and several high-profile TV series, including Iconoclasts on the Sundance Channel. I felt I was drifting from that internal fire that excites me to make a film for the love of the process and the desire to tell a certain story for a big-screen audience. It was also a return to a kind of handmade, DIY filmmaking for me, largely because of the massive scope of this story and the kinds of locations we were shooting in made it something of a guerilla effort.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in developing the project? I’ve shot in a number of different countries for many different film and television projects, including four seasons of Iconoclasts on the Sundance Channel, which has taken me to a number of far-flung locations, but this was the first time I made an entire feature with so much time spent shooting in a foreign country. I made an hour-long doc a few years ago called “Gray Matter”, which we shot in Austria, but there’s no real comparison between the two experiences. “Crude” was a pretty complicated production, and working in the Amazon was exhilarating but also extremely challenging. Aside from the language, the jungle heat was fairly intense, and the conditions overall were far from cushy. There’s a big difference between touring Europe with Metallica, filming on Richard Branson’s private island, or surfing in Maui with Eddie Vedder for Iconoclasts and this project, where we stayed in sparse accommodations in some fairly dangerous towns with a skeleton crew.

What are some of your favorite films? I am a huge fan of earlier cinema-verite classics like “Salesman”, “Grey Gardens”, “Gimme Shelter”, “Titicut Follies”. My other creative influence is the photography galleries at MOMA and ICP.

How do you define success as a filmmaker, and what are your personal goals as a filmmaker? At different times in my career, I have defined success in different ways. For “Crude”, just getting it completed and exposed to people at Sundance is more than I could have hoped for. At this point in my career, I define success as being able to make a living exploring worlds that interest me and/or bringing sorely needed attention to a just cause.

What are your future projects? Two music documentaries, one on B.B. King and one about the Grateful Dead, are being discussed; a possible IMAX film about Russia is also in the works. I am also developing two feature narrative projects, “Education of a Felon” about cult crime writer Edward Bunker and “Facing the Wind”, a true story about a guy who kills his entire family and then start life all over again. It based on the nonfiction book of the same name by Julie Salamon. I hope we will be embarking on Season 5 of Iconoclasts for the Sundance Channel as well.

Sundance. "Crude" Thursday, January 29, 2009

"**Crude**" is "a remarkable documentary about the decade-and-a-half-long, multibillion-dollar class action lawsuit filed by indigenous Ecuadorian villagers against the Chevron oil company alleging toxic pollution of the local soil and water supply," writes *LA Weekly's* **Scott Foundas**. "At one point in [Joe] **Berlinger's** film, longtime Amazon Rainforest advocate (and wife of **Sting**) **Trudie Styler** develops an interest in the case, and her involvement leads directly to a flurry of increased US media attention (including a *Vanity Fair* **profile** of charismatic Ecuadorian prosecutor **Pablo Fajardo**)." "Crude" is also "the most urgent film I've seen at Sundance this year."

"Among other things, the movie makes clear that while it's easy to laugh at celebrity do-gooders, they have access to real power unavailable to the merely mortal," notes **Manohla Dargis** in the *New York Times*, where **John Anderson** recently reported on "Crude" and another doc that *didn't* make it to Sundance, **Sandy Cioffi's** "**Sweet Crude**."

"'Crude' is such a classic David vs Goliath story that you'd swear it was written by a well-meaning liberal screenwriter," writes **Daniel Fienberg** at *Hitfix*. "It's a splendid story complete with murder, corruption and political intervention from the highest level. If some studio hasn't already snagged the narrative rights to either 'Crude' or the *Vanity Fair* article on the same subject, I'd do that immediately. Cast **Benicio Del Toro** as attorney Pablo Fajardo, who worked in the oil field and would eventually lead 30,000 indigenous Ecuadorians in a class action suit against one of the world's wealthiest corporations. Cast **George Clooney** as master manipulator **Steve Donziger**. Hire a director gifted in political thrillers - **Fernando Meirelles** would be an obvious choice. I smell Oscar bait."

"Colorful personalities on both sides, incriminating new/archival footage, slick assembly and Berlinger's narrative smarts make this unusually involving edutainment," concurs **Dennis Harvey** in *Variety*.

