

“The line between fiction and nonfiction
is blurrier than most people think.”



Sam Green.

It is hard enough to make a documentary without overcoming the greatest obstacle: finding a worthy subject. Sam Green has not had that problem, with his past films investigating The Rainbow Man, that guy who was always at sporting events holding up a John 3:16 sign and wearing a rainbow wig, a group of filmmakers attacking socialites with pies, a seminal girl band film and one of the most controversial, yet forgotten, group of 1960's radicals. His films (always made with collaborators) cut to the chase, offering sincere portraits of outside society, bring the audience closer to it's fringes. The films have played many film festivals and THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND just got Academy Award nominations for Green and co-director Bill Siegel. Other Cinema has just released a great DVD of his short films.

CINEMAD: Did you always want to make documentaries?

SAM GREEN: I never went to film school, but I did study journalism at UC-Berkeley, and Marlon Riggs, the documentary maker, taught there, so I studied documentaries with him, but it was all video. I never learned how to do film or anything. He was awesome. I got a master's degree. When I went there I wanted to be a newspaper reporter, but then I took this video class and it was really fun and writing was so lonely. I wasn't even that good at it. I would spend super long hours in front of a computer alone, being frustrated. And video, to me, was so much more fun and collaborative. After I took that class I changed direction.

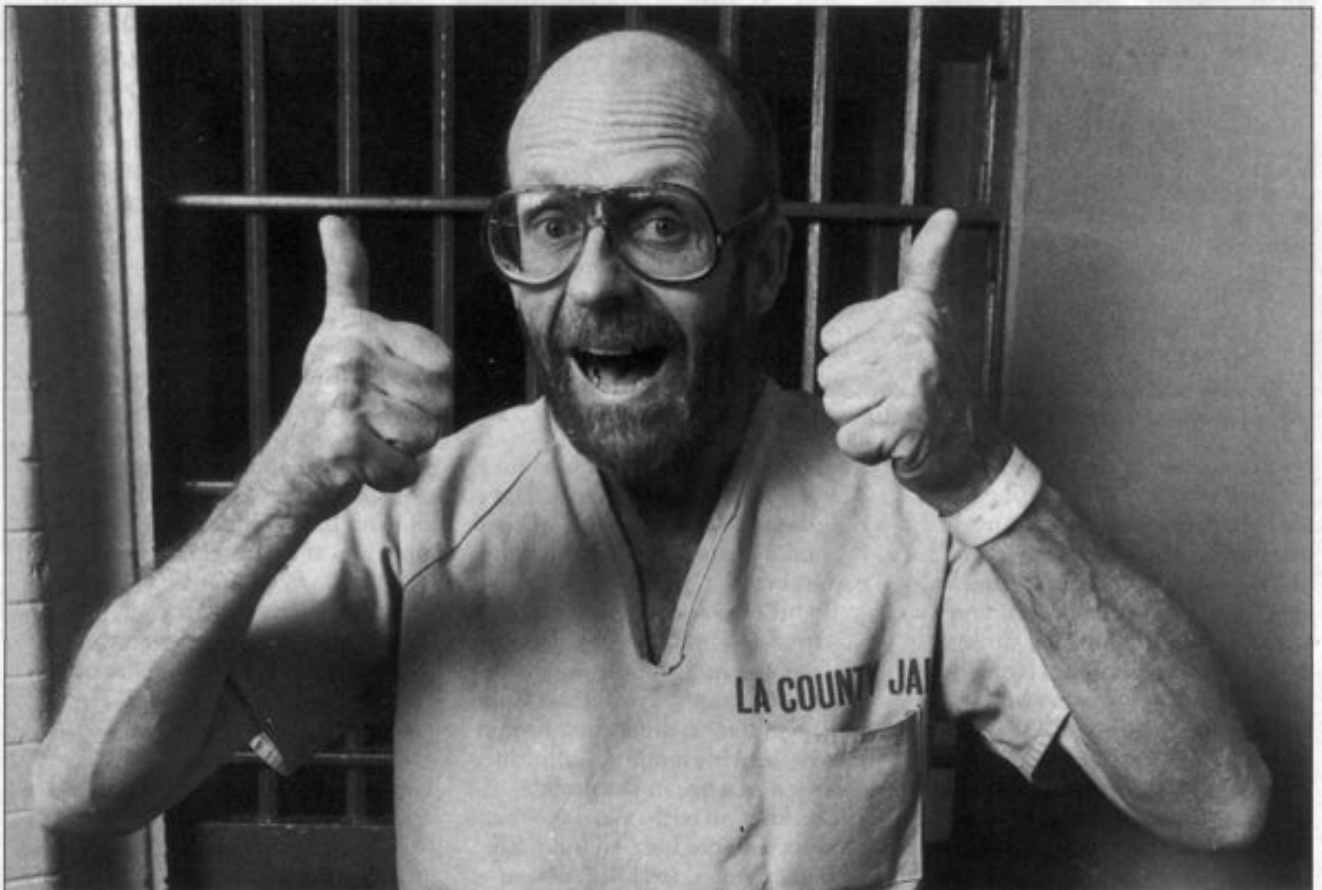
What did he show in class? He showed all sorts of stuff. He was great because he, in a lot of ways, sort of showed me a direction that I wanted to go and ended up going, which was both a real rigorous journalistic approach, but at the same time, kind of an experimental impulse as well. I had not been super into film before that, and I saw some things there that really knocked me out and opened my eyes, like SANS SOLEIL by Chris Marker. Or SALESMAN. ...Seeing those movies kind of opened my eyes to this whole world that I really got sucked into, I guess.

