

# UNDER THE SEA

## WITH AL GIDDINGS

**New documentary reveals film adventures and underwater visions from the legendary, Emmy-winning director/cinematographer**

“The Michelangelo of the Deep Sea,” the “American Cousteau,” pioneer, innovator and record-breaker, are just some of the words used to describe Al Giddings, four-time Emmy Award winner and one of the world’s most accomplished and renowned underwater director-producer-cinematographers. Drawing from more than 30 years of deep sea diving experience—and quite possibly the most hours underwater of any human being—Giddings shares stories and scenes from a lifetime of undersea film adventures. With unprecedented access to his one-of-a-kind library of underwater footage, featuring countless television specials, documentaries, groundbreaking IMAX undersea films, and Hollywood movies like *Titanic*, *The Abyss* and *The Deep*, WLIW New York President and General Manager Terrel Cass speaks one-on-one with the legend to discover the fearless genius behind his breathtaking aquatic images. **UNDER THE SEA WITH AL GIDDINGS premieres nationwide June 2008 on PBS** (check local listings).

Beginning his career in the early 1960s off the northern coast of California, Giddings earned a state teaching credential as one of the country’s first diving instructors at age 20 and managed his own dive shop business, taking still underwater photographs on the side. His first commission, a photo of three perch hovering over a rock for *Motorland Magazine*—for which he was paid \$35—led to work for numerous international magazines, including *National Geographic* feature stories, covers and books. From his 3,000-acre ranch in Pray, Montana, Giddings recalls, “In the very early years, you just couldn’t buy underwater cameras. So I took land cameras, engineered special pressure housings and designed systems that allowed me to do underwater stills and eventually cinematography underwater.”

This ingenuity landed Giddings his first Hollywood gig as underwater photographer for the 1973 B movie *Sharks’ Treasure*, which caught the attention of first-time producer Peter Guber. The former president of Columbia Pictures was putting together a crew for the theatrical adaptation of Peter ‘Jaws’ Benchley’s latest book, *The Deep* (1977), starring Nick Nolte, Jacqueline Bisset and Robert Shaw. Giddings’ inventiveness and diving skills were just what Guber needed to realize his vision: real actors doing underwater scenes instead of stunt doubles. Al persuaded a reluctant Bisset to learn how to dive for the role—the actress’ notorious wet T-shirt scene was a fringe benefit. He later trained dozens of Hollywood actors including Sean Connery and Kim Basinger for the James Bond film *Never Say Never Again* (1983).

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*The Deep* proved to be the first of a distinguished theatrical career filled with firsts. Giddings inspired technological advances for the world of underwater cinematography, among them, the use of motorized drives on still cameras with optically correct hemispherical dome ports for underwater photography. He was also one of the first divers to effectively use a rebreather system with whales, which let him stay underwater even longer. In 1978, Giddings trained with the 1,000-foot-rated Jim Suit. Looking like a cross between a space suit and the “Michelin Man,” these atmospheric metal diving suits allow humans to penetrate the crushing depths beyond 1,000 feet. Teaming up with underwater explorer/oceanographer Sylvia Earle, Ph.D. in 1979, Giddings filmed a Jim Suit-wearing Dr. Earle setting the world-record for the deepest solo dive (1,250 ft.), untethered. That same year he’d dive 8,500 feet with oceanographer Bob Ballard to discover dozens of stunning, never-before-seen organisms, based on chemosynthesis (geothermal heat and chemicals from the earth’s interior, as opposed to the sun).

For 1989’s *The Abyss*, Giddings collaborated with legendary director James Cameron, turning an abandoned nuclear power plant in South Carolina into the film’s elaborate main set containing eight million gallons of water. “Many times during *The Abyss* we left the surface at six in the evening and surfaced at midnight,” remembers Giddings, who engineered two filling stations so that he, Cameron and the other principals could refill their scuba bottles without resurfacing, during the grueling three-month shoot. In 1992, Giddings pushed the realm of underwater cinematography even further, descending 12,500 feet deep, two-and-a-half miles down, aboard the Russian *Mir* submarines to explore the world’s most famous shipwreck, the Titanic, for a CBS special hosted by Walter Cronkite. Diving for as long as 23 hours to film *Titanic: Treasure of the Deep* paid off big: James Cameron loved Al’s footage and decided to base his next film on the Titanic, recruiting Giddings as co-producer and director of underwater cinematography. The result was 1998’s Academy Award winner for Best Picture and the highest grossing movie of all time, earning approximately \$1.8 billion worldwide.

Against unpredictable waters and formidable odds, Giddings plunges into the deep to reveal the rare tropical fish, otherworldly creatures and Darwinian masterpieces of Maui, Palau and other exotic locations in his natural history documentaries and IMAX films. Conveying the importance of preserving the ocean’s resources and inhabitants through the beauty of his images, Giddings and his colleagues recount a series of innovative and heroic acts to obtain once-in-a-lifetime footage. Vividly detailing his favorite natural history moment underwater, Giddings relives photographing – at touching distance – singing humpback whales, whose sounds can be heard for 3,000-4,000 miles. For many years Giddings held the *Guinness Book of World Records* title for longest breath hold underwater (11 minutes, 40 seconds), and this skill enabled him to capture the awe-inspiring footage for IMAX’s *Whales*, using a special 2,000-plus pound camera. From gaining access to Cuba’s embargoed waters for cancer research to a life-saving shark attack rescue, from one o’clock in the morning dives to swimming amongst great whites without a cage, conservation is closest to Giddings’ heart and fuels his desire to push the envelope visually and technically to this day.

#### **UNDER THE SEA WITH AL GIDDINGS Participants**

Terrel Cass, host; President and General Manager, WLIW New York

David Clark, film producer/director

Sylvia Earle, Ph.D., underwater explorer/oceanographer

Al Giddings, underwater director-producer-cinematographer

Peter Guber, film producer

Don Liberatore, Chief Submersible Pilot, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute

Richard Lutz, Ph.D., marine biologist

Geri Murphy, underwater photographer

Shirley Pomponi, Ph.D., President/CEO, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute

A Co-Production of WLIW New York and GW Entertainment, LLC. Executive Producers: Roy A Hammond, Al Giddings and Matthew White. Producers: Dave Beaty and John Biffar for Dreamtime Entertainment. Director/Writer: John Biffar. Underwriters: Public Television Viewers and PBS. ST and CC.