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Film : MVFF moves film fans into theater, out of comfort zone

By [Steve Myrick](#)

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There is a point in the film "Still Bill," one of the highlights of the 10th annual Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, where fame-averse singer songwriter Bill Withers says, "I have to be careful not to just wallow in my comfort." By Mr. Withers' standards, the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival is doing just fine. Festival founder and artistic director Thomas Bena once again screened edgy, entertaining, humorous, and sometimes disturbing films for an enthusiastic Island audience last weekend.



MVFF organizer Thomas Bena, left, shares the stage last Sunday with guest speaker David Denby, New Yorker film critic. Click on photo to enlarge. Photos by Ralph Stewart

For Mr. Bena, the sign of a successful festival is a chorus of vigorous discussion as people leave the theater. The sign of a really good film festival is when they are still talking about the films the next day.

"We always try to get people to explore different ways of looking at the world," Mr. Bena said.

"We've had grown men and women standing up very emotional, sharing their feelings after the film ("Girls on the Wall") with the film maker and the film's subject. During "Still Bill" you could just hear everyone's emotion. It's those moments of

intensity and connection that make it a success, rather than just saying we had a full house."



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Each year a little past winter, but not quite spring, the sturdy Chilmark Community Center is transformed into a chic art house film theater. Film lovers from across the Island count this as a high point of the artistic year. Many summer residents make a special trip back to the Island to see it.

"Still Bill" delighted a large crowd on Saturday.

His Slab Fork, West Virginia mixture of humor, wisdom, and philosophy had the audience engaged and applauding from start to finish. Of course those familiar tunes, "Lean on Me," "Ain't No Sunshine," and "Just the Two of Us," playing in the background didn't hurt the mood inside the theater. "The music is wonderful," said Magdalena Blouin of West Tisbury. "He is inspirational, how he kept his originality in the world of music."

"The Most Dangerous Man in America," a documentary about Daniel Ellsberg, the war planner who leaked the Pentagon Papers, held a large audience rapt with the real life drama of a nation finding out a succession of presidents had lied about American involvement in Viet Nam. The recorded voice of an infuriated President Richard Nixon considering a nuclear attack brought gasps, and Mr. Ellsberg's outmaneuvering of President Nixon's lawyers and covert operatives brought applause.

There were also films about sheep, traveling accordion players, economic collapse, and the ascendance of technology.

After two packed days and three nights, 13 films, three series of shorts, a rowdy Sunday morning round table, dinner with New Yorker film critic David Denby, and countless discussions with the filmmakers in attendance, no one will accuse the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival of wallowing in its comfort. Certainly not Bill Withers.



Dave McGlade, foreground, peruses the festival program while waiting for the opening film, "Collapse," on Friday. Click on photo to enlarge.

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