Did you make RAINBOW MAN at school? I made some short pieces, but Riggs was dying at that time and the program was kind of falling apart, and there really just wasn't any support to do a longer film. So I graduated, and I figured I'd have to get a job, so I moved to LA and got this job working for Fox Television on this news magazine show. My job was to find footage of people, and it was a really dumb job and I needed something to keep me busy. I had read something about the Rainbow Man in a paper and really got curious. It really got under my skin, so I just decided to try to find shots of the Rainbow Man, because I could call up Major League Baseball to get stuff for stories, like they were doing a profile on Barry Bonds. I would just slip in, "Hey could I also have the 1977 World Series?" I started to acquire all this footage of the Rainbow Man, and at first it was just kind of a funny, goof, lark type of thing, but then after a while it started to become more serious. I was totally perplexed because my parents were kind of

CRIME

END OF THE RAINBOW

The strange crusade of TV's wigged evangelist turns violent



super-liberals, and so they didn't have a TV when I was growing up. I never watched TV, and I remember reading about the Rainbow Man when I was in LA and thinking to myself, "How do I know who this guy is? How has he penetrated into my consciousness? I never even watch TV." So that was one of the things that interested me, that he had been so incredibly successful, in a way.

At least according to your film, it's misguided, but it's an interesting goal.



The cult of celebrity is interesting, and then when you mix in the religion, and a crazy upbringing, the rest of the story. He sort of struck me as like the ultra-American. He seemed to have

all the qualities of an American, only in super-extreme forms, like no family, no direction, no other values except TV. TV was his total reference point. That's obviously not a good recipe for having a stable, positive, peaceful life.

Was he pretty cooperative since you were another piece of his celebrity? I wrote him a letter. He'd been in prison for a couple years and nobody had ever visited him. He'd never had a single visit. I went once without a camera and talked to him. He was crazy about the idea because at that point, and I think it's actually still true, he felt like the world was still just about to end, and so I was a way for him to get the word out. It was weird when I actually did go back and interview him, I did this long interview, and you know how when you do an interview you save the more sensitive questions for the end, and one of the questions I saved in case he'd get upset was, "Do you think that the media, myself included, exploited you?" He had been really tense throughout the whole interview and it was the only time that he smiled. He actually smiled and chuckled. He said, "Actually, I'm the one that's exploiting you. Who else is getting interviewed in this prison today?" And it sort of knocked me back for a minute. You know, that's the way he thinks of it. He feels like he's using the press, although I would disagree with that.

He's still in prison? Yeah, he's gonna be there forever. I showed it in Europe, and the first question was always, "How is this guy in prison for life?" To them, it makes absolutely no sense.

It's because we're scared of the mentally ill. Yeah, or just somehow this crazy guy is stuck in the non-crazy part of the criminal justice system, which is itself crazy.

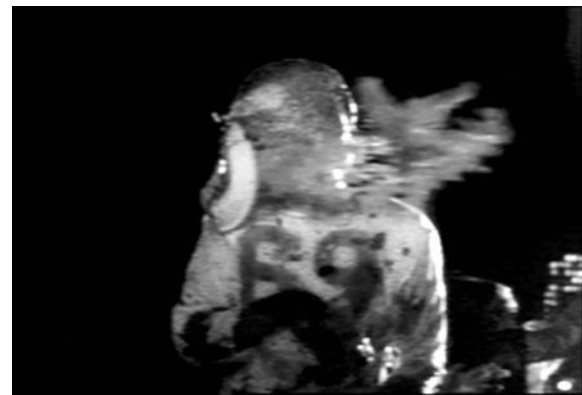
Is he actually in a prison or is it a mental health institution? He's in Vacaville, which is like a prison, but it's prison for... not

people who are certifiably crazy, but I think they pump them full of drugs and stuff like that. It's a medical prison.

