

Director's Q&A – Julien Nitzberg

How would you describe this film and the Whites in a snapshot for someone who may not know anything about it/ them?

This is the portrait of a family of outlaws who live outside society's rules and their struggles with the consequences of such a life. It follows four generations over almost a year and a half as they deal with births, deaths, attempted murders, being released from prison and drug dependency.

The Whites are also the last people preserving their particular version of the tradition of mountain dancing that stems from early Irish cloggers moving to America. Their moral code dates back a hundred years to the mountain version of frontier justice when the law was either too corrupt to bother with, or, too far away to affect you. People did what they wanted and lived in clans. If someone crossed you, you simply got a gun and enforced your own idea of justice (no matter how misguided). This ethos resulted in much bloodshed and feuds like the Hatfields and the McCoys.

What was the genesis of the project? What inspired you to make this film?

This project can be said to have started in 1989 when I first met Mamie White while filming my documentary *The Wild World of Hasil Adkins*, One Man Band and Inventor of the Hunch, about Boone County's infamous rockabilly pioneer and punk progenitor, Hasil Adkins. Adkins was a close friend of the White family, having frequently performed with Jesco's father D. Ray White.

Mamie was at a concert of Hasil's I was shooting at a Boone County roadhouse. She excitedly kept telling me that she was on acid. Later in the night she broke up a three-woman catfight. A week later I ran into her again. Sitting in her pick-up, she eagerly informed me she was on acid again. She then invited me to her birthday party because she was going to have a cake "with tits and a pussy on it." Never one to say no to cake, I took her up on the offer.

The next day, on the way over, I stopped to ask directions to Mamie White's trailer (where Jesco was living at the time). Pulling over to ask a random pick-up truck parked on the side of the road, I was told: "You're looking for Mamie White? I hope you get VD and your cock and balls fall off." This gave me a sense of how some people in the community felt about the Whites.

Eventually I found the trailer and met Jesco. Immediately, I was fascinated by him and his family. A week later I went back and filmed the first video footage of Jesco. This footage later helped raise the interest and money for *Dancing Outlaw*.

Over the years, I always wanted to do something with that original footage. Then out of the blue, I got a call from a friend telling me that Johnny Knoxville was a big fan of my documentaries and wanted to know if he could call me. I agreed and we went out to lunch and bonded over our love for obscure and offensive country music. I ended up showing him my original footage and he became obsessed with trying to figure out what we could do with the "secret Jesco footage." I didn't feel like that the original footage was strong enough to put out on its own. They were more like the lost demo tapes of a great band. Then I remembered how I'd found everyone in the family to be as wild and interesting as Jesco. Knoxville suggested that I go back to Boone County to see if there was a story to be told about the rest of the family and the younger generation of Whites. We decided to follow multiple generations of the family to see if I could figure out whether certain White family tendencies (including their love of sex, drugs, and crime) were learned or genetically imprinted. Johnny Knoxville and Jeff Tremaine paid for the first shoot out of their own pockets. We shot for four days and came back with what would become the basis of the film. The original Jesco tapes didn't end up in the film but will be available as a bonus feature on the DVD.

Are there any films that served as inspirations or influences for you when it came to making this film?

I told my crew that our mission was "to shoot like the Maysles and edit like Scorsese." The Maysles Brothers' *Salesman* influenced my decision to roll the dice and take a

mostly cinema verite approach to the film. It could have been an interview-based documentary but I decided to shoot a verite documentary, risking the possibility that if nothing majorly dramatic happened in the year we shot it, I'd be fucked.

In the editing, my big influence was *Goodfellas*. Like that movie, we were documenting a crime family. I wanted to have the majestic scope of that movie and show the fun that being part of an underground life could be. We used lots of music in a way influenced by that movie. When choosing music for scenes, I would ask myself what music is the character hearing in their head and provide the appropriate soundtrack score. Like *Goodfellas*, I knew that after showing the exciting part of the criminal life, I wanted to address the real consequences of that life and how it can go dark. In *Goodfellas*, the audience realize when Joe Pesci shoots Spider that what at first seemed fun is actually not at all attractive. We tried to have Kirk's time in the hospital serve the same thematic purpose and structured it in the film similarly to serve as an act break denoting the film's darkening.

The other movie that really influenced me was Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man*. This is a more obscure movie that I've been obsessed with since high school. In it, Malcolm McDowell's story is narrated by songs sung in a studio by former "Animals" keyboard player, Alan Price. The songs then continue into scenes in a way similar to Cat Stevens' songs in *Harold and Maude*. Hank Williams III's songs seemed to be a natural soundtrack to the family's life. He had even written one already about Jesco's father. I decided to film Hank III singing these with Jesco dancing to them. Thus, they became almost like a Greek tap dancing chorus narrating the movie's key events.

What was the most difficult scene to shoot?

Most of it was difficult to shoot. Because of the precarious situations where we were often observing illegal/ and or questionably moral activities a lot of the shoot was done surreptitiously. The family, of course, knew, but we usually got permission from locations/other people in scenes later.

There were also frequent death threats from different members of the family. In total, we received at least 8 death threats. One half-sister of the Whites told us she was coming down with her rifle “Josey Wales,” and was going to kill me. A few weeks later she kept insisting that I come to her house for an interview and that everything was alright. I’d heard stories that she’d recently held up a bar and also knew she’d imprisoned Les White against his will. I chose not to pursue that interview even though I knew that the Whites are quick with a death threat, but also quick to become friends. As Billy Hastings learned, some death threats from the family can be very real.

Nothing went the way it was supposed to ever. When we were supposed to shoot with Mousey and her husband Charles Green, he could not be found. Instead we filmed her search for him. When we were trying to film the interview with Kirk at the beginning of the film, her son Tylor kept interrupting. Once again, I went against the normal instincts of a documentarian trying to control an interview situation and let the chaos happen- to what I think was a good effect.

Family members were jealous of who got the most time with the crew and would then refuse to be filmed. So it was a constant state of winning people back over. Stories were spread by different family members that we were doing crack with other family members, sleeping with them, had bought one a Hummer and even that Kirk had put a hex on me to spend more time filming only her. Sue Bob’s boyfriend Rick got jealous that he wasn’t on a shoot. They got in a fight about it and she refused to go home. He called the police and claimed I’d kidnapped her when she went to spend the night with Kirk. In the middle of the night, a state trooper showed up at my room.

Many scenes were emotionally hard to shoot. Obviously this included destructive drug use. During the funeral, it felt very intrusive to be there, but it was also such an important emotional moment, we knew we had to get it.

We also had a number of local law officials who didn’t like the family and would try and prevent us from shooting.

What do you hope people will get out of seeing the film?

I hope people get a feeling for the complexity of the family. They are incredibly poetic, funny and beautifully profane. I hope people can love them the way I do and not focus only on the sad or destructive parts of their lives. They are incredibly fun people to be around who live life how they want to live, aware of the consequences, never caring what anyone thinks of them.

In some ways I think they embody one neglected aspect of the original pioneer spirit- the settlers who left Europe not for opportunity but just to be left alone to cause as much trouble as they could. This is a portrait of the double edged sword of an American outlaw culture that has probably been with us since our country's founding and probably will stay with us until the end.