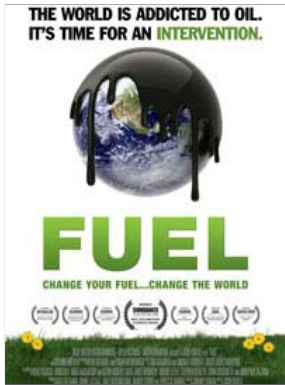


Saving the world, one biodiesel drop at a time

Submitted by Kimberly Gadette on Thu, 04/02/2009 - 13:15.



The activist and filmmaker Josh Tickell's homegrown film *Fuel* wants to encourage us to make a change and embrace biodiesel as the fuel of the future. **Kimberly Gadette** interviews the man with a mission ... and finds herself converted.

In 1997, a spirited guy named Josh Tickell took an old Winnebago with a diesel engine and painted it blue, green and yellow. Sure, people have painted their vans before – '60s hippies took the practice to a new psychedelic art form, their vehicles far more impressive at a standstill than when they attempted to chug on down the road. But what made this van, this 'Veggie Van,' so special wasn't the fact that Tickell had painted a rolling vehicular landscape of bright blue skies, lush green fields and buttery, super-sized sunflowers. It was what he used to fill its tank.

With a camera crew, a roadmap and a masters' degree in film, Tickell (a tall, blondish thirties-but-looks-twentysomething guy, with an impish grin and sincere manner) took to the highway – and as he cruised through town, he'd pull up to various fast-food, drive-through windows. He'd order a drink for himself, and ever the polite Southerner, one for the van: "... and all your used cooking oil? Please?"

"What?" was the startled response through the intercom.

"You know, the oil you've already used to cook the French fries?"

"What?!?"

Flash forward 11 years. Tickell's film, *Fuel* wins the Best Documentary Audience Award at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. It recently made it on to the Academy Awards' shortlist, one of only fifteen films under consideration for nomination as this year's Best Documentary Feature, a category eventually won by *Man On Wire*.

But as it's often said, it's not the destination but the journey.



Though activist filmmakers don't often spring from their mother's womb with a camera in their infant hands, it seems that Josh Tickell's early history lent itself to this particular calling. His idyllic childhood in Australia was followed by a move at the impressionable age of nine to his new homeland of America, namely to the oily, toxic wastelands of Louisiana, the biggest crude oil producing state in the US. As Tickell states, "I came with the perspective of a child who'd grown up outdoors in a very clean environment; I keep the Australian perspective that air, water and land should be clean." When his own family members starting coming down with ailments linked to pollution, Tickell set off for answers – and during a college semester abroad, while studying organic farming in East Germany, he witnessed a farmer producing his own fuel. Growing it from seeds right out of his own backyard. It was biodiesel: organic, pure, poison-free. Tickell raced home, eager to share what he'd learned.

The wheels rolling in his head gave way to the wheels rolling on the ground – and next thing he knew, Tickell decided to make an eco-documentary on alternative energy in order to spark national awareness. As he worked over the years, he noticed that other progressive documentaries were growing in popularity: the films of Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock and, most particularly, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. "Suddenly, the little energy documentary I'd been working on for over a decade became hot."

But Tickell's "little energy documentary" is as much about his personal journey as it is an in-depth examination of wide-ranging energy solutions other than oil, the faltering US auto and petroleum industries, and the latest stirrings of the American mindset toward alternative energy (versus the advanced European commitment to ending its oil dependence altogether). He's both director and narrator, a virtual tour guide through the drama of fuel, the history, the politics, the mess that the world is in and the fascinating alternatives for a way out. Tickell intermittently steps aside as others address the camera: politicians, historians, professors and a sprinkling of activist celebrities.

This film, this little engine that could, continues to meet challenges. Even earlier this year, *Fuel* veered off on a new path when previous excitement about food-based biofuels, such as soybean and corn, gave way to an unexpected media backlash. He explains, "Unfortunately, it was a black and white issue for most of the media. It was 'biofuels are bad, biofuels starve kids in other countries, therefore we need to just stop using them.' Most of the funding dried up; a lot of political ramifications happened. Inside of that, there was a larger inquiry – if not biofuels, then what?"

This meant that the original movie shown at Sundance needed additional work. "After Sundance, we re-filmed 45 minutes of the movie, and re-cut it to embrace what we saw was going to be happening with the next president's administration, which was a critical need to focus on a multiple-source approach to alternative energy solutions."



