

# SMALL-TOWN GAY BOY

Canadian filmmaker Malcolm Ingram lights a new flame

**COVER STORY**  
**JP LAROCQUE**

Filmmaker Malcolm Ingram describes his career as “a lot of lucky stumbling.”

“I was one of those people who knew what they wanted to do. I always knew I wanted to be in film; I just didn’t know where I was going to fit . . . I didn’t have an agenda, but I was given a lot of lucky opportunities.”

In his 20s, while working for the Toronto International Film Festival, Ingram crossed paths with American indie auteur Kevin Smith, who was in town promoting *Clerks*. The two became fast friends, and with the filmmaker’s guidance, Ingram (alongside fellow Canadian Matt Gissing) went on to direct the film *Drawing Flies*, a wilderness-based com-

edy featuring Smith’s well-known stable of actors, including Jason Mewes, Jason Lee and Smith himself.

The project was enough of a success to guarantee Ingram a second shot at the helm, this time on his own. His second feature, the Denise Richards-Breckin Meyer vehicle *Tail Lights Fade*, was the filmmaker’s first foray into true commercial cinema. Still, for all the talent and money involved in the project, the film was panned by critics and failed to turn a profit. “That experience was very humbling because it was one time when I actually realized that a lot of people had put a lot of faith in me on a lot of different levels, and I disappointed everyone.”

Shaken, Ingram stepped away from the craft for a few years, vowing to return only if he found a worthwhile

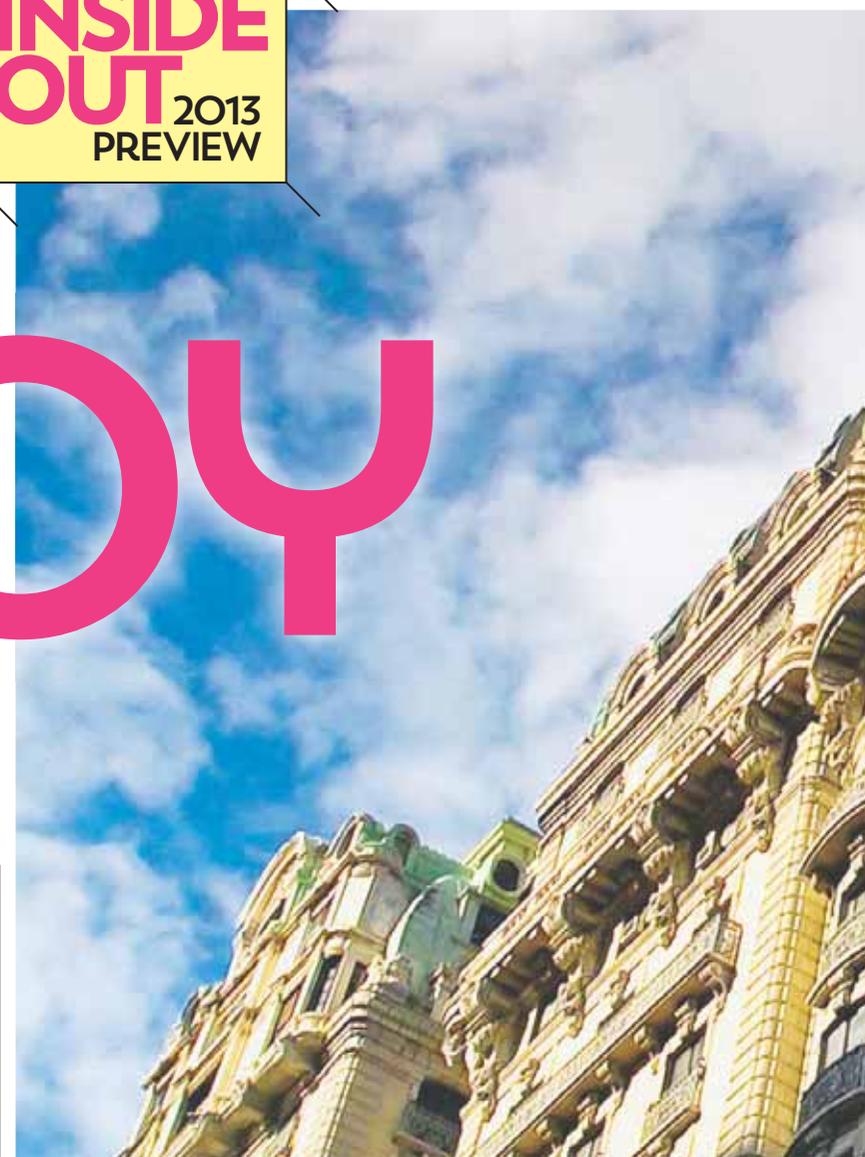
project that would require more of a personal investment. After a few years of self-described “floating,” he came across an article in *Fab* magazine about Zig’s, a small gay bar in Sudbury that had been plagued by homophobic attacks. The story resonated strongly with Ingram, and the idea for the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* was born.

