

Life Through a Lens

Local filmmakers are making movie magic

By Stacey Vreeken

Filmmakers in Santa Cruz County cover the spectrum of the art. Environmental documentaries, sports, commercial and feature films—it's all here. Some of it is homegrown. The Doyle sisters, Kelsey and Sandra, inspired by their freewheeling Santa Cruz upbringing and support for ecological themes, make wildlife and environmental documentaries. Cameraman Bill Evans finds tranquil respite here from his fast-paced life shooting professional sports. Eric Thiermann rides the cutting edge of film technology, working with Silicon Valley innovators. Director Craig Comstock, another native, brings smarts and hard work to his success in Hollywood. All of these artists travel the world for film, but they always come back home, inspired and sustained by the ocean, mountains, and generous community of Santa Cruz.

(Above) Bill Evans spent more than two months traveling the globe while he was filming the making of *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit issue.

Photo: Courtesy Bill Evans

Photo: © Bob Barbour 2017



(Above) During the filming of "Chasing Mavericks" one of the challenges for Craig Comstock was coordinating more than 1000 extras. With a camera suspended from a telescoping jib arm, the camera boat slides past a group of local surfers during the paddle out scene.

Bringing the environment into focus

Growing up in Santa Cruz County provides the perfect backdrop for becoming an adventurous documentary filmmaker. The Doyle sisters—Kelsey, 25, and Sandra, 24—founded Hawks Peak Productions here in 2012 and travel the world making environmental-themed films, all while remaining based in their hometown.

"I grew up right outside of Nisene Marks Park. It was like our playground," Kelsey said. Their parents, who "championed experiences over materialism," took the girls boogie boarding, hiking, and traveling, she said. And no matter how far they travel, Santa Cruz is home.

"I've lived in Buenos Aires. I've lived in London. I've lived in Brooklyn," Kelsey said. "But it's Santa Cruz I always keep coming back to. I'm always wanting to do a lot, so living somewhere that's a little bit more calming, where you hone in on your senses just by being in nature, is where I thrive."

That connection with nature, and specifically with Santa Cruz, drew the sisters to environmental filmmaking, she said. The Doyle family's adventurous ways opened the rest of the world to the sisters. As a young high school graduate, Kelsey went on a backpacking trip across Australia and New

Zealand. She has filmed trips to Burma, Indonesia, Belize, and Micronesia. Most recently she traveled to Kenya, where she filmed five Masai women on their first backpacking trip. On many occasions, Sandra accompanies Kelsey.

"I have a really special bond with my sibling," Sandra said. "We both really like adventure. She tends to get in more traveling than I do. We both have an adventurous spirit. I don't have to go and try to find someone to go with me, because I can always rely on her to jump up and say, 'Yeah, let's go do that.'"

Their ability to jump up and travel at a moment's notice has been tempered somewhat by the need to balance their passion for independent filmmaking with the need to make a living. Sandra, who has a bachelor's degree in film and digital media from UC Berkeley, works full-time as



(Above) Although often traveling to exotic locations creating their films, sisters Kelsey (left) and Sandra Doyle continue to call Santa Cruz home.

Photo: Colton Crum



Photo: © Bob Barbour 2017

(Above) Gerard Butler (left) who portrayed big wave surfer Frosty Hesson in the film "Chasing Mavericks" discusses a scene with assistant director Craig Comstock.

an editor for Aptos design company Firefly, where she is in charge of the video department. Kelsey, who has a master's degree in news and documentary journalism from New York University, works for Eric Thiermann's Impact Creative in production and editing. She also is affiliated with the Santa Cruz Film Festival.

Between them, the two sisters have produced documentaries for National Geographic, Oceanic Society, National Science Foundation, United Nations, PBS Newshour, and New York Magazine. Their films include "Abalone Hunters," "The Howl Between Mountains," and "The Wild Life with Gabby Wild."

Living in Santa Cruz, away from the heart of the film industry, has allowed the sisters to be extremely creative in shaping their careers.

