

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
FILMMAKER
TOMMY AVALLONE
September 16, 2020
Host: Bryan Smith

Tommy Avallone (00:00):

I wanted to be like a 22 year old Kevin Smith that made a movie in New Jersey, went to Sundance and all that stuff. It just didn't happen that way. And I'm actually kind of grateful it didn't, because I can imagine success at that age would have destroyed me.

Bryan Smith (00:17):

Brian Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now, let's jump in.

Bryan Smith (00:34):

Tommy Avallone is on the show. Tommy is a Los Angeles based filmmaker who directed and produced one of my favorite documentaries over the last few years, The Bill Murray Stories, Life Lessons Learned From a Mythical Man, which is still on Netflix. He also directed the documentaries I am Santa Claus and Ghostheads, among others. His most recent film is Waldo on Weed about the parents of a child, Waldo, with cancer. After Waldo becomes violently ill as a result of chemotherapy, his parents decided to give him CBD oil, which is illegal where they live in Philadelphia. Co-produced by Whoopi Goldberg, Waldo on Weed premiered at the Tribeca film festival, and is now available on Amazon Prime. They can also be rented or purchased on iTunes and other streaming services.

Bryan Smith (01:19):

In this interview you will hear about the challenges facing documentary filmmakers when it comes to working within the Hollywood film industry versus doing things on your own, what it's like networking and trying to sell a film in the festival circuit, how Tommy was able to combine home movies and present day interviews to tell the Waldo and Weed story, how Whoopi Goldberg got involved in that project, what it was like trying to capture the essence of Bill Murray's zen-like philosophy through the stories of those who had chance encounters with them, as well as what projects Tommy is working on now that will be coming out soon. So, let's jump right into my conversation with filmmaker, Tommy Avallon.

Bryan Smith (01:57):

Welcome to the DreamPath podcast, Tommy.

Tommy Avallone (01:59):

Well, thank you for having me.

Bryan Smith (02:01):

Yeah. So tell us about Waldo on Weed. I watched the film by the way, it's on Amazon Prime, and I really enjoyed it, and I thought you accomplished some things with this documentary that you're not really expecting. And so, tell us about your approach to this, how you found the story and what you would like audiences to know about it, to maybe get them to hop onto Amazon and see it.

Tommy Avallone (02:25):

Well, the thing I want people to know is it's available to watch. If you feel like paying for it or it's on, free for Amazon Prime, But yeah, I mean, my friend Brian is the father of the son, Waldo. He was very popular in the Philadelphia area. I'm from New Jersey, but I would work in Philadelphia and he had this pizza place called Pizza Brain. It was a very crazy pizza shop that had all this pizza and -I can never say that word, right- ...Memorabilia? And he's just, he was a character. In every city there's characters and Brian was certainly one of them; had tall, orange hair. And I reached out to him, I was like, "Let's do something on pizza. That would be fun, right? Like pizza." And he's like, "Actually, you know, I'm kind of leaving the pizza shop soon. My son has just got over his first round with like-" Oh, at the time it was his first round of cancer.

Tommy Avallone (03:17):

And he was telling me about how he illegally smuggled cannabis oil. This is, at the time when Waldo had cancer, it was 2014 going into 2015. So, it wasn't legal in Pennsylvania at the time. And he was telling me all about the story and how he filmed it. And he's not sure if he'll ever do anything with the footage, but he has it. And we kind of just kept in touch. And one thing led to another and we kind of took that footage, turned it into a documentary. Uh, we filmed interviews of them throughout the years, put it together. Whoopie Goldberg was our executive producer. We premiered at Tribeca and now you can watch it on Amazon Prime.

Bryan Smith (03:54):

Well, tell us how you connected with Whoopie.

Tommy Avallone (03:57):

It's such a boring story. We just were both repped by William Morris and it just- They- We showed them the sizzle that we put together and she liked it, and we just knew she had an opinion on cannabis and had done a bunch of different documentaries herself. And we just wanted someone that kinda could help us craft a story that was a little bit more universal for everyone to watch. 'Cause I mean, to me personally, like I've never smoked pot a day in my life, I'm not a cannabis user. I'm not even a fan of cannabis. I just wanted to tell a story about what a father would do to save his son. They just happened to use cannabis to say that.

Bryan Smith (04:35):

Right.

Tommy Avallone (04:35):

That's why we interviewed anti-cannabis people, CALM, citizens against legalization of marijuana. Like, interviewing doctors at Harvard that are saying, "Hey, this could be something

good about here." It's really interesting to see both sides and the fears and all that sort of stuff. And to me pot was Cheech and Chong movies or Half Baked. And now it's listening to Brian's story and seeing the doctors kind of talk about it. It's really interesting where everything is now, at least six years now, since Waldo's cancer.

