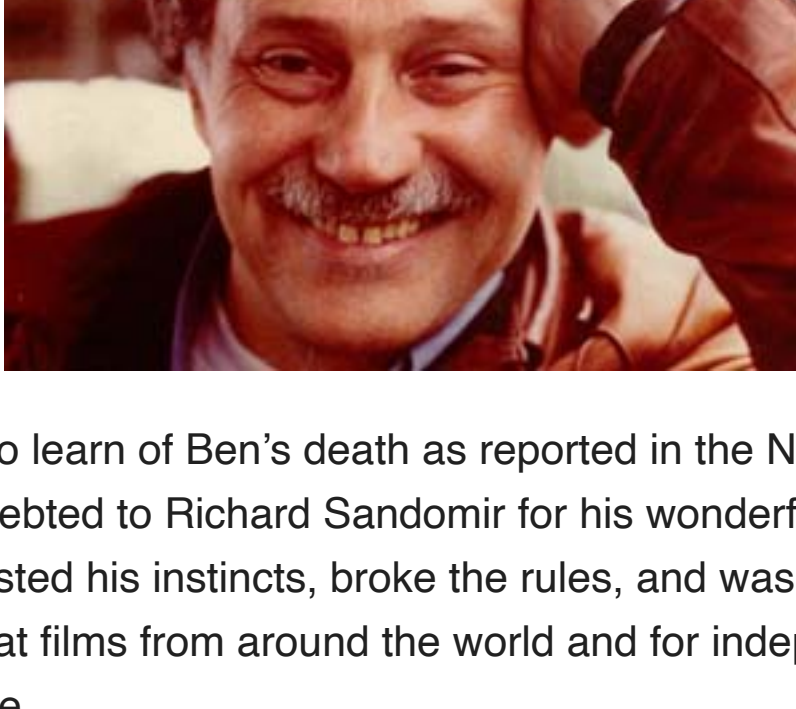


# INDIECOLLECT

## Sandra's Homage to BEN BARENHOLTZ [1935-2019] Who Supported the IFP During our Early Days



I was devastated to learn of Ben's death as reported in the New York Times on July 5, and am indebted to Richard Sandomir for his wonderful portrait of an iconoclast who trusted his instincts, broke the rules, and was a fearless advocate for offbeat films from around the world and for independent films made here at home.

Ben had the best swagger of anyone I knew. Tall and lean in his leather jackets and always irreverent, Ben was "einfach cool." I was just one of his many admirers. He was a hero in our indie community, showing us that taking chances was worth it — whether in exhibition, distribution or production — no matter the financial and artistic risks.

Ben played a crucial role in helping me program the IFP's first Independent Feature Film Market (IFFM). As the IFP's founding director, I had opened our first office in January 1979. Later that year we entered into an agreement with the Film Society of Lincoln Center to create what became the "American Independents" sidebar of the 17th New York Film Festival. But we knew that in order to attract buyers and festival programmers from abroad and other parts of the U.S. we'd have to offer many more films than those selected for the exclusive sidebar.

Filmmakers from around the country had sent us their new features, but where to screen and evaluate them? That's when I turned to Ben, who offered his screening room at Libra Films above the Elgin Theater. For months we had a standing date to screen the films. We picked 20 and the Market was born.

Here's the original line-up in the order they were shown, September 22 through 27, 1979, at the Magno Screening Room.

### Films Shown at the 1st IFFM

- *Vietnam: An American Journey* by Robert Richter
- *Off the Wall* by Rick King
- *Phantom of the Open Hearth* by David Loxton & Fred Barzyk
- *Bush Mama* by David Schickele
- *Over-Under Sideway-Down* by Gene Corr & Peter Gessner
- *In MacArthur Park* by Bruce Schwartz
- *The Whole Shootin' Match* by Eagle Pennell
- *Billy in the Lowlands* by Jan Egleson
- *Skeleton Key* by Fred Keller
- *Street Corner Stories* by Warrington Hudlin
- *Property* by Penny Allen
- *Joe and Maxi* by Maxi Cohen & Joel Gold
- *Not a Pretty Picture* by Martha Coolidge
- *Raices de Sangre* by Jesús Treviño
- *The Boss' Son* by Bobby Roth
- *Passing Through* by Larry Clark
- *Stoney Island* by Andy Davis
- *Johnny Vik* by Charles Nauman
- *Deal* by E.J. Vaughn & John Schott
- *Reaching Out* by Pat Russell

Goodbye, Ben, and much love....You leave a huge hole in our universe.

