

MacGillivray Freeman's To Fly! Celebrates 50 Years of Flight and Giant Screen Innovation

Historic film marks 50 continuous years at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, the longest theatrical run in history

LAGUNA BEACH, CA, UNITED STATES, July 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Fifty years ago today, a groundbreaking film took audiences soaring and forever changed the future of immersive cinema.



To Fly! premiered 50 years ago at the National Air and Space Museum.

On July 1, 1976, *To Fly!*, directed and produced by [MacGillivray Freeman Films](#), premiered at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum as the centerpiece of the museum's grand opening celebration and America's Bicentennial. Half a century later, the film continues to screen at the museum, making it the longest-running film in the history of a single theater.

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Greg MacGillivray, Co-Founder, MacGillivray Freeman Films.

More than an enduring audience favorite, *To Fly!* is widely recognized as the film that helped establish giant screen cinema as a global museum attraction. At the time of its release, giant screen filmmaking was in its infancy and only a handful of IMAX® theaters existed worldwide. The film's innovative aerial photography and immersive storytelling demonstrated the extraordinary power of the giant screen experience, inspiring museum directors across the globe to build their own giant screen theaters.

Today, it is estimated that more than 100 million people have experienced *To Fly!* in giant screen theaters worldwide, including over 15 million visitors at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum alone—an all-time attendance record for a single film in one theater.

"To Fly! proved that giant screen films could do something audiences had never experienced before," said Greg MacGillivray, co-founder of MacGillivray Freeman Films and director of To Fly!. "It wasn't simply about documenting flight—it was about making people feel as though they were flying. That emotional connection helped define what giant screen cinema could become."

"For 50 years, To Fly! has been an unforgettable part of the visitor experience at the National Air and Space Museum," said Jackie Mollet, Director of Theaters, Group Sales and Reservations at Smithsonian

Enterprises. "Generations of visitors have begun their journey through aviation history by experiencing the thrill of flight on our IMAX screen. Its extraordinary longevity is a testament to the film's timeless storytelling and enduring ability to inspire curiosity and exploration."

The film traces the history of flight in America through spectacular aerial imagery, transporting audiences from the earliest balloon ascents and barnstorming biplanes to soaring hang gliders, the Blue Angels and breathtaking landscapes viewed from above. Its immersive cinematography established a new benchmark for experiential filmmaking and became the blueprint for generations of giant screen documentaries that followed.

"To Fly! demonstrated that giant screen films could be both educational and enormously entertaining," said Shaun MacGillivray, President of MacGillivray Freeman Films. "Its success helped accelerate the growth of giant screen theaters around the world and laid the foundation for the industry we know today."

Over five decades, To Fly! has received some of the industry's highest honors. It remains the second highest-grossing giant screen documentary of all time, behind MacGillivray Freeman's Everest. In 1996, it became the first giant screen film selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress, recognizing its enduring cultural, historical, and artistic significance. In 2001, members of the Giant Screen Theater Association voted To Fly! into the IMAX Hall of Fame, and the film also received the Best Film of the Decade Award from the Informational Film Producers of America.

Throughout its remarkable history, To Fly! has also served as an ambassador for American filmmaking. It was screened during the inauguration celebrations for President Ronald Reagan,



To Fly! features scenes with the Blue Angels.

who later presented a copy of the film as a diplomatic gift to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The film has been viewed by heads of state and dignitaries from around the world and was held over for an additional year at Japan's Space Expo at the request of the country's Prime Minister, allowing another two million people to experience the film.

As MacGillivray Freeman Films celebrates this milestone, *To Fly!* remains a testament to the enduring power of cinematic innovation and the spirit of exploration that has defined giant screen filmmaking for generations.

About MacGillivray Freeman Films

MacGillivray Freeman Films is the world's leading independent producer and distributor of giant screen films, with more than \$1 billion in worldwide box office ticket sales. For more than five decades, the company has created immersive documentaries that inspire audiences through breathtaking cinematography and powerful storytelling. Its acclaimed films include *Everest*, *National Parks Adventure*, *America's Musical Journey*, *Dream Big: Engineering Our World*, *Superhuman Body: World of Medical Marvels*, *Humpback Whales*, and many others. Two of the company's films, *The Living Sea and Dolphins*, received Academy Award® nominations for Best Documentary Short Subject, while *Everest* remains the highest-grossing giant screen documentary of all time.

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