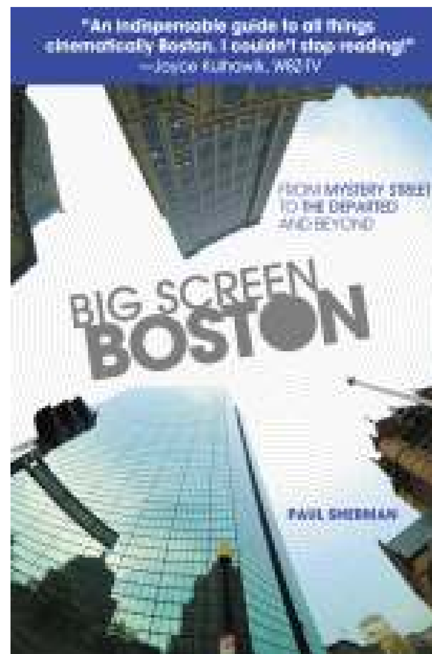

Excerpted from* Big Screen Boston: From Mystery Street to The Departed and Beyond *by Paul Sherman. © Paul Sherman.
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Boston might have been a periodic pit stop for Hollywood by the 1970s, but feature filmmaking that really reflected the city didn't emerge until two local traditions, documentary filmmaking and theater companies, intersected.

Boston had long been a hot spot for both. Many of the country's most innovative non-fiction filmmakers had ties to the area. Albert and David Maysles (*Salesman*, *Gimme Shelter*) grew up in Brookline and Dorchester; lawyer turned filmmaker Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies*) was based here; and such directors as Richard Leacock, Ed Pincus, Alfred Guzzetti and Richard Rogers were teaching locally. Boston was one of the homes of "direct cinema" non-fiction filmmaking, a style that frowned upon narration and other overt forms of audience manipulation. These filmmakers went out into the world and shot "fly on the wall" style, and for this they needed stripped-down, portable equipment, much of which they developed themselves. Boston's documentary films were also often politically motivated, with an eye toward focusing on the disenfranchised and issues of the day. There was a Boston chapter of the activist film collective Newsreel, Henry Hampton formed his production company Blackside in 1968 (it would eventually make the definitive civil-rights chronicle *Eyes on the Prize* in the late 1980s) and WGBH supplied a substantial amount of documentary programming to PBS.

So, in the 1970s, Boston did not have many people who knew how to shoot and edit a polished, "professional" feature film. But it did have many who knew how to make documentaries.

Meanwhile, David Wheeler's Theater Company of Boston was ambitiously staging plays in the area, with such actors as Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, Blythe Danner, John Cazale, Stockard Channing and Lance Henriksen appearing in its productions. So, too, did Jan Egleson, a young actor who'd begun directing for the company. Egleson had had a small part in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* as a soldier selling

stolen guns; technical problems necessitated the reshooting of his scene, and he took the extra time on the set to observe the logistics of moviemaking.

"The transition was just a natural step from doing theater to doing film," he says, years later. It wasn't until a few years after *Eddie Coyle* that he'd have the inspiration. During the run of one Theater Company of Boston production, *The Medal of Honor Rag*, he had pondered filming a performance for posterity. But that never happened. Then Egleson and his wife, actress (and future casting agent) Patty Collinge, volunteered to teach drama at The Group School, an alternative Cambridge school for working-class kids.

"A lot of the kids were great actors, they were naturals," Egleson recalls. "Their stories were fascinating, and their experiences were different from what you could see in mainstream films. So we took the stories that the kids told and wove them into a script and worked with them as actors. And we used the technique of documentary guys who were here: we used their lightweight equipment, we shot on the street with available light."

The result was *Billy in the Lowlands*, among the first homegrown feature films and the most ambitious yet (James A. Pike's 1966 teen picture *Feelin' Good* and Dick Bartlett's daffy 1971 comedy *Ruby* predate it). With Henry Tomaszewski as the feisty anti-hero, *Billy* is no-frills filmmaking that challenges audiences to invest themselves in characters who are just scraping by in life, if that, and to find drama in the everyday world around them. *Billy* is certainly not for all audiences—not escapist enough for some nor exotic enough for others (Egleson used to joke that his movie would have gotten more attention in America if he'd made it in Polish and subtitled it). It had a spotty release in theaters, but earned a New England Emmy after later airing on WGBH, prompting the station to help finance Egleson's follow-up, the Cambridge projects drama *The Dark End of the Street*.

