

# Parade

SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2020 | PARADE.COM

**PLUS**  
Sports Moments  
We'll Never  
Forget, p. 4



#3 FM91.1

# DRIVE-INS

## THEN & NOW

THE COMEBACK OF AN AMERICAN TREASURE



CONN.

MARCH  
2008



# Drive-Ins: An American Treasure



Sky-Vu Drive-In,  
Warren, Minn.

Stars on a big screen, stars in the night sky—how a nostalgic staple of American entertainment is experiencing a most welcome comeback.

By  
Nicole Pajer

Cover  
photography by  
Cedric Haboush

“I believe the drive-in theater is as much of a great American pastime as baseball, hot dogs and apple pie,” says Denny Pine, 51, a drive-in superfan who has been to more than 120 of them across North America, “with many more to go.”

It’s the combination of the outdoor screens and art deco marquees that has him hooked. He’s a member of the Drive-In Movie Theater Fan Club, keeps a running list of the locations he’s visited and has a growing collection of memorabilia that includes everything from old drive-in speakers to article clippings about grand openings.

And he’s not alone. Whether

it’s the memory of seeing your first film from the back seat as a kid, the setting of an unforgettable first date or weaving your way through cars to get to the snack bar during intermission, drive-ins hold a special place in many Americans’ hearts. They’ve been the background for music videos, including Jimmy Buffett’s “Take Another Road,” and featured in iconic scenes in dozens of movies,

like *Grease*, *That Darn Cat!* and, more recently, Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

For *Grease* star Olivia Newton John, 71, filming the movie’s memorable drive-in scene was one of her favorite moments. “It reminded me of being a young girl when I used to love going to the drive-in. There was such a great energy of all the families in cars, with kids in their paja-

mas—including me!” she says.

“There is not one thing that I don’t love about a drive-in,” says Paul Reubens, 67, whose 1985 comedy *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* featured a drive-in. “The first movie I ever saw, *Dumbo*, was at a drive-in.”

“There’s an underlying quality of Americanism” to the drive-in theater concept, says Philip Hallman, film studies librarian at the University of Michigan. “It’s this combination of our love of automobiles and movies. And it’s this experience, which is both public and private, that lets us see a

film in a community setting but also control the environment in our cars.”

In recent months, thanks to COVID-19, drive-ins have seen even more activity, repurposed as the site of weddings, high school graduations, dances, concerts and more. Many have been reopening with infection control in mind. Aut-O-Rama Twin Drive-In Theatre in North Ridgeville, Ohio, cut down on the number of cars that could enter and added 10 portable toilets to supplement existing stalls. But as its marquee facing the highway says, Aut-O-Rama has been “Social Distancing Since 1965.”



## A RETRO REVIVAL

That social-distancing aspect has certainly helped put drive-ins back on the pop-culture radar. The 2020 rendition of *Valley Girl*, a new musical adaptation of the 1983 movie, was released in May digitally and to drive-ins.

In July, the Tribeca Film Festival launched “Tribeca Drive-In” at the famed Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, Calif. More than 30 iconic films—from *Goldfinger* and *Back to the Future* to *Bill &*

*Ted’s Excellent Adventure* will be shown. Opening nights are free to essential workers.

Music acts have been getting in on the action too: In April, country star Blake Shelton, 44, who shot the video for his country-rockin’ remake of the Kenny Loggins’ “Footloose” at a drive-in in 2011, made this forecast: “When this virus is through, I could see drive-in theaters having an even bigger resurgence. Being in your truck or car forces the 6-foot rule, and you can watch a movie with your family and be entertained. It’s a new way to do concerts too!”

Country superstar Keith Urban did just that recently, staging a free live private concert at the Stardust Drive-In in Watertown, Tenn., just outside of Nashville, for about 200 frontline health care workers—packed into some 125 vehicles—from Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Cameras broadcast the show, with lights and sound—streamed into the vehicles from FM transmitters usually used for movies, as well as from a full concert PA system—onto the big screen. The audience “applauded” by flashing their headlights and honking their horns. Country superstar Garth Brooks reached out to his fans during the pandemic too, with a one-night-only concert simulcast to some 300 different drive-ins across America. As the pandemic wears on, more singers and producers are figur-

## Drive-Ins, From Coast to Coast

There currently are 305 operating drive-ins and 549 screens in America. Part of the appeal is “they’re all mom-and-pop operations, so each one has its own personality,” says Joe Bob Briggs, host of the Shudder network’s *The Last Drive-In With Joe Bob Briggs*. Here are some favorites. (Visit [Parade.com/driveins](http://Parade.com/driveins) for a theater in every state!)

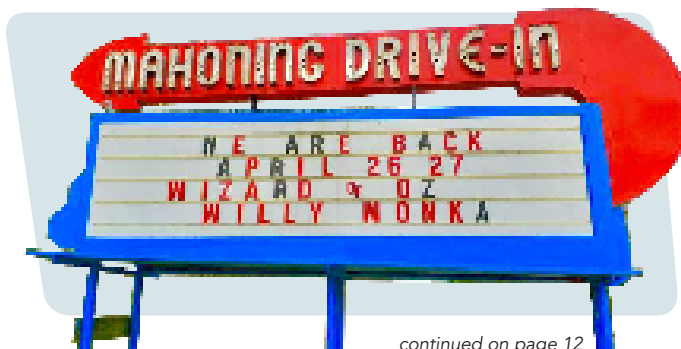
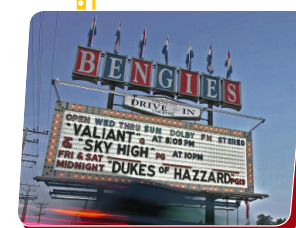
★ Pennsylvania’s **Shankweiler’s Drive In**, circa 1934, is the country’s oldest. Owner Paul Geissinger says people from all over the world pop by to pay his establishment a visit, and many locals attend frequently. “I can get here at 6 o’clock for a 9 o’clock movie and I’ve got my regular customers lined up outside,” he says.

