

‘COMMUNE’ Press Notes

The inside scoop on free love, utopian dreams, and the surprising endurance of radical lifestyles, through the story of California’s influential Black Bear Ranch commune.

Opening NY Cinema Village Theater, Nov 3, 2006
Opening LA Laemmle Grand Theater Nov 10, 2006
Photos: www.communethemovie.com

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‘COMMUNE’

CREDITS

Producer and Director

Jonathan Berman

Editors

Marisa Simpson

Michael Taylor

Music

Elliott Sharp

Co-producer

Zed Frick

Camera

Alan Deutsch

Tamas Bojtor

Rob Vanalkemade

Jonathan Berman

Additional Camera

Kevin White

Frazier Bradshaw

The People

Aaron Marley & family

Amir Bey

Andy Getz & Sharon

The Beavers

Catherine Guerra

Damaru

Efrem Korngold

Elsa Marley

Geba Greenberg

Harriet Beinfeld

Hoss Bennett & Earl

Karuna & Allegra

Kish Bear

Kenoli Oleari

& the Residents of Fairview House

Larry Bacon

Les Harding

Mahaj & Cedar

Maitri

Malcolm & Susan

Martin Linhart

Michael Tierra

Natek

Osha Neumann

Peter Coyote

Peter Leaf

Rachel Newmann

Richard Marley

Sara & Rex

Shem, Natasha, Ethan, Erica

Wakan

Yeshi Neumann

The Places

Black Bear Ranch

Godfrey Ranch

Siskiyou Daily News

Salmon River Restoration Council

Siskiyou Historical Society

Footage

Milestones (1975)

By Robert Kramer & John Douglas

Portapak Video:

The Tribal Vision Archive (c. 1968)

Courtesy of Loren Sears

Summer '68 (1968)

Directed by Newsreel

Courtesy of Roz Payne

Feel My Pulse (1928)

Directed by Gregory La Cava

Peter Coyote in *Main Line* (2004) aka *Shadow of Fear*
Courtesy of Millennium Films & Two Sticks Productions

Music

All songs written and performed by Elliott Sharp
Except *New Day Coming*, performed by the Lilies

The Ballad of Cedar and Mahaj

Written and Performed by Cedar Seeger

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CAST/FEATURED INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

ELSA MARLEY

Co-founder of Black Bear; artist & professor, Oakland, CA

RICHARD MARLEY (deceased)

Co-founder of Black Bear; superintendent & revolutionary, Oakland, CA

PETER COYOTE

Actor & author (*Sleeping Where I Fall*), Mill Valley, CA

MICHAEL TIERRA

Herbalist & author (*The Way of Herbs*), Santa Cruz, CA

KENOLI OLEARI

Community organizer & founding member of the Fairview House, Berkeley, CA

HARRIET BEINFELD & EFREM KORNGOLD

Authors (*Between Heaven & Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine*) &
healers at Chinese Medicine Works, San Francisco, CA

MAHAJ & CEDAR SEEGER

Farmers, Four Winds Growers, Winters, CA

PETER LEAF

Cabinetmaker & co-owner, City Cabinetmakers, San Francisco, CA

OSHA NEUMANN

Community artist & lawyer, Berkeley, CA

AARON MARLEY

Research Scientist, University of California at San Francisco

HOSS BENNETT (deceased)

Junkyard owner, Forks of Salmon, CA

DAMARU

Ex-Shiva Lila, Musician, Hilo, HI

NATEK

Ex-Shiva Lila, Salesperson, Pahoia, HI

WAKAN

Ex-Shiva Lila, Import/Export, Hilo, HI

TESILYA HANAUER

Editor, New Harbinger Publishing, Berkeley, CA

‘COMMUNE’

SYNOPSIS

Commune is a feature documentary that explores an audacious premise – that being together in the wilderness will help create revolutionary movement in the rest of society.

During the radical fervor of the early 1970s, utopian communities dotted the country. They aimed to reshape the world with free love and common property, and they excited controversy and fear amongst local, often rural, residents across the country. Though the idea of communes is now often relegated to a naïve past, *Commune* discovers a successful and lasting, if controversial, legacy at the influential Black Bear Ranch, in Siskiyou County, California.

Premised on the idea of “Free Land for Free People,” and financed by the largesse of Hollywood rock stars, the founders of Black Bear bought a rural, abandoned gold mine and raised a rough-hewn homestead. Soon the fragile bonds of human connection became frayed, especially when the group discovered that each person had a totally different idea of what utopia might look like...and that “free love” wasn’t free after all.

Over the years, hundreds would join the community, and life would be complicated by growing conflicts about the role of women, child-rearing, proper communalist behavior, the FBI, and most traumatically, a child-snatching cult.