Andy Lauer reports on the premiere screening for *indieWIRE*, also featuring an **interview** with Berlinger.

Berlinger answers *Filmmaker's* query as to how the story was "shaped by the social, technological and economic forces affecting cinema today." Online viewing tip. **Cara Mertes** introduces the Sundance Channel's "Meet the Filmmaker" segment.

SOAKING UP SUNDANCE

By **DADE HAYES** PARK CITY, Utah

Doc parties, often lethal at sea level, took centerstage on the Sundance party circuit. **Mike Tyson** tossed off some casual vulgarities at **James Toback's** "Tyson" bash Saturday at the Bon Appetit Supper Club. "I told James it might be a foreign movie because of the language I'd be using," he said.

Sunday's party for oil doc "Crude" had eco-warriors **Pierce Brosnan**, **Sting** and **Trudie Styler** staying until the wee hours.

Over in Salt Lake City, Friday's opening gala feted "The September Issue," director **R.J. Cutler's** portrait of **Vogue's Anna Wintour**.

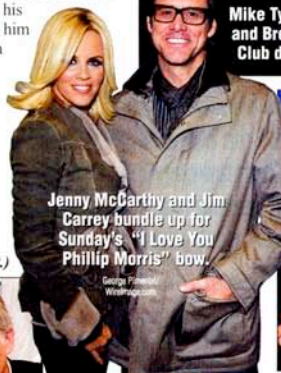
Also tubthumping docs was **Ben Affleck**, exec producer of "Reporter," who said his time in the media glare has given him "a real yearning to see journalism work in its best light."

It wasn't all nonfiction, of course. **Mariah Carey** hit the town for "Push," NFL star **Terrell Owens** caught an ESPN football viewing party at Harry O's and IndieWire's Queer Lounge reception attracted fest founder **Robert Redford**.

(*Addie Morfoot and Sharon Swart contributed to this report.*)



Mike Tyson with helpers **James Toback** and **Brett Ratner** at the Bon Appetit Supper Club dinner for pic "Tyson"



Jenny McCarthy and **Jim Carrey** bundle up for Sunday's "I Love You Phillip Morris" bow.



Honoree **Ewan McGregor** at the Ray-Ban Visionary Award ceremony



Tea Leoni and **Billy Bob Thornton** at the Celebration of Music in Film event



Nia Long and **Chris Rock** at Sunday's bow of "Good Hair" at the Temple Theater



Sam Rockwell and **Kevin Bacon** at the preem for doc "Crude"



John Krasinski and **Amy Poehler** in Park City



Sundance Film Fest founder **Robert Redford** is flanked by **Demi Moore** and **Ashton Kutcher** at Saturday's "Spread" soiree.

Fest director **Geoffrey Gilmore**, thespis **Zoey Deschanel** and **Joseph Gordon-Levitt** and Fox Searchlight's **Peter Rice** at the "500 Days of Summer" premiere



Virginia Madsen hits the snow at the "Paper Heart" after-party during the Sundance Film Festival.



Above: **Susan Sarandon** and **Pierce Brosnan** at "The Greatest" preem; left: **Andie MacDowell** at the Wii Experience at the Island Def Jam House

On Variety's watch

PARK CITY, Utah — *Variety* changed the format and venue for its annual 10 Directors to Watch event Sunday, making it a panel, moderated by Sundance vet **Mark Waters**, followed by a party at the Shop that was so jam-packed, it was shut down by Park City fire marshals.

Directors **Adam Elliot** ("Mary and Max"), **Emily Abt** ("Toe to Toe"), **Cherien Dabis** ("Amreeka"), **Shana Feste** ("The Greatest"), **Bohdan Slama** ("The Country Teacher"), **Antonio Campos** ("Afterschool") and **Marc Webb** ("500 Days of Summer") shared at the panel discussion the highs and lows of launching their careers.

Abt said she put her crew in lacrosse uniforms and even put herself on the field to get one shot for her film after her players were sent home. Dabis discussed using her own discrimination experiences as an Arab to inform "Amreeka."

