

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Peak Living on a Texas River

Ben Masters on Deep in the Heart 2, Ethan Hawke, and the Hail Mary that started with sixteen wild horses

Interview by Paul Salfen • AMFM Magazine



Official key art for Deep in the Heart 2: Texas Rivers. Photo courtesy of Fin & Fur Films.

Ben Masters sat in the back of a packed house and cried. Not a polite premiere snuffle. An emotional mess. A full orchestra was playing Noah Sorota's score live while *Deep in the Heart 2: Texas Rivers* unspooled on a Dallas screen, and the filmmaker who had spent three years chasing otters on the Sabine and mountain lions on the Pecos finally let the room have him.

"I was, like, peak living right then," Masters told AMFM Magazine Managing Editor Paul Salfen in the days after that screening. "I just sat in the back and was just an emotional mess, just like, oh, I can't believe this is really happening. It was so good."

Salfen, a proud Texan talking to another proud Texan about a movie that treats the state's rivers as both cathedral and policy brief, did not hide how the picture landed. The first *Deep in the Heart*, narrated by Matthew McConaughey, had already proven that Texans will buy tickets to watch their own wildlife. The sequel, narrated by Academy Award-nominated native Texan Ethan Hawke, narrows the lens onto water — springs, creeks, rivers, and bays from the rugged Rio Grande to the Sabine and Neches — and asks a harder question than any pretty otter can answer on its own: how do we want to manage the rivers that make this place possible?

FROM MCCONAUGHEY TO HAWKE

Salfen could not resist the Texas narrator math. After McConaughey, where do you go? Masters grinned through the obvious next names. Beyoncé, maybe. Salfen floated Shaq, now an honorary Texan living in-state, and the two of them briefly tried to imagine the deepest voice in basketball saying “deeper in the heart of Texas.” It was a joke with a serious undercurrent. These films are Texas objects as much as they are nature films, and the voice has to belong to the map.

Hawke belongs. Austin-born, he is a five-time Academy Award nominee whose first Best Actor nomination came at the 98th Oscars for Lorenz Hart in Richard Linklater’s *Blue Moon*, after supporting nods for *Training Day* and *Boyhood* and adapted-screenplay nominations for *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*. That résumé gives *Texas Rivers* a different grain than McConaughey’s first-film drawl. Masters is not precious about the swap. He is more interested in the fact that the second film “has nothing in common with the first one, at all, whatsoever.”

“The second one has a lot tighter of a story,” he said. “It says things about water, whereas the first one is more of just sequence after sequence after sequence. They’re both different... It’s a good sequel in the sense that it covers things that are totally different, but it also builds upon the first one as well.”

That tightness is the point. *Deep in the Heart 2* is not a highlight reel of Texas animals with a river in the background. It is a river picture that happens to be stuffed with resilient otter families, strutting turkeys, Fatmucket mussels on the Llano, Whooping Cranes in the Guadalupe’s estuary, and prehistoric Alligator Snapping Turtles on the Neches. The wildlife is the bait. The water policy is the hook.

We could do this for the rest of our lives, and it would be a good thing to do for Texas.

— Ben Masters

A TIGHTER STORY ABOUT AN INSECURE FUTURE

Salfen asked what Masters hopes the second film will actually do — not as marketing language, as consequence. Masters did not dodge.

“*Deep in the Heart 2*, *Texas Rivers* dives deep into water policy, water management, and our insecure water future,” he said. “And poses the question to the audience of how do we want to manage our rivers? Because the way that we’ve been managing them is leading us to depleted aquifers, to species becoming endangered or going extinct, and to rivers that aren’t functioning like a healthy river.”

He is equally specific about the other side of that ledger. Reservoirs can be managed to keep a base flow moving through the river bottoms and all the way out to the coast, where shrimp, crabs, and redfish live or die on that freshwater pulse. Aquifers can be managed so springs keep flowing and the water table does not drop below the spring line. “There’s a lot of things that we can do in Texas to help out our rivers,” Masters said, “and I genuinely hope that the film leads to some of those things happening.”

He has receipts from the first movie. Deep in the Heart, he told Salfen, “inspired thousands of Texans to write into Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and their reps, and the governor, and request that they begin monitoring and managing mountain lions here in the state. And that directly led to Texas’s first-ever mountain lion conservation efforts getting passed.” The same footage and platform have been used to support ocelot reintroduction, advocate for state parks, and arm conservation groups with short films and raw media they could never have shot themselves.



Life along a Texas waterway in Deep in the Heart 2: Texas Rivers. Photo courtesy of Fin & Fur Films.