Working with a compact crew, Ingram travelled to the American South and shot the film, which focuses on the lives of a handful of gay men in two rural Mississippi communities. Although the project took him far away from his hometown, he still sees common lines that can be drawn between the lives of the film’s subjects and his own. “I grew up in Oakville, which is kind of a rich, dopey suburb, but it does have a small-town mentality. The high school I went to wasn’t the most tolerant place in the world . . . Being gay wasn’t part of the program. So I felt as alienated in that environment as I imagine someone in the South would have felt being gay, without the inherent danger that is present in the South.”

The project also solidified for Ingram his personal responsibility, both as a filmmaker and a documentarian. “I was sitting down and interviewing a kid whose brother had just been brutally murdered. And I had never made a documentary before. And at that point, you’re just like — the responsibility that I am taking in making this guy have to tell his story, it is my responsibility. I become the keeper of his story, and it is my job to pass the flame to as many people as possible.

“THE CONTINENTAL WAS SUCH AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THINGS LIKE STUDIO 54, OF HOUSE MUSIC, OF REALLY INTERESTING THINGS.”

Above, the Continental, a legendary bathhouse that was both a social space and a hotbed of culture in the 1970s. Left, filmmaker Malcolm Ingram points out the iconic building. Right, Steve Ostrow, previous owner of the Continental, emerges as the star of Ingram’s documentary about the bathhouse.



“So in making documentaries, I felt it was my duty as the flame holder to fucking light the world on fire with his story.”

Not long after *Gay Bar*’s completion, Ingram found out that it had been accepted into the Sundance Film Festival, which was the achievement of a lifelong dream for the filmmaker. American queer channel Logo soon approached him about creating another documentary — this time about the burgeoning bear culture. Ingram was initially skeptical, concerned that he was too close to the movement to do it justice. Still, he went ahead with it, and the final product — *Bear Nation* — met with a decidedly mixed response.

“I couldn’t win because the bear’s journey is such a personal journey. And I can never make that perfect documentary, and it was something that so many people had criticisms of — saying things like I made the wrong movie, that essentially I didn’t get it. Bears be bitches, man. And the claws came out.”

The subject matter of Ingram’s latest documentary, *Continental*, came more easily to the filmmaker. Ingram



had always wanted to tell a story about gay history, and the famous bathhouse where Bette Midler got her start had always fascinated him — especially when considered as both a social space and a hotbed of culture. “Everything that appeals to me in the zeitgeist is really rooted in the ’70s. And the Continental was such an essential part of things like Studio 54, of house music, of really

interesting creative things. It was very much ground zero for a lot of that stuff.”

Beyond historical specificity, the topic of bathhouses is also of particular personal importance to the filmmaker. “I actually kind of had my introduction to gay culture through bathhouses . . . When I first came out, there was this place called the Barracks, and that was where I discovered bear culture.

And that was a very social experience.”

So what’s next for Ingram? Having told the stories he wanted to tell, he is taking a break from documentary filmmaking and plans to pursue creative projects in reality television — a genre he views as having considerable potential. “The great thing about reality television is that there’s a spoonful of sugar with your medicine. You can impart knowledge, you can represent voices that haven’t been represented before in an entertaining way, and that’s an interesting challenge for me.”