Bryan Smith (05:07):

You made a comment about the story and sort of the lack of agenda that you had going into it.

Tommy Avallone (05:13):

Oh yeah, no agenda.

Bryan Smith (05:14):

And it made me- And I noticed that as I was watching it, you weren't trying to sell anything in the film. You're telling a story, but really what it is... It's like, I don't know if this is a bad analogy, but when you first hear about Game of Thrones and if you're not into fantasy, you're not into dragons, you're not into Kings and Queens and all of that. If you don't like that type of approach, you can still be brought into Game of Thrones, because of the story. Really there are universal themes that are happening within Game of Thrones. And I kind of found with Waldo on Weed that, even if you don't like pot or you're anti-pot or whatever, this is a story of parents who love their child so much that they're willing to break the law, and to make him comfortable and to get him better, whatever way possible. And it's that universal theme that I really connected with.

Tommy Avallone (06:11):

Yeah, I mean, like a lot of times people will have opinions and stuff without thinking about the people who go through it. And Brian and Danielle, the parents of Waldo, they went through this and it was very- It wasn't just an opinion, it was a thing that they went through. They could very well have lost their son. And yeah, and I don't make agenda movies. I just, I tend to like to make movies about characters. And I thought the Dwyer family was very interesting characters and they were going through an interesting experience. It was really the only one of my movies that really the character changed from the beginning to the end. We spent, I want to say four years with them, starting with the dad cam footage of what Brian would film himself. Brian-

Tommy Avallone (06:52):

A lot of them in that movie is Brian on a flip cam. If you remember those sort of cameras.

Bryan Smith (06:57):

Right.

Tommy Avallone (06:57):

Filming himself for his own sort of therapy of it. And we use these- This video because what was interesting about that is like, we're not a documentary crew. There's no documentary crew, there's no mic, there's no lights, it's just kind of a father with his own thoughts, and there's no real performance there. And which I really liked about that sort of part. But yeah, I mean, this is really the only one of... My movies tend to have some sort of comedic angle to it. And I think,

what's great about this one, even though it's a pretty intense subject matter, Waldo is hilarious. You know, Bryan and Danielle are funny people. Brian, Waldo's uncles Mike, and Larry, they're very humorous looking. We get laughs in a cancer movie. So that's very exciting to me, because sometimes those sort of movies you're like: Oh, I don't want to watch that. That seems really heavy, a lot's going on. I don't want to watch- I don't want to be dragged down. But it's a really good story about hope and family, and I think that's kind of important nowadays.

Bryan Smith (07:52):

Yeah, they are characters.

Tommy Avallone (07:53):

Well, that's Philadelphia for you.

Bryan Smith (07:56):

I'm glad you pointed that out, because yeah, it's very Philly and his bright orange hair. It's almost like they're handpicked, almost like you casted it to be something this interesting and captivating, especially Brian.

Tommy Avallone (08:11):

Yeah. Well, that's how- I mean, I just thought Brian was an interesting character and I went to him for pizza. It just so happened that he had this like crazy life experience that was happening.

Bryan Smith (08:18):

Yeah. So, tell us about the found footage experience, as opposed to- Because I look at Waldo on Weed as kind of a found footage-

Tommy Avallone (08:26):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (08:28):

-endeavor where you're taking all this footage and trying to organize it, but also figuring out how to incorporate your own footage and how to fill in the gaps. What was that process like?

Tommy Avallone (08:40):

It was very tedious. I mean, you're just watching home videos, you know what I mean? Like, you film a documentary and you go: Well, these are story points, or these are questions I asked, or there's a reason why we're filming this stuff. And sometimes there was absolutely no reason Brian was filming at all, so you're just kind of going through a lot of times, or he's just doing whatever. So it's a lot of- I mean, think of any home videos you might have, it's like- And then how do you create a narrative out of that? You know?

Tommy Avallone (09:07):

So...

Bryan Smith (09:07):
Right.

Tommy Avallone (09:08):

Brian was very helpful. He'd be like, "Oh, I was going through this," and like, "this month of this year," and then the footage was organized quite well, where it was kind of like by the month, by the year. So, that was helpful. But yeah, I mean, there's a lot of personal- And it's so weird to- Brian would call me a couple of times and I was like, "I can't talk to you right now. I spent four hours of listening to you today. I can't have anymore." And it was a really weird experience, because he wouldn't be there for those conversations physically. It was just past Brian, you know? And it was just- I just- Enough Brian today. He understood.

Bryan Smith (09:45):

Yeah. Well, I'm really excited to see where this goes for you, because you hit- No, it was Tribeca that you got into last year with Waldo on Weed?

Tommy Avallone (09:56):

It was 2019, yeah.

Bryan Smith (09:58):

Okay, yeah. So, tell us about the film festival circuit and the hustle of getting your film seen by film festival folks and submitted, and hopefully part of a festival so that it can be seen by more audiences and hopefully picked up for distribution.