TEAMWORK FILMS

Masters’ father was at the screening. He told Salfen that his son has always had the eye, and has always known how to put the right people together. Salfen put the compliment back to the director and asked for the origin story — the first moment he knew this was the work.

Masters did not give a childhood epiphany. He gave a working definition of the job. “These are teamwork films. I mean, you cannot do a film like this on your own. You just can’t. So you have to rely on a good team. There is no other way to do it.” He has had to learn leadership the long way. People imagine a director barking orders. “In reality, what you’re doing is just managing all of the chaos and all of the art, and trying to get everybody to move towards a common goal and a common value.”

Give the cinematographers and the sound designers the shared vision, he said, and then get out of the way enough for them to run with it. “You always wind up with something that’s totally different than how you imagined it in your mind’s eye. And that’s just so rewarding.” The relationships last three or four years by the time a film of this scale starts and ends. “That’s longer than a lot of marriages. And to go through all of that together is incredibly rewarding.”

The partner list on Texas Rivers looks like a Texas civic Rolodex on purpose: Texan by Nature, HEB, Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation. Salfen heard tourism in the footage — the urge to get in the truck and go stand in one of those rivers — and Masters did not argue. “We’re just building pride in the state. We live in a pretty cool state, man.”



Ben Masters, founder of Fin & Fur Films. Photo courtesy Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation.

THE KICKSTARTER YEARS

Salfen had been primed by Masters’ father to ask about the first movie — the one that started, as the family lore goes, by getting in the car and making one. The official version is only slightly less mythic. “Our first movie was funded on Kickstarter, so I got my film career started on Kickstarter.”

The moment it became a life, though, was 2015, when *Unbranded* landed. Masters produced the film and rode it: he and his collaborators adopted sixteen wild horses, trained them, and rode them from Mexico to Canada for six months. Directed by Phillip Baribeau, the picture took audience awards at both Hot Docs and Telluride Mountainfilm. “We had hundreds of horses get adopted because of that movie. And it really changed a lot of the conversations around wild horse and burro management on public lands.”

Masters had studied wildlife biology. He is, in his own words, a wildlife nerd. *Unbranded* taught him that film can move culture faster than applied science. “That was kind of what opened up my eyes to realizing I need to do this professionally and really dedicate my life to telling these stories.” The later features — *The River and the Wall*, *Deep in the Heart*, *The American Southwest*, and now *Texas Rivers* — are the long version of that decision.

I realized then that these films have a lot of power to influence culture, to inspire people to appreciate nature more.

