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"High Ambitions"  
movie and music  
reviews on pages  
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article



**Climb Every Mountain:** Unless, of course, it's time to save yourself from yourself, as director Curt Dowdy discovers in 'High Ambitions.'

## Gather Round the Great Idea

Whether people are hanging out in a commune, murdering ex-cons, worshipping James Joyce or simply watching movies together, it's all about a search for identity and community, in the fourth Santa Cruz Film Fest. And don't forget the afterparties!

By Mike Connor, Peter Koht, Benji Langley and Sarah Phelan

The fourth Santa Cruz Film Festival is upon us, a nine-day extravaganza (May 5-13) that features 102 films and

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represents 19 countries. To help readers find their way through this smorgasbord of international cine, we previewed films, tracked down directors and even grilled the musicians who plan to turn on their love lights at the fest's many after parties. The resulting odyssey--which took us through programming categories such as Freaks Like Us, Viva La Laugh, Middle East Calling and Artists at Large--proves this fest contains something for everyone, including our city's youth. This year's fest is dedicated to Evan Kuhn, a former Aptos High Student whose film about skateboarding was shown at the first Santa Cruz Film Fest when Kuhn was 18 years old. Sadly, Kuhn died in February from injuries received in an automobile accident. In his memory, his family has set up a fund to honor the winner of the under-18-produced category. We salute you, Evan, and all the filmmakers who honor Santa Cruz with their creations.

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## May 6

### **High Ambitions**

**May 6, 7pm, Del Mar Theatre, 1124 Pacific Ave.**

In case you're wondering, high altitude mountaineering doesn't involve bounding about like a goat, from peak to craggy peak, while a bunch of sherpas schlep your stuff. OK, so the sherpas are real, but beyond that, as Curt Dowdy's 57-minute documentary *High Ambitions* reveals, extreme mountaineering is a cold, painful and potentially deadly process, in which climbers move like flies in treacle, slowed down by high altitudes that make a task as simple as tying a boot take an hour. In this extreme environment not being honest about the weather or your own physical weaknesses can cost lives. So why would anyone put themselves through this hell, which involves hunkering down in tents like a herd of yaks--a herd that has to wear oxygen masks even while it sleeps.

The answer, perhaps, lies with A-type personalities, who've already been successful in life and want the challenge of being slowed down and humbled by Nature. That's one conclusion you can draw from the experience of *High Ambitions* director Curt Dowdy. For two decades, Dowdy was a Los Gatos-based Hewlett-Packard executive, whose jet-setting lifestyle never gave him the time to pursue his twin passions: high altitude mountaineering and filmmaking.

That changed in 2001, when Dowdy leapt of the corporate hamster wheel and embraced both passions simultaneously, as he filmed the efforts of the mountaineering team of which he was a member, as it tried to climb Cho Oyo, a 27,000-foot peak in the Mt. Everest region.

The month-long trip (during which Sept. 11 went down stateside) mostly involved downtime, as team members tried to acclimatize to the Himalayan climate.

"In Buddhism, people talk about 'empty mind.' It's a Tibetan concept, and it's easy to understand it when you are there. High altitude mountaineering is a form of meditation," maintains Dowdy, whose team included *Into Thin Air's* John Taske, whose decision to turn back on Mt. Everest in 1996 saved Taske's life.

And as *High Ambitions* illustrates, the point of the expedition isn't "getting to the top," but trying to learn to be humble and gracious in face of Nature, who is the one ultimately calling the shots on this kind of life journey.

"It was a life-transforming experience," says Dowdy of the experience, in which he was one of two team members to last the longest before being thwarted by, er, a contact lens.

"When you realize you need to turn back, you need to do so with dignity," says Dowdy, noting that the Himalayas are so high that they're in the jet stream, which buffets the summit in the afternoon with hurricane force winds, thereby causing ferocious storms even on nice days.

"I don't think we should be afraid of failure. The universe has a way of speaking to us, saying, 'Go here, do that,' but the universe is not saying, 'You need to achieve this goal.' It's simply saying, 'You need to have that experience.'" (SP)

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**Afterparty** with Lumin (May 6) 9:30pm-1am, Vets Hall, 846 Front St.; \$20 (free to pass holders); see following review.

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## Rock the Afterparty

Darth wouldn't be Darth without the "Empire Theme" and Elijah wouldn't be as snuggly unless his big blue eyes were accompanied by the "shire theme" from *Lord of the Rings*. Music has an uncanny ability to draw out emotions when combined with cinematic images. Take Curt Dowdy's *High Ambitions*, in which the music of Irina Mikhailova was an essential element in the storytelling process. Faced with a mound of 30 hours of footage, Dowdy was stumped at his Mac when he heard a haunting voice coming from his speakers via the good people at [epiphanyradio.org](http://epiphanyradio.org).

"As I listened, the opening scenes of the movie started unfolding in my mind," he recalls.

Finding the artist's name on the tune, he did what any sensible person would do in this digital age--he Googled her.

After the electronic rendezvous, Dowdy secured the rights to three of Irina's tunes. In a very concrete way, her voice began to embody the entire spirit of the expedition. "Irina is like a siren," Dowdy explains, "She's like the voice of the goddess of the sacred stone turquoise, ... [for which] the mountain we climbed, Cho Oyo, is named. Her voice is calling you to the summit."

There is also some heavy symbolism written into the track sequencing in the film as well. "About the time that we start the final three-day push up the mountain, the music is still there, but Irina's voice is gone. There is no siren and nothing calling us to the top. No siren equals no success."

Luckily for patrons of the film festival, the elusive siren will visit Santa Cruz on May 6. Performing with the world fusion group Lumin, Irina will layer intricate vocal melodies with Middle Eastern string instruments, drum loops and heavy organic percussion.

Her musical co-conspirator in Lumin, Jeff Stott, is thrilled to be part of a film and loves the process of matching visual images to music. "Music is very evocative of cinematic elements for me. The mood and the ambience of music is able to conjure up the images that I would normally have in my dreams." (PK)