

# REEL INJUN

ON THE TRAIL OF THE HOLLYWOOD INDIAN

## Synopses

### Long synopsis

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond takes an entertaining and insightful look at the Hollywood Indian, exploring the portrayal of North American Natives through a century of cinema.

Traveling through the heartland of America, and into the Canadian North, Diamond looks at how the myth of “the Injun” has influenced the world’s understanding – and misunderstanding – of Natives.

*Reel Injun* traces the evolution of cinema’s depiction of Native people from the silent film era to today, with clips from hundreds of classic and recent Hollywood movies, and candid interviews with celebrated Native and non-Native film celebrities, activists, film critics and historians.

Diamond meets with Clint Eastwood (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, A Fistful of Dollars, Unforgiven*) at his studios in Burbank, California, where the film legend discusses the evolution of the image of Indians in Westerns and what cowboy-and-Indian myths mean to America. *Reel Injun* also hears from legendary Native American activists John Trudell, Russell Means and Sacheen Littlefeather.

Celebrities featured in *Reel Injun* include Robbie Robertson, the half-Jewish, half-Mohawk musician and soundtrack composer (*Raging Bull, Casino, Gangs of New York*), Cherokee actor Wes Studi (*Last of the Mohicans, Geronimo*), filmmakers Jim Jarmusch (*Dead Man*) and Chris Eyre (*Smoke Signals*) and acclaimed Native actors Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves, Thunderheart*) and Adam Beach (*Smoke Signals, Clint Eastwood’s Flags of our Fathers*). Diamond also travels North to the remote Nunavut town of Igloolik (population: 1500) to interview Zacharias Kunuk, director of the Palme d’or-winning *The Fast Runner*.

*Reel Injun*’s humour and star power is balanced with insightful commentary from film critics and historians, including CBC film critic Jesse Wente, author and scholar of American Indian Studies Angela Aleiss, and associate professor of ethnic studies at Mills College, California, Melinda Micco.

In *Reel Injun*, Diamond takes the audience on a journey across America to some of cinema’s most iconic landscapes, including Monument Valley, the setting for Hollywood’s greatest Westerns, and the Black Hills of South Dakota, home to Crazy Horse and countless movie legends. Was Crazy Horse the inspiration for the mystical warrior stereotype? In search of answers, we meet his descendants on the desperately poor Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota.

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*Reel Injun* traces the evolution of cinema’s depiction of Native people from the silent film era to today, only to find the future of Native cinema in the unlikeliest of places – Canada’s North.

It’s a loving look at cinema through the eyes of the people who appeared in its very first flickering images and have survived to tell their stories their own way.

## Short synopsis

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond takes an entertaining and insightful look at the Hollywood Indian, exploring the portrayal of North American Natives through a century of cinema.

Travelling through the heartland of America, Diamond looks at how the myth of “the Injun” has influenced the world’s understanding – and misunderstanding – of Natives.

With clips from hundreds of classic and recent films, and candid interviews with celebrated Native and non-Native directors, writers, actors and activists, including Clint Eastwood, Robbie Robertson, Sacheen Littlefeather, John Trudell and Russell Means, *Reel Injun* traces the evolution of cinema’s depiction of Native people from the silent film era to today, only to find the future of Native cinema in the unlikeliest of places – Canada’s North.

## One line

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond takes an entertaining and insightful look at the Hollywood Indian, exploring the portrayal of North American Natives through a century of cinema.



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## Neil Diamond Director/Writer

One of Canada's foremost Aboriginal filmmakers, Neil Diamond hails from the Cree community of Waskaganish, on the coast of James Bay. His recent credits include *The Last Explorer* (2009), a feature-length docudrama for APTN retracing the steps of Diamond's own great uncle, Aboriginal guide George Elson, on an ill-fated voyage into the heart of uncharted Labrador.

An integral part of the Rezolution Pictures International creative team, Neil has directed two award-winning documentaries. *One More River* (2004), a behind-the-scenes look at the Quebec Cree's decision to accept another hydro project on their land, was named Best Documentary at the Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois, while awards for *Heavy Metal: A Mining Disaster in Northern Quebec* (2004) included Top Prize and Audience Pick at Norway's Riddu Riddu Festival.