Tommy Avallone (10:17):

I mean, I love the festivals. You feel like a star for like a week, week and a half. These fun parties, these fun get togethers, free food, the screenings, the press. I enjoy it. Tribeca is a little different. I've been at Tribeca twice and New York is already abuzz. So, sometimes it gets lost in that where it's like- But like with South by Southwest or Hot Docs, you're going to Austin, you're going to Toronto, and the places have turned around for this festival. So, you're constantly walking around with people that have badges on. New York, you just blend in with everything, everyone's already there, you know?

Bryan Smith (10:56):

Right, right. Kind of like Seattle- Seattle International Film Festival's the same way. There's just- It's kind of spread out, it's in the city as opposed to like Sundance, which is everybody you see on the street is wearing their tags.

Tommy Avallone (11:10):

Yeah. I mean, I've never been to Sundance yet. But with Bill Murray we premiered at South by Southwest, our international premiere was at Hot Docs, we went to BFI in London. And they're all just great experiences of just having the movies play and getting together to meet other filmmakers. I love the idea of hanging out with your class, especially last year at Tribeca- Or 2019 at Tribeca, I really tried to like look around to other documentary movies or documentary

directors that I was like, "Oh, I like your style, let's hang out." You know? And I just kinda dig that stuff, because I have these fantasies of like the Tarantinos and Rodriguezs is like hanging out together or even like a Spielberg hanging out with a Lucas. And that whole, like whoever's class that you're in, I like that idea. And I'm not saying I'm at that level, but like on this like small little circuit of festivals, you can kind of play around or hang out with people who are around about your area, you know?

Bryan Smith (12:20):

Yeah. And do you find that in those festivals that a lot of business gets done, that you- That's where the sales are made and the distribution deals are made?

Tommy Avallone (12:28):

No, I mean, they're talked about, but I mean, to my experience, it's never- You're never having that 1994 Sundance, Kevin Smith, let's talk at a coffee shop, sign a deal, I'll get paid a lot of money and your life changes moment. I don't know if those things happen. They certainly don't happen to me. You know, I hear these stories and these myths of it happening, but I don't- That's not my encounters.

Bryan Smith (12:57):

Yeah. And how important is it to have someone like Whoopie attached to a project to actually be taken seriously? Because I would imagine that there's so much content out there now. I mean, the number of documentaries, I'm just assuming based upon my Netflix queue.

Tommy Avallone (13:16):

Right.

Bryan Smith (13:16):

That the number of documentaries now is 10 times more than it was a decade ago.

Tommy Avallone (13:22):

Well sure, because there's a way to watch them. You mean- Like, how many times have you actually watched a documentary in the theater? You know. I mean, I saw Supersize Me in the theater. I saw Fahrenheit 911, I seen that one at the theater. Even saw the Conan O'Brien documentary in a theater. But that was really about it back then, and now you can just- Documentaries are made kind of for that streaming... That's why obviously there's uprise. But Whoopie's great, and having people like that, I mean, I try to surround myself with big and good executive producers. Morgan Spurlock executive produced I am Santa Claus, Glen Zipper executive produced the Bill Murray Stories, Whoopie was Waldo on Weed. I don't know if it's my own complex or something that you need to do, but I always just want to show to someone that I'm just not some punk kid from New Jersey trying to make a movie. I have someone vouching for me. So, I'm not sure if it's necessary or just something that I need for myself.

Bryan Smith (14:27):

Yeah. Well, it's smart. I mean, it's not going to hurt to have a big name like Spurlock or Goldberg attached to a project. So tell us- You mentioned Jersey and I read, obviously there's a lot online about your run for mayor.

Tommy Avallone (14:42):
Is there a lot on there?

Bryan Smith (14:44):
Yeah, there's quite a bit. So, can you tell us how that came about? Why did you decide to run for mayor at the age of... Was it 19 or 20?

Tommy Avallone (14:53):
I was 20 when I ran, but I was 21 when the election happened.

Bryan Smith (14:56):
Okay. What was going on in your life that made you decide: You know, what I'm going to run for office.

Tommy Avallone (15:01):
I'm just a huge Andy Kaufman fan. And I just love a bit. And that was really what it was. I didn't have any- I'm not a political person by any means. I think it's funny to have run- I was student council president of my high school, and I thought I could just do the same thing. I had people, my friends, dress up in suits and they're my bodyguards, they're Tommy's Angels. We would do these press conferences and give out milk and cookies to the press. I was on CNN, I was like- It was like all these news coverages, because at the time Arnold Schwarzenegger was running, right? And it was like: ...Well this is happening in California, but in local news a 20-year-old from- You know? And it's just a way to talk about the movies I was doing. It was very, it was just like...

