



PHOTOGRAPHY: CORBIS

Sundance

THE ART AND PROCESS OF ROBERT REDFORD



COWBOYS

INDIANS

COVER STORY

By William C. Reynolds

Back in 1969, two desperate men hunkered down under a small rock outcropping overlooking a cavernous, river-filled gorge. Under fire from an advancing posse, the two knew they were trapped. Finally, running low on cartridges, one of the battered outlaws looked over the edge of the cliff and shared his frantic thought with his associate: "We'll jump," he said hopefully.

The other would have nothing to do with such a hairbrained thought. Pressed by his companion, the doubter finally admitted, "I can't swim." His partner burst into convulsive laughter and finally managed, "Hell, the fall will probably kill us!" With that, Paul Newman's Butch Cassidy and Robert Redford's Sundance Kid jumped off that cliff and into the world of cinematic classics. *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* would go on to be the favorite Western of two decades and would affect the portrayal of Western characters from that day on.

The two lovable outlaws moved on to a sepia-toned finale, but the work of the Sundance Kid has unmistakably continued. Separate from the celebrity the film brought him, Robert Redford had plans for Sundance. The name would appear again in his life in another form and another venue, as he had his own idea of

Opposite: The Sundance Kid. Robert Redford's commitment to all aspects of the mission of Sundance is ongoing and open-ended.



jumping into something.

With the success of that fabled Western, Redford was able to fulfill a dream and acquire a significant piece of land in Utah's majestic Provo Canyon area. He had purchased some land there earlier, in 1961, from a sheepherder and had built a small home by himself with the help of a local carpenter. He loved the land and wanted to be there—to “exist in your environment on a real basis,” he would say. It was land with a mythic past. Centuries earlier, the Ute Indians had come to this canyon to escape the summer heat and hunt the abundant game found there. By the beginning of the 20th century, a family of Scottish immigrants, the Stewarts, had settled in the canyon and would live and ranch there through the mid-1900s.

Because of the unique nature of the canyon, the Stewarts—creative in their thinking—in the 1950s opened Timphaven, a small ski resort in the snow-laden slopes beneath Mount Timpanogos. Remote at that time, it boasted a chair lift, a rope tow, and a burger joint named Ki-Te-Kai—Somoan for “Come and get it!” (One of the Stewarts had served as a Mormon missionary to Somoa.)

This was the land that Robert Redford acquired in 1969, along with much of the surrounding acreage—all from the Stewart family—and from which Sundance ultimately was born. Rather than fill the canyon with hotels and condominiums, as many investor types suggested he do, Redford saw his newly acquired land as an opportunity to create a community setting for environmental conservation study and the implementation of artistic and independent experimentation in film. It was a dream that would not happen overnight, but it

Clockwise from top left: The many faces of Sundance—Sundance Catalog partner and CEO Bruce Willard, the natural beauty that is Sundance, the 2003 Sundance Film Festival poster, Shearling coat for her from the Sundance catalog.

was this dream and its evolution that I wanted to speak with him about when I caught up with Redford in August. He had just returned to Utah, having recently completed work on a film in Canada. In the film, *An Unfinished Life* (Miramax, due out in December 2004), Redford portrays a contemporary rancher living in Wyoming whose life is changed when his estranged daughter-in-law (played by Jennifer Lopez) and granddaughter come to live with him. (The photo of Redford on this issue's cover shows him in character in that film.)

He tries to disappear after doing a

There's a mythical element to the Western that will always make it viable and important, no matter how many are made.

—Robert Redford

COWBOYS

can be terribly restricting if you want to do some things or simply be with your family.” That celebrity helped get the vision of Sundance off the ground. But it didn't happen overnight, he told me.

“Sundance started as a nonprofit system to help new artists have a place to work and develop away from what I was seeing starting to happen in the film industry—a move toward more centralized, higher-budget films that were, by design, exclusionary. Films that were more about high-tech effects and action than great storytelling,” he says. “Sundance was put into motion to help develop the talent that was going away, and that's independent film and filmmakers.”