Neil also directed three seasons of *DAB IYIYUU*, the six-part series for APTN about Cree elders. His 2001 directorial debut, *Cree Spoken Here*, garnered the Telefilm/APTN award for Best Aboriginal Documentary.

In 1993, Diamond co-founded *The Nation*, the first news magazine to serve the Cree of northern Quebec and Ontario. His columns "Rez Notes" and "The Last Line" offer edgy, irreverent perspectives on the Cree issues of the day.

Neil is also an award-winning photographer whose work was used in the James Bay Cree's international campaign to stop the construction of more Hydro Quebec dams on their land.

## Neil Diamond Director/Writer

One of Canada's foremost Aboriginal filmmakers and photographers, Neil Diamond hails from the Cree community of Waskaganish. His recent credits include *The Last Explorer*, a feature-length docudrama retracing the steps of his great uncle, Aboriginal guide George Elson, on an ill-fated voyage into the heart of uncharted Labrador. Neil also directed the award-winning documentaries *One More River* and *Heavy Metal: A Mining Disaster in Northern Quebec*.



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## Director's Statement

The idea for *Reel Injun* came from questions people asked me about Native people when I first moved to the south to study. Like, did we still live in teepees and ride horses? Being a sub-arctic Cree, I couldn't believe how naïve they were, until I realized their idea of Natives came mostly from the films they'd watched of Indians on horseback, who lived in teepees, on the plains. Then I understood: for there was a time, as a boy, when I thought *that* was how my ancestors had lived, too.

Like most young boys growing up in the '60s, I was a huge fan of cowboy-and-Indian movies. Almost every Saturday night, the Indian residential school chapel screen was filled with the sights and sounds of gunfights and whooping Indians on horseback. After church the following day, when we were let out to play, our games usually consisted of us recreating the entire film from the night before.

Bizarrely, most of us wanted to be John Wayne or Errol Flynn and not the Indians they were fighting. The cowboys seemed cooler and more heroic than the Indians, or perhaps they just had more screen time.

Gradually we saw more and more films with Native characters, and our sympathies changed along with Hollywood's. We started to hate getting our hair cut; once our locks flowed long enough, on went the headbands. It didn't matter that our great grandfathers never wore them – we wanted to look like the Indians in the movies. Young Crees today still play those games, but now they want to be Indian heroes.

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Today, the style of most Native people at powwows and social gatherings reflects that Hollywood image. No matter what nation one is from – from sub-arctic to the southern deserts – the braided hair and fringed jacket say: I'm a Plains Indian. It's a movie image so distinct and powerful that most Native people have adopted it. Which is not to say that's a *bad* thing, because it's helped bring the nations together. From these culturally ravaged peoples, recovering from genocide, came powwows that drew upon the cinematic imagery perpetuated by colonizers – they made it their own. The sad part is how great it could have been had the different Indian cultures survived in all their glory.

*Reel Injun* does not look back in anger; rather it follows the Native tradition of respectfully teasing as it looks back at hundreds of films that show Native and non-Native people in all their ridiculous guises. Cinema is first and foremost entertainment. The greatest cowboy-and-Indian films *are* entertaining, and even the bad ones can be fun to watch. We can watch, with just as much love and interest, the films that cast the likes of Elvis Presley, Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis and Raquel Welch as Natives.

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Even more entertaining are the Red Westerns made behind the Iron Curtain in the 1970s, which featured German actors portraying Indians with utter sincerity and an obvious love and respect for the culture. It amazes me that so many Germans and Finns still celebrate our romantic stereotype. In some odd way I am flattered, realizing, of course, if they actually knew any of us, they probably wouldn't like us at all.

Today, a golden age is dawning in Native Cinema with films such as *Smoke Signals* and *Atanarjuat* enchanting audiences around the world. I rejoice in the knowledge that our real image and cultures may one day become just as alluring as our stereotypes.

What makes *Reel Injun* special and distinct are the documentary sequences that take us behind the scenes to meet film stars of yesterday and today. Movie lovers always enjoy getting the “inside story,” hearing from actors, writers and directors who have made cinema history. Like when I paid a visit to some of those silent and anonymous Navajo actors who appeared in countless films shot in their homeland, and they tell stories of the tricks they used to play on the unknowing star and his director.