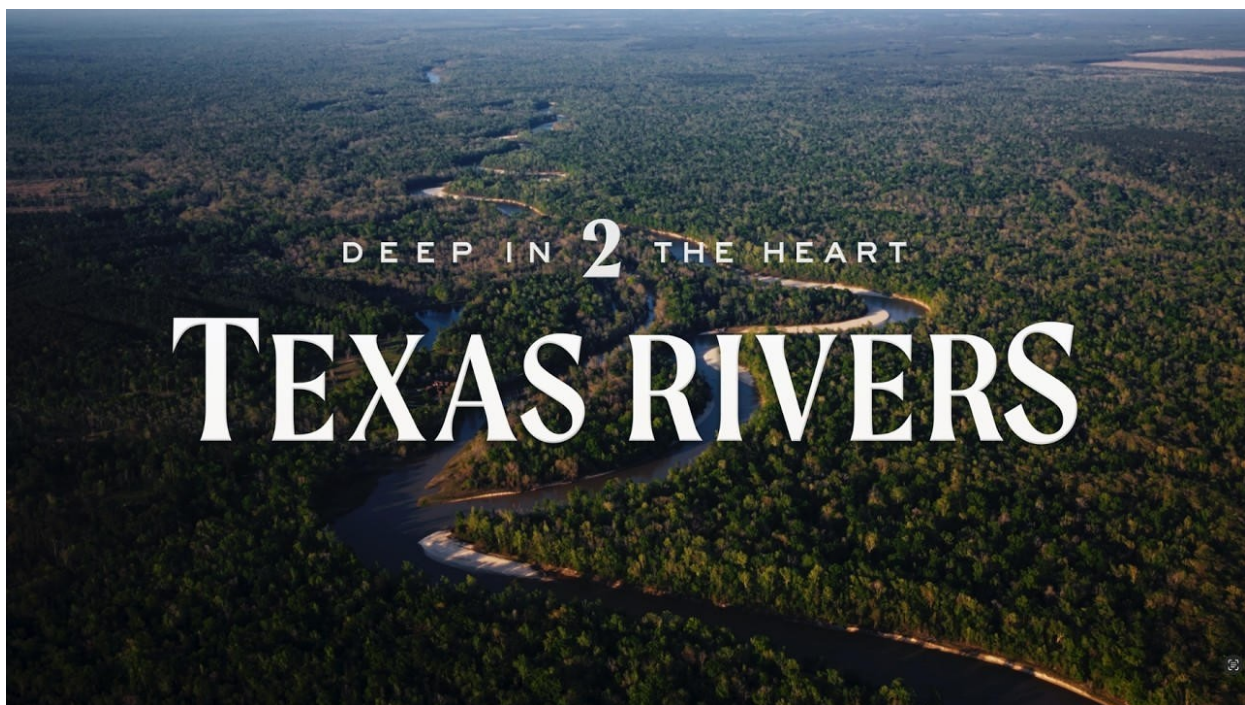
— Ben Masters

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen's co-host on other AMFM conversations is Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboy who caught the Hail Mary and went into the Hall of Fame. The Hail Mary question is house ritual. Salfen asked Masters for the moment in his life or career when he just had to go for it and it worked.

Masters did not pick the orchestra premiere. He did not pick Ethan Hawke saying yes. He went back to the horses. "I think probably our Hail Mary moment was in our first feature, *Unbranded*. We adopted sixteen wild horses, trained them, and rode them from Mexico to Canada for six months. That's a little bit more Hail Mary than filming wildlife."

Salfen, who has spent two decades collecting those moments, did not argue the scale. Riding sixteen freshly trained mustangs the length of the West is a different category of risk than waiting in a blind for an alligator snapping turtle. It is also the same muscle. You commit before the ending is guaranteed.



Texas river country, the landscape Deep in the Heart 2 asks audiences to manage as if it matters. Photo courtesy of Fin & Fur Films.

START WITH A SHORT. STEAL FROM PLANET EARTH.

Young filmmakers already look at Masters the way Salfen described — as proof you can make pictures that change policy without leaving the state you love. The advice he gave them was unromantic on purpose.

“If you’ve never done a film before ever, do a short film. Make it about something that you really care about, and that you know about, something that it’s not like you have to do a ton of research or travel a long ways to go do it. That’s going to be your most affordable way to do it, and you’ll probably do a better job at it, because you know the story.”

Then watch the best in the business until you can take them apart. Masters did not know how to make a blue-chip natural history film. So he watched Planet Earth one and two. He watched Our Planet. “I transcribed it. I looked at how many shots they had. I looked how they entered into each sequence. I looked at how many sequences they had. I just broke down how the best in the business do it, and then just applied my own flavor to it.”

The flavor is Texas — the Canadian he grew up on, the Brazos where he fell in love, the Guadalupe where he got married, the Rio Grande where he found adventure, the Colorado where he is raising his kids. Those lines are in the official notes. On the tape with Salfen, the same devotion shows up as gratitude that has not gone soft. “I think I have the coolest job in the world. I’m so grateful for the people that I work with, for the people that believe in these projects... I take the responsibility really seriously and we work really hard. But man, we have a good time doing it.”

WHAT TO DO WITH THE LEFTOVER GLORY

Nature films of this scale generate mountains of unused footage. Salfen asked what happens to it. Masters treats the outtakes as a second public good. “This footage that didn’t make it into the cut will be used in other productions. We’ll be able to give it out and help out local causes. We like to see it out in the wild and helping folks out.”

The first public good is simpler. Go see the movie while it is still a communal event. “You gotta go out and watch Deep in the Heart 2 in theaters, for a limited time, and then it’s going to be streaming on Apple TV and Prime on October 27th.” For anyone outside Texas, he added, the usual conservation verbs still apply: donate, volunteer, pay attention to the rivers you actually live on.

Salfen asked if part three is already alive in his head. Of course it is. “No better time to launch a new film than premiering your most recent one.” Masters signed off the way a man signs off when the work is a decade-long argument with his home state: “I’ll see you in a few years for Deep in the Heart 3.”

Salfen will be there. AMFM will be there. The rivers, if the film does what Masters hopes, will still be there too.

FIND BEN MASTERS

Deep in the Heart 2: Texas Rivers is in Texas theaters now (opened September 25, 2026) and streams on Apple TV and Prime Video beginning October 27, 2026.

A Fin & Fur Films production with HEB, Texan by Nature, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation. Narrated by Ethan Hawke. Produced by Josh Winkler. Edited by Sam Klatt. Score by Noah Sorota, performed by the Dallas Chamber Symphony.

Official site: deepintheheartwildlife.com · Fin & Fur: finandfurfilms.com · Instagram @finandfurfilms / @bencmasters

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Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.