"It's kind of like the Wild West," Sandra said. "Being out here is a little like being on the ragged edge of the film industry. I think that creates more opportunity to build your career however you want."

Her film friends in Los Angeles work insane hours relative to the money they earn, she said.

"When I hear about their lifestyle, I'm just like, oh my God, I love filmmaking, I'm passionate about it, but you shouldn't have to sacrifice those things to do what you love," Sandra said. She excels at editing, interviewing, creating storyboards, and in pre- and post-production.

"She's a phenomenal editor," Kelsey said. "Our strengths work together." The feeling is mutual.

"When we get the opportunity to work together, I really value it a lot," Sandra said. "We each have our own strengths and weaknesses. Because we know each other so well, we're able to make a good team. Finding that balance and working together goes smoothly because we know what we're going to be best at. Lately, I've been working more post-production, editing things because I'm not able to travel as much."

Kelsey believes that filmmaking is the best way for her to capture and unleash the creative process. Telling people's stories in a visual way entertains as well as informs, she said, and environmental documentary filmmaking is extra special.

"There is an art to it," she said. "It's also raw. Because unlike making fiction film in Hollywood, which is a whole other world, you're just letting reality unfold. When something happens that's just happening in real life, it's pretty thrilling to be able to capture it. That's the magic moment that Hollywood prepares to capture—it's already known to them. Whereas in documentary filmmaking, reality is unfolding unbeknownst to you. You have to be ready for it."

For Kelsey, much of the magic happens when she's out in nature.

"I feel alone and miniscule in the world," she said. "You're reminded that it's up to you

to make a difference. And it will. Even if it might not mean anything, it's a tiny little step forward. It's going to preserve these amazing places and get people to see how beautiful they are."

Making a long story a short film

For more than 40 years, Eric Thiermann has filmed every kind of video there is—art pieces, feature film, documentaries, commercials, weddings, social media—but the short film is his specialty. His work sizzles with energy and verve. That's why companies such as Google, Seagate, Apple, Plantronics, and Hyundai choose his production agency, Impact Creative, to help launch products, work with web marketing, produce micro-documentaries, and participate in social media campaigns.

"We deliver more than people expect," Thiermann said. "That's our hallmark. And we have fun doing what we do. We have a culture of just enjoying what we do and doing a great job of it."

No wonder these big companies repeatedly hire Impact Creative, which is based in Santa Cruz but also has offices in San Francisco and Venice (California). Wander into any Best Buy, check out the Google table, and you'll watch video made right here in Santa Cruz. The company stays on top of the latest technology, including virtual reality and augmented reality video.

"We are in up to our neck at this point,"

Thiermann said.

For Seagate's latest demonstration of how much data its products can handle, Impact Creative was involved in setting up a multiple experience trade booth for business clientele.

"We had multiple artists from the Santa Cruz area painting in three dimensions," he said. "We had things floating in space. It's sort of like Pokemon Go."

The pace of change is exciting for Thiermann.

"The fourth industrial revolution is getting into augmented reality. It's going to be really interesting to see. I think you're going to see some awe-inspiring immersive videos in the very near future. It's an exciting time to be in the business," he said.

It's also a time when learning to be a filmmaker has never been easier, and the means to do it more available.

"You're not going to learn how to be filmmaker dreaming about making films or watching TV or watching movies," Thiermann said. "You're going to learn how to do it by getting out and pressing the red button. Pointing the camera at something meaningful to you."

Over the years, Thiermann has found that making an emotional connection to the person being filmed is key.

"If you ask the right questions, you can get a CEO not just speaking the company line, but get a feeling for how they actually emote. That's the thing you can't translate," he said, describing his experience shooting a video at Standing Rock. During that shoot, the participants protesting the pipeline were so passionately involved that they wept into the camera.

"Emotion is really important to me when I'm doing video," he said.

Thiermann first fell in love with film as a student at UC Santa Cruz in 1965, the year the university first opened. Someone had asked him to turn a poem into a movie, and his life course was set. He later transferred to UCLA's film school.

