

Wailuku Film Festival's inaugural year establishes Maui as a global gathering place for independent cinema

More than 5,300 attendees, 100+ films, sold-out screenings, and global media reach mark the beginning of Hawai'i's newest international film destination.

WAILUKU, HI, UNITED STATES, July 24, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In its inaugural year, the Wailuku Film Festival transformed Historic Wailuku into a vibrant gathering place for filmmakers, students, cultural practitioners, industry leaders and audiences from across Hawai'i and around the world. Over five action-packed days, the festival demonstrated the power of independent cinema to unite communities, elevate Indigenous voices, celebrate ocean culture, inspire emerging filmmakers and strengthen Maui's creative economy.



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Mayor Richard Bissen

Held June 17–21, 2026, the festival was an initiative of the Maui Film Office, supported by the County of Maui and presented by Pacific Media Group and Hampton Inn Maui North Shore.

By the Numbers

The event drew more than 4,000 attendees in the first four days, plus another 1,300 the final day for the Best of Fest at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center. The festival presented 100+ films, including more than 55 Hawai'i-

made films, 30 student productions, and filmmakers representing 15 countries and Indigenous nations.

Numerous screenings at the historic Īao Theater sold out, while festival programming generated more than 12.5 million media impressions across press and social media placements, extending Maui's stories to audiences across the Hawaiian Islands, the continental United States and internationally. Wailuku town businesses reported increased activity and sales throughout the festival.

Wailuku Comes Alive

Throughout the week, Historic Wailuku came alive as audiences moved between theaters, filmmaker conversations, coffee shops, restaurants, galleries, boutiques and local businesses. New collaborations were born, students connected with industry professionals and conversations continued long after the credits rolled. The festival quickly became more than an event; it became a gathering place for Hawai'i's creative community.

From the beginning, Wailuku Film Festival was envisioned as a place where Hawai'i filmmakers could share the screen with internationally recognized artists, where Indigenous stories could be celebrated authentically and where emerging creatives could see a future for themselves in the film industry without leaving home.

One of the festival's defining achievements was its Indigenous Voices Program, which brought together Native Hawaiian, Māori and Indigenous filmmakers exploring culture, language, genealogy, environmental stewardship and resilience. Their work demonstrated cinema's unique ability to preserve knowledge, strengthen identity and connect generations.

Another signature of the inaugural festival was its acclaimed Watersports Program, celebrating



the artistry and culture of life on the water through award-winning surf documentaries, ocean adventure films and stories of exploration and conservation. Highlights included the Maui premiere of SURFILMUSIC, featuring Jack Johnson and a celebrated lineup of surfers, musicians and filmmakers whose work reflects the deep connection between ocean, culture, and creativity. The festival also welcomed home acclaimed Maui-raised filmmaker Destin Daniel Cretton, who took time out of his demanding schedule on the eve of the global release of Spider-Man: Brand New Day (July 31) to encourage and mentor the next generation of Hawaiʻi storytellers.

The Next Generation of Storytellers

The festival also invested deeply in Hawaiʻi's next generation of storytellers. Through partnerships with organizations including Pacific Media Group, Akakū Maui Community Media, Hisako Film Lab, Maui Huliau Foundation, Mid-Pacific Institute, University of Hawaiʻi Maui College Academy for Creative Media and the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa School of Cinematic Arts, students screened their work alongside established filmmakers while building relationships that can shape future careers.

"Presenting Nā Kāne ʻElima at the inaugural Wailuku Film Festival was truly a milestone moment in my life," said Hawaiʻi filmmaker Ethan Chang, a student at Loyola Marymount University. "Seeing the Maui community embrace a perspective of hula that is rarely shown in mainstream media reinforced the growing support for Hawaiʻi filmmakers telling our own stories from the inside out. Witnessing audiences connect with that authenticity was deeply meaningful."

The festival also welcomed Hawaiʻi's creative diaspora filmmakers and storytellers who have built careers around the world to return home, share their work, mentor emerging artists and strengthen Hawaiʻi's growing creative ecosystem.

"One of the most meaningful aspects of the Wailuku Film Festival was seeing so many talented Hawaiʻi filmmakers return home—not simply to screen their work, but to be recognized and celebrated by the communities that shaped them," said Mayor Richard Bissen. "For too long, many of our artists have had to leave Hawaiʻi to build their careers and find opportunities. This festival reminds us that their stories belong here, too. By creating a place where local filmmakers can share their work alongside internationally acclaimed artists, mentor the next generation, and receive the recognition they deserve at home, we're investing not only in our creative economy, but our people. That's something our entire community can be proud of."

Festival Director Brian Kohne said the first year of the Wailuku Film Festival exceeded everyone's hopes and affirmed why storytelling matters. "What we witnessed wasn't simply audiences watching films," Kohne said. "We saw a community come together. Students discovered new possibilities, filmmakers found one another, Indigenous voices were celebrated, the ocean found its place on the big screen and Maui shared its stories with the world. That's exactly what this festival was created to do."

Planning is already underway for the 2027 Wailuku Film Festival, with expanded opportunities for Hawaiʻi filmmakers, Indigenous storytellers, watersports filmmakers, students, educators and community partners. Building on the momentum of its inaugural year, the festival is committed to establishing Wailuku as one of the Pacific's premier destinations for independent cinema, cultivating the next generation of storytellers and strengthening Hawaiʻi's creative economy.

For more information, visit www.wailukufilm.com.

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