★ **Bengies** in Middle River, Md., shows triple features.

★ Owner Brian Francis points out that the **99W Drive-In** in Newberg, Ore., was built by his grandfather in 1953 and is now in its 67th season. “I work there every night it’s open,” he says.

★ **The Spud** in Driggs, Idaho, attracts passersby with its clever sign: a 1946 Chevy truck toting a two-ton “potato.”

★ Pennsylvania’s **Mahoning Drive-In** has its original screen, marquee, concession lobby and projection equipment. The theater only shows 35mm films and opens each season with *The Wizard of Oz* and *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.



continued on page 12

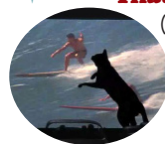
# Scene It!

**D**rive-ins are such a big part of movie culture—they don't just show our favorite films, they're in some of them too. Check out these memorable scenes set at a drive-in.

★ **Lolita** (1962) Professor Humbert (James Mason) sits between his wife, Charlotte (Shelley Winters), and her daughter, Lolita (Sue Lyon), as they watch *The Curse of Frankenstein* at a drive-in.



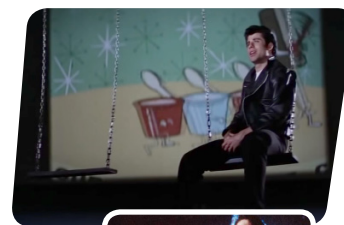
★ **That Darn Cat!**



(1965) DC, the feline protagonist in this live-action Disney movie, disrupts a drive-in theater crowd by casting a Godzilla-size shadow onscreen.

★ **Grease** (1978)

After Danny and Sandy (John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John) argue at the drive-in, Danny sings the famous "Sandy."



★ **The Outsiders** (1983) This classic directed by Francis Ford Coppola begins with the Greasers sneaking into a drive-in.



★ **Pee-wee's Big Adventure** (1985)

The final scene shows Pee-wee at the drive-in watching a movie about his own life.



★ **Twister** (1996) A twister rips through the drive-in theater as it plays *The Shining* next door to the tornado team's hotel.



★ **The Cider House Rules**

(1999) Homer (Tobey Maguire) tells Candy (Charlize Theron) that the only movie he's ever seen is *King Kong*.

★ **Once Upon a Time in Hollywood**

(2019) Cliff Booth

(Brad Pitt), the stunt double for actor Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), lives with his loyal pit bull in a trailer behind a Van Nuys drive-in in this Quentin Tarantino film. —Dillon Dodson



continued on page 14

from page 12

ing out how to create a drive-in experience.

## **BACKYARD BEGINNINGS**

The first patented U.S. drive-in was created by Richard Hol-  
lingshead as a way to provide his mother—who was too large to sit comfortably in a movie theater—with a way to watch films. He experimented with hanging a sheet up between trees and putting a projector on the hood of a car in his driveway before opening a drive-in in Camden, N.J., in 1933. Admission was 25 cents a carload.

By 1942, there were around 100 drive-ins in the country, and after World War II, the concept really took off. Couples moved to the suburbs, purchased cars and had babies, all of which added to the appeal of watching a movie from autos. At indoor movie theaters, people felt more compelled to dress up; but at the drive-in, you could “leave your girdle at home,” toss the kids in the back seat and enjoy a cozy family night out, says Hallman.

The heyday was in the late 1950s, when some 5,000 drive-ins existed and seeing a movie in your car was a common family pastime, says April Wright, director of the 2013 drive-in documentary *Going Attractions*. Drive-ins were so popular that in August 1952, their attendance exceeded that of indoor theaters.

As cars became smaller, color televisions and VHS became mainstream and acres of land

continued on page 16



from page 14

that once belonged to drive-ins were purchased for urban development. John Vincent Jr., president of the United Drive-In Theatre Owners Association and owner of the Wellfleet Drive-In Theatre in Cape Cod, Mass., says 1987 was the worst attendance in his drive-in's history.



Looking for a drive-in  
near you? Go to  
**[Parade.com/drive-ins](http://Parade.com/drive-ins)**  
for a theater in every state.

That all turned around in 1993 when *Jurassic Park*—a supersize adventure that was just begging to be seen on the supersize screen—hit the drive-in. “It was uphill attendance-wise from there, and it’s been fairly steady since then,” Vincent says. There was a return to more family-friendly movies and superhero flicks (a change from the beach and biker movies of the 1960s and the raunchy R- or X-rated films of the ’70s), with Disney movies often dominating the box office.

Another thing that’s helped is nostalgia—people wanting to re-experience their past and the desire to introduce younger generations to the drive-in experience. “Parents want to show their kids how fun it is to watch a movie outdoors,” says Thomas Novak, owner of the Sky-Vu Drive-In in Warren, Minn.

Reubens and Newton-John are thrilled that one of their childhood experiences is having a revival. “It was such fun,” Newton-John says, “watching a film, out under the stars.”