The multiple-source approach includes the film's exploration of wind, solar,



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as he waxes on about algae-based fuel. "This is really the next generation; most people don't know, but algae is the source of all oil on earth. Oil is actually 150 million year-old algae that's been compressed under the earth. What if we could take that same process that makes oil in 150 million years, and make it in about three days?"

But *Fuel* is far from a simple, rosy outlook toward an oil-free future. The movie takes a harsh view of the US automotive industry, the 'Big Three' (Chrysler, Ford and General Motors), all still insisting that they can't sell alternative energy cars to the American public. Ironically, Tickell depicts how Ford of Sweden is leading the way with bio-ethanol vehicles while Ford of Detroit has stopped dead in its tracks, another gas-guzzling animal altogether.

"How a company truly is can always be seen by how it treats its own city. How does it relate to the place that gave birth to it? And the Big Three have related to Detroit like a garbage dump." His voice grows impassioned as he continues, "On a moral level, are these the companies that we want to see move forward into the green energy future for the country? Either they have to commit to being green or, if not, I think that they've got to go the way of the dinosaur."

And don't even get him started on the Bush administration, big oil and the refineries in his home state of Louisiana, creating the toxic wastelands that the film refers to as "Cancer Alley."

Speaking of administrations, he feels that even though 2009 has ushered in new, strong leadership in the White House, it's going to take a grass roots revolution to move America toward green.

To that effect, he's taking *Fuel* on a 25-to-50 city tour of America, to be followed by a tour through Europe. "We're very excited about the international tour. We're going to the UK and Germany probably between mid and late 2009; we're working with musicians to do a music tour – just like the US tour, but even more musically-oriented in Europe. It's great how the UK is primed for clean energy, and how we can look to Germany as a leader." He adds, "Who doesn't love English rock and roll?"

Before rushing off to his next screening at a packed movie house in Portland, Oregon, the effusive Tickell couldn't keep from blurting out one last thought: "When people hear that the movie's an environmental documentary, sometimes they think, 'Oh God, my vegetarian girlfriend's going to drag me to it, I don't want to see it!' But *Fuel* is completely different. It's an upbeat story: it's a story of hope, it's a story of change ... and it's ultimately a story about the audience."

An overview of the film

Tickell creates an informative documentary, both personal and panoramic in scope. Determined to fight the sludge in Louisiana's backwaters as much as the muck in Washington, DC, he is relentless in his pursuit of a better world. But like his Veggie Van (referenced above), it's all over the map. We get a bit of personal history, but not enough. He tells us members of his family are sick from the various pollutants in Louisiana, starting him on his quest for answers ... but who, and how are they now? We get a geo-thermal lesson, but that's the purview of *An Inconvenient Truth*, previously, brilliantly explored by Al Gore and not all that necessary as a *Fuel* additive. We get an interesting back story about Rudolf Diesel and his original invention. But when the movie suddenly dips into a whodunit as to Diesel's mysterious death, the film bogs down – giving us too much while concurrently, ironically, providing too little. Ah, for a pair of editing room scissors!

Yet Tickell is such a charming, vibrant personality, a boyish, ecologically-driven wunderkind, that a great deal of the documentary's appeal comes from his on-screen monologues. Though many luminaries weigh in, it's Robert F Kennedy Jr's speech contrasting earlier administrations to the George W Bush years that packs the most punch. "When I was a little boy, I went to Europe with my father ... Everywhere we went we were met by vast crowds of people because they wanted to be near an American politician, because they loved our country ... And in seven short years, through monumental arrogance and incompetence, these oil slaves in the White House have drained those reservoirs [of public adoration] dry."

Coming in close to two hours, the film gathers steam toward the end as it refocuses on the problems at hand, and point by point examines the current energy alternatives – those that are available today as well as those still under careful exploration.

Frequently an audience will exit a film, shaking its collective head over problematic issues, but ultimately feeling impotent about effecting any real change. Kudos to *Fuel* for bringing the responsibility back to every last one of us. For a film about energy, it's marvelous that Tickell ultimately gives us all the proverbial power.

Fuel

Directed by: Josh Tickell

Written by: Johnny O'Hara

Cast: Josh Tickell, with appearances by: Sen. Barbara Boxer, Richard Branson, President Jimmy Carter, Sheryl Crow, Larry David, Laurie David, Larry Hagman, Woody Harrelson, Robert Kennedy Jr., Willie Nelson, Julia Roberts, Smudo, Neil Young

Running time: 112 minutes

Fuel will be released on DVD in the UK later this year. To learn more about the *Fuel* tour, find screenings near you, or to support Josh's work, please visit: thefueelfilm.com