— Anne Thompson



Above: **Helmers Marc Webb** and **Antonio Campos**; left: **Bohdan Slama** and **Adam Elliot** at *Variety's* 10 Directors to Watch bash at the Shop



"Toe to Toe" helmer **Emily Abt**



Shana Feste talks up "The Greatest" during the panel discussion.



Sundance goes green as environment takes spotlight

By James Nelson Fri Jan 16, 2009

PARK CITY, Utah (AFP) - Environmental movies with a message are taking center stage at the 25th Sundance Film Festival, with films ranging from vanishing bees and threatened dolphins being screened here. "We are ravaging the earth. We need to think how we treat our resources but more importantly how we treat the people," said director Joe Berlinger in an interview with AFP.

Berlinger's latest documentary "Crude" in the US Documentary Competition is the riveting story of five Ecuadoran tribes as they seek justice from oil giant Chevron. "We as a society fill our gas tanks but don't think where these products come from. It's our moral responsibility to know. I hope that's what people get out of this film," Berlinger said.

Berlinger deftly introduces the tribes and their way of life deep in the jungle rainforests of the Amazon. Gradually the "paradise" quiet jungle life is revealed to have been poisoned decades earlier by oil producers. Waste pits from oil production are visited by both legal teams as charges and counter charges are leveled. The inspections, delays, arguments and legal wrangling are coupled with endless frustration.

"It's a great David and Goliath story," Berlinger said, adding, "It will be decades before this is decided. In the meantime the people will suffer. It's a shameful chapter in our history."

Lawyers for the tribes go on a marathon legal run to harness evidence, witnesses and support before ever hoping for a chance against resources employed by Chevron. Berlinger clearly knows about balance in covering an important issue. Lawyers and scientists representing Chevron appear throughout the movie offering their viewpoint. "It's a film about the process about the process of justice. I'm not saying who is guilty. The film doesn't try to solve who is responsible. I let each side have their say," said Berlinger.

The film also shows how legal teams prepare for court appearances and how they strive to have their side presented in the media spotlight. The legal war is accompanied by a public relations battle that features radio and television appearances along with efforts to bring government pressure to bear on the issue. Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa sides with the tribes' dilemma and rock star Sting and his wife Trudie Styler trumpet their plight. "I consider it our fight as well," said Trudie Styler in the film.

Berlinger is no stranger to Sundance where he won the audience award with "Brother's Keeper" (1992). Other credits include "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" and "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster."

FACT-DRIVEN PICS FIND SAFE HAVEN

Documentary filmmakers return to the 'nurturing environment' of Sundance



DOUG PRAY

Pop-culture chronicler Doug Pray makes his third visit to Sundance's docu feature competition with "Art & Copy," following his 1996 debut "Hype!" and 2001's "Scratch."

"It's an exploration of creativity and the innate human urge to say something, even if it's for a product," says Pray about his latest pic. "Everybody is affected by commercials, whether we like it or not. We all love to hate them, but my movie is about a bunch of people who have affected culture as much as anybody else. Who the heck are these people manipulating us and making us do things and changing our culture?"

Pray favors unveiling his films in Park City. "At Sundance, it feels like you're 100% on par with the dramatic films," he says, "and I say that with a chip on my shoulder, because at most festivals, you realize you're not, where it's really about actors or celebrities. It's just an amazing platform for documentaries that you can't get at other festivals."

R.J. CUTLER

The September Room" marks Emmy-winning producer-director R.J. Cutler's first trek to Sundance in the docu feature competition, but he's been to Sundance before with the short "Anita Liberty" in 1997 and as a producer of Lauren Greenfield's "Thin" (2006).

"It's no revelation that Sundance has been the single most important force in the American documentary, in terms of film festivals," he says. "Because of the platform they have given to documentaries, the health of the American documentaries has thrived. They're intent on

asserting, rightly so, that nonfiction form is as important an art form as fiction film."

Cutler's latest work charts the production of the September issue of Vogue. "I spent eight months with (Vogue editor-in-chief) Anna Wintour and her team of editors as they created the single largest issue of any magazine ever published. It's also a very funny movie about the fashion industry, the workplace and the unique, dynamic and entertaining relationship between Wintour and Grace Coddington, the creative director of Vogue."



