

# Neon Q&A



*Neon* is one of five **MIFF Premiere Fund**-supported films for 2015.

We sat down with director Lawrence Johnston to ask him about the making of his documentary, his love of neon lighting and more.

## ***Neon* celebrates the aesthetics and invention of the neon sign. Why does it hold such a fascination for you?**

I have always been interested in neon, from seeing it in real life, and in the movies. So much so that many years ago I would look for images and bought some books on neon and learnt more about its invention. My main attraction to it is the glow: there is nothing like neon in terms of its form. Every neon sign you see across the world – apart from some small generic beer signs – is handmade to this day, and that is an amazing thing in this world where everything is constantly changing and people's attention spans are getting shorter and we are so able to embrace many things of lesser quality.

Some of my favourite neon moments in the movies include Hitchcock's use of neon in *Vertigo*, *Rope* and the Bates Motel in *Psycho*. And *It's a Wonderful Life* with James Stewart, where his small town is 'neonised' in a nightmare sequence. Then there are real-life locations like The Boneyard in Las Vegas, where iconic Las Vegas casino neons have been saved: they are incredible. By making the *Neon* film, I got to explore all the of the things about neon that I love. It was terrific.

## **How did your early experience in directing fictions influence you on working in documentary?**

Much documentary work I see lacks style and emotion. It is the combination of these that I try to bring together to tell a story. Emotion, to me, is particularly important when I'm planning interviews, as the people who are ultimately up there on the screen need to be interesting and hopefully excited about what they are talking about for the audience. It is my job, given that I conduct the interviews on all of my films, to get to know the subjects to a point and really direct them – as much as one can for them to have the

freedom to express themselves – but also to elicit as much emotion from them as possible, to enhance the film's content and story. If people like you as a director and see that what you are trying to achieve has quality and ambition, then they are usually interested in giving their best performance.

Following this, in the Edit Room, the mise-en-scène of the documentary form comes into play and it is here that the images one has created to surround the interview content find their form. So for me the use of voice, timing and music is integral to the process, along with archival aspects or, say, reception, as in *Eternity*. The work done in collaboration with composers Antony Partos and Cezary Skubiszewski has been integral in terms of being a major part of the emotional mood and force of some of my films. These images and moments are going to be there forever and you need make them as affecting as possible, particularly as this is the first film of this length ever produced on neon, so there was the responsibility of making quality work.

**You filmed in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Cincinnati and New York: how does neon's presence in the United States compare to Europe or Asia?**

For me the most dynamic neon story is the North American story. It was here that it was embraced on a huge scale in terms of its popularity, design and commercial usage. You have iconic neon hotspots like Times Square in New York, Los Angeles and of course Las Vegas, which are all explored in the film in a really dynamic way. Neon really changed the visual landscape in the early 20th century and has had its ups and downs and now again being affected by the advent of LED.

Neon was, of course, also used in Europe –including Paris, where it originated – as well as China and Japan. While their neon is distinctive, the journey of neon in these locations was less dynamic for me in terms of investigating a substantial narrative for the film. I think there are a number of neon films that could be made, but in terms of making a cohesive narrative journey I think what we have achieved is dynamic but also sheds lights on other international locations.

**A documentary on neon and lights necessarily has a strong visual dimension. How did you organise your work with Eron Sheean, the director of photography?**

This is the third film Eron Sheean has shot for me. We previously worked on a very personal film about my family for SBS, entitled *The Dream of Love*; we also worked together on *Once a Queen*, which explored the women who had been crowned Jacaranda Queen in Grafton since 1935, also for SBS.

Eron and I discussed at length visual ideas for the film from existing locations, archival film as well as neon's use in narrative film. With any film there is a schedule and a budget and only so much can be achieved in any given shoot. We literally had something like three nights to shoot location material in the four American cities we visited, and separate to this was the shooting of the interviews. We had always planned for the interviewees to be shot against a green screen to utilise our time by bringing

subjects to the studio and have the flexibility of matting in their backgrounds appropriate to each.

My past films have always strived to have a classic visual beauty and I think this continues in *Neon*, which is just so visual and inviting. The combination of the beauty of the film and the quality and excitement of the interviewees has resulted in what I set out to do: make a visually stunning and insightful celebration of all that is neon.

**What are you working on next?**

I have worked in drama and documentary and have written a feature drama entitled *Love Me Tender*, which is a family drama based on my own family. When my mother died, my sister took my mother's clothes and made what I guess you would call a memory panel of small swatches of each of article of clothing. She sprayed it with perfume I had given my mother and sent the panel to me as a gift. I was deeply moved by this and so it was the inspiration for *Love Me Tender*.

I also have some documentary projects in development, but as we know we can dream about them as a film project, but all film work in this country is predicated on raising the finance as film is such an expensive medium. I am thankful to the Melbourne Film Festival Premiere Fund, who were the main integral element to make *Neon* become a reality. Without it the fund there would be no *Neon* or any of the many other quality films which they have invested in over the years.