The New York Times

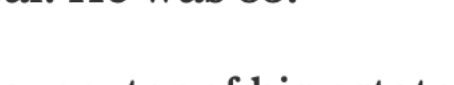
## Ben Barenholtz, Midnight-Movie Innovator, Is Dead at 83



Ben Barenholtz at his apartment in New York in 2017. He began the midnight-movie phenomenon in 1970 and went on to nurture the movie careers of David Lynch and the Coen brothers.  
Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

By Richard Sandomir

July 5, 2019



Ben Barenholtz, who began the midnight-movie phenomenon at his Manhattan theater in the 1970s and nurtured the movie careers of [David Lynch](#) and [the Coen brothers](#), died on June 27 at a hospital in Prague, where he had been living since last year. He was 83.

The death was confirmed by Tom Prassis, the executor of his estate and an executive vice president of Sony Pictures Classics.

Mr. Barenholtz had been running the [Elgin Theater](#) in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan as a repertory and art-film house for two years when he decided, in late 1970, to show “El Topo,” the Chilean director [Alejandro Jodorowsky’s](#) surreal, bloody Spanish-language western, at midnight on Sundays through Thursdays and 1 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

“I was told by the experts: ‘Who’s going to come to see a film at midnight? You’re out of your mind,’” he recalled [in an interview with The New York Times in 1995](#).

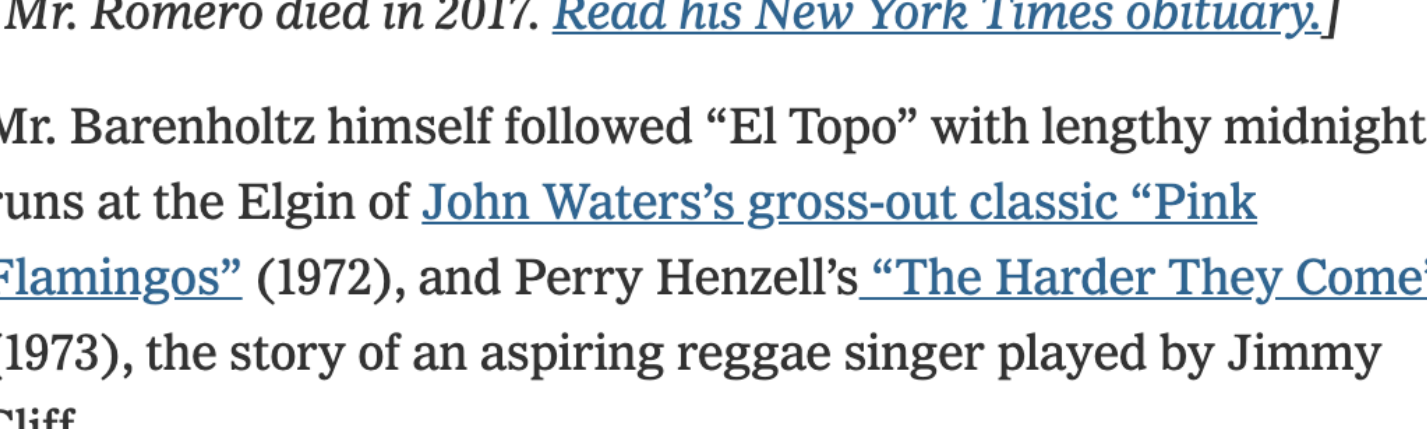
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But something about “El Topo” — which had its United States premiere at the Elgin on Dec. 18, 1970 — suggested to Mr. Barenholtz that it would appeal to a young audience eager for a new type of late-night movie experience in a run-down theater where marijuana smoking was condoned. He was right. With little advertising but strong word of mouth, crowds soon filled the Elgin’s nearly 600 seats during the film’s exclusive run.