When did you find out about the incident in your film PIE FIGHT '69? It was probably like '98 or something. The year after RAINBOW MAN, I started working on WEATHER UNDERGROUND, and I was at the Bettman Archives in New York, which is this great photo archive that has since been bought by Bill Gates and is not accessible anymore. I was going through folders of photos, and one of the photos was this really funny one of a woman in a tutu throwing a pie, and it said, "San Francisco Film Festival, Opening Night, 1969." And it didn't say anything more than that and I was completely intrigued. So when I got back I got a couple of articles and read about what happened... the ringleader was Peter Adair, who was a huge hero of mine.

The first real film that had moved me had been... this is a little bit of a digression. I'd had a job in college showing movies in classrooms, and this was back in the days when you would bring a 16mm film into the class, set up the projector, and show it. Most of the movies sucked. I showed INSIDE THE HUMAN BRAIN in psychology classes like 400 times, and these were all old educational movies, but once I went to a comparative religion class and showed this movie HOLY GHOST PEOPLE. It's Peter Adair's first movie, and it's a documentary he made when he was actually still a college student at Antioch College. It's about this church in West Virginia, Appalachia, in the late '60s where they handle snakes. Like that's part of their ecstatic approach to religion where they handle snakes and speak in tongues. They handle rattlesnakes. It's fucking amazing. This is a verite documentary in black and white. Unbelievable. After I saw it in class, my jaw dropped and I took it back to the office and just projected it on the wall and watched it again. I was amazed. I'd never seen a movie that movie me like that, so Peter Adair was always a big hero of mine.

When I got these articles about the pie fight incident and read that Peter Adair had been the ringleader, I was really intrigued, and also the articles had mentioned that the radicals had filmed this event with cameras and they wanted to make a film about it. I just started to ask around to find out about what happened to this film, and nobody really knew. So it became this big mystery, and then I talked to Bill Daniel, you know, like the Zelig of the underground film world. He said, "Oh yeah, I found that film once in the free box at Film Arts Foundation." You know in the lobby there's this box where you can put things if you just want to give it away. I was amazed. I said, "Well, what did you do with it?" And he said, "I gave it back to Peter Adair," who was real sick with AIDS and had subsequently died. So I asked



stills from PIE FIGHT '69.

around, I went to Peter Adair's family and his business partner and his old boyfriend, because now I knew that the film existed, but it had sort of disappeared again. Nobody had it and I went through all of his stuff and I couldn't find it. This went on for a couple years so I sort of figured it was lost. Then one day, late at night, I got a call from Bill Daniel, saying, "Sam, you won't believe this. I was in the basement of ATA (Artists Television Access) going through some unmarked boxes and I found that film again." The odds of that, that's almost divine, there's no other way of explaining it. So I rushed over to look at it and it was amazing footage, it was beautiful. At that point, I was really inspired to make that little movie.

Were the people involved happy that something finally came out of the film and incident? Yeah, you know, the whole thing had been a complete disaster. It was like if somebody made a movie about your worst date or something, uncovered footage about it and made a documentary about it thirty years after the fact and people liked it. I think it'd be this bizarre but somewhat heartening experience.

What drew you to the Weather Underground? I had always known about the group and I loved the story. With RAINBOW MAN I really loved that story. It resonated with me emotionally and it felt to me like it was a story that was almost a parable. This is what I liked about it. It was a really fascinating story, but it evoked ideas and themes and kind of said something in a very indirect way. It was both kind of dramatic and sexy and interesting, but there was also a lot of substance at the heart of it.

And at that point, was it sort of a forgotten thing? I think it's more than that. It was always weird to me that when you work on a documentary, you have eight billion conversations with people about

what you're working on. Anybody over 40 that I talked to about it, said, "Oh, wow, the Weather Underground," and 99.9% of people under 40 I mentioned it to would just have this blank look. They'd never heard of the group. I think, in a way, it doesn't fit into the sort of clean cartoon version of the '60s in history at this point. You know, the idea that everybody was a hippie and they all went to Woodstock and protested the war and then the war stopped and everybody got into disco and got jobs. I don't think it's a conspiracy to suppress a story like this so much as it's hard to write about it. You have to write about it in a sophisticated way to fit it into those narratives.