When I was growing up, before being sent to residential school, my mother rarely went to the “shows” that were screened several nights a week at the community hall, unless the film was something like *The Ten Commandments*, *Jesus of Nazareth* or the latest Elvis movie. I'd be thrilled to learn that one of those films was playing because I knew I'd get to go, too. Those early experiences in ramshackle movie halls gave me a great love of films – good and bad – and a respect for all cultures, Native and non-Native alike.

*Reel Injun* is an informative, funny and loving look at cinema through the eyes of the people who appeared in its very first flickering images – and have survived to tell their stories their own way.



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## Who's who on the screen

### Angela Aleiss, Ph.D.

The author of *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Praeger, 2005), Angela Aleiss was a contributing writer for such publications as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter* and *Religion News Service*, and has been interviewed by *National Public Radio*, *Voice of America* and *E! News Daily*. Angela is a former postdoctoral fellow at the *American Indian Studies Center*, *University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)*, and a *Fulbright Fellow* at the *University of Toronto*. She is currently a visiting assistant professor at *UCLA*.

### Adam Beach

Acclaimed film and TV actor Adam Beach is a member of the *Saulteaux First Nations* from the *Dog Creek Reserve* in *Manitoba*. His recent credits include the TV mini-series *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, for which he won a *Golden Globe Award*. He starred in *Clint Eastwood's Flags of Our Fathers* and learned *Navajo* for his role in another high-profile WWII drama, *John Woo's Windtalkers*. Adam's major motion picture roles also include *Bruce McDonald's Dance Me Outside* and *Chris Eyre's Smoke Signals*.

### Charlie Hill

Native American comedian Charlie Hill received the 2009 *Ivy Bethune Tri-Union Diversity Award* for his work in breaking many stereotypes about Native and non-Native Americans. He will be featured in the *Showtime* special *The Indian Comedy Slam, No Reservations Needed*, airing in *November 2009*. Charlie starred in the documentary *On and Off the Res' w/ Charlie Hill*, broadcast on *PBS*. He has appeared with such comedy stalwarts as *David Letterman* and *Jay Leno*, and his acting credits include the TV series *Moesha* and *Roseanne*.

### Sacheen Littlefeather

Native American activist and actress Sacheen Littlefeather was catapulted into the world spotlight in 1973, when *Marlon Brando* asked her to accept his *Oscar* for his portrayal of *Don Corleone* in *The Godfather* to bring attention to the treatment of *American Indians* and the siege at *Wounded Knee*. Active in the *Native American Bay Area* community, Sacheen was one of the original occupiers on *Alcatraz Island* protesting civil rights violations against *Indian people* and is co-ordinator of the *Kateri Prayer Circle* in *San Francisco*.

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## Russell Means

Russell Means is one of the best-known and most prolific activists for the rights of Native Americans Indians. Thirty years ago, he led the historic 71-day takeover of the sacred grounds at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Today, he has instituted programs for the betterment of his people, including the Porcupine Health Clinic and KILI radio, the first Indian-owned station. He has also built thriving careers in screen acting, film and television production, and music recording.

## Melinda Micco, Ph.D.

A member of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Melinda Micco is an associate professor and former chair of ethnic studies at Mills College in Oakland, California. She has served as a consultant for the documentaries *Black Westerners* and *Black Seminoles: A Fight for Freedom*. Her published articles include "Tribal Recreations: Buffalo Child Long Lance and Black Seminole Narratives," published by the University of Hawai'i and the East-West Center.

## John Trudell

John Trudell is an acclaimed poet, recording artist, actor and activist. Trudell (Santee Sioux) was a spokesperson for the Indian of All Tribes occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971. He then worked with the American Indian Movement (AIM), serving as Chairman of AIM from 1973 to 1979. Since 1983, Trudell has released 12 albums featuring his own unique mix of poetry, Native music, blues and rock. Trudell has also acted in a number of feature films, including *Thunderheart*.

## Jesse Wentz

Jesse Wentz has been the weekly film critic for CBC Radio in Toronto for nearly a decade. He also appears on *Q*, CBC Radio's national arts and culture show and is seen regularly on TVOntario's *Saturday Night at the Movies*. Jesse is a programmer at the Toronto International Film Festival as well as the *imagineNATIVE* Film + Media Arts Festival. He is also president of Native Earth Performing Arts, Canada's oldest Aboriginal theatre company.