Film jobs kept him in Los Angeles until 1976, when a grant from the American Film Institute funded a project that propelled him back to Santa Cruz. He then made documentaries. His film, "Nuclear Shadow: What Can the Children Tell Us," was nominated for an



(Above) Wearing life jackets, Emmy Award winning director Bill Evans (right) and his camera assistant use state-of-the-art equipment while filming white-water rafting in Colorado.

Academy Award in 1984. In 1986 he did camera work on "Women for America," which won an Oscar for best short documentary film.

Documentaries don't pay the bills, but Thiermann still manages to work them into his schedule. He produced the critically

"It was a very interesting piece on health and pets and kids and law and sex and drinks and food," he said. "It was really, really fun. Some things we just get out and do it because it's fun."

Santa Cruz has proved to be fertile ground for a variety of creative work, owing partly to its beautiful setting, social consciousness, and proximity to Silicon Valley. Thiermann's two sons, Kyle and Toby, both are filmmakers, and his daughter, Ariel, is a successful singer-songwriter with her mother Linda Arnold.

"Santa Cruz is paradise," Thiermann said. "I've never found another place I would prefer to live, even for making movies. I encourage anybody to get into the art form and try it. You may really love it."

It's one rung at a time climbing Hollywood's ladder

Who knew the key to a successful career in film was a job at Marini's Candies? Well that and an ABC movie of the week "Brotherhood of Justice" that was filmed in Santa Cruz in the 1980s.

For director-producer Craig Comstock, the movie of the week – where the high school student was a lighting stand-in – cemented his direction, and the candy store job taught him how to get there.

"I worked for Marini Candies on the Boardwalk. I started really young. Josephine Marini and Joe Sr., they taught me a great



(Above) Oscar-winning director Eric Thiermann sets up a shot on one the many productions generated by his Impact Creative.

acclaimed "Calypso Dreams" in 2004 with Michael Horne and Geoffrey Dunn, and recently did an eight-episode piece on women in cannabis.

at Marini's, you worked," he says.

Comstock knew from his high school days that he wanted to attend film school, but actual work in feature films kept getting in the way. He started as a stand-in for actors, in such films as "Killer Clowns From Outer Space," but on the Matthew Broderick film "Out on a Limb," Broderick's "regular" lighting stand-in came in from New York to do it (who's knew there's a career as a lighting stand-in?), and Comstock was offered a job as a production assistant.

That's when that work ethic worked for Comstock, as he compiled 1,000 days on set as a production assistant in movie after movie, allowing him to join the Directors Guild of America.

"There was no nepotism for me. I didn't really know anyone in Hollywood or any filmmakers. It was just all on-the-job experience, meeting people, building relationships, word of mouth," he says. "Once I started getting a couple of films under my belt, my phone started ringing."

Comstock has worked with some of the best in the business, multiple times, including director-writer Brian Helgeland (on "42," "Cirque Du Freak"), director-writer Frank Darabont ("The Mist," "The Majestic") and director-writer Nancy Meyers ("The Holiday," "Something's Gotta Give," "What Women Want").

"It's been a really rewarding experience watching some of the best of the best in Hollywood work," he says. "I start early on in pre-production and usually prep the movie for sometimes up to three months ahead of time before shooting. Watching how (the directors) work, how they run their sets, how they direct, how they operate, (it's) stuff you can't learn in film school. It's been really a rewarding experience to work with such pros."

Comstock has worked on all kinds of film – comedy, action, romance, horror – "I'm game for everything," but likes a good story line best.

One of Comstock's most memorable experiences was working as second assistant director for "Chasing Mavericks," the 2012 film about local big wave surfer Jay Moriarty, much of it shot in Santa Cruz.

