

2012

EIU Professor debuts Piedra Roja at Film Festival

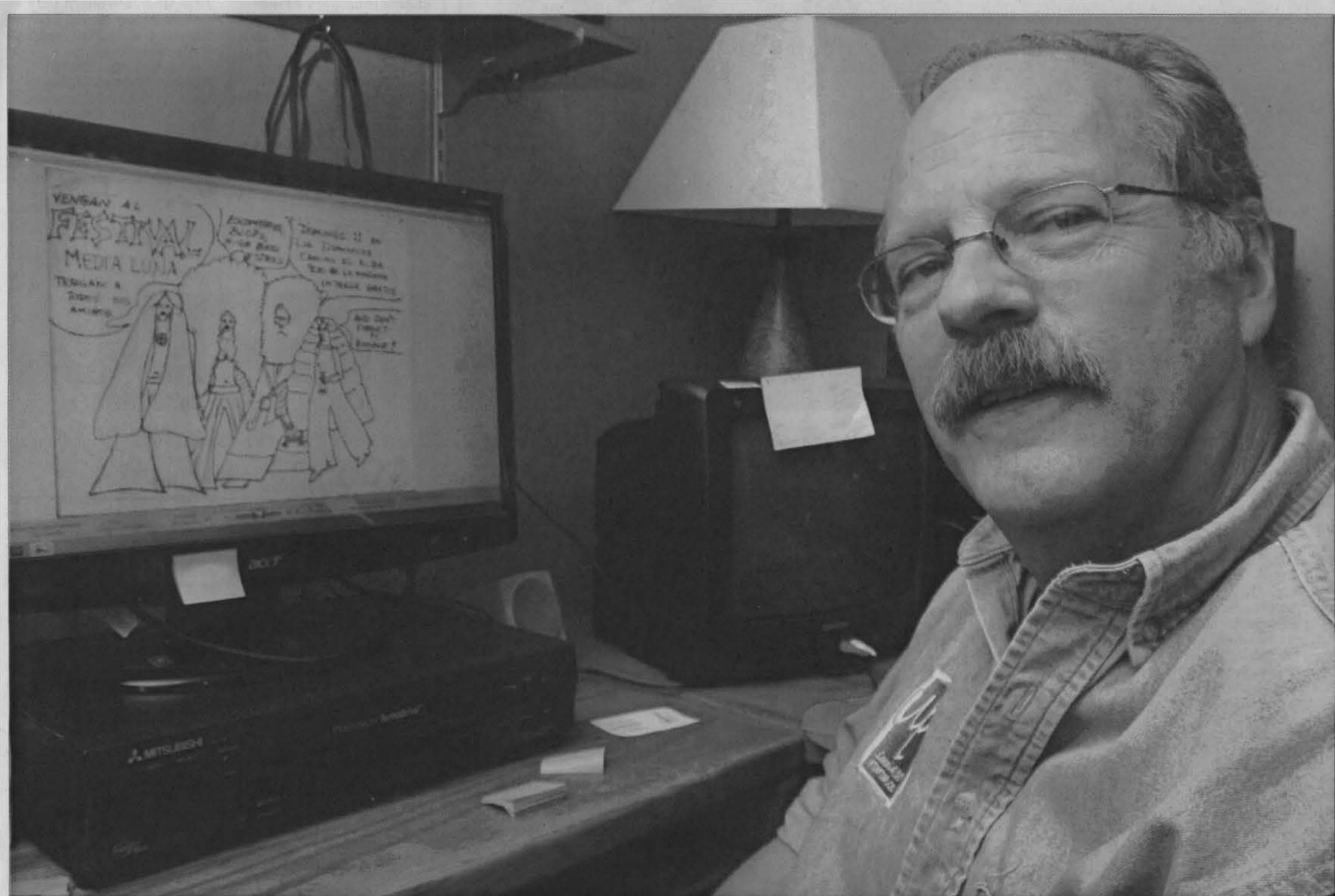
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Ken Trevarthan/Staff Photographer

Filmmaker Gary Fritz sits at his desk Jan. 19 with a screen image of the hand-drawn and mimeographed Piedra Roja festival handbills at his home in Charleston.

EIU professor debuts 'Piedra Roja' at international film fest

BY SARAH MILLER
JG-TC Staff Writer

CHARLESTON — Held up by a wrinkled passport, Gary Fritz, professor in the biological sciences department at Eastern Illinois University, was late to his own inauguration.

He was traveling to Santiago, Chile, for the IN-EDIT International Film and Music Documentary Festival earlier this month to introduce the inaugural film, "Piedra Roja" — his first feature film.

