



## Review: Steep

**Katherine Monk**

Canwest News Service

Friday, January 18, 2008

*Mark Obenhaus directs this gorgeous documentary about the birth and evolution of extreme skiing. Beginning with Bill Briggs's 1971 descent of Grand Teton, and moving into the modern era of freeskiing spawned in the mountains of Chamonix, Steep talks to the legends of the sport -- some of whom have since succumbed to the very real risks of their obsession. A good rush.*

**A documentary by** Mark Obenhaus  
**Parental advisory:** Coarse language  
**Running time:** 90 minutes  
**Rating:** Three stars out of five

Though there's nothing all that revelatory about Steep, Mark Obenhaus's new documentary about the evolution of "extreme skiing," there's something very fresh about his approach.

It's not immediately apparent, especially while you're watching the film, because like every other movie that's ever been made about the highly cinematographic sport, Steep includes shot after shot of slow-motion snow poetry carved into thigh-high powder by the world's very best.

The images are so hypnotic and so exquisitely pretty, you don't recognize just where Obenhaus veers off the well-worn path of Red Bull-sponsored video montages that say nothing -- and into the territory of bona fide documentary filmmaking with real substance.

The difference begins with the choice of interview subjects. Though the usual extreme ski suspects such as Glen Plake and Shane McConkey do make an appearance, Obenhaus begins his trek into the annals of extreme skiing at the very beginning of the movement -- way back in 1971-- when a physically lame ski instructor named Bill Briggs decided to schuss down the Grand Teton, one of the tallest and most foreboding peaks in the "Lower 48."

When you look at the massif, it's practically impossible to believe anyone could ski down it, but when you see the archival footage of the day after Briggs's history-making run -- and see where he found places to turn across crevasses and navigate seracs, the enormity of his accomplishment begins to sink in.

The archival footage is truly spectacular, and because so little of it has ever been seen outside a small community of crazies, it's a big part of what makes Steep special. These days, the footage of dudes getting huge air and gliding down couloirs is commonplace, and downright generic -- especially when coupled with the type of garage punk that could make even the most placid type postal.

The early footage, cranked by hand on Bolexes or carefully spun on 16mm celluloid, communicates the danger and the novelty of the sport when it first took off in the mountains of Chamonix.

No one had yet mastered the angles and the set-ups for extreme skiing cinematography, and as a result, the angles all feel fresh. Moreover, the images themselves communicate a sense of the absolute -- from the remoteness of the regions, to the sheer danger of an endeavour that leaves no room for error.

The early accomplishments of the first wave comprise the core of Steep, and give it a meaty documentary backbone as a piece of well-researched history -- but it's the unspoken question of "Why?" that brings Steep full circle and makes it that much more rewarding than your average music video featuring skiers.

Every time Obenhaus turns his camera lens on another ground-breaking daredevil, the same platitudes spew out as the almost exclusively male subjects talk about how they couldn't handle a desk job and how they feel truly alive while



**A scene from "Steep" (Getty Images)**

facing down death.

We've heard it all before, but behind the devilish Owen Wilson-ish glint in their eyes, Obenhaus tracks the core compulsion: A need to be different from everyone else, or more likely, a need to be more than just another Joe on boards.

They aren't the most articulate types, so you're not going to get any long oration on metaphysics or the ephemeral nature of life itself -- but even without the language skills, the men get their feelings across to the viewer in such an honest way, it's hard not to empathize with their compulsion or admire their courage.

Yet, despite these endless opportunities for creating drama within the frame, Obenhaus never quite cashes in on the interpersonal snags, or the personal demons, choosing to keep his documentary well within bounds.

Given his subjects' penchant for pushing the envelope and ignoring the markers, Obenhaus may have scored some extra mileage with a little more risk-taking on the film side. Then again, he could have been snowed under by material and face-planted the whole movie.

As it is, Steep is the best -- and safest -- way of getting an extreme ski fix, without going to extremes.

EDS: UPDATE changes opening dates --- EDS: Movie opens Jan. 18 in TORONTO, and Jan. 25 in VANCOUVER, WHISTLER

© CanWest News Service 2008

 **Print Story**

 **Send to a Friend**

---

[Contact Us](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [canada.com](#) | [E!](#) | [GlobalNational.com](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Terms](#) | [Copyright & Permission Rules](#)

Specialty Networks: [COOL TV](#) | [DejaView](#) | [Fox Sports World](#) | [Lonestar](#) | [mentv](#) | [MysteryTV](#) | [TVTropolis](#) | [Xtreme Sports](#)

[Public Service Announcements](#) | [Producer Guidelines](#) | [Broadcasters of the Future Awards](#) | [MVP Mobile Productions](#)

This site is part of the **[canada.com Network](#)**.