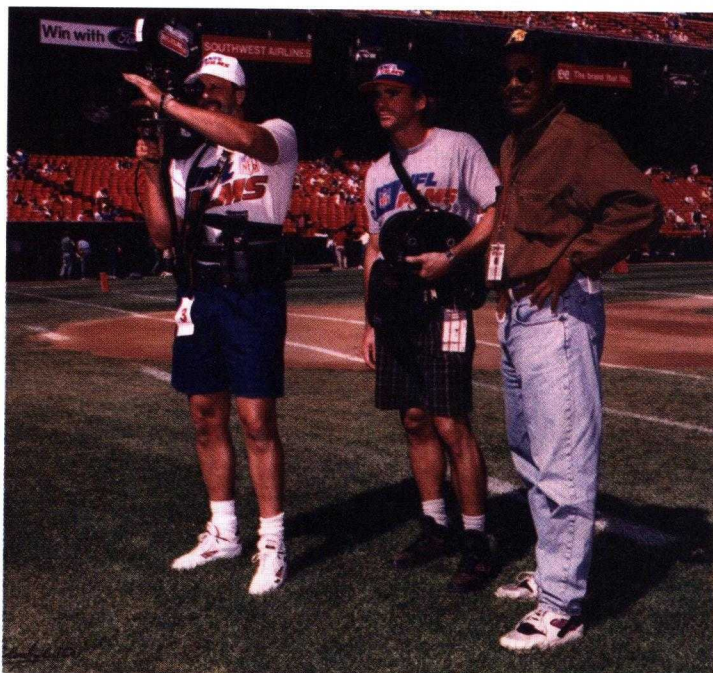
Comstock was in his third month in Russia for "The Darkest Hour" when he heard about the Mavericks movie, then called "Iron Cross." When producers found out he lived in

Santa Cruz, he landed the job.

"Getting to work on a film at home, especially that kind of story, of an iconic Jay Moriarty and the story of Frosty (Hesson), and Ken (Collins). It was a privilege and an honor to work on that project and be part of the team," he says.

As homeboy, Comstock took on extra duties and is quick to give Heather Bonds and Joel Domhoff credit for "a fabulous job coordinating extras." With aerial shots and surf scenes, it was a tough movie to coordinate.

"Because of the story, because everyone knows Jay, Ken, and Frosty, there was a lot of excitement in town about the project," says Comstock, describing a scene with 1,000 extras at Pleasure Point. "It's a really successful day and when a day like that ends, it feels pretty good when it goes off without a problem."



(Above) Bill Evans (left) filming during a 1994 NFL playoff game, between Dallas and the 49ers at Candlestick Park.

One of the tricks to make it run smoothly that he learned from Hollywood casting director and Santa Cruzan Judy Bouley was to make sure the people who "work as an extra or take the time to join us on the set, you want them to have a good experience as well... you want to give them all the information you can, and it will ultimately help you when you put them in front of a camera."

In addition to telling a story about his hometown, he also got to work in his hometown.

"When I go to work, I have to travel and go on the road. My family, my friends — everybody's here. I've always wanted to live

in Santa Cruz and make the adjustment. Have I lost some opportunities and turned down more jobs? Is it a little more travel? Yes, but it's more important to live in area that I love," he says.

"I've had a lot of support from my wife Pamela and son Cooper, and my parents and from friends on this journey," he says.

Still Comstock is in it for the long run. It must be that Marini work ethic.

"The Hollywood ladder is never ending. You never really hit the top. You gotta keep battling through the disappointment and keep working ahead. There's a lot of films I want to make down the road," he says.

When there is only one chance to catch the action

We've all seen the iconic images— footballs intercepted, basketballs dunked, baseballs smashed, records broken, Olympic medals won. For many of these scenes, producer and cameraman Bill Evans is the man behind the camera. He's got a knack for capturing critical moments that occur at great speed.

"I got to be really good at following the action. That's what sports cinematography is," said Evans. He has won two Emmys for his work at NBC, for Best Sports Film Cinematographer at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games and for a profile on freestyle skiing and aerials at the XIX Winter Olympic Games.