“Within two months, the limos lined up every night,” Mr. Barenholtz was quoted as saying by J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum in their book “Midnight Movies” (1983). “It became a must-see item.”

“El Topo” would have stayed at the Elgin past June 1971, [but John Lennon, who had seen the film several times](#), persuaded the Beatles’ manager, [Allen Klein](#), to buy the rights. Mr. Klein gave it a splashy official opening at a Times Square theater later that year. It flopped after a short run.

By then, other theaters had begun to copy Mr. Barenholtz’s formula — [most notably the Waverly, in Greenwich Village](#), which showed George Romero’s [“Night of the Living Dead”](#) at midnight in 1971.



A scene from Alejandro Jodorowsky’s “El Topo,” which Mr. Barenholtz began showing at midnight at the Elgin Theater. “I was told by the experts: ‘Who’s going to come to see a film at midnight? You’re out of your mind,’” he later recalled. The experts were wrong. *Abiko*

[Mr. Romero died in 2017. [Read his New York Times obituary.](#)]

Mr. Barenholtz himself followed “El Topo” with lengthy midnight runs at the Elgin of [John Waters’s gross-out classic “Pink Flamingos”](#) (1972), and Perry Henzell’s [“The Harder They Come”](#) (1973), the story of an aspiring reggae singer played by Jimmy Cliff.

The cultish appeal of midnight movies expanded after Jim Sharman’s [“The Rocky Horror Picture Show,”](#) a camp spectacle that invites audience participation, opened at the Waverly in 1976. It soon became a national phenomenon.

What bound the midnight films was their originality.

“The movies were told in a way that was further out,” Mr. Barenholtz told The Times, “where you felt that if you showed it through the normal channels it would be impossible for it to get a normal audience.”

Ben Barenholtz was born Berl Bernholz on Oct. 5, 1935, into a Jewish family in Kovel, Poland, and grew up in the village of Kupichev, which is now part of Ukraine. His father, Aaron, was a timber merchant; his mother, Paula, was a homemaker. Their lives, and that of Berl’s older brother, Rubin, were roiled by the occupations of the Soviets in 1939 and the Germans in 1941.

As the Nazis, with help from Ukrainian nationalists, began to murder the local Jews in 1942, the Bernholzes fled their ghetto for the safety of a Polish farm family sheltering other Jews in a barn. For more than two years, the Bernholzes found safety at the farm and in various forest hide-outs. But on March 15, 1943, Aaron Bernholz was killed by a Ukrainian nationalist as Berl sat next to him.

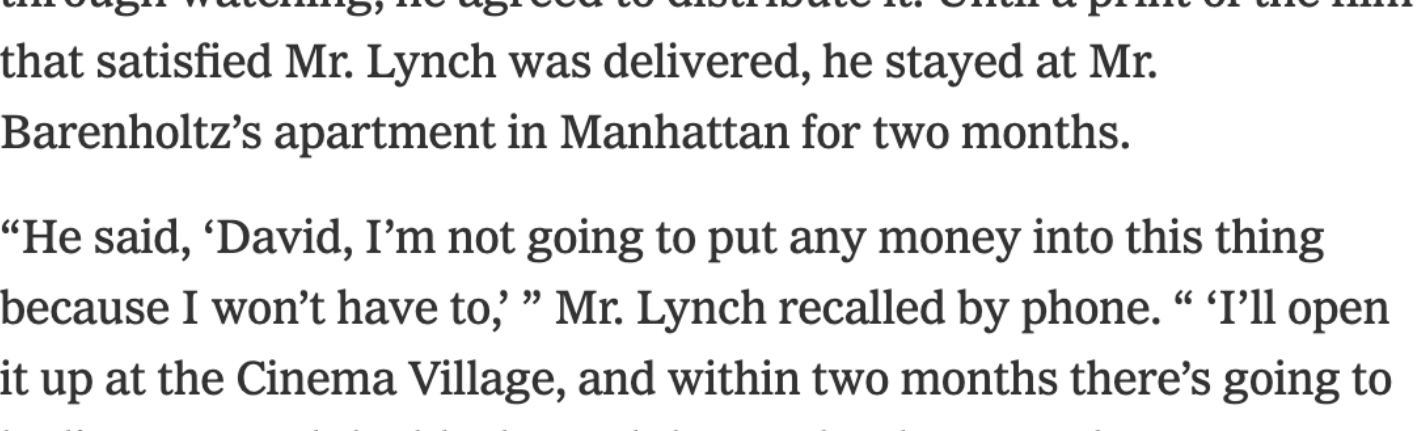
“My father’s last word to me was ‘Run,’” Mr. Barenholtz said in various accounts of his childhood.