Bryan Smith (15:50):
Oh, I think it was brilliant actually. I mean...

Tommy Avallone (15:53):
Yeah, it was just funny, man. I was actually, at the time I was going to try to make a documentary. I have like 10-12 possibly 14 hours, which is not much, of just what I was doing to run. And I was like: Oh, I could make a documentary out of this. And I just never did anything with it. 'Cause it was this... This wasn't good. But I just thought it was really funny to do, and I just thought it would be funny.

Bryan Smith (16:18):
How far into a project have you gone and decided, I don't even know if this has ever happened, but decided that it just isn't going to work. You're maybe 40 hours into it, 80 hours of footage. And you're like: Oh, this is a great idea at the time, but... Have you ever had to kill your baby like that?

Tommy Avallone (16:36):

Being a father I don't like to call any of my projects a baby, 'cause I have enough respect for my children. But I don't know. I mean there's- The last like year and a half I've been developing a lot of stuff and there's certain things that I just kinda fall out of interest in. I'm a pack rat, it's like I don't ever feel like something would- If I put time into it and I have footage of it, or I have something with it, I think I'd still find a way to do something with it. Even that mayor footage I'll do something with it eventually. I just don't know what it is, you know? I just, I don't know.

Tommy Avallone (17:15):

Like I'm constantly collecting puzzle pieces and I just don't currently know what puzzle I'd be using that puzzle piece for. We were thinking about trying to do this documentary of Hollywood, and I filmed an interview with Alice Cooper. And we filmed a couple things and I don't know, I just kinda currently have no interest in continuing it. But I'm sure I'll do something with that footage eventually. I'm sure that the interests will reignite at one point, you know? So it's never a squashed idea. I just think it's like: I'll come back to it.

Bryan Smith (17:45):

Oh, so you're not killing the project, you're just tabling it and maybe there's another opportunity down the road where it will fit into something that you're focusing on?

Tommy Avallone (17:55):

I think that's the way I like to look at it, yeah.

Bryan Smith (17:57):

Yeah, Elizabeth Gilbert talks- I don't know if you've ever read, Eat, Pray, Love or any of her books. I haven't, but I've listened to interviews with the author.

Tommy Avallone (18:06):

I've watched parts of the movie.

Bryan Smith (18:07):

Elizabeth Gilbert talks about her process of writing, and stories, and stories that she's inspired to tell. And then also the process of losing that inspiration and losing interest in it. And she does the same thing. I mean, she just catalogs ideas and just kind of keeps them, and also has this concept of: You know what? Maybe I'm not the one who was meant to tell this story. Maybe it's someone else and maybe they can kind of, in a generous way, let them pick up where she left off or something.

Tommy Avallone (18:36):

Yeah. I mean, recently there's been things that I've been playing around with that were something that I was wanting to do 10 years ago. So it's always- It's: Oh, that would make sense now. Or: Oh, I could tell that better now. You know?

Bryan Smith (18:51):

So what is a day in the life of Tommy Avallone look like, in terms of you're looking for ideas, you're nurturing and cultivating ideas. You already have- You're collaborating, I imagine, with a lot of folks. Is there a typical day in the life of Tommy Avallone?

Tommy Avallone (19:10):

It's... I guess it's just trying to stay focused. I wake up early, then I'm with my kids for a little bit, and then me and my wife kind of switch. And then... I mean, like right now we're about to pitch this project next week and I'm trying not to be excited about that, because it just got my feelings hurt too many times when things don't happen. I mean, for example, like you're saying 'squashing projects' and all that stuff. We were pitching something... God, about maybe a month, two months ago? And everyone said, "No." And I'm just like: You know what? I'm just gonna make it. It's like, I don't need you. I don't need anything. Like I'll just- I was going to be like a TV show sort of thing.

Tommy Avallone (19:50):

And I was like, I'm just gonna start filming as a documentary. I'll just do it myself. And I kind of have that mentality. I don't like when you were asking me the beginning, about like- Well, I'm not a salesman. I don't like selling anything, I just like making it. And I remember very, very early on when I was younger someone's like, "Oh, why should I watch your movie?" And I was like, "You know, don't bother." 'Cause it's not- I love talking about movies. I love talking about even the process of stuff like that. But I couldn't tell you why someone should watch some of my movies. I can tell you why I'm interested in making them and why I liked making them, you know? But I don't know, I'm not a good salesman. I think I got off on a tangent here. This is currently where my brain is and I'm just working through something. This is today's shower conversation I had with myself that I've brought into your podcast.

Bryan Smith (20:39):

No, it's good stuff. So, you mentioned that you didn't need- You pitched an idea and you didn't need these people, you're going run with it on your own. So, that leads me to the question: How much do you need investors and folks that are- How big is your team and your operation to make a film like The Bill Murray Stories or Waldo on Weed?

