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IF A TREE FALLS

A STORY OF THE EARTH LIBERATION FRONT

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Activism on Fire

ELF documentary asks just what is a terrorist

IF A TREE FALLS: A STORY OF THE EARTH LIBERATION FRONT Directed and produced by Marshall Curry. Codirected and produced by Sam Cullman. Cinematography by Sam Cullman. Written and edited by Matthew Hamacheck and Marshall Curry. Music by James Baxter. Featuring Kirk Engdall, Jim Flynn, Tim Lewis, Daniel McGowan, Lauren Regan.

You don't expect a documentary about the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) in Oregon to open on the streets of New York City. But *If a Tree Falls* cuts from dramatic media footage, including the burning of a \$12 million ski resort at Vail, Colo., to the streets of New York, where activist and ecosaboteur Daniel McGowan was living in 2005. He was arrested in December of that year for his role in the ELF arsons that hit the Northwest from 1996 to 2001. The film quietly makes its point that McGowan traveled a long way, physically and philosophically, from NYC to Oregon and arson and back again.

Filmmaker Marshall Curry learned of McGowan's case the day of the arrest — McGowan worked for Curry's wife at Womenslaw.org — and he says one of the things that drew him to making *If a Tree Falls* was “something in the contradiction”: McGowan, the son of a NYC cop and a business major in college, didn't fit the stereotype of an ecoterrorist. In making the film, he says, “people defied my expectations again and again.”

One of the challenges of the film, Curry says, was condensing a story that “would take up a Ken Burns 10-part series” to 85 minutes. Focusing on McGowan allows the film to go deeply into one person's decisions in the context of a larger movement.

If a Tree Falls is not an “activist film” per se. It gives an equal amount of time to the voices of McGowan and Eugene's own Tim Lewis, Jim Flynn and Civil Liberties Defense Center attorney Lauren Regan as it does to prosecutor Kirk Engdall and Eugene police detective Greg Harvey. *If a Tree Falls* allows those prosecuting McGowan as a terrorist to be human, too.

Engdall, in an interview in the documentary, says of his work on the case: “You see all the damage and the harm they did, the threats they made and they are not very likable people at all ... but you gain an understanding and an insight how it came to pass that they started doing these things and then you're curious about how their lives will end up. But only time will tell.”

“It's not the film I would have made,” says Lewis, whose own documentary footage appears in the film, “but he (Curry) did a good job telling the story.” Lewis says he hopes the film brings the issues of police brutality toward protesters and questioning who is called a terrorist to a new audience. Going through his own video footage of forest protests and the local activist scene was one catalyst for the videographer to start posting some of the vignettes he's filmed over the years on his YouTube site, PictureEugene, Lewis says.

The film's clear-eyed take on the dramatic events that catalyzed the local ELF movement — from the Eugene downtown pepper-spray incident to the WTO protests — as well as the words of those on the opposite end of the spectrum such as Engdall, lets viewers make their own decisions — or indecisions — about the environmental and social issues that led up to the arsons. Bill Barton of the Native Forest Council asks, while gazing out over a stark Oregon clearcut, “Why are we so gentle in our activism when this is what's happening?”

Curry says, “Daniel looking at these fires, looking at these years of his life, is very conflicted.” With scenes from McGowan's family and candid interviews with McGowan himself — talking to fellow ecosaboteur Jake Ferguson while Ferguson was wearing on FBI wire, deciding whether to cooperate with the federal prosecutors and finally reporting to federal prison — the film permits McGowan's character, conflicts and all, to drive it.

The documentary draws on archival footage, and shots by Lewis from Warner Creek and other local protests lend a feeling of an insider's view to a time and a group of people that for many is hard to understand.

The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January. Lewis says he was later told FBI agents were at the first screening.

It's “a story of the Earth Liberation Front,” says Curry, “not the story.” The strength of the film is that it steps aside and lets the images and the people involved — those like Steven Swanson of Superior Lumber, whose buildings were burned, and McGowan himself, who participated in the burning — tell that story. **EW**

If a Tree Falls was an official selection of the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and winner of the festival's Documentary Editing Award. The film screens Thursday, June 23 at 6:15 and 8:45 pm at Bijou Art Cinemas as part of the new monthly Cinema Pacifica Filmmaker Dialogues. These premiere screenings will be followed by a moderated Skype chat with director Marshall Curry.

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