

20Q: Catching up with BIFF Executive Director Max Maiken

By Greg Little glittle@gazettextra.com 15 hrs ago



Max Maiken

Angela Major

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Editor's note: Kicks presents 20Q, a feature that introduces readers to people involved in the area's arts and entertainment community. Compiled by Kicks Editor Greg Little, each piece will include a short bio, photo and answers to questions that provide insight into not only that person's artistic interests but also his or her unique personality.

Max Maiken

A Beloit native, Maiken earned a degree in economics at Beloit College before landing his first jobs: working with the Beloit Janesville Symphony Orchestra and serving as office manager for the Beloit International Film Festival. He stepped away eventually, spending a year making music in Brazil, touring and recording with several different bands and artists.

Upon his return to the U.S., Maiken programmed entertainment at a fine arts center in Arkansas before eventually finding his way back to the Midwest. He re-entered the film world via the Hollywood Film Festival, where he worked in development. He has since found his way back home to become the new executive director for BIFF, a role he took over from former ED Rod Beaudoin after last year's event.

After watching countless films, Maiken and his team will present the 2018 Beloit International Film Festival from Feb. 23-March 4 in locations throughout the city.

To learn more, visit BeloitFilmFest.org.

1. You watch hundreds of movies each year in preparation for BIFF. After that much screen time, do you have any desire to go see one at a theater for recreation? Occasionally. I have felt starved to read more. I picked up a subscription to *The New Yorker* this year, which has helped.

2. In your opinion, what is the single greatest flaw in films of the modern day? The overuse of deus ex machina in script writing. Deus ex machina is a literary device in the script where an unexplained character or event enters the scene to resolve a seemingly impossible situation. Just like any device, it should be used sparingly for emphasis. But I find that many films overly rely on it.

3. Share your favorite movie quote: “Just naturally blabby, I guess”—Robert Redford as The Sundance Kid in “Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid.”

4. Share something casual film fans don’t know about BIFF but need to. The time commitment and production power it takes to produce the festival. We have a team of about 15 prescreeners in Beloit and across the country to help sift through content. We have more than 400 volunteers in our database to help us produce the festival as venue captains, techs, box office volunteers, etc. Staff size might be small, but we have an enormous footprint in the community.

5. What three films that will be screened at this year’s festival are you most excited about? “Song of Sway Lake”: The music, locale and characters really resonated with me. If you’ve ever been to Door County or to a lake up north during the summer, you’ll understand the magic that is conveyed through the film. There is mystery, adventure and a dash of nostalgia that keeps the viewer engaged throughout the film. Besides, who doesn’t like Cole Porter?; “Land Grab”: Detroit is known for its decay, but this is an interesting story about a community stakeholder who is investing in its redevelopment. The Midwest is in the midst of redefining itself as a post-industrial region, and this is a story that portrays one solution to fix the blight; and “Aquarians”: A great Wisconsin film with a strong cast. The writing is excellent, and the acting backs it up. It’s amazing to see the talent coming out of our own backyard, and this is the perfect film to showcase that. It’s a film that speaks of conflict and resolution framed around two estranged brothers—one a saint and the other a sinner—and the friction that eventually brings them closer together.

6. By the time BIFF rolls around, how many films will you have watched this year? Hundreds, but many are shorts.

7. What is your all-time favorite movie? Just like a favorite song, a favorite movie depends on how it speaks to me at the time. Although one that has spoken to me time after time is Wes Anderson’s “*Darjeeling Limited*,” there are subplots that I have only just discovered after seeing the film a dozen times. I enjoy content like that. “*The Big Lebowski*” is another great example. It’s a film that gets better each time I watch it. My appreciation for the film grows as I mature.