JOE BERLINGER

With "Crude," the two-time Emmy Award-winning director makes his fourth visit to Sundance as a filmmaker, following the three films he co-directed with Bruce Sinofsky, "Brother's Keeper" (1992), "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" (1996) and "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster" (2004).

The Sundance vet got a sobering education the first time he hit the fest. "We went into Sundance in 1992 wanting the \$3 million Michael Moore deal, and walked out with nothing," Joe Belinger remembers. "I was shocked and stunned. But now I'm glad we had that downturn, because I learned the distribution business backwards and forwards."

"The festival has been an incredibly important place for me to premiere difficult material, and giving me the stamp of approval for my work to go out into the world," he adds.

"Crude," he says, "is an inside look at what plaintiffs have to do to hold a corporation responsible and raises troubling issues of how do we define justice in the 21st century. I was moved to make it because the white man's treatment of indigenous peoples in the last 500 years is a shameful chapter in human history, and this is the modern extension of that."

— Anthony Kaufman

LIZ GARBUS

In 1998, Liz Garbus, along with co-director Jonathan Stack, won Sundance's Grand Jury Prize for "The Farm: Angola USA," which went on to garner an Oscar nomination. She returned in 2002 with "The Execution of Wanda Jean" and appears this year with "Shouting Fire: Stories From the Edge of Free Speech."

"Frankly, the festival launched my career as a filmmaker," Garbus says. "It was integral in my ability to make films about social issues. Sundance has a brand that allows people to understand that these are high-

quality films. There's a way in which Sundance just thrusts the film into the public eye that is difficult to find without it."

Garbus' latest pic tackles another social issue. "Daniel Webster said, 'If you have to preserve one right in a democracy, you preserve free speech, because without it, you can't fight for the others,'" she notes. "The film looks at the people fighting those battles, from Daniel Ellsberg to an Arab-American principal in Brooklyn. And my father (First Amendment attorney Martin Garbus) is a guide, whose own cases form the spine of the film."



ONDI TIMONER

In 2004, Grammy-nominated music-video helmer Ondi Timoner won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize for "Dig!" her seven-years-in-the-making portrait of the band the Brian Jonestown Massacre. She makes her second trek to Sundance this year with "We Live in Public."

The new pic, as she de-

scribes, is "the story of the greatest Internet pioneer you've never heard of, Josh Harris, and about the experiments that he did to test the effects of technology on human interaction." Harris himself is "a walking cautionary tale," she adds, "because his whole life was mediated by television. At once, he's

telling us what our world will be like and he's showing us the dangers of allowing the virtual world to consume our social interactions."

Timoner credits Sundance for putting her on the map. "And now that I'm going back, it feels like returning to a safe, nurturing environment," she says.





Sting brings music, eco-message to Sundance fest

By DAVID GERMAIN The Associated Press Monday, January 19, 2009

PARK CITY, Utah -- Sting drew cheers with an impromptu jam session at the Sundance Film Festival, but his real purpose was to bring attention to a film dealing with the singer's other passion: rainforest preservation. Joe Berlinger's "Crude" traces 15 years of a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of Ecuador residents who claim that oil producer Chevron Corp. is liable for contaminating water supplies around the headwaters of the Amazon River. Sting and wife Trudie Styler are founders of the Rainforest Foundation, and they became involved at Berlinger's behest. The film chronicles Styler's fact-finding trip to Ecuador and includes footage of Sting performing with the Police at last summer's Live Earth music marathon on behalf of global-warming issues.

"I have a walk-on in this film and nothing else. I'm here to support the missus," Sting said in an interview alongside Styler, Berlinger and plaintiffs' attorneys Pablo Fajardo and Steven Donziger. "I think it's a great battle to fight," said Sting, whose Sundance visit included performing with the house band at a lodge sponsored by Gibson guitars. "All the things we've been arguing against and about are involved in this film. The right to breathe clean air, to drink fresh water, to feed your children and have a healthy life. No one has the right to stand in the way of that."