Tommy Avallone (21:02):

Yeah, I mean I'm very, very- I don't want to say lucky, because I don't believe in that, but I'm very... I appreciate the people that are around me, you know? I have people that believe in me and the ideas I have, and help me along with my producers and people around me that can tell these stories on a small budget. It's a very independent way of doing it. You know, Santa, Ghostheads, Murray, Waldo; it was all made independently and then sold outright, playing the festivals, doing all sorts of stuff. What I've been trying to figure out in the last couple years is how to figure out how to play inside the system. And in doing that you need a lot of pitches and green lights. And people will say yes, and people who don't get it and they go: What about game show version of that?

Tommy Avallone (21:53):

And you go, "Nope, nope." There's a lot of that sort of thing. And I like making independent movies, and I like doing that sort of stuff. But in order to try to grow, you have to figure out a way to work inside the system. And that's- I mean, I like to think that each movie we've made we've grown and been able to tell different and bigger, or better, stories. And that's... I don't want to keep doing the same thing. So, it's just trying to figure that out and working inside the system is very difficult. That's all it is, it's just difficult.

Bryan Smith (22:22):

Well, I interviewed Brian Knappenberger at Sundance this year -and he's he made *The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez*, which is on Netflix- who is a pretty interesting guy, and documentaries are his focus. But he talked about the pressures that come with money, the expectations of somebody financing your project versus you financing your project independently, like you're saying, and then bringing it to someone that has money to sell it. And he much prefers to go about it independently. So, he doesn't have those... The sense of obligation or running something by a team as he's creating the story. Is that kind of the way you look at filmmaking?

Tommy Avallone (23:04):

I mean, it's just like, everything keeps changing. Like when Bill Murray came out in 2018 the way people would buy or acquire movies started to shift. People didn't want to buy finished movies, they wanted to be on that quote unquote ground floor. Ground floor means many different things to many different people. Some people it works and sometimes the story is just so this or... This is a movie that needs to be made independently, because no one would understand it in a pitch. And there's so much discovery and then all that sort of stuff... There's definitely the people need to make it. And no one would have been like: You don't have Bill Murray attached and you want to make a movie about Bill Murray stories? That's not going to happen. You have to make it independently.

Bryan Smith (23:56):

Right.

Tommy Avallone (23:56):

So I'm just- When you're speaking about that person, he has that experience of working inside the system and I just I'm working on that, 'cause it's just interesting to me to see what that experience would be like.

Bryan Smith (24:12):

As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes, and for many of them we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place: Our newsletter! You can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists, and resources to help you on your journey. Now, back to the interview.

Bryan Smith (24:38):

So, how hard did you chase Bill Murray in terms of getting him to sign off on that project and be involved in some way? And when did you just give up?

Tommy Avallone (24:49):

I didn't chase him at all.

Bryan Smith (24:51):

No, you never chased him? Well, I mean, you called his 800 number.

Tommy Avallone (24:55):

Not chase.

Bryan Smith (24:55):

Yeah. Well, I mean pursue- Maybe chases is a strong word, but-

Tommy Avallone (25:00):

You emailed me to be on the podcast. Did you chase me?

Bryan Smith (25:03):

No, no that's true. Actually, I did. It was- I consider everything I do to be kind of a hustle. I'm always looking for people who are inspiring to me, and how do I convince those people to talk to me, somebody they probably have never heard of before? And I would imagine that same dynamic has occurred with a lot of the folks that you're...

Tommy Avallone (25:32):

I tend to like argue over the words of it. To me...

Bryan Smith (25:35):

No, it's a fair point.

Tommy Avallone (25:37):

You know, you don't hear what I'm saying on those phone calls in the movie, because I'm never asking his permission to make the movie, and I'm never asking him to be in it either. Really what I'm telling him is that we're doing this project and I love to talk to him about it. Our process was, we are making a bigfoot documentary. Bigfoot is not Bill Murray. Bigfoot is The Bill Murray Story. So, if you were making a bigfoot movie and trying to capture the magic that is bigfoot, do you sit down with bigfoot at the end 20/20 style and go, "So, what's with the woods?" It destroys the magic, destroys kind of the idea of what a Bill Murray story is.

Tommy Avallone (26:16):

It's magical, it's mythical. How do you answer some of these questions of reality to them? And tell these real stories with keeping that sort of magic and urban legend alive. You never talk Bill. So we would just kind of mention certain things to him -or not to him, to his answer machine- to ideas, how we wanted to like: Hey, could you like walk by a scene and this and all that sort of

stuff, but he just never replied back to me, and that's totally fine. So, in this encounter that we talked to the river sharks with, we just knew Bill would be there and that was our truthful experience with Bill at that time. And my favorite part about making these movies is 'cause it was- This particular trip was me, my producer, camera guy, Derek Hunter, and a friend of mine who's a camera guy, Chris Raab from Jackass fame, Raab himself.

