

# Wailuku Film Festival Unveils First Wave of Films

*First 12 films announced across Hawai'i, Indigenous Voices, Watersports and Student Short categories ahead of June 17-21 debut in historic Wailuku.*

WAILUKU, HI, UNITED STATES, April 8, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The inaugural Wailuku Film Festival (WFF) is announcing its first wave of selections and key partnerships ahead of its debut, June 17 to 21, 2026, in historic Wailuku. Over five days, the County-supported festival will connect filmmakers and audiences to celebrate storytelling rooted in place, culture and collaboration.



Wailuku Film Festival (WFF) welcomes both emerging voices and established artists across all formats and genres in four program categories: Hawai'i, Indigenous Voices, Watersports, and Student.

"The Wailuku Film Festival is more than a celebration of film — it's a reflection of our community's creativity, culture and shared stories," said Mayor Richard Bissen. "This festival will bring people together, support local artists and businesses, and showcase Wailuku as a vibrant place where ideas and talent can thrive. It strengthens our sense of connection while inspiring the next generation of storytellers in Maui County."

“

A film festival is a vital step beyond the classroom for student filmmakers... [that] support the transition from student to filmmaker, shaping the next generation of storytellers in Hawai'i."  
*Christine Acham, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's School of Cinematic Arts*

The County's Maui Film Office is organizing and supporting the festival, along with numerous local businesses, organizations and individual donors.

The initial sampling of 12 independent grassroots motion pictures offers a cross-section of work across WFF's four core categories: Hawai'i, Indigenous Voices, Watersports and Student Shorts.

The Hawai'i and Indigenous Voices categories reflect a wide and powerful range of storytelling, including "Sacred Island: Living the Dream," which celebrates 50 years of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, produced by NMG Network for A Hana Hou!. Also, the award-winning short "Kūkini," directed by Mitchel Merrick, which depicts the Battle of Kepaniwai in 'Īao Valley and stars Paula Fuga alongside Maui's Moses Goods (Chief of War).

Another highly anticipated showcase film, "Lāhainā Rising" directed by Matty Schweitzer, is an award-winning documentary that takes audiences inside the August 8, 2023 wildfire, capturing the devastation alongside the lived experiences, history, and cultural identity of the Lāhainā community. The film serves as both a record of what was lost and a reflection of the people and place that continue to endure.

In "Before the Moon Falls," award-winning Hawai'i filmmaker Kimberlee Bassford delivers an intimate, eight-year-in-the-making portrait of acclaimed Samoan writer Sia Figiel, exploring the complexities of mental health and its far-reaching impact. From Yukon, Canada, "River Revelations" by Chantal Rousseau and Darcy Tara McDiarmid moves through a sacred landscape where animals and ancestors intersect, reminding us that the land continues to speak.

In "Reel Wāhine of Hawai'i: Pākē Salmon," director Vera Zambonelli profiles an award-winning filmmaker and mentor whose work bridges storytelling and ocean stewardship. Lisette Marie Flanary's award-winning "MĀHŪ" honors a groundbreaking theatrical work by Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne, reclaiming the respected place of māhū within Hawaiian culture. "All the Things I Leave You," directed by Jade Castro and produced by Maui's Lance Collins, unfolds as a generational story of conflict and connection set against the backdrop of the Philippines—this film is part one of a six-part series.



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The Incredible Paulk, from directors Christoph Gelfand and Caroline Losneck, follows visually impaired surfer Aaron Paulk as he navigates both the waves and the aftermath of the 2023 Lahaina wildfire.

“Hui O Wa‘a Kaulua,” directed by Moloka‘i auteur Matt Yamashita, brings forward a vital and largely untold chapter of Hawai‘i’s cultural renaissance, tracing the origins of a Lahaina-based movement formed in 1975 that helped ignite a resurgence of voyaging, identity and community. With the Mo‘okiha O Pi‘ilani canoe currently under construction and the hui’s reestablishment on Front Street, this movement is laying a tangible new foundation for Lahaina, connecting the past, present and next generation of Hawaiian voyagers.

Emerging voices take center stage in the Student Shorts program. “Leihana,” directed by Mid-Pacific High School students Layla Yamamoto and Michi Yorkston, follows a young Native Hawaiian and Micronesian student navigating identity and exclusion at an elite Mānoa school, drawn from the lived experiences of its creators and featuring Kaipō Dudoit, a Hawaiian actor who appears in Disney’s live-action *Lilo & Stitch* (2025).

In “Ride Pending,” director Sam Tiwanak of UH Mānoa’s School of the Cinematic Arts crafts a tense, surreal journey through Honolulu, where a stranded hiker’s ride home becomes increasingly uncertain and potentially dangerous.

In Watersports, “The Incredible Paulk,” from directors Christoph Gelfand and Caroline Losneck, follows visually impaired surfer Aaron Paulk as he navigates both the waves and the aftermath of the 2023 Lahaina wildfire, redefining resilience and connection to the ocean. A number of remarkable watersports features and shorts are in consideration, including those from Maui residents.

“We’re proud to present films that are not only artistically compelling, but deeply rooted in place and identity,” said Maui Film Commissioner and WFF Director Brian Kohne. “This first wave reflects the caliber of storytelling that we’re building the festival around and provides a preview of the remarkable films programmer Barry Wurst and the judges, including veteran critics Rick Chatenever and Terry Hunter, are considering for exhibition.”

Submissions remain open through May 1, 2026, and filmmakers from Hawai‘i, across the Pacific and around the world are encouraged to apply.

Tickets for the general public will go on sale May 27, 2026, alongside the release of the full festival schedule that includes workshops, panels, parties and Fuzz Flix Fringe Fest, a late-night, out-of-competition showcase celebrating “the bizarre, the bold and the beautifully unhinged.” The festival event kicks off on June 17, and concludes June 21 at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center’s Castle Theater for the Best of the Wailuku Film Festival Audience Choice encore screenings in the Hawai‘i and Watersports categories.

The festival recently secured media partnerships with Pacific Media Group, MauiNow.com and Akakū Maui Community Media. Venue partners Maui Academy of Performing Arts (MAPA), MauiOnStage and the Maui Arts & Cultural Center are also supporting the festival.

“Beyond screenings and awards, the Wailuku Film Festival is a primary initiative of the Maui Film Office to establish a thriving film industry while nurturing and empowering a new community of storytellers, creators, and audiences who revolve around meaningful cinema,” Kohne said. “An economy can emerge in Wailuku town, an identity. We aim to recognize and showcase the talent that live among us, who could use our support and admiration as they begin their own artist’s journey.”

[For more information, visit www.wailukufilm.com.](http://www.wailukufilm.com)

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