

Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner



When director Jeff Toste's documentary *Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner* has its Providence premiere on Saturday, June 7 at the Columbus Theatre, the iconic food truck itself will be there selling burgers, fries and its other famous fare. Begun as a horse-drawn food cart in 1888, in various incarnations and under a series of owners, it has been serving the city for generations. Today, Haven Brothers appears in the early evening next to City Hall and remains parked and open until well after bars close, and then quietly disappears shortly before sunrise.

Asked what drew him to the subject, Toste candidly replied, "Food on a truck, man! I remember going there as a kid. It was such a weird experience. I climbed onto a truck to get something to eat." Besides, it was a good story. "The full story had never been told. You're lucky when ideas present themselves. Telling the story came from making the story."

Toste, a lifelong Rhode Islander born in Providence - "I was born at Haven Brothers. No, not really. Don't print that." - faced difficult challenges making his first feature film. "It's a real DIY film. I was learning to make a film by making a film," Toste said. Although he was grateful to receive a pre-production grant from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, he said he was frustrated that most grant applications expected him to know exactly what his story was going to say before he found out himself what that was. "To me it was a journey," he said. For example, Toste discovered during his research that the 19th century food cart was one of the earliest known businesses owned by a woman. "The food truck explosion today doesn't know its roots," he said.

In a community where people typically give directions referencing where things used to be, permanence is a rare and valued commodity. "Beyond being a local landmark, this is the oldest diner on wheels. People in Rhode Island like things that stand the test of time," Toste said. "What it means to people transcends the place itself. It has come to symbolize Providence. It's a survival story. People love perseverance."

Haven Brothers faced its greatest threat in the 1980s when then-mayor Joseph Paolino touched an angry nerve by trying to exclude it from downtown, provoking a reaction that demonstrated that this humble food truck had become something well beyond just a food truck in the minds of the public: It was where people remembered going with their parents and grandparents, and they wanted it to stay. That's the "lynchpin" of the story, according to Toste, but that's not the focus of the film. "It's about Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders."

In the past, Toste ran for public office on the Green Party ticket. "I wasn't a politician, but I tried to act like one," he said, "but I could do as much through art as I could ever do through politics. This is a feel-good film, but it's a feel-good film for thinking people. Art is a tool to put messages into the world."

Almost 30 different local bands and musicians are credited on the official website for the soundtrack, which is “all Rhode Island,” Toste said. “One way to reflect the diversity of the people who go to this place is in the diversity of the music.”

Unexpectedly spending three years making the film, Toste sometimes would be at Haven Brothers five nights a week interviewing customers. Many of these interviews led to new discoveries that had to be chased down with more interviews. With a work-print running time of about 75 minutes as of this writing, Toste said that he has “enough raw footage for a miniseries. I read once that artists never finish their work, they just abandon it.” The film is in final form at this point, he said, but he may make minor changes before the Providence premiere. He did screen the film privately for the owner of Haven Brothers and his family, who gave it a “thumbs-up,” he said. The owner had no right of approval or creative control, Toste said, but during the making of the film graciously allowed Toste to be “very much in his space.”

Toste, whose day job involves making commercials and advertisements, was very concerned that this film “not look like a commercial,” he said. “You have to show the food, but it’s not about the food. It’s about the people. It’s about the place. It’s about reminding people of their history,” he said. “If anyone thinks I’m showing the food to make them hungry, I’m not. To me, the food is an art form.”

Ironically, Toste himself is not a typical customer. “I’m a vegetarian, but I’ve eaten a lot of their grilled cheese and fries.”

Haven Brothers: Legacy of the American Diner official web site: <http://www.havenbrothersmovie.com/>

Trailers: <https://www.youtube.com/user/havenbrothersmovie>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/havenbrothersmovie>

Tickets, Providence premiere, Columbus Theatre, Broadway, Providence. Saturday, June 7, \$11.00 (\$12.38 w/service fee): brownpapertickets.com/event/61940