Were the people in the WU pretty much on board? Oh, no. They all initially said it was a horrible idea. None of them wanted it to happen at first. "Why bring this up?" It took a long time to get the people who had been in the group comfortable with us to the point where they would actually participate in the project.

How did you even find them? Some of them are kind of public, but most of the others, it became pretty clear early on that there were going to be good ways and bad ways to find them. Once I just got somebody's number off the internet and called them up. I said, "Hi, I'm doing a documentary on the Weather Underground. Can I talk to you?" There was this long pause and she said, "I don't know how you got my number but never call me again," and hung up. I just realized then that that's not a good way to do that. We would talk to people and sort of develop a relationship with them and then ask them to help us get in touch with other people. You know, one person could call another and say, "These guys are doing some research and they're OK, they just want to talk to you in a very off the record way." Almost anybody will have coffee with you just to see who you are, and after a while we were able to impress upon people that we were serious and it wasn't Fox News, it was an independent film.

Did you at least have the RAINBOW MAN to



show them? I was kind of uncomfortable with that. I didn't want them to think that I was kind of putting them on the same level as the Rainbow Man. The only person who really asked was Mark Rudd and he loved it. I was completely shocked. He said that he'd never really talked to anybody about it, and he had been sort of a famous guy, so certainly over the years people had tried to get him to talk. He said later that it was THE RAINBOW MAN that had made him decide to talk to us because he felt like it was kind of nuance and dealt with the subject matter in a kind of complex way and wasn't black and white. I was surprised but happy to hear that.

How is it that you were working with Siegel? I lived in New York in the early '90s and I got this job working on a documentary series about Muhammad Ali, just doing photocopies and then I started doing research. We had mutual friends and I ran into him one day when he was looking for a job, so I helped him get a job there. We ended up working together for a year on this series, this totally ridiculous project. It was a lot of fun and we became friends. We had these common interests in history and documentaries, so when I started to get into the Weather Underground film, I really like working with people and almost all my films have been done with somebody else.

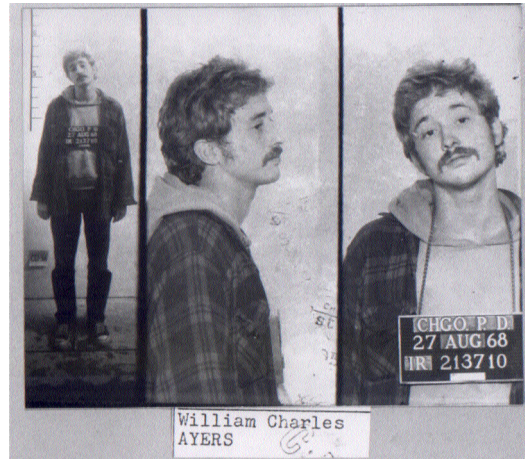
How did you go about deciding what was important and what had to be included and how do you figure out what order all those things are? That was really hard. With documentary, you're always kind of subtly rearranging chronological events. The line between fiction and nonfiction is blurrier than most people think. I'm not making stuff up, but just sort of adjusting sometimes. With the Weather Underground, there were all these people who had a.) been in the group, and you had to have your shit straight for them, and b.) all the people who had lived through that time and had strong feelings about the group, either pro or con. I felt a huge responsibility to know what I was talking about and to get it right. The editing took a long, long time just to make the film communicate the story in a clear way and also to include enough context where it made sense and make sure that important things were in there,

and on top of that to make it work as a narrative. Those are sometimes things that conflict. With a documentary, you show people a rough cut of the film and you do that over and over

again, the most helpful person was Caveh Zahedi. He was amazing because I didn't know anything about dramatic film. He said real early on that you've got to make this work like a feature film. You sort of have to take that structure and use it, and I haven't got nothing against that. If those kinds of things work, I'm all for it. It's a real formula and I didn't adopt it a hundred percent, but the ideas behind it are really sound.

Was there anything that you thought would work and you ended up taking it out? I went through all sorts of crazy ideas. I had this great footage that I loved and this whole section I put together. I was trying to develop this sort of sub-theme for the movie about the consolidation of the media and sort of explain why nobody under 40 has ever heard of the Weather Underground. I was in the middle of editing and I read "1984" which I'd read in high school and thought was cool, but I read it again and I was flabbergasted by how good and how sophisticated it was. There was this quote in there, and I'm paraphrasing here, "Whoever controls the present controls the past, and whoever controls the past controls the future," and there's a lot to that. The idea that whoever is in power now controls what we know of history or how we think about history and people's notions of the past inform what they're going to do in the future.