In 1981, Redford was able to bring together a group of like-minded colleagues and friends to what was then a ski resort and is now Sundance, Utah, to discuss these new ways of enhancing the artistic vitality of American filmmaking. The result was the establishment of the Sundance Institute, dedicated to the support and development of emerging screenwriters and directors and to the national and international exhibition of new independent dramatic and documentary films.

This intent, this artistic approach, was natural to Redford. “I had started out to be an artist and felt that was what I was going to do,” he says. “As time and my film career moved along, I realized that the performance side of my life had joined with the artistic side of my life. It came quite by surprise and by accident; but it happened, and this plan simply made sense. Sundance is this ongoing process of fulfilling an opportunity to create an environment for creative people to explore their vision. It's an opportunity many actors and writers never get in the studio system—I am inclined to protect actors but at the same time press them to get the most out of them. The environment here lends itself to mutual access for that natural exploration and limit-pushing.”

film, but the demands on him make it tough. Then there's “being Robert Redford,” the attempt to have a private life away from celebrity, but he came to terms with the issue of celebrity long ago.

“Early on, I had to treat celebrity almost as something I had to go to war with,” says Redford. “Still, I'm not going to denigrate something that has given me a lot of pleasure and a lot of the strength to do the things I wanted to do. It seems over the last 20 years our country has become obsessed with celebrity. Obsessed to the point that we're diverted from more important things that affect our country and the world. Celebrity can be like a big dog, you have to watch out for it or it can engulf and trap you. I have this shadowboxing relationship with celebrity where I can appreciate it. I'm not going to deny what's come from it, the good fortune and having your work appreciated, but on the other hand, celebrity is very narrow and shallow and

INDIANS

PHOTOGRAPHY: BRUCE WILLARD BY JODIE WILLARD · ALL OTHERS SUNDANCE CATALOG



Robert Redford speaking at the Sundance Film Festival—celebrating independent film. It's all about being invitational and inclusive—"In filmmaking, you realize that you alone are not going to make it work."

Our commitment to Sundance has always been to develop very little and to preserve a great deal.

—Robert Redford

ketplace. The irony is that diversity is what has made us be perceived as so commercial. We still program it like a festival, but it became a market because our product was getting better and better and mainstream wasn't."

As with the Festival, the environment plays a dominant role in Redford's life and affects almost everything he does and considers. Strictly speaking, the reason for Sundance is really about art, the environment, and the West. About answering the question of what we develop for survival and what we preserve for our survival. His view of living and working as much as he can in such a natural place is realistic. "Living close to nature, you develop a way to be with things you can't

control," says Redford. "The frontier we knew doesn't exist anymore. What does exist is really a vestige of what remains, but in what remains it is important—incredibly important—not only to us but to future generations and must be respected, protected and understood."