With unusual archival footage from the early days, and the candid present-day views of Black Bear members and their offspring, *Commune* is a revealing look at how our most basic choices about family, work, and relationship can send powerful and lasting shock waves through the fabric of communities, nations, and the world.

PETER COYOTE and other interviewees from the film are available.

Director JONATHAN BERMAN is available for interviews.

Old and new participants in the Black Bear Ranch and the director will attend the opening weekend screenings in New York and Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JONATHAN BERMAN DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Jonathan Berman began his career working at two notable NY film and television gigs: as a production assistant on *Pee Wee's Playhouse* (along with Rob Zombie), and as an assistant editor at Troma Films, where he contributed to *The Toxic Avenger, Pt 2*. His first directorial effort was *The Shvitz* (1994), a documentary which explored the unlikely patrons of the old time steambaths. Through significant festival and TV exposure, *The Shvitz* gained a solid following that continues – it is being released as part of the Docurama DVD collection in October 2006. *My Friend Paul* (1999), his second directorial effort, premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival and has aired on the Sundance Channel and PBS stations. The film follows Berman and his childhood friend, Paul, a bipolar bank robber who has violated his parole. Berman's work has screened theatrically at diverse festivals and venues including the Amsterdam Documentary Festival, the Hamptons International Film Festival, South By Southwest, the Karlovy Vary and Munich Film Festivals, MOMA, the Chicago and NY Underground Festivals and many others. He was co-story writer of *On the Run* (1999), a feature comedy that featured *Sopranos* regulars Michael Imperioli and John Ventimiglia. Berman is currently developing a TV series about spirituality and a dark comedy feature film.

For press info on *The Shvitz* DVD release this month on Docurama/ New Video, contact Mike Krause, mkrause@foundrycomm.com phone (212) 586-7967

MICHAEL TAYLOR CO-EDITOR

Michael Taylor came to *Commune* after cutting *Homework*, which won the Grand Jury prize at Slamdance, and *This So-called Disaster*, Michael Almereyda's incisive documentary about Sam Shepard. He edited *Be Here To Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt* which premiered at the Toronto and was acquired by Palm Pictures. Taylor's other job is his work as a top script supervisor, on projects which include: *Bad Santa*, *Monster's Ball*, *Happiness*, *You Can Count On Me*, *American Splendor*, and Julie Taymor's upcoming Beatles opus, *Across the Universe*.

PETER COYOTE DIRECTOR / PRODUCER

Peter Coyote (born Robert Peter Cohon) is an American actor and author. He is the cofounder, with Emmett Grogan, of the San Francisco Diggers and a veteran of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the original street theater group in the Bay Area. While he had his own communal place in Marin, he was also a frequent visitor to the Black Bear Ranch, as part of a loose, extended communal family. His counterculture activities, including his exploits at the Ranch, are detailed in his memoir *Sleeping While I Fall*. Coyote's film efforts include *E.T.*, *Erin Brokovich*, and Polanski's *Bitter Moon*. Coyote is also widely known for both his voiceover work and his activity in progressive actions.

ELLIOTT SHARP

COMPOSER/ MUSICIAN

Sharp has personified the avant-garde music scene in New York City for over thirty years, creating works that span the musical spectrum from blues, jazz, and orchestral music to noise, no wave rock, and techno music. He performs with the blues-oriented Terraplane in nightclubs, while his Orchestra Carbon headlines at BAM and opera houses across Europe. Sharp previously worked with Berman on the soundtrack to *The Shvitz*, along with the Klezmatics and guitarist Marc Ribot. In a previous life (as 70's hippie student at SUNY Buffalo) Sharp had an unlikely meet up with the Shiva Lila, the cult group the plays into the story of *Commune*.

BLACK BEAR RANCH

THE COMMUNE

In 1968, while on a camping trip near Mt. Shasta in Northern California, Elsa and Richard Marley stumble across an unlikely property -- an abandoned goldmine for sale-300 acres for \$22,000. The Brooklyn-born, Depression-era dockworker was older than his wife and friends, and he thought twice about it, although he still believed in the revolution -- after all, his mother was a famous British Communist. Elsa makes up a slogan for Black Bear that sums up the group's anarchistic raison d'etre: "Free Land for Free People!" Fueled by contributions from the Doors, the Monkees, and Antonioni, the group manages to buy the Black Bear Ranch.

Close to 40 years later the Black Bear Ranch remains open land – it is owned as a Land Trust by anyone who has every spent a winter there. Currently a handful of younger people live on the Ranch, while many of the older participants have settled near by, working on environmental issues through the Salmon River Restoration Council. They may be contacted at www.blackbearranch.org and www.srrc.org.