I tried for a long time to work in this more experimental thread through the film that evoked these ideas in a very nondidactic way, and it never worked. Eventually I had to cut it out. That kind of broke my heart because one of the films that I loved and was kind of an inspiration for me in making Weather Underground was D-I-A-L HISTORY. It's amazing. It's a really smart movie about lots of big ideas but never explicitly so. It's very experimental in that it's just this weird history of the hijacking phenomenon without anything else that's explicitly articulated



and it's just a compilation of great footage. I was aiming to do something that was in that direction in terms of being experimental but I kept getting pushed in a more straight direction just by the nature of the story and the kind of responsibility that I felt to make it clear.

So did you show the people in the Underground rough cuts at all or was it just understood that they would just see it at the end? There was never anything said about anything like that, but we did all the interviews before September 11th, and before September 11th, the story was just this odd piece of forgotten history that nobody really cared about. After September 11th, obviously the context was so much more charged and people were going to take it a lot more seriously, so it was important to me to show it to all of them when it was done, not so much to get their feedback, but just so they would know what they're getting into. I wanted all of them to be OK with it. We really hadn't thought what would happen if they weren't, but we went around and with everybody watched it, just a VHS tape. They had criticisms of it, but everybody was on board. They've all done a lot of screenings, except for David Gilbert, who's in prison.

Was there anything that you found out about them that you didn't expect or was everything pretty well-reported? I had always thought that if you bomb a building, they go out and buy the bomb and put it in the building and that's it. Takes a couple hours. But it was a really big, pretty impressive operation. They would get a hotel room a couple days before and people would fly in from around the country who knew about how to do the different parts of this, and they had to get all the parts in ways that couldn't be traced, and get people to take care of things and build it and test it, and it went on and on for a couple of days and involved a lot of people. Then they'd all split, disappear, leave the town after that, go somewhere else for a while. That was kind of surprising.

Instead of a comic book sort of way with capes and masks and shit. Right.

So after that, when did you finally finish it? We finished it at the end of 2002 and showed it for the first time at Sundance in 2003, so a little more than a year ago.

Was it preaching to the converted, or was it a lot of mixed feelings? It depends. In general, it depends on where I'm showing it. In a way, it's never preaching to the converted, though, because even if it's an audience of a lot of people who are on the left, a lot of them hate the Weather Underground anyway, so it's a controversial subject even on the left. Those screenings, there's often a lot of people who stand up and have a lot of negative things to say, and at a lot of more mainstream screenings, people will say, "Why are you supporting terrorism?" Stuff like that. To me, that's like a softball pitch because that's a very easy question to deal with. I don't necessarily consider this terrorism. Terrorism, to me, is killing or hurting innocent people to make a political statement or to achieve political ends. This was the destruction of property. Bombing is a strong word for what they

do. They put like a stick of dynamite in a bathroom and blow up a couple of toilets. They did 25 bombings and never hurt anybody, so to me, it's closer to the Boston Tea Party, which was the destruction of property to make a political statement and those people are revolutionary heroes, they're not terrorists. But anyway, Sundance was cool. It was the first time I really showed it, and it got a lot of buzz and the screenings were all sold out and two of the people from the film were there. It was a pretty phenomenal way to premiere the film.

Do people in the industry and distributors take documentary filmmakers seriously as filmmakers, or is it just that you're stuck with the content and that's all people care about?

Yeah, it's pretty much that. At this point, some documentaries are making a couple million bucks, so they kind of get taken seriously in that sense, but it's still like nobody cares about it, which I love. I think one of the bad things about documentaries starting to make money is that I'm afraid it's going to attract a lot of assholes, the same assholes who are in the feature film world.

So are you supposed to go to meetings about the Academy Awards, or do they just send you a pamphlet about what to wear and where to go? The weird thing was is that for a couple days I never even heard from them.

So you just heard that you were nominated? Yeah, but never heard from them, and I started to wonder if maybe it was a mistake. But eventually I called them and was like, "Hey, it's me," and they were like, "Oh, we were gonna call you," like when you're trying to blow off somebody, it was the same thing. They don't really tell you much, like what to wear or anything. I went online and looked at what other people wore. I had always heard that you could get free clothes, although I didn't know how to do it. Like, do you just go into a mall and yell out, "I want some free clothes!" But you know who hooked me up?

