

A spirited history

New documentary dispels myths
about moonshining

BY BILL KOPP

bill@musocrfb.com

There's an enduring stereotype of moonshiners: They're lazy, ignorant, backwoods folk bent on breaking the law. That caricature has been reinforced in popular culture in everything from the original design of the Mountain Dew soda can to more recent cable television series like *Discovery Channel's* "Moonshiners."

But as Western North Carolina filmmaker and historian David Weintraub emphasizes, "Everything you know about moonshine is wrong." Weintraub sets about the task of correcting misconceptions — and elucidating history — in his latest documentary, *The Spirits Still Move Them*, which premieres locally at The Orange Peel on Thursday, June 17, at 7 p.m.

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Some 15 years ago, Weintraub launched an oral history initiative called the Mountain Elder Wisdom Project. That endeavor dovetailed with his founding of the nonprofit Center for Cultural Preservation, where Weintraub serves as executive director.

Throughout his career, Weintraub has published over a dozen books and produced more than 30 films. *The Spirits Still Move Them* is the latest installment in his lifelong mission to explore and share cultural legacies.



LIGHTS, CAMERA, MOONSHINE: Filmmaker David Weintraub talks with Cody Bradford, fifth-generation moonshiner and owner of Howling Moon Distillery in Asheville, for his latest documentary, *The Spirits Still Move Them*. Photo courtesy of Weintraub

"What I learned from these oral histories is that moonshining was probably the toughest work you could do," he says. "There were sciences involved, and there was the constant battle with the elements and with law enforcement."

The distilling practice, he continues, was about survival more than anything else. It was about how to scratch out a living under difficult circumstances."

Avoiding a narration approach, Weintraub's film instead gives the real-life distillers the opportunity to speak for themselves. The present-day moonshiners in *The Spirits Still Move Them* — some operating legally with state-of-the-art distilleries, others still preferring a DIY/illicit approach — reveal nuance and character. They're hardworking people, many of whom could have chosen an easier and more comfortable life path.

And that's a recurring theme in Weintraub's film. Through archival photographs and oral histories, *The Spirits Still Move Them* places moonshining in a larger historical context. The practice began as soon as settlers came to the region, many bringing the tradition from Scotland and Ireland. New laws made it illicit after the Civil War but rarely stopped production.

The film also makes the point that there was effectively a class system in place. By the late 19th century, wealthier people in the region could settle on land ideal for farming. Poorer folk were forced to hillside and holler where farming was difficult. So if converting a portion of their own crop into liquor provided badly needed income, that's what they would often do. The legality of the practice didn't figure into their thinking; it was a matter of survival.

NEW FACES

Asked if his extensive research involved partaking of 'shine, Weintraub laughs. "Documentary filmmaking requires a lot of research," he says. "Misquoting that he's not a big drinker, Weintraub jokes that he was fortunate to try some amazing blackberry moonshine. "It was so smooth and tasty, it didn't even [seem] like there was alcohol in it," he says. "Until you stood up."

Nevertheless, he continues, "I certainly helped me better understand the whole process."

As did his conversations with present-day moonshiners who appear in the film. Initially, Weintraub thought

he would have to blur faces and distort voices to protect the moonshiners' identities. But instead he was often told by participants that they wanted to be on screen, in order to show it to their children and grandchildren.

The moonshiners believe they're carrying on the heritage and traditions of their culture, notes Weintraub. And by appearing in *The Spirits Still Move Them*, they hope to share a father, more accurate portrayal of their pursuits. 🍷

Additional screenings

In addition to its Thursday, June 17, premiere at The Orange Peel, 101 Hillmore Ave., *The Spirits Still Move Them* will also be shown at the following locations:

- North River Farms, 3233 N. Mills River Road, Mills River, Friday, June 18, at 7 p.m., \$40 per vehicle.
 - Southern Appalachian Brewery, 822 Locust St., Hendersonville, Sunday, June 20, 8 p.m., \$20 per person.
 - Livestreamed event, Thursday, June 24, at 7:30 p.m.
- For additional information and to view the film's trailer, visit avf.mv53.com. 🍷

More projects in the works

Along with *The Spirits Still Move Them*, Weintraub is in the process of creating a dozen or more shorter films on YouTube that explore the subject of moonshining in deeper ways. One of these builds on the film's focus concerning the role that people of color played — and continue to play — in the moonshining tradition.

To learn more about these projects, visit avf.mv53.com. 🍷