Berlinger, whose documentaries include "Brother's Keeper," "Paradise Lost" and "Metallica: Some Kind of Monster," heads into the rainforests in "Crude" to record field arguments with the judge and legal teams involved in the lawsuit. He also interviews indigenous people who claim oil-tainted water has caused cancer, skin lesions and other ailments. "I'm used to seeing great environmental and humanitarian tragedies and problems, and throwing Sting's light around that raises dollars to help relieve them. But I didn't bargain for the devastation I saw when I got there," Styler said. "Speaking with mothers who were nurturing their children with murky, brown, petrol-smelling, horrible water containing many, many contaminants. ... They are in dire need of help."

Plaintiffs' claim Texaco, which was bought by Chevron in 2001, left an environmental mess when it departed Ecuador in the early 1990s after decades of oil drilling. Chevron contends it was absolved of liability by a 1998 agreement between Ecuador and Texaco, which carried out a \$40 million cleanup. The Rainforest Foundation is helping to bring in tanks to capture rain and provide clean drinking water as a stopgap measure, but the plaintiffs say Chevron needs to pay for long-term measures. "We're all conscious of the fact that the world without petroleum would basically stop," said Fajardo, the plaintiffs' lead attorney, speaking in Spanish translated by Donziger, an American attorney consulting on the case.

"If these companies act to a greater responsibility, respecting life, I believe we could coexist with oil companies. The problem isn't petroleum in and of itself. It's how it's drilled in our case." "Crude," one of 16 films in Sundance's U.S. documentary competition, presents a fairly balanced portrait of the case, with Chevron's side of the story well represented. The company's attorneys and chief environmental scientist argue that its former partner, Petroecuador, continued polluting the area after Texaco departed and that its own research did not support plaintiffs' claims that oil contamination presented health risks. Berlinger said he set out to present all sides of the story, but he came away with a strong conviction himself.

"When we destroy the rainforest, we destroy our own livelihood. When we fill up our gas tanks in this country with relatively cheap gasoline compared to the rest of the world, it's at the expense of other people who have lived in harmony with nature," Berlinger said. "That was a life-changing epiphany for me. I had heard it as catch-phrases before, but I had never truly felt it."



Sundance Unveils A New Star, So Does Ecuador

By Roger Friedman

Last night also brought the debut of Joe Berlinger's sensational and controversial documentary, "Crude," about the long and winding lawsuit between the people of Ecuador and Chevron Oil, formerly Texaco. Vanity Fair readers may recall a story last year about Pablo Fajardo, a young Ecuadorean who instead of working in the Quito oil fields went to college and law school, then sued Texaco — now Chevron -- for allegedly polluting Ecuador's water supply and causing rampant cancer and death.

Berlinger does present the oil company's side and even offered them a chance to appear at Sundance, but so far they won't even see the film. Meanwhile, the director expertly weaves together the story of a bigger oil spill disaster than the Exxon Valdez, the saga of locals who've died, and the tragedy of an all but ignored country that doesn't have clean drinking water thanks to corporate negligence.

Into this mix last year came Trudie Styler and Sting with their Rainforest Foundation. US attorney Steven Danziger, working with Fajardo, contacted Styler who not only immediately flew down to Quito but then interceded with UNICEF to get water filtration systems for Ecuador villages. These water "tanks" are a temporary solution — they last 15 years—but at \$300 a pop they're a great immediate savior for these people. Luckily, Styler already knew the landscape after having built 60 schools in Ecuador through the Foundation.

The story isn't over by far in Quito, as the lawsuits drag on. But Berlinger's film is eye opening. It's also so well made that it shouldn't have any trouble getting theatrical distribution. For more information you can read about it at www.crudethemovie.com.

Last night after the screening, Fajardo and Berlinger were toasted at a dinner sponsored by Self magazine at the Greenhouse, with lots of celeb support including Styler and Sting, Kevin Bacon, Sam Rockwell, John Cleese, Chris Botti, and Pierce Brosnan—all of whom will be hit up for multiples of that 300 clams, I'm sure. I couldn't help thinking during this film that if every American who didn't need bottled water set the money aside and sent it to UNICEF, this problem could be solved. I'm just saying ...