For all the turbulence in his career up to this point, Ingram approaches both his past and future with an admirable sense of calm. “I’ve had the privilege of knowing what I wanted to do since I was five years old, and I did it . . . Once I got into Sundance, everything else was gravy. I have that peace where I’ve done the thing that I’ve set out to do, and I got to do it before I was 40. That’s such a privilege.” ■

# TUBS OF FUN

Malcolm Ingram looks back at a legendary bathhouse in Continental

**ONSCREEN**  
**MATTHEW HAYS**

Who knew a history lesson could be this much fun? From its opening, eye-popping title sequence, *Continental* spills over with lively interviews, hilarious anecdotes, crazy stock footage and loads of gossip.

Ingram’s skill as a documentary filmmaker comes into full play here. *Continental* is the story of the legendary bathhouse, which existed from the late 1960s to the late ’70s. This, of course, was a pivotal time for the gay community and for civil rights advances, and the film shows us how an institution that operated 24/7 and was essentially one gigantic orgy was part of that change. People showed up, partied, had sex, shopped in the boutique or had a coffee, then had more sex. Some men would stay for days at a time.

The star of the documentary emerges as Steve Ostrow, an entrepreneur who realized men

wanted to meet up with other men for sex but often had no way or nowhere to do it. He set up shop, soon to realize that the police would not allow for such an obvious gay-

orgy outfit. But Ostrow explains that after a couple of raids the police pointed out that if he simply bought some tickets to their weekly fundraising ball — \$8,000 worth each week — the raids would stop. Ostrow agreed, given the burgeoning success of his business and his need to protect his customers’ anonymity.

While acknowledging that the bathhouse culture accommodated those who remained closeted, *Continental* also shows us that Ostrow was himself a man discovering his own gay sexual identity and that he and bathhouse staff always fought for the decriminalization of gay sex. It’s a strange time to look back at because there was a sense of euphoria that went with the sexual revolution

and there was no stigma of AIDS. Interviewed for the film, author Edmund White quotes Susan Sontag, who suggested there was, in fact, a brief window of about 30 years — from the widespread dissemination of birth control pills and antibiotics to treat STDs to the outbreak of the AIDS crisis — when people could live with complete sexual abandon. The Continental bathhouse stands as a potent symbol of this time.

But perhaps the strangest part comes with the Continental’s status as a multipurpose space. Leave it to gays to decide they had to put on a show. Ostrow had a dancefloor installed (the first glass disco floor ever, he claims) and recruited talent to perform live. Most legendary is the story of how he discovered Bette Midler, who was a struggling performer paying her way by waitressing, and how she got her start there, accompanied by a then-unknown Barry Manilow on piano. (They didn’t get along at first, Ostrow says.) Peter Allen played there, as did Sarah Vaughan and Patti LaBelle. It sounded like quite the party.

But Ingram, to his credit, doesn’t gloss things over. A disgruntled White suggests that the shows got in the way of the sex party, which he feels was the main reason the Continental existed and should have been its focus. The Continental became the talk of the town, and as such, all sorts of people starting showing up to check things out, among them Johnny Carson, Hitchcock, Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Ingram doesn’t skimp on gossipy details: Nureyev loved rough trade! Holly Woodlawn occasionally performed while lying down, as she was too wasted to stand up!

Given what would come down the pipes not so long after the Continental shut its doors, Ostrow’s story makes for a beautiful — and quite uplifting — story arc. He got to pursue his lifelong dream of being an opera singer and now works to better the lives of older gay men. It’s a fitting punctuation mark to an invigorating documentary, which, in the Grindr era, seems almost like science fiction. By the final credit roll, I was sure of one thing: watching *Continental* made me want to see the Continental. ■

**CONTINENTAL**  
Sat, Oct 19, 2:30pm  
National Gallery of Canada  
380 Sussex Dr  
[insideout.ca/ottawafestival](http://insideout.ca/ottawafestival)