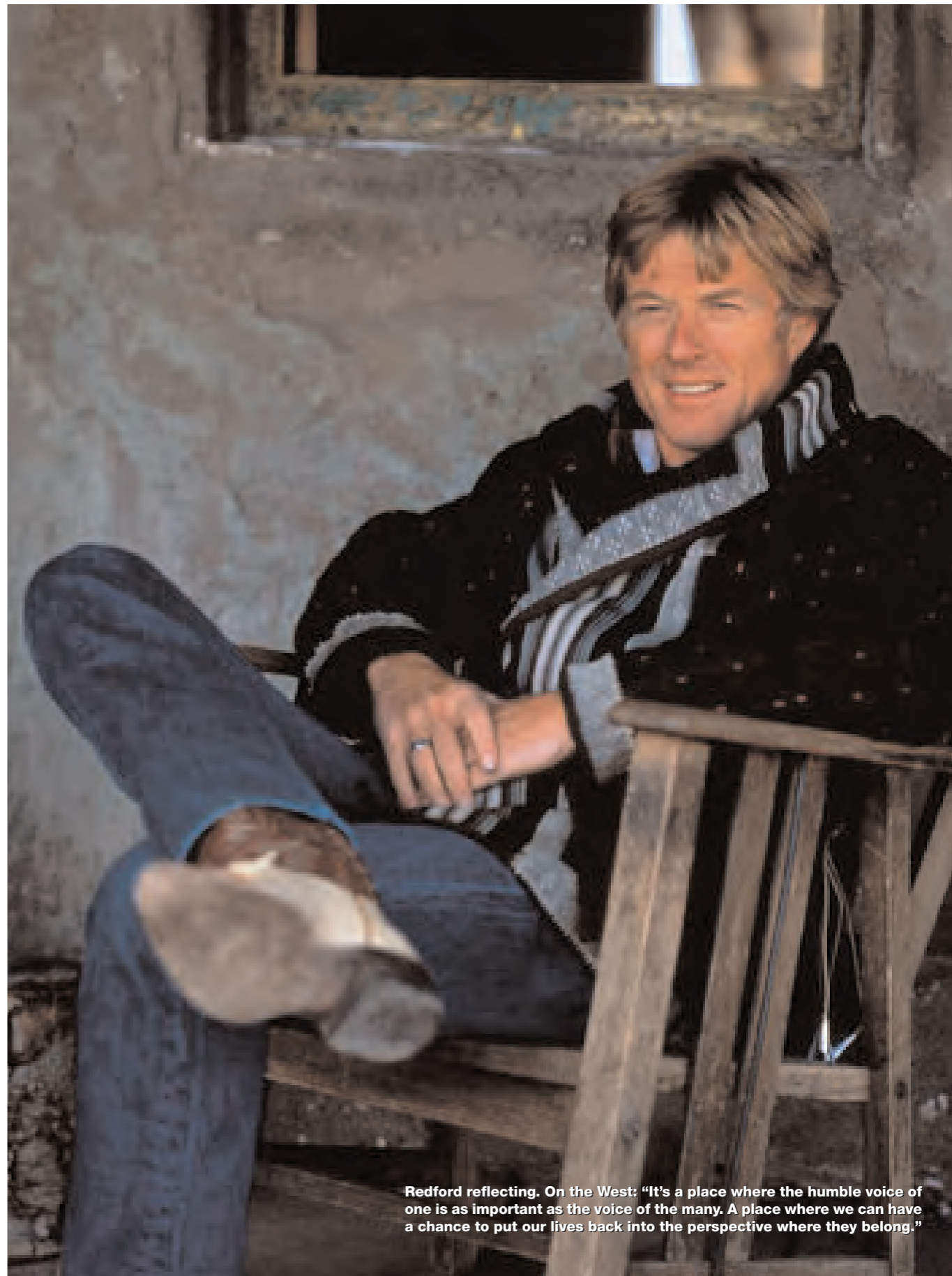
That way of thinking fits logically into how Sundance evolves—always aware of the environment it affects. "When we started the Festival we attracted maybe 200 people, and now we're at almost 40,000 and growing," says Redford. "A nice problem to have but something that led me to the notion that this can go outside of Park City, which led me to start The Sundance Film Channel."

And so Sundance expanded. But no matter what the expansion, the mission stays the same—grow with care and attention. But protection does not mean

standing still. Sundance has expanded its scope to include not only the Sundance Film Festival but also The Sundance Channel cable network. The Channel is a partnership with Redford and two mainstream media giants, Viacom and Universal. There's retail, The Sundance Catalog; a resort, The

Sundance Village; and a focused environmental effort, the North Fork Preservation Alliance, aimed at protecting the significant Provo Canyon area, among others, in Utah.

The Institute itself has been the birthing ground for countless new talent in the film industry. It is multifaceted and broadly cultural in its scope and encompasses all aspects of the filmmaking process, offering an inclusive and supportive environment for creative work—especially writing. One area unique to Sundance and Redford's mission is the opportunity to encourage Native American cinema through its Native American Initiative. Developed as a means of supporting Native filmmaking



Redford reflecting. On the West: "It's a place where the humble voice of one is as important as the voice of the many. A place where we can have a chance to put our lives back into the perspective where they belong."