Tommy Avallone (27:12):

And my favorite part is always the ride home after these things, talking about what we just grabbed and how would you use this structurally, and all that sort of stuff. And I was like: I think I can frame the whole movie about this encounter, if I take that picture. 'Cause I was like- My thought is, you showed that picture of me and Bill, then you rip that bandaid off. This is not a chase. This is not a 'Will Tommy get Bill in this movie?' First three minutes in the movie there's a picture of me and Bill, obviously I met him. So, here's the real movie about Bill Murray stories. It's not My Date with Drew. It's not me searching out this person to have an experience with them. It's talking about these experiences. So- And I mean, no disrespect to My Date with Drew, it's a good movie and it's- That's what that story was, but ours wasn't that

Bryan Smith (28:02):

Yeah. Well, do you think that The Bill Murray Stories up to- I mean, I guess the Waldo on Weed movie still has to play out before we find out how well it's going to be received. But do you think that you're most well known for The Bill Murray Stories?

Tommy Avallone (28:17):

Oh yeah, sure. I mean, we have Bill Murray's name in the title of our movie. I don't know if I'll ever have anything that's little more well known than that. You know what I mean? I remember we would sell out every single screening at South by Southwest and at Hot Docs in Toronto, we had like three nights of 700 people sold out. That's crazy, that doesn't happen. And we wouldn't pay for any publicity. We wouldn't do any- We weren't even handing out flyers. It was just in the program, Bill Murray Stories, with a 'B' so you're the beginning parts of the festival programming. Apposed to Waldo on Weed. I just remember sitting there and going: It will never be- I mean, I shouldn't say- I always try to correct myself when I say this, but my thought was: It will never be this easy again to get people to see the movie.

Tommy Avallone (29:07):

And I like to think people heard it was good, and that was another reason for seeing it. But it's a movie about something that everyone loves, it's the beginning of the alphabet as far as the program goes. So I very much understand that that movie is so much more recognizable. I mean, it's on Netflix and it was on people's airplanes. I mean, you're flying, you can go, "Hey, The Bill Murray Stories, less than 80 minute movie? Sure." It's definitely... I mean, I am Santa Claus, Waldo on Weed-

Bryan Smith (29:39):

Ghostheads, yeah.

Tommy Avallone (29:42):

Some people know. Bill Murray Stories, as I mentioned, people go, "I think I've seen that." Or, "I've seen it on Netflix, the icon."

Bryan Smith (29:49):

What are the legal challenges to taking clips of movies, Bill Murray movies and interview clips that- You have this great collection of Bill Murray footage, but legally how do you get to the point where you can actually put it in the film, distribute it, put it on Netflix?

Tommy Avallone (30:07):

I mean, we're not abusing any of the footage it's called a fair use. So...

Bryan Smith (30:11):

It's all fair use?

Tommy Avallone (30:12):

I mean, majority of it- I mean in no way are we just putting it on to put it on. We're just proving a point in our narrative. So yeah. I mean, I'm really- I've gotten pretty good at how to edit with fair use. And when we talk to journalists and they mentioned Coffee and Cigarettes, or Zombieland, or even Razor's Edge; these are important notes in Bill Murray's career where he kind of talks about, or does these sort of Bill Murray stories in the movies. So you can point to what he does in real life to that. So yeah. It was all fair use. It's a boring answer, but yeah we can.

Bryan Smith (30:54):

Bill Murray Stories for me was really special. And you saw that I did a dual cast, or a short little podcast on it with my producer and editor.

Tommy Avallone (31:02):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (31:02):

But what I really appreciated about the Bill Murray stories is it takes you... You watch it with the understanding that it's going to be a chase and you quickly realize that it's not a chase. It's more of an exploration of the philosophy of Bill Murray and- At least that's my takeaway from the film.

Tommy Avallone (31:19):

Yeah. I mean, we try to make these sort of Trojan horse movies; you walk in and go, "Hey, isn't Christmas and Santa Claus great? Here's something about identity and community. Hey, Bill Murray is cool, right? Let's talk about living in the moment and being present." I think there's fun little scenarios to do with those- There's situations in a majority of the movies that make people go, "I wasn't expecting that." And I take that as a compliment. I like- Bill Murray Stories, I love that movie. I hope that's okay to say about your own stuff, but I just, I think there was so many ways for us to go down a different path that wouldn't end in the way we made that movie. I

mean, I was reluctant to put myself in there. A lot of- I watched so many documentaries on purpose that were bad, that people put themselves in to not do with that, not to do that.