The apparatus to get low-budget, American non-horror independent movies to audiences barely existed at the time. But Egleson's film reflected a growing rebellion against Hollywood hegemony. Like him, other moviemakers were taking to *their* streets, including Victor Nuñez (*Gal Young 'Un*) in Florida and the team of Rob Nilsson and John Hanson (*Northern Lights*) in Minnesota. Regional filmmaking was posing no threat to Hollywood, but it was bubbling under the surface. And *Billy in the Lowlands* had a ripple effect in Boston. Among those who saw Egleson's movie were Robert Jones and the husband-and-wife duo of Randall Conrad and Christine Dall. All three had been making documentaries, but recognized that Egleson had shown how they could take their talents in a new direction. After seeing *Billy*, and as Egleson filmed *The Dark End of the Street*, these other moviemakers made their own fiction films—*The Dozens* (1981) by Conrad and Dall, *Mission Hill* (1982) by Jones.

"I think there was a craving to make films," Conrad recalls of the time. "Making films was a very '60s thing. People used to joke that, in Cambridge, if you tripped over an architect you fell over a filmmaker—they were so common. It was sacrosanct to make documentaries, for various reasons. (But) in some of our fantasies, we all wanted to make a feature film—a dramatic movie. I remember going over to see Jan and asking him a little bit of how he worked. Because I had zero experience making fiction films, a fact which was to be sorely tested during the shoot.

"Jan was very encouraging," Conrad adds. "He was very lonely out there by himself."

For Dall, making *The Dozens*—which she and Conrad shot in 1978 and 1979, shortly before they were married—wasn't chasing a dream, it was a practical solution. Although they'd originally imagined doing a movie about a just-released female convict as a documentary, she saw the logistical problems in that.

“One of the big problems we faced if we were going to do it as a documentary was being allowed into the real life of this person,” Dall says. “Obviously, they’re not going to want what they’re doing and who they’re associating with out there in the public.”

So *The Dozens* became well-researched fiction, with a script the couple wrote with Marian Taylor, an ex-con who also acts in the movie. Debra Margolies brings fiery spunk to the role of Sally, a young woman with one foot in prison and the other in a drab, blue-collar world of limited opportunities, especially for a woman. Inspired by the English movies of everyday drudgery made by Ken Loach and Roland Joffé, it’s grim yet somehow lyrical.

Robert Jones, then teaching film at Boston University, felt the influence of *Billy in the Lowlands*, too. “Jan was definitely the primary influence—I really liked his films and his style,” says the *Mission Hill* director. Like Egleson’s films and *The Dozens*, *Mission Hill*, set in the neighborhood where Jones grew up (though filmed in other parts of Boston and its surroundings), is a blue-collar drama. But it spreads its focus over an entire family—a dissipated single mother (Barbara Orson) and the kids (Brian Burke, Alice Barrett and John Mahoney) who are still rattling their cages to escape their triple-decker flat. Social realism isn’t the only thing linking the movies. “The tech talent pool was very thin, so we all used the same camera people, editors, make-up people, etc., which augmented the feeling of community,” recalls Jones.

Movies such as *Billy in the Lowlands*, *The Dozens*, *The Dark End of the Street* and *Mission Hill* received plenty of local attention and jump-started Boston independent moviemaking. There was even a 1983 Museum of Fine Arts panel discussion with all four directors which, putting a local twist on Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*, branded their movies as “Beanstreets” movies. But the idea of self-sustaining regional cinema was not economically viable. In order for a movie to be attractive to the sort of independent film distributors that sprang up in the 1980s, it had to appeal to audiences nationwide, conforming to the accepted style and look of a “commercial movie” and, in the process, requiring an enhanced budget and losing some local flavor.

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