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ers and the exhibition of their work, the Native American Initiative maintains a commitment to Native cinema in a multi-tiered effort that tracks and provides support for projects and producers, as well as programming the Native Forum at the Sundance Film Festival. Recently the Native American Initiative has broadened its efforts to encourage Native American playwrights, music composers, and nonfiction arts writers for participation in the Institute's other core developmental programs. While also broadening to include indigenous artists from all of North America and the South Pacific, at its core the Native American Initiative supports Native and indigenous creative control in filmmaking, as well as other art forms.

"Sundance was conceived as a place that would honor the three time zones of yesterday, today, and tomorrow," Redford continues. "One goes there and deals with the most advanced part of our industry technologically. Humanistically, Sundance is more focused on stories and people rather than the high-tech, special-effects emphasis we see in the marketplace. We are about good storytelling. If our culture or society loses its mythology or its need to be told stories, we're goners. It is why the Native American program lends itself to the very nature of our mission. Their cultures survived because of the handing down of skills and information, of storytelling, Sundance at its core is about storytelling."

One of Sundance's most literal stories is the catalog. The Sundance Catalog follows the same mission—giving artists a chance. With over 20 separate mailings a year comprised of the main product catalog and a separate jewelry offering, the catalog has taken on a life of its own since its inception. Growth meant attention, and last year, Redford brought in catalog veteran Bruce Willard. Willard had started at the father of all outdoor mail-order catalogs—L.L.Bean. A true boot strap story, Willard started driving a forklift at Bean and soon found him-

self ghost writing the L.L. Bean "Guide to the Outdoors" (Random House, 1981). In 1989, he decided to start his own company, The Territory Ahead, a name inspired by a line in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Driven by lifestyle, sort of a Huck Finn-meets-Jimmy Buffett, The Territory Ahead served Willard's conceptual needs not only for apparel but for a more minimalist and environmental approach to marketing. An approach that, after he sold Territory Ahead, led him in 2001 to Robert Redford. Sundance appeared to fit his vision of a comfortable mix of creativity and life. Redford explains, "Bruce contacted me, and I knew he had a reputation as a good

Sundance is inclusive by design, like the charm of an ensemble piece; rhythms blend to make a greater whole, like pieces of an orchestra.

—Robert Redford

business man and was a creator at heart. As a writer and adventuresome person, Bruce understood and appreciated what Sundance was about." In the summer of 2002, Willard ultimately became an investor and partner and is currently CEO of the Sundance Catalog.

"I've always been about anti-commodity," Willard told me from his home in Santa Barbara. "Sundance comes from the same kind of inspiration point. I am personally moved by things that have a craftsman approach to detail. Things that convey a sense of life's values. They may convey the values of an artist, something that conveys the grit of the land, or just the beauty of thoughtful design. I surround myself with items that make me feel good. And those things can be quite diverse—it can be a beautifully hand-forged knife, a great old saddle, a gorgeous wooden desk."

Interestingly but not surprising, the

Sundance Catalog customer is very Western oriented and highly educated, most with postgraduate degrees as well as high incomes. A dreamy demographic for upscale direct marketers. "After years of evolving," Willard continues, "the catalog understands its customer and maintains a strong sense of place. For Sundance that place is naturally the West. Personality is what gives a catalog its voice, and our voice is very much that of the West."

The catalog does have a unique personality beyond content and presentation. It has Robert Redford as its founder and its founder's introduction inside each catalog's front cover. Short and to the point, Redford's "note to reader" invites the recipient into the catalog's process of inspiring creativity. In one introduction, Redford wrote of the importance of that issue's artists' work: "The arts aren't merely a luxury. They can mean the difference between economic and spiritual salvation and decay. We support these artists and their communities not swallowed by the interstate and other development. We are living in a compressed state of time, technology, and space. We hope it comforts you, as it does me, to discover these artists and bring a unique product to you. And after all, for me it was the discovery that came from rediscovery."

