



GUERRILLA DRIVE-INS

Groups across the country are reviving the nostalgic pleasures of the drive-in movie

By Gretchen Kalwinski · Illustration by Kevin Cyr

When was the last time you watched a movie with a bunch of strangers under the stars? Drive-in movies have been phasing out since their heyday in the '60s and '70s. They were popular because of the inherent romance in watching a film under the stars, snuggled up with siblings, friends, or paramours under blankets. Contemporary technology allows an extremely high-quality home entertainment experience, but it has come at the cost of estrangement from fellow movie-goers. So some radical folks began their own "guerilla" drive-in movie collectives as a DIY way to enjoy the intimacy and communal nature of drive-ins, with the bonus of being able to show whatever films they damn well pleased, usually free of charge.

One of the most organized groups is the Santa Cruz Guerilla Drive-In in Santa Cruz, California (guerilladrivein.org). In 2002, they started showing films such as *The Third Man* and *The Gleaners and I* on vacant walls of abandoned buildings for friends and strangers to enjoy. The Santa Cruz "drive-in," however, doesn't actually involve cars. Movie-watchers bring lawn chairs and blankets to the given location, where they view the film via a projector and high-powered speakers.

The nationwide MobMov collectives — short for "mobile movie" — (mobmov.org), take the term "drive-in" a bit more literally. They use technology similar to that used in yesteryears, utilizing an FM transmitter to broadcast the movie's sound into car radios, so that, as organizer Bryan Kennedy notes,

"there is no sound pollution at all." Because of this, says Kennedy, they have rarely been bothered by law enforcement since the organization was founded in 2004. He thinks that the MobMov idea (now active in 12 U.S. cities) has caught on because of "the sense of community you get when you come, the experience of sharing something unique with strangers." Most groups have guidelines for if and when they are approached by police or upset neighbors, since, as the Santa Cruz group notes on their Web site, "good neighborly relations are an important element of DIY culture." Kennedy has been lucky. A law-enforcement confrontation at a MobMov event "has never happened — if it did, I would just show them my papers, and if they asked that I stop the movie, I would."

Most collectives agree that the real issue at hand is one of public versus private space. The mission statement on the Santa Cruz GDI's Web site states, "Beyond showing great movies and bringing a broad community together, our mission is helping to reclaim public space and transforming our urban environment into the joyful playground it should be."

Kennedy from MobMov echoes the sentiment, saying, "A drive-in is much more than just a movie projected on a wall, like at your local cineplex. In a cineplex, you have this huge public space, yet interaction is frowned upon, so it is not appreciably different than watching the movie by yourself. In the drive-ins of old, some people would roam around and visit each other, while others would sit in the privacy of their car, unperturbed. With a drive-in, you can select the level of interaction you want. It's a much more customizable experience."

TIPS FOR PLANNING YOUR OWN GUERRILLA DRIVE-IN

Location, Location, Location: The Santa Cruz group suggests that you scout out a dark location near a smooth, light surface, in areas that are either full of warehouses or under bridges to minimize the chance of interruption.

Zee Technicalities: Determine whether you'll use speakers or a radio transmitter, and then scrounge for speakers, an amplifier, and projectors. Additional technical information about projecting films can be found on the Santa Cruz GDI and MobMov sites.

Whatcha Gonna Watch? Make a list of films to choose from. Some groups have subversive or political themes, while others make a specialty of documentary or foreign films.

If You Build it, They Will Come: Let people know when and where the screening will take place. This can be done via a Web site, e-mail distribution list, or fliers on local bulletin boards.

Dealing With Authorities: The Santa Cruz group always has a few "cop tamers" on hand to serve as police liaisons. "A good cop tamer has experience with non-violent communication and a good understanding of applicable laws," organizer Rico Thunder says.