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## Production Crew and Producers

### **Jeremiah Hayes, *Co-Director/Editor***

Jeremiah Hayes is an award-winning documentary editor and director with a style that pushes the boundaries of conventional filmmaking. For the past 20 years, he has brought his talents to bear on over 30 projects, including the multi-award-winning documentary *Vendetta Song*, which he edited. As director/editor, his credits include the acclaimed documentary *God Comes as a Child*, profiling his mother's struggle with Lou Gehrig's disease, and the NFB documentaries *The Prom* and *Silence & Storm*.

### **Édith Labbé, *Director of Photography***

Cinematographer Édith Labbé's credits include Rezolution Pictures' historical docudrama *The Last Explorer*, filmed on location in Labrador, and the documentary *Mommy Mommy*. A graduate of the Université de Montréal, she worked for several years in the camera department at Panavision. Édith's first feature film DOP credit came on François Delisle's acclaimed *Happiness is a Sad Song (Le bonheur c'est une chanson triste)*, starring Anne-Marie Cadieux.

### **Catherine Bainbridge, *Producer/Co-Director /Writer/Executive Producer***

A trailblazing documentary filmmaker and co-founder of Rezolution Pictures International – as well as a former newspaper reporter and TV host – Catherine Bainbridge began a distinguished career behind the camera in 1992 as co-director of *Okanada*, a rare inside look at the Oka Crisis. She and her partners at Rezolution are currently in development on the series *The River* for The Movie Network and Movie Central.

### **Christina Fon, *Producer/Executive Producer***

Christina Fon is a key member of the Rezolution Pictures International creative team, producing an impressive array of projects with her partners over eight busy years. Her production credits include two Rezolution/NFB co-produced documentaries directed by Tracey Deer: *Club Native*, honoured as the best Canadian documentary at DOXA Documentary Film Festival, and *Mohawk Girls*, winner of the Alanis Obomsawin Best Documentary Award at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival.

### **Linda Ludwick, *Producer/Executive Producer***

Linda Ludwick offers a rare mix of financial and production expertise. She's been responsible for financial management since Rezolution Pictures International's inception and still oversees corporate and production accounting to this day. In recent years, Linda has branched out into production. Her growing list of credits includes the upcoming dramatic series *The River* and the award-winning *Moose TV*, recipient of the 2008 CFTPA Indie Award for Best Comedy Series.

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## **Ernest Webb, *Executive Producer***

Born in Moose Factory and raised in the Cree community of Chisasibi, Ernest Webb has devoted his life to telling the stories of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, across all media. He co-founded Rezolution Pictures International along with his wife and creative partner Catherine Bainbridge in 2001. His recent credits include co-directing the docudrama *The Last Explorer* with fellow Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond. In 1993, he co-founded Beesum Communications, publisher of Cree news and cultural magazine, *The Nation*.

## **Adam Symansky, *Producer, National Film Board of Canada***

Winner of an Academy Award with director Cynthia Scott for the 1983 short documentary *Flamenco at 5:15*, NFB veteran Adam Symansky has produced works by many of Canada's most talented directors. His long association with the legendary Donald Brittain resulted in such classics as *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks* (1985) and *The King Chronicles* (1988). Adam also produced Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's acclaimed co-production *Manufacturing Consent*, exploring the political life and ideas of Noam Chomsky. His recent credits include Ben Addelman and Samir Mallal's 2008 NFB co-production *Nollywood Babylon*, selected to the Sundance Film Festival.

## **Ravida Din, *Executive Producer, National Film Board of Canada***

Ravida Din has an uncompromising commitment to social justice and feminism. It is integral to her work and a strong guiding principle towards bringing an insightful and engaging analysis to social documentary film. In her position as the NFB's Quebec Executive Producer, her mandate is to envision and manage a varied program of theatrical and television documentaries, community-based media and alternative drama. Recent credits include: *Up the Yangtze* (Genie Award for Best Documentary 2009, Sundance 2008), *Baghdad Twist* (TIFF 2008), *Nollywood Babylon* (Sundance 2009), *Roadsworth: Crossing the Line* (Hot Docs 2009).