Who? Elizabeth Subrin.

Really? How did she know? She lives in New York and moves in rarified circles, you know, and she emailed some friends of hers at this designer Marc Jacobs, who I didn't know about but I think people are impressed. They were like, "Yeah, have him call us." So I called him and the guy was like, "Yeah, no problem. We'll FedEx you a tuxedo." It was like they don't realize that it's just me.

What else? Did you get like a gift bag or fruitcake or what?

Nothing, man. Nothing. They don't do nothin' for you. The whole thing ended up nearly breaking me financially. It's funny. I just get poorer and poorer. People sometimes look at the box office totals on Yahoo, and they'll see WEATHER UNDERGROUND on there and get in touch with me and say, "Dude, you must be rich! The money's pouring in!" And I'm literally getting poorer and poorer. I'm going to wearing a barrel in a couple months. But it was really fun, that was the most amazing thing and kind of surprising thing. It was super fun. I ran into Prince. That was the high point for me. I turned into this hallway

and literally ran into him, like I was face to face with him, and I was so starstruck and shocked that I screamed and I went, "It's Prince!" He kind of just looked at me like I was a total idiot and went around me. But that was the high point for me.

How fast did people realize you aren't a celeb? I think they realized that when we walked up. I mean, I'm not going to get a limo. Those things cost tons of bucks. We all walked up and I think that was a dead giveaway. When you walk up in LA, you might as well be carrying a neon sign above your head saying, "I'm nobody."

Didn't even drive up in a Civic? We took taxis to the hotel next door.

Did you have some badge saying, "It's cool, I'm supposed to be here." Yeah, and that was weird because the red carpet is divided into two halves. The riff raff goes down one side and everybody gets kind of hustled along, and all the stars are on the other side, and the nominees as well. That was so bizarre. It was one of the most surreal spaces I've ever been in, because it's like you're in this thing and there's like hundreds of screaming photographers, literally this wall of photographers and they're all screaming, like, "Nicole! To the left!" And then to us they were screaming, "Get the fuck out of the way! Security! Get those people out of there!" We just kind of started to lurk in the background, and it was totally fascinating. This'll sound a little new age-y, but the energy was totally bizarre, because there were also bleachers where people had camped out for days to get these seats and they're all screaming, so you're just kind of at the focus point of this intense blast of energy, and I was just sitting there phoning people trying to explain to them how fucking weird it was. I had never been in a weirder place. It's like Vegas where it's so far beyond weird that there's no point in judging it. It's just pure spectacle. For ethnographic value, it's completely fascinating.

Did they seat you high up or what? I knew this was going to happen. All I wanted to talk about was my serious work and all you want to do is be a starfucker. No, we got four seats right down about ten rows from the front, and my whole posse, we got about a million seats for them in the back. But we were sitting next to Ted Turner and in front of Faye Dunaway, so that was pretty weird.



Is there still no way for somebody who wants to make documentaries to kind of navigate making a living? I'm convinced that the only way to do it is to make films really fast and

make 'em for TV and get paid while you make 'em. Anybody I know who's done that has started to make shitty films. I'm just going to keep doing it as long as I can. I do a few college screenings and make a little money off that, but I teach and that's how I make money, and I also live in a pretty low-budget way.

I think it's age 50 where people just kind of... Fall off. "It's a young person's game."

Or then it's the wine commercials, the comedy with Robin Williams... The bad corporate videos.

Yeah, I mean, you gotta plan your eventual sellout. The problem is at that point it's going to be for such little bucks, an exercise in humiliation. At that point I'm going to go to law school. In California, you don't actually have to go to law school, you can just take the bar exam. Very few people do it, but I'm just gonna study hard for a year.

Do you have another film lined up? I'm doing something, it's a real messy idea at this point, but I want to do something that's more experimental, a documentary that weaves together unrelated stories to kind of make a meta-narrative, in a way, that would be about idealism and utopia, the idea of utopia, and the limitations of human nature. I'm approaching things differently than I have in the past where I've

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always had a story that evokes ideas, and here I'm sort of starting with the ideas and putting together a few stories. I don't know, it's still real unformed at this point. I gotta figure out a way to work in a celebrity, though. I'm trying to see how this idea can incorporate the rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard. If I could get ODB in this, I'd be really happy.

www.theweatherunderground.com
www.othercinemadvd.com
www.samgreen.to