



Filmmaker **Chris White** talks storytelling, music, memory, and the



his second coming of **Electric Jesus** to the Beaufort International Film Festival.

By Margaret Evans, Editor

For Greenville filmmaker Chris White, appearing at the Beaufort International Film Festival – whether as an actor, screenwriter, director, or producer – has become something of an annual tradition.

“Except for that one year I was snubbed,” he cracks.

Divine Comedy

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
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“We shall never speak of it,” I whisper.

The banter is all in good fun. One of the perks of being long-time BIFF media sponsors is getting to know “the regulars,” and occasionally, those regulars become real friends. Many BIFFs ago – maybe 2015, the year their feature *Cinema Purgatorio* took Best Comedy and Audience Choice? – Chris and his producing partner/wife Emily hit it off with me and my publishing partner/husband Jeff, and the rest is double-dating history. We keep in touch, chitchat on Messenger, get together for dinner when they swing through town on various moviemaking excursions. We’re wildly fond of each other. So that’s my full disclosure.

Today, Chris and I are talking on the phone about *Electric Jesus*, the Whites’ feature film that will open

[BIFF](#)



[2021](#) on the night of Monday, February 15th. Promoting itself as “the 80s hair band music-comedy you’ve been saving yourself for,” this funny, wistful tale of a teenage evangelical rock band touring the South in the summer of 1986 has taken the ‘20-‘21 festival circuit by storm. For Chris White, it’s been a long time coming.

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Margaret: Chris, three years ago *Electric Jesus* was selected as a featured screenplay at BIFF. At that point, you had already cast the film, and you brought several of your young actors to Beaufort for the festival. But even then, the project had been with you for a while. As the writer/director, how long did it actually take you to get this movie made?

Chris: I remember as far back as the 90s, when I was working in advertising, thinking that I wanted to somehow tell the story of my church youth group days. I realized that I'd had a very peculiar, really *good* experience. There was just this spirit of creativity – we were always making plays, videos, stunts . . . trying to convey our faith to other people, to “make Jesus famous.” Believe it or not, I think it was during those two or three intensive years in a Southern Baptist youth group that I developed my skills as an actor, writer, and comedian. Our youth minister was just really great. He'd let us do all this weird, funny stuff.

Margaret: Were you allowed to dance? Some of my friends grew up Southern Baptist and they weren't allowed to dance.

Chris: Oh yeah, we could dance. No cussing, no drinking, no having sex . . . but we could dance. And we could watch MTV.



Margaret: Did your youth group have a band like the one in *Electric Jesus*?

Chris: Sadly, no. No band. But I was in an improv/comedy sketch group in college. That was kind of *like* being in a band. So I drew from that *and* the youth group experience.

Anyway, I was taking a graduate screenwriting class back in 2011-2012 and I pitched this idea to my professor, and he really liked it. But it took me a long time to get the script right. The first draft was really just me trying to process my first marriage, which had failed – kind of a therapeutic thing, with this middle-aged guy flashing back to his youth group, where he met his wife – but once I got the marriage stuff worked out in my head, I realized that the “middle-aged guy” part of the story was incidental. That the flashbacks were the best part of the movie. In fact, they *were* the movie. Once I figured that out, I was free. And then the script almost wrote itself.

Margaret: You and I agree that most “faith-based films” are . . . God-awful. (Pardon the pun.) They tend to be heavy-handed and preachy. EJ is not really a faith-based film. But it’s not anti-faith, either. Not derisive of religion. In fact, I’d say it has a warm Christian heart. Somehow, it manages to be hilarious and gently satirical of its subject matter, while also sincere and affectionate and even . . . respectful? One reviewer at IMDb nailed it, I think, saying: “Southern Evangelical Christianity makes an easy target, of course, for cheap, shopworn laughs. ‘Electric Jesus,’ though, threads an expert needle between needling Bible thumpers while threading its characters together with durable strands of, uh, Christian compassion.” It seems to me you’ve walked a very fine line here. How did you pull it off?

Chris: Yeah, it was a challenge. I guess the main thing I kept telling myself was this: Let the characters be themselves and don’t try to fix them. Love them just as they are. I think that love comes through. Also, in terms of keeping the “preachiness” out – a lot of the credit goes to my editor Scott Lansing, who will always try to pull things more toward the secular and edgy . . . He’s always trying to pull things R when I’m trying to pull things PG-13. *Electric Jesus* is a much better film because of that tension, and because of Scott.

“Faith-based films” are basically Christian propaganda. They’re made with a certain purpose in mind – to

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