

Thousands Gather for Inaugural Wailuku Film Festival as Jury and Audience Award Winners Announced

Sold-out screenings, standing ovations, and powerful stories mark a successful first year for Maui's newest film festival.

WAILUKU, HI, UNITED STATES, June 25, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Historic Wailuku Town came alive this past week as thousands of filmmakers, artists, students, industry professionals, and film lovers gathered for the inaugural Wailuku Film Festival, a five-day celebration of storytelling that transformed the heart of Maui into a vibrant hub of cinema, culture, and community.



From June 17–21, audiences filled the historic Īao Theater and the newly activated The Naylor for screenings, filmmaker conversations, panels, and special events spanning Hawaiʻi cinema, Indigenous storytelling, watersports films, animation, and emerging student voices. The festival culminated with two Best of Fest showcases at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center's Castle Theater, where audiences gathered one final time to celebrate the films that resonated most deeply throughout the week.

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Founder of Hisako Film Lab*

The inaugural festival presented more than 100 films from Hawaiʻi and around the world, welcoming filmmakers and audiences from across the islands, the continental United States, and international communities. For five days, the streets of Wailuku buzzed with conversation, connection, and creativity as filmmakers and audiences mingled between screenings, proving there is a strong appetite for a world-class film festival rooted in Maui.

“The Wailuku Film Festival is a celebration of the aspects of cinema and storytelling that really

matter. The programming highlights a beautifully diverse lineup of films that challenge, inspire, entertain, and spark thoughtful dialogue regardless of your cultural background. I left the festival feeling more connected to my home and full of hope for our future. I can't wait for next year." – Destin Daniel Cretton, Founder of Hisako Film Lab

Among the festival's most celebrated works was *Lāhainā Rising*, by Matty Schweitzer, De Andre Makakoa, Blake Ramelb, and Phil Schlieder, which earned the Jury Award for Hawaiʻi Feature after moving audiences with its powerful portrayal of resilience, recovery, and community in the wake of the Maui wildfires. In the Hawaiʻi short film categories, NMG Network produced the film *Sacred Island: Living the Dream for A Hana Hou!*, which celebrates 50 years of the Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻŌhana, and the film merited the Jury Award for Documentary Short. Mitchel Merrick's *Kūkini* was recognized with the Jury Award for Narrative Short, while audience members also rallied behind Austin Alimbuyuguen's *Concrete* and *Salt*, which captured the Audience Choice Award for Hawaiʻi Short.



The festival's Indigenous cinema program emerged as one of its most powerful and talked-about showcases. The Jury Award for Indigenous Feature was presented to *The Stolen Children of Aotearoa* by Julian Arahanga, while Lisette Marie Flanary's *Māhū* earned the Jury Award for Indigenous Documentary Short, and Eric Michael Hernandez's *Courage* received the Jury Award for Indigenous Narrative Short. Audience members selected *Mālama Mākua* by Mikey Inouye as their favorite Indigenous Feature, while De Andre Makakoa's film *Remembering Wai*, and Laura Margulies and Hinalaimoana Wong-Kalu's *Kapo Maʻi Lele* earned Audience Choice honors in the documentary and narrative short categories, respectively.

Watersports films proved to be a major draw throughout the festival, with sold-out screenings and standing-room-only crowds celebrating stories from the ocean. The Jury Award for

Watersports Feature went to Harbour Chronicles: Shaping a Legacy, filmmaker Chris Sardelis' moving portrait of legendary surfboard shaper Rich Harbour and his enduring impact on surfing culture. The Jury Award for Watersports Short was awarded to The Sea and She by Tyler Shortt, and Produced by Sunny Kazama, audiences cast their votes for SURFILMUSIC, the beloved surfing and music film presented by Jack Johnson. The Audience Choice Watersports Feature went to adaptive surfer Josh Bogle's inspiring story in Finding True North, which captured the Audience Choice Award for Watersports Short.

The festival's commitment to nurturing emerging filmmakers was reflected in its robust student showcases. In the high school competition, Jury Awards were presented to Resilient Reefs from Maui Huliau Foundation and Toilet World from Hisako Film Lab. At the college level, Nā Kāne ʻĒlima by Hawaiʻi-based filmmaker Ethan Chang, Loyola Marymount University Graduate, showcased a moving exploration of healing, identity, and purpose through hula, receiving top honors alongside UH Mānoa filmmaker Anne Di Martino's James, a heartfelt film centered on family, love, and growing up with a sibling with Down syndrome.

"To see Nā Kāne ʻĒlima so warmly received by the Maui community and audiences beyond reinforced the growing support for Hawaiʻi filmmakers who tell stories from the inside looking out not the other way around. I strive for authenticity in both my life and my work, so witnessing people embrace and connect with that authentic narrative was deeply meaningful and made my heart full." – Ethan Chang

Animation also found a devoted audience at the inaugural festival. The Jury Award for Animated Short was presented to City on the Edge of Whatever by filmmaker Aidan McDermott, a standout work that captivated audiences with its artistic originality and imagination.

"This first year exceeded our hopes in every way. The energy in the theaters, on the streets of Wailuku, and among the filmmakers and audiences reminded us why film festivals matter. They create connection, spark conversation, and bring communities together through shared stories." –Barry Wurst, Festival Programmer

As Head Programmer, Wurst spent months reviewing submissions and carefully curating a lineup that reflected the festival's core pillars: Hawaiʻi stories, Indigenous voices, watersports culture, animation, and the next generation of filmmakers.

Festival organizers extend their deepest gratitude to the filmmakers, volunteers, sponsors, community partners, and audiences whose enthusiasm and support helped bring the inaugural event to life.

Plans are already underway for the second annual Wailuku Film Festival, continuing its mission to elevate diverse voices, celebrate Hawaiʻi's creative community, and establish Wailuku as a celebrated destination for film and storytelling. For additional details, please visit <https://www.wailukufilm.com>

About Wailuku Film Festival

The Wailuku Film Festival is an annual celebration of independent cinema held in Historic Wailuku Town on Maui. Dedicated to showcasing Hawaiʻi filmmakers, Indigenous voices, watersports culture, animation, and emerging student talent, the festival brings together audiences and creators from around the world through the power of storytelling.

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