Fortunately, by a stroke of luck that few people manage, Fritz was able to secure a new passport the next day, but still missed the chance to introduce his film.

Instead, Jorge Gomez, the main organizer of the rock festival that inspired the documentary, did the honors for Fritz.

"It was the best thing that could have happened in terms of ambiance," Fritz said. "The guy that made it all happen was up on stage. He was the most appropriate person to represent the film."

Fritz arrived at IN-EDIT to see the second showing and talk with audience members



Ken Trevarthan/Staff Photographer

An invitation to a reception for Fritz's documentary and programs from the IN-EDIT Festival are shown at his home in Charleston.

and media about the documentary that examines the ramifications of Chile's first free rock festival, a South American Woodstock, during a time

of social and political upheaval, including the inception of Salvador Allende's socialist government and the subsequent military coup d'

etat. The festival, also named Piedra Roja, turned out to be

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Submitted Photo

It was 1970 when Gary Fritz, then age 17, became a co-organizer for Piedra Roja.

"Chile was already struggling with being on the verge of civil war. The left and the right used the festival to attack each other."



Submitted Photo

Audience members who attended Chile's first free rock concert in 1970 stand after the inaugural showing of the film 'Piedra Roja' at the IN-EDIT International Film and Music Documentary Festival.

FILM

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a huge mythological event, Fritz said.

Fritz was 17 years old at the time and became one of the many co-organizers for the festival after meeting Gomez when his family moved from Bolivia to Santiago in 1970. Along with his brother, the two produced flyers on a mimeograph machine and distributed them at local parks in Santiago that were frequent hangouts for "hippies."

Piedra Roja was held on October 11, 1970, and was originally to be a one-day festival featuring a half day of music.

"It was way up in the hills in the middle of nowhere. That added to the mystic of the festival," he said.

People began arriving a few days early. They set up tents, built fires, and played and listened to music.

"People idealized it and romanticized it, but most people remember how wonderful it was," Fritz said.

According to Fritz, some counts estimated nearly 10,000 people attended Piedra Roja, but an exact tally was hard to come by as people were always coming and going. Police estimated the attendance at 5,000 during its peak and closed the festival down the day after the musicians took to the stage, Fritz said.

Local media portrayed the festival as a scandal — full of sex, drugs and music. Its organizers and attendees were stereotyped as leftist, counter-culture, hippie-types, Fritz said.

"Hippies were generally looked down upon in Chile. Parents and institutions felt threatened," he said.

Congress held a special session to prohibit smoking, and the military started pulling men off the street and cutting their hair, Fritz said.

Although Fritz did not experience any backlash himself, Gomez was kicked out of school and his parents' house, Fritz said.

"Chile was already struggling with being on the verge of civil war. The left and the right used the festival to attack each other," Fritz said.

Three years later, a coup d'etat overthrew the socialist government, but Fritz had left Chile by that time.

Piedra Roja became a memory for Fritz until about three-and-a-half years ago when his father brought him a box containing original audio recordings of Piedra Roja — the only recordings known to be in existence. Around the same time, Paul Lowry, another festival co-organizer, posted some of the only known photographs of the festival on Flickr.

Soon after, Fritz read an article about a seminar titled "The Pink Lizard at Chile's Woodstock" that was being given by Patrick Barr-Melej, an associate professor at Ohio University.