## **Catherine Olsen, *Executive Producer, CBC Newsworld***

Catherine Olsen is the Executive Producer of Documentaries for CBC Newsworld and Commissioning Editor of the highly acclaimed documentary series *The Passionate Eye*, a program she helped develop 15 years ago which features some of the world's best political and social-issue documentaries. From 1993 to 2000, she also had the unique opportunity of hosting the program. Recent award-winning *Passionate Eye* commissions have included last year's Genie winner *Up the Yangtze*, and 2008 Emmy Winners *Shake Hands with the Devil* and *Sex Slaves*. Catherine is one of the founding members of the Canadian Documentary Festival Hot Docs, and continues to be a member of its international advisory board.

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## Rezolution Pictures International Inc.

Rezolution Pictures International Inc. is an award-winning Aboriginal-owned film and television production company that plays a vital role in bringing cultural diversity to Canada's broadcasting landscape.

Rezolution Pictures International Inc. has built a reputation for excellence since its formation in 2001. Today, it's one of Canada's leaders in social issue documentary filmmaking, with a library of outstanding documentary productions, covering subjects as diverse as contemporary Aboriginal culture, environmental protection, gay parenting and more.

This Montreal-based company has also created an award-winning comedy series and a rip-roaring reality series on Native car culture – and is always on the lookout for exciting new one-offs, series and ventures.

Boasting a motivated creative and business team that features co-founders Earnest Webb and Catherine Bainbridge, producers Christina Fon and Linda Ludwick, and a dedicated team of filmmakers, artists and support staff, Rezolution Pictures International Inc. has forged strong ties with some of the top names in Canadian broadcasting and production, including the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network, the National Film Board of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Showcase.

## National Film Board of Canada

The world changes, our stories live on: The National Film Board of Canada marks its 70th anniversary in 2009 with a new national online Screening Room and a slate of bold, innovative productions. Canada's public film producer and distributor, the NFB produces and distributes social-issue documentaries, auteur animation, alternative drama and digital content that provide the world with a unique Canadian perspective. In collaboration with its international partners and co-producers, the NFB is expanding the vocabulary of 21st century cinema and breaking new ground in form and content, through community filmmaking projects, cross-platform media, interactive cinema, stereoscopic animation – and more. Since the NFB's founding in 1939, it has created over 13,000 productions and won over 5,000 awards, including 12 Oscars and more than 90 Genies. In 2009, the works of NFB animation pioneer Norman McLaren were added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Registry. To watch over 1,000 productions online or for more information, visit <[NFB.ca](http://NFB.ca)>.



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## **Credits**

### **Director**

Neil Diamond

### **Co-Directors**

Catherine Bainbridge

Jeremiah Hayes

### **Editor**

Jeremiah Hayes

### **Producers**

Christina Fon

Catherine Bainbridge

Linda Ludwick

### **Writers**

Catherine Bainbridge

Neil Diamond

Jeremiah Hayes

### **Director of Photography**

Édith Labbé

### **Line Producer**

Lisa M. Roth

### **Executive Producers**

Ernest Webb

Catherine Bainbridge

Christina Fon

Linda Ludwick

### **Producer for the NFB**

Adam Symansky

### **Executive Producer for the NFB**

Ravida Din

### **Executive Producer for CBC Newsworld**

Catherine Olsen



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## Contacts

### Canada

#### Theatrical and television distribution

Domino Film and Television International Ltd.

Jeanne Ritter

O: 514-484-0446, C: 514-944-0468

jritter@dominofilm.ca

#### Publicity

Media Monkey

Micol Marotti

C: 416-567-1698

Rezolution Pictures International, Inc.

Christina Fon, producer

O: 514-272-8241, C: 514-984-8241

christina.fon@sympatico.ca

### USA, Latin America, Asia and Middle East

#### Distribution

National Film Board of Canada

Christina Rogers

O: 310-399-4519, C: 310-487-0557

c.rogers@nfb.ca

#### Publicity

National Film Board of Canada

Melissa Than, publicist

m.than@nfb.ca

O: 416-952-8960, C: 647-248-9854

Jennifer Mair, publicist

j.mair@nfb.ca

O: 416-954-2045, C: 416-436-0105

#### Festivals

National Film Board of Canada

Madeleine Belisle, Festivals Office

O: 514-283-9805

m.belisle@nfb.ca

### Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Africa

Films Transit International Inc.

Jan Rofekamp

O: 514-844-3358

janrofekamp@filmstransit.com