He survived, lived in a refugee camp in Austria, and immigrated with his mother to New York in 1947. His brother, who is his only survivor, left for Palestine.

Mr. Barenholtz settled with his mother in Brooklyn and attended school for several years, but by age 15 he was spending a lot of time in bars and movie theaters. He served two years in the Army before entering the movie business around 1958 as assistant manager at [the RKO Bushwick theater](#) in Brooklyn. He left after about a year.

By now living in Greenwich Village, he led a knockabout existence as a house painter, bartender, carpenter and postal worker, and hung out with artists like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline at the [Cedar Tavern](#) on University Place. In 1966 he became manager of the Village Theater, a revival house that showed classic, underground and cult films. (It later became the Fillmore East.)

Mr. Barenholtz moved on to the Elgin in 1968. While there he began distributing films, and he continued doing so after leaving in 1975. Among the films he distributed were Claude Chabrol’s “Just Before Nightfall,” Barbet Schroeder’s “Maitresse” and Jean-Charles Tacchella’s “Cousin Cousine.”



Mr. Barenholtz with the filmmakers Ethan, left, and Joel Coen at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2016. “Our first two deals with Ben set an example and standard for integrity that we haven’t seen matched since,” Ethan Coen once said. *Markus Schreiber/Associated Press*

In 1977, while running the company Libra Films, Mr. Barenholtz screened [“Eraserhead,”](#) David Lynch’s first feature; halfway through watching, he agreed to distribute it. Until a print of the film that satisfied Mr. Lynch was delivered, he stayed at Mr. Barenholtz’s apartment in Manhattan for two months.

“He said, ‘David, I’m not going to put any money into this thing because I won’t have to,’” Mr. Lynch recalled by phone. “ ‘I’ll open it up at the Cinema Village, and within two months there’s going to be lines around the block.’ And that’s what happened.”

“Eraserhead” ran at midnight at the Cinema Village on Friday and Saturday nights for a year, and then for nearly two years, also at midnight, at the Waverly.

“It paid my rent for 10 years,” Mr. Barenholtz told the podcast “Movie Geeks United!” in an interview in 2007.

Mr. Barenholtz was also a distributor of “The Return of the Secaucus Seven” (1979), the director John Sayles’s first feature.

A few years later, he was approached by the producing and directing team Joel and Ethan Coen about producing [“Blood Simple”](#) (1985), their debut feature. After the Coens raised the financing, he agreed to distribute it. He subsequently helped finance the Coens’ next film, “Raising Arizona,” and was an executive producer of two others, [“Miller’s Crossing”](#) (1990) and [“Barton Fink”](#) (1991).

“Our first two deals with Ben set an example and standard for integrity that we haven’t seen matched since,” Ethan Coen said at a tribute to Mr. Barenholtz at the [2010 Hamptons International Film Festival](#) on Long Island.

Mr. Barenholtz was also a producer or executive producer of several other films, including Ulu Grosbard’s “Georgia” (1995) and Darren Aronofsky’s “Requiem for a Dream” (2000), before he turned to directing. He made a documentary, [“Wakaliwood”](#) (2012), about a filmmaker in Uganda, and a self-financed feature, [“Alina”](#) (2017), about a Russian woman who leaves Moscow to search for her father in New York City.

“I’ll never be Kubrick,” he told The Times. “But I wasn’t afraid either.”

Mr. Prassis, Mr. Barenholtz’s executor, said in a phone interview that “Alina” had been intended as Mr. Barenholtz’s warm-up for a more personal film.

“It was going to be called ‘Aaron’ and it was about his father,” he said. “It was about Ben’s life during that time, his father’s death and the people who saved him.”



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