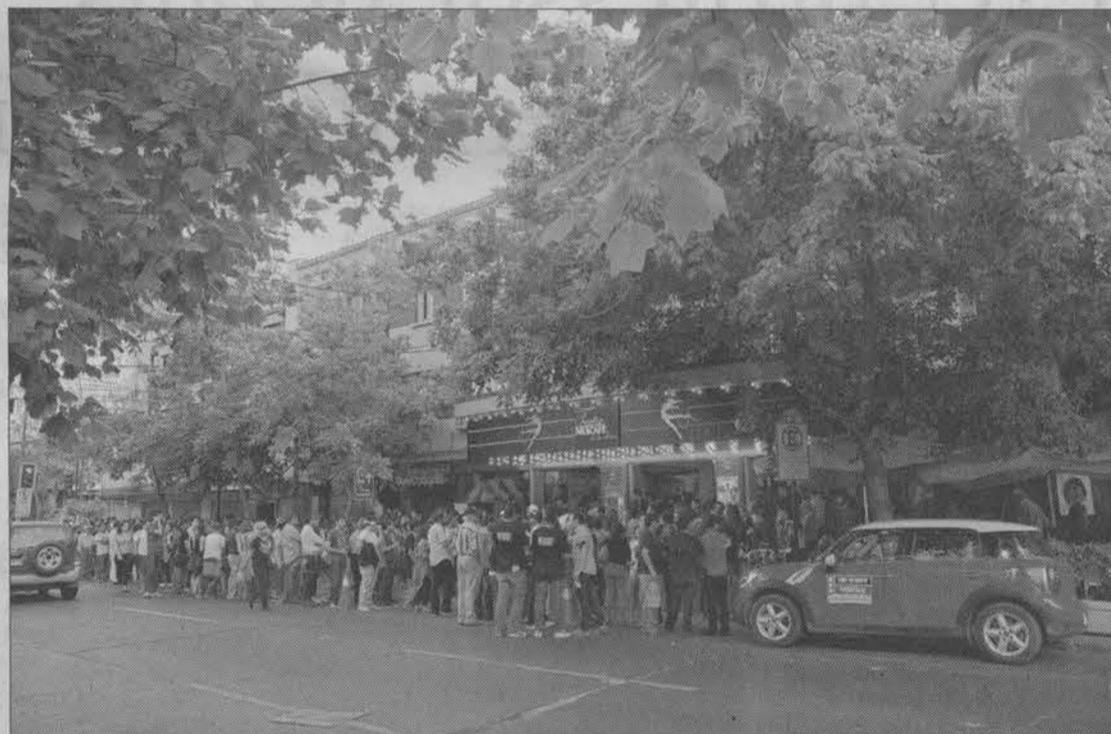
Pink Lizard was Fritz's brother's alias during the festival. Barr-Melej had never met anyone who actually knew Pink Lizard and came to interview Fritz for his book, "Psychedelic Chile," about the Chilean counterculture in the early 1970s.

Whether coincidence or not, Fritz found it interesting that he had suddenly stumbled upon an apparent resurgence in the interest of Piedra Roja. He opened a Facebook account, started by looking for some



Submitted Photo

Newspaper articles published during and shortly after the Piedra Roja music festival in 1970 portrayed organizers and attendees as leftist, counter-culture, hippie-types.



Submitted Photo

Nearly 500 film enthusiasts wait for the doors to open for the inaugural showing of 'Piedra Roja' at the IN-EDIT International Film and Music Documentary Festival.

"It was a part of my life and I was intrigued by the status it had achieved. It was the right time to do it, but then it just sort of evolved."

Chilean friends and found several of the musicians and organizers of Piedra Roja.

Fritz then said to himself, "You know what? I'm going to make a film."

Fritz traveled to Chile, toting two video cameras, two microphones and a set of lights. He conducted 75 hours of interviews in 40 days.

"It was the most intense, pleasurable month of my life, and my life's been pretty rich," Fritz said. "I've never had that many days with emotional and personal highs."

He met and re-established connections with people who were at Piedra Roja 40 years ago and found it interesting to recall and share their stories.

"I was really shocked at how much positive energy I got from everybody. There were endless surprises," he said.

Once returning home, Fritz didn't intend to make a feature film, as he had no experience in filmmaking except for a few short films he created for the EIU faculty union.

Instead, the production of "Piedra Roja" began in Fritz's home office as a DVD to archive the festival for the national archives in Chile.

Fritz used the footage from his trip and other pieces he collected along the way.

"It was a part of my life and I was intrigued by the status it had achieved," Fritz said. "It was the right time to do it, but then it just sort of evolved."

"Piedra Roja" was chosen over Martin Scorsese's film on the Beatles as the inaugural film at the IN-Edit International Film Festival in December and won honorable mention in the national film documentary category.

Although he missed the inauguration and an interview with CNN due to the delay with this passport, Fritz was able to see the second showing of his film in the same theater where he and many of the Piedra Roja organizers had once listened to some of the musicians who headlined the festival, he said.

In addition to the IN-EDIT film festival, "Piedra Roja" is scheduled for the Festival of the Arts in Valparaiso, Chile, this month. The film is not yet available to the general public, as Fritz plans to first run it through the film festival circuit.

Submissions to the Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival next January, as well as Sundance and other U.S. venues, incorporating English subtitles, are in the works, Fritz said.

Perhaps none will be as emotional as "Piedra Rojas" inaugural showing in Santiago.

While stuck in the U.S. awaiting his passport, Fritz sent several text messages to Gomez with notes for the inauguration. While Gomez threw most of them out because the speech was getting too long, he did keep one of Fritz's requests.

At the end of the introduction, Gomez asked members of the audience to stand if they had attended Piedra Roja in 1970. As they did, the audience erupted with applause.

"It must have been a very emotional, very magical moment," Fritz said.

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The trailer for "Piedra Roja," featuring English subtitles, can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgJyNa7VWw4>.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers should be forewarned that there is profanity in the film's trailer, including in the subtitles.