Tommy Avallone (32:12):

'Cause, like Morgan Spurlock does a fantastic, Michael Moore does it great- But there's- I could tell you off camera and off record and a whole list of people who don't- And that was Santa Claus and Waldo, I'm not in it, 'cause that's not the kind of movie I want to make. But we just felt like that was the only way to do a through line that made sense to kind of connect you. So, the hardest thing with that movie was trying to make it not a bunch of just vignettes. So, you're not just watching webisode on YouTube or something like that.

Bryan Smith (32:41):

Yeah. Because it's way more than that. There's a gestalt to the film that is very zen and almost Buddhist. Because I think his Buddhism and- Or his approach to life really comes through in the interviews with all of the collateral interviews that you got. But also just these impromptu brushes with folks randomly off the street and at parties and stuff. It really makes you appreciate the spontaneity that he gravitates towards every day. And I think that we can all learn a lesson from the Bill Murray Stories about how to live life. I hope I'm not overstating it when I say that, it sounds like an exaggeration about a documentary, but for me that was the takeaway.

Tommy Avallone (33:26):

Yeah. You know, like when we played at South by this nice lady came up to us afterwards and was like, "I just saw your movie. And I had a two hour gap before I was going to visit my friends. And I would have just normally went to my hotel and took a nap. But I was like: Well, what would Bill do? I just kind of did this and did that, and I just had a great time, you know?" So, it's really like you can't help but see someone like Bill Murray who, for the most part, has been around your whole life, and you see him in these movies: Oh yeah, he's a Ghost Buster. Or he's down at the little local. There's all these things that you put when you see him kind of just take life the way he does.

Tommy Avallone (34:06):

I mean, it's one of those things where I would like to do that. And some people have the answer, "Well, if I had that kind of money, I could just..." Like, no.

Bryan Smith (34:15):

No.

Tommy Avallone (34:15):

No, he was doing it way before he was rich, or way before he was famous. Bill's always kinda been that way. I mean, I think it's improved as he's learned more. I mean, he studied GI Gurdjieff, or Del Close in Second City. These are all people that I think helped kind of build that live in the moment, wake people up or wake yourself up. And it's, yeah.... It's all about staying awake.

Bryan Smith (34:39):

Oh, that's a great way to put it, yeah. Wake yourself up, wake other people up. And what a nice way to approach life.

Tommy Avallone (34:45):

Well, when he- When Razor's Edge- Razor's Edge was what he wanted to do, and he filmed that, then film Ghostbusters. Ghostbusters came out a huge hit, but then Razor's Edge came out and people weren't ready for him to be that Bill Murray. That Bill Murray kind of came out later in life, and people were ready for it. But they weren't ready for it in the eighties, and when that movie didn't do well, he was like: Forget it. I'm just, I'm done. And him and his family moved to France and that's where he studied philosophy. And Gurdjieff, this guy if you look him up, he would do these things- We were going to put it in the movie, but it just didn't work out. But he would hit people with stuff and try to wake them up and all that sort of stuff.

Tommy Avallone (35:26):

And that kind of philosophy, that his books are all around that Second City sort of tribe. How Remus knew about it, Belushi and all that sort of stuff. But everyone called Bill Murray that sorta like Gurdjieff, like the trickster God. And so that was really in the back of his mind during at least that part of his life, maybe a little bit before, but he eventually came back and did movies again, obviously. But it's just that mindset and combined with Del Close, Del Close was very much like that. Taking improv off the stage and into real life.

Bryan Smith (35:59):

Have you ever explored the concept of charisma and tried to deconstruct what charisma is? Because I look at Bill Murray as one of the most charismatic figures on film or television. Same thing with someone maybe like, with Jack Black or- It's the type of person who, when they walk into a room, everyone's eyes are drawn to this person. And why is that? Is it the in-the-moment existence that they live and that they adhere to? Or, what are your thoughts on charisma?

Tommy Avallone (36:31):

I mean, I can talk to, about Bill's. With Bill it's like he just doesn't care. My opinion of Bill is that he doesn't care in that. I think it's in their movie. Whereas someone told them a long time ago, I think it's just the idea that to be relaxed, I think we gravitate towards someone who is comfortable in their own skin. And when they're walking in a room, they're not bringing anxiety, they're not bringing their own stressors or all that sort of stuff. I think Bill tends to be, and I don't know this from my studies, it just seems like he's very calm and collected and just, if he's there, he wants to be there. And I think that kind of calmness is something that could be possibly felt.

Bryan Smith (37:13):

Right. He's he's not coming in with expectations about what he wants from somebody. And he's, in a very Del Close kind of way, he's in a 'yes and' state of mind all the time, willing to go wherever it needs to go.

