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Hard Drive



In the mid-'90s, Chris Sautter tried to make a documentary about James "Yank" Rachell, a blues musician who'd had a roller-coaster career. But Sautter's funding fell through, and he had to put the project on the back burner. When Rachell died soon after, at 88, Sautter lost the chance to tell the singer's story. And he promised himself he wouldn't miss another

great filmmaking opportunity.

Not long after, the son of East Chicago, Ind., Mayor Robert Pastrick asked Sautter—who runs his own Washington-based political media consulting firm—if the filmmaker could broker a book about his father's legendary political career. Sautter said no: He offered to make a movie instead.

The tough 1999 primary pitted the elder Pastrick—a charismatic machine politician who'd been mayor since the '70s—against his longtime political and personal rival, fellow Democrat Stephen Stiglich, for control of the demographically diverse, economically challenged former steel town that lies just east of Chicago. Sautter, 52, had gotten to know the city somewhat from his years as an adviser, aide, and lawyer for Democratic politicians in the state. Still, the opportunity to view the campaign from behind the camera proved to be an eye-opener. "This was a city race that was won on the ground, unlike most races today, which are so dependent on television," he says. "It's clearly a throwback to another era, when patronage and jobs were the driving force in local campaigns."

Sautter's favorite scene in *The King of Steeltown: Hardball Politics in the Heartland* is a rally during which Pastrick pumps up a crowd of city workers who support him. As a politico, Sautter admires the old-fashioned tactics that prevail in East Chicago—but he is also aware of their corrosiveness: "Clearly, I don't think vote-buying—or at least the suggestion of vote-buying, which was discussed by people in East Chicago as if it were routine—is anything a democracy ought to be proud of," he says.

The movie received favorable reviews when it was screened in July at a Los Angeles preview of the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival, which officially begins this weekend in Manhattan. It was also featured in Washington last month at the Georgetown Independent Film Festival.

Perhaps the most important screening took place in mid-August, when Sautter showed the film to Pastrick and his supporters. After some nail-biting on his part, he says, the crowd applauded the film when the credits rolled. "Periodically, there's talk of the U.S. attorney investigating corruption in East Chicago, so that may have been on [Pastrick's] mind," Sautter says. "I got a sense that he was relieved by the result. But I still felt a little like Joe Pesci in *My Cousin Vinny*: I wanted to get out of town before anybody changed their mind."

—Louis Jacobson