Redford laughs, "In the very beginning, the staff would do the messages because I guess they thought I would tank the catalog. Wouldn't let me anywhere near it. But after all these years of building it up, I've kept the creative to myself."

Above all a patron, Redford instilled in Sundance an opportunity for diversity in discovery to help provide creativity's key for those searching to open that door. Montana writer William Kittredge describes that kind of opportunity in his recent book, *The Nature of Generosity*, writing, "The world is luminous with significances." It is the human significance—as well as the environmental—that Sundance reaches out for. Probably nothing

is more basic than good communicating, and good writing is a huge part of the process and art of Sundance. The Sundance Writers Fellowship Program, started in 1999 with support from the Irvine Foundation, is a response to the perceived lack of innovative and passionate creative nonfiction writing about the arts, especially film, theater, and music—the core art programs at Sundance Institute.

It is the belief that good writing about art changes the art; how we reflect upon a film, for example, after the film is over often becomes the "final scene" of the movie. Art, especially art of the highest qualities of the imagination and craft, is often the stimulus for dialogue about what matters most in our private and public lives. The program offers specialized labs for both screenwriters and playwrights and maintains a linear relationship with the Institute's Native American program. Programs at Sundance flow and mingle like that river Butch and Sundance jumped into those many years ago.

Redford is pleased with this lattice approach. "We have versions of these programs in labs forming all over the world," he says. "We're in almost every country, extending the Sundance mission in other areas. We've become kind of a cultural exchange program, and because of our interest in the West, it stays at the center of our image. Sundance—in all of its parts, including the catalog—honors the artist and the audience. It's fundamental to our identity that we work for both sides so that the artist gets a chance, an opportunity, to have a place to develop and then have a place for the work to be shown to an audience. That's why we have started looking at new ways of distribution and exhibition. The Festival gives a chance for viewing, the Channel another. But for many good films it's not enough. So we're starting something called the Sundance Film Series that will take films to a number of cities across the country. We select four films that did not get distribution, didn't get picked up, missed the glare or the buzz but that we feel are good films and should be seen.



Pilgrim's progress. Redford and his equine co-star "Pilgrim" from a Sundance Catalog cover inspired by a scene from his 1998 film, *The Horse Whisperer*. Horses and riding continue to be an important part of Redford's life.

The films get another chance, and Sundance gets broader exposure in diverse cities. We're first opening in Washington, D.C., L.A., Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, New York, Dallas, Detroit, and Baltimore. Above all, we spread the mission that at the heart of Sundance is art, the West, and environmental preservation, and as we move around the country—away from the place, Sundance—we continue connecting all the pieces. We have a reminder at the heart that we are of the West, but that we are taking the message, the mission, beyond the West, for everyone."

If there is anything that, simply put, defines the reason for Sundance, it is Redford's own desire to offer opportunity without judgment. To celebrate the old ways of basic, well-crafted work and creativity while embracing the evolution of the human spirit and its desire to move forward. That desire echoes what he wrote in his 1975 book, *The Outlaw Trail*, a pictorial diary of his personal horseback jour-

ney along the trails of the West that led to outlaw hideouts such as Hole-In-The-Wall and Robbers' Roost. In it he wrote, "Maybe it's having lived so long with science fiction as a culture-mate. Or maybe it's that in our future rush, in our need to expand and grow at any cost, we have lost something. Something vital. Something of passion and romance. But perversely, I find that as technology advances us into the future with stunning innovations, I become more interested in the past."

Good storytelling, culture, art, a concern for the environment, and a love, a deep-seated love for the West was all part of the leap taken by Robert Redford back in the late '60s. What's next? Is there an exit strategy for the Sundance Kid? Without hesitation, he says, "There is no exit strategy. It's open-ended. Change is always going to be there, and things simply can't evolve if you lock yourself off with an end game. Given that openness as a basis, the mission of Sundance is meant to continue."