8. Share an early experience that convinced you that you wanted to have a career that involved film? As a millennial, I may never enjoy a traditional “career,” but I knew I wanted to go into the arts early on. I’ve always enjoyed the people and conversation in the arts community, and it was something I knew I wanted to be included in. A unique experience I had growing up was getting to watch films with my dad. Once a week or every other week, if we were well behaved, we’d go rent a movie to watch together as a family on Saturday night. Most of the time, these were old noir films or musicals from the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s, which would have been the films my dad grew up with. My favorite films growing up were much different from my peers. Early on, I was obsessed with Glenn Miller’s “*Sun Valley Serenade*.” “*Chattanooga Choo Choo*” was my first favorite song, and Tex Beneke inspired me to want to play tenor sax. We watched our Laurel and Hardy tapes until they were unplayable.

9. As a college student, you circumnavigated the world during a semester at sea through the University of Virginia. What inspired you to do that, and what was the coolest thing you saw while doing it? There wasn’t one country or region that I wanted to focus on, so I decided to see a little bit of everything. From sleeping in hammocks on a riverboat in the Amazon to a safari in South Africa, it’s hard to say what the coolest thing was—although I did stumble across The Who in concert in Tokyo. That was totally unexpected. Skydiving in Namibia was also fun. Sorry, Mom.

10. You hold a bachelor’s of arts degree in economics from Beloit College. How did a numbers guy get into the film business? Economics interested me greatly, and I enjoyed the challenge. But after graduating, I wanted to try something different. I also graduated from college during the peak of the recession, so options were limited, and I really wasn’t ready for an office job. I craved adventure and the flexibility to pursue other interests. The arts seemed to be the avenue for me.

11. What is the difference between watching a movie and watching a movie being considered for inclusion in a film festival? Films for submission must be watched with a critical eye looking at a number of criteria which we outline (writing, story, pacing, cinematography, audio, acting, etc.). However, I’ve found that I carry that checklist mentally whenever I watch content. It really can’t be turned off at this point.

12. You have a musical background and formerly worked for the Beloit Janesville Symphony Orchestra. What convinced you to go the way of film rather than music? I simply followed the opportunities. In 2013-14, I toured with a band from Brazil. The project went cold, so I definitely tried to make something out of my music. When I came back to the Midwest, BIFF was expanding its reach. I wanted to be a part of the story, so I jumped at the opportunity to work for it.

13. I love a good documentary, but sometimes I enjoy sitting in front of the screen laughing at something I don't have to think about. Are there any movies you've seen that, as the ED of a film festival, you're slightly embarrassed to admit you enjoyed? Anything with Nicolas Cage.

14. If you could have dinner with any three people, alive or dead, who would they be, and why? Miles Davis (because Miles is the definition of cool), Ernest Hemingway (because he didn't just write the stories, he IS the story) and Teddy Roosevelt (because the man was larger than life. I would love to learn how he ticked).

15. At the grocery store, what is the one item that goes into your cart whether you need it or not? Cheese, for the health benefits.

16. In your opinion, what are ideal film-watching conditions? On a large TV, feet up, reclined, with surround sound, with your hot or cold beverage at hand. Unfortunately, this doesn't happen too often. Normally, we're watching on our small devices to keep moving through our agenda.

17. It used to be that unless you owned a movie camera, you couldn't direct. Today, films have been produced on iPhones. How has this changed the film industry? It's allowed for more content to be produced at cheaper levels. It's an accessible art form in a way that it wasn't only 10 years ago. The volume of content that is being produced is mind bending. It also gives voice to the local storytellers. We have films that are incredibly niche to local audiences but sell out because they are stories that resonate with the people. It allows us more discretion to consume.

18. If you're playing Tic Tac Toe, are you an X or an O? X. As a redhead with a temper, I'm not to be crossed.

19. Without looking in the dictionary, what would you assume a hallux to be? A French cooking utensil? (The hallux is the big toe).

20. If you could take any character in movie history and place him/her/it into the storyline of any other film, what would that look like? Willy Wonka meets "Some Like it Hot."

Do You 20Q?

If you're involved in the arts and entertainment community and think you or someone you know would be a great subject for 20Q, send an email to kicks Editor Greg Little at glittle@gazettextra.com.

Greg Little
Kicks Editor