

Caption



FINDING OUR INNER WARREN MILLER

BY DAN EGAN

Warren Miller once told me: When you ski, think about the beauty of the place and your role in it, which is to complement the surroundings, to be the accent or exclamation point on the mountain. My tracks are that sign: how they flow with the fall line illustrates my vision for the run. It's at these times I summon my inner Warren Miller and smile a deep-soul chuckle that reminds me that I seized the moment and embraced this winter opportunity.

Like a child, I still get giddy when I ski, from the minute I slap down my skis on the snow to the last run of the day. There's something special about gliding on, over and through snow and nobody every summed it up as well as Warren Miller. >>

SKI BUNN



Left: Caption

Below: Caption

Arguably one of the most prolific American filmmakers, Miller produced 39 feature-length movies from the 1950s to the 1980s and his films captured scenes like the ones I described. He brought them to theaters and auditoriums across the country year after year and, like the turning of the seasons, the official kickoff to winter was when the annual Warren Miller film came to town.

Patrick Creadon, director of the new documentary about Warren's life, *Ski Bum: The Warren Miller Story*, sums it up this way: "In 1962, Warren toured town to town doing 100 shows in 110 nights, by himself. Think about it, he took three to four months to make the movie, six months to edit it and write the narration, and three months to tour with it. [At] home he'd rest for a week or two and did it all over again."

A Warren Miller production was special because the venue didn't matter, the film did. Warren released his first film, *Deep and Light*, in 1949. He debuted it in an auditorium at John Marshall Junior High in Pasadena, California. Ski Club Alpine, which sponsored the event, took 60 percent of the ticket sales, leaving Warren with the remaining 40. Over eight hundred people paid \$1 each to see the show. Warren made \$334.40 that night.

Over the years, Warren's audiences were as impressive as the productions themselves. They're full of families, friends and passionate winter sports enthusiast who make the annual pilgrimage a rite of passage. The chatter before the film is full of anticipation of the winter ahead, questions of when will the snow fly, which resorts are open and what's the hot gear this season. These comments echo the halls of performance centers across North America and have for decades planted the generational seeds of winter.

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But the magic sauce was Warren's narration. His snarky jabs at the mundane and bits of humor mixed together with jaw-dropping footage and rocking music stir emotion for skiers of all abilities. And his core message, was always simple: "This is the world in winter. Go live in it, see it, touch it, share it."

Marcus Caston, a star of the last eight Warren Miller ski films, says Warren inspired his professional ski career. "His films are inclusive," Caston says. "Watching his movies in a packed theater is like hanging out with 500 of your best friends, hooting and hollering for 90 minutes."

He goes on: "What I liked about Warren Miller's films when I was a kid was that I saw myself in the everyday people from run-of-the-mill ski areas riding rope tows and bombing down the hill. Today, when I watch a group of school kids race off toward the bottom of the mountain, I'm reminded of the simplicity of the sport."

2020 was a year few of us will ever forget, and as we embark on 2021, with snow falling in the mountains, it challenges us all to draw on our inner Warren to make sense of it all.

Today, as he did countless times during his life, Warren, I believe, would rush forward into the mountains to embrace the solitude of the view, turn his chin to the wind on a high mountain ridge, and simply point his skis downhill, letting the acceleration of the shape of the turns speak for themselves.

I miss Warren and often like to think of him on a lift with a stranger spinning a tale about traveling across Europe from resort to resort or making a joke about how he managed to find a free lift ticket and how lucky we are to experience winter. I'll never forget the first time he told me about the Yellowstone Club. He called it "Giggle Mountain." "You won't believe it," he said, "The slopes are wide open with no one around and the grooming is perfect till late in the day. I giggle every turn."

Warren made you earn his respect. Longtime Warren Miller cameraman Gary Nate explains how he came to work for Warren: "I drove down to the theater where he was showing his movie in Salt Lake City and I waited for him to walk out the door at the end of the show," Nate says. "I went up to him, introduced myself as a ski filmmaker and said, 'You can either hire me or compete with me.' Two weeks later, he called and sent me on location, and I worked for him for the next 30-plus years."

It was that sort of brazen confidence that Warren looked for in people around him. I recall one time being on the road for one of the first ski movies I produced with Warren's help and support. After the show, I called him and said, "Warren, there were two people in the audience tonight and the screen fell over in the middle of the show. It was a complete bust."

And Warren replied, "Did anyone buy you dinner?"

"Yes" I said.

"Then you had a great night," he laughed.

That was his spirit, as if to say, "Hey, you got something: a free meal. What are you complaining about?"



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"Warren liked making a buck," says Eric Ladd, publisher of this magazine and a former business associate of Warren's. "He really enjoyed the side hustle. Whether it was drawing his lithographs, coloring them in himself and selling them, or sitting down at a lodge to autograph and sell his book, he saw it as an accomplishment. He believed anything could be achieved with hard work." >>

Caption

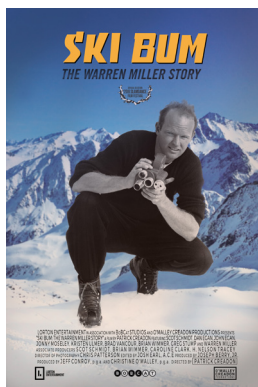


Warren died in January of 2018, but he ultimately was a master storyteller. And his message was timeless.


The only film that Warren ever skied in was my movie: *The Extreme Dream*. Warren and I skied together at Jupiter Jones Snowcat operations in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, which left me with the daunting task of narrating Warren while he skied. I figured the best way to do that was narrate Warren with Warren. I researched his films, and this is what I said as Warren smoothly skied the powder in his red one-piece Bogner on a pair of Atomic powder skis.

“Three thousand years ago, nothing roamed on these mountains except animals as big as the machines that brought us up here today.” To me, that is a well-structured Warren phrase: it tells a story in one sentence through time and brings the viewer to a place that is special.

The movie *Ski Bum: The Warren Miller Story*, was the last time Warren sat down for an interview. Creardon recalls the interview, stretched out over three days.



“What was so revealing,” he said, “was how Warren told us his story of being a Walt Disney paperboy as a kid. Then he moves away from L.A. to the mountain and lives in a parking lot at a ski area, starts to make movies, gets married, has all of the struggles of life with adversity of family and running a business, has his highs and lows, never gives up on his passion or his filmmaking, becomes one of the most prolific filmmakers of all time, and eventually lands on top of the heap as the face of the YC, the most exclusive private ski clubs in the world, where the lodge is named after him and he is adored.

“Those threads standing alone could lead anywhere,” Creardon adds, “but woven together by the school of hard knocks tell the story of a ‘ski bum’ who became a king.” 

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 Visit white-baze.com for more info on Dan Egan’s new book, *Thirty Years in a White Haze*, and find *Ski Bum: The Warren Miller Story* on Amazon Prime or iTunes.