A love of downhill skiing and a resulting broken leg first led Evans to sports cinematography. Unable to ski at the time, he helped some friends who'd formed a ski film company shoot the action, capturing a crucial scene. They told him he had the knack. That led to more sports and ski films, including work as cameraman for Warren Miller Entertainment Snow Skiing and as

producer, director, and cameraman for NBC Sports World's "World Professional Skiing."

"I was really fortunate that I got the opportunities that I don't think a lot of people got, and I capitalized on it," Evans said. "I got big breaks in my early career that catapulted me right to the top."

Evans called NFL Films for a chance to try out even though he'd never shot football before. He sent them a fishing shot—a 200-frames-per-second, super-slow-motion, 10-second film of a marlin leaping from the water—and even though they'd never let anyone without five or more years of shooting football even try out, Evans got the nod.



Photo: Courtesy Hawks Peak Productions

(Above) Kelsey Doyle while working on a film to help save Sumatra's endangered elephants, which featured wildlife conservationist Gabby Wild.

Maguire" and "Time Masters," shot World Cup Soccer (1995), directed photography for Major League Baseball—including a high-definition shot of Barry Bonds 600th home run—all while keeping his ground-level, high speed cameraman job with NFL Films.

In addition to football, the Olympics are Evans' specialty. He is director of photography for numerous Olympic athlete profiles for both summer and winter games, and he's directed multi-camera live coverage for NBC. In recent years, however, the pace has slowed.

"I'm not shooting as much as I was," he said, noting he dropped Major League Baseball from a schedule that includes football, basketball and soccer. Evans also travels the country shooting games for ESPN's "SEC Inside."

So what's a fast-moving

near Nisene Marks Park in 1998. Aptos also is home to Bill Evans Productions, which specializes in TV shows, music videos, documentary films, TV commercials, and corporate films. He shoots with an array of equipment for all types of film and video production. In his 30 years, Evans has served as director of photography, camera operator, production manager, editor, producer, and director.

"I shoot my own productions in Santa Cruz," he said. His film library includes stock-piled footage of athletes and scenic locales, including the crumbling cement ship. "I'm freelance, my camera is for hire." Evans also spends time and talent on private projects limited to family and friends and causes he believes in, including the Arthritis Foundation and FitKids, which provides afterschool fitness programs.

He's seen a few changes in film technology and culture over the years.

"The whole filming thing in Santa Cruz has changed a lot," he said. "Everyone is networking right here in Santa Cruz."

He has done a lot of TV shows right out of his barn.

"This whole place has beautiful light," he said. "All of the green inland and all of the blue by the coast. In fall, in this area specifi-

At the tryout, Evans showed his knack for getting the shot. Evans remembers shooting well that day. He was on.

"Who opened all the doors for me was NFL Films," Evans said. "I learned under these guys who shot snow skiing, but it didn't have as big a stage. The National Football League had a huge stage, and I was fortunate to get a job with NFL Films. And they were considered the best cinematographers known throughout the world. The way they shot. The way they made movies. So they gave me credentials I wouldn't have gotten for myself."

Within a year, Evans was traveling around with Morley Safer, behind the camera with celebrities such as Robert Redford for "60 Minutes," and shooting the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit show and home video for NBC.

"I was pinching myself," he said. "A lot of people don't get that fast of an opportunity."

The trick was making a living year-round. Evans was a camera operator for "Jerry



(Above) Eric Thiermann filming one of the world's largest bells in Poland's Wawel Cathedral while creating his documentary "The Heart of a Bell"

guy like Evans doing in Santa Cruz? Well, he said, it's plenty close to the airport, and just a few hours from the slopes of Lake Tahoe, where he still avidly skis. He also has a home in Sun Valley, Idaho.

And besides that, "Santa Cruz is the nicest place to live," Evans said. He moved here in 1977 and bought a place in Aptos,

cally, there are so many trees that emit their pollen into the air, and it makes the light into this gorgeous red color. You can do some fine photography around that time of year."

From the run-and-gun action of the football field to the thrill of skimming over the snow, Bill Evans always comes home to the light of the Monterey Bay. ■

Photo: Courtesy Impact Creative