Tommy Avallone (37:27):

I think it's a practice. I think there's this audio that we have from Gavin Edwards who wrote The Tao of Bill Murray, which is great book. And he- Bill just talks about how it's like, you talk about living in a moment, you can't always live in the moment. You can't always be present. It's something that you attempt and you try to be as much as you possibly can. He's like, "Sometimes I'll be like... I just need to wake myself up. I've been asleep for four days." And I think that's the thing it's just, kind of catch yourself in moments where you were like: All right, well, let's get it together, let's be here. I think it's a practice.

Bryan Smith (38:07):

Yeah. Kind of like meditation is a practice. You can't always be meditating.

Tommy Avallone (38:12):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (38:13):

So, tell us about your calling toward documentary as opposed to narrative film and why you're in that space and your filmography reflects that.

Tommy Avallone (38:25):

I wanted to be like a 22-year-old Kevin Smith that made a movie in New Jersey, went to Sundance and all that stuff. It just didn't happen that way. And I'm actually kind of grateful it didn't, because I can imagine success at that age would have destroyed me. I was lucky enough to meet Kevin, he interviewed us after Santa and all that stuff. And he was like, "I'll never understand what life I was supposed to live. 'Cause I was kind of plucked out of obscurity." He was like, this new life was presented in front of him, so I've always wanted to do that. And I just felt like my skillset wasn't there. I have a tendency to think that I can't dictate what's in my head for an actor to do.

Tommy Avallone (39:10):

I tried it a couple of different times, but I realized later in life that I was like, "Oh, I wasn't really working with real actors. I was working with my friends." So, I think it's like half and half. Like maybe I wasn't fully ready to be a narrative director and they just don't want to be actors. They're just kind of doing me a favor. There's no prep work, they're reading the line right there and going, "Oh, alright." You know?

Bryan Smith (39:33):

Yeah.

Tommy Avallone (39:33):

So I stopped directing, and I went into producing a couple of scripted stuff. Miss December, Kevin Smith actually did put out and I just produced that. But then it kinda- Our Miss December movie was playing at a festival that Morgan Spurlock was playing there and we had a couple of mutual friends. I told them I had this idea for a Santa Clause documentary and we kinda just started talking about it. And that's really- I always thought about doing documentaries. I try to do

a documentary on a karaoke guy that I knew and my own mayoral run, but it was the Santas that really, I was like, "I'm just going to do this". And I felt my skills as a director, or more so an editor, in that we're a lot better than the ones I was using as a writer/director. So, I just kinda like kept following that thread in my life. And I feel like I'm really good at following someone, or finding characters and being able to tell their story through the edits like I did on my own stuff. I eventually would like to get into scripted again. I shouldn't say again, I would like to get into scripted. But you I still got a bunch of different docs that we're pitching and all that sort of stuff. So, I think eventually I'd like to get there.

Bryan Smith (40:41):

Yeah. It sounds, it sounds like a very organic journey for you.

Tommy Avallone (40:44):

Yeah. Well I just- I had this idea who I wanted to be, but I just kinda listened. Like I'm going to be 'yes and' my own stuff. But it wasn't a real, forcing anything. It was just kinda, these are the things I'm interested in and I do is just follow those interests.

Bryan Smith (41:01):

Do you think documentary filmmaking for folks who just want to get into storytelling visually, do you think that documentary filmmaking is more accessible for folks than narrative films, scripted films?

Tommy Avallone (41:14):

Yeah, I guess so. Because you can kind of play around with things, it's just, maybe it's cheaper to make. It was easier for me to make a documentary about Bill Murray Stories than ever to write him a movie about Bill Murray stories that have Bill Murray in it. But yeah, I guess because there's crew and less money and all that stuff. It attracts a lot of people, where a lot of people feel that they could just make a documentary. But it is a lot of hard work. It really does take someone that can tell a story to do it. I guess nowadays you can do anything with scripted or else. Look, the technology is out there, but yeah, I don't know. I don't have the real good answer. I guess it's easier to get into documentaries, but it doesn't mean you're going to make a good one.

Bryan Smith (41:58):

Right. Well, I would imagine that it's accessible from the standpoint that anybody can pick up a camera and start interviewing people or finding footage, but to have the endurance to go four years collecting footage and have probably, I would guess hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage, and then have the acumen and the judgment to know what works and what doesn't and how to craft that narrative is probably way more challenging than a scripted film director who knows exactly what needs to be on film and how to cut it, and that type of thing.

Tommy Avallone (42:33):

You know, as I've mentioned, I want to get into scripted stuff. I feel like having directed all these documentaries has made me become a better writer, in that I just know a little more about

characters. Before I used to just write funny lines and now, having followed different Santas, or different people who have had Bill Murray stories, or just different people in general, I feel like I have a tendency to know a little bit more about characters.

Bryan Smith (42:59):

Yeah, that makes sense.

Tommy Avallone (43:01):

But also, too, before I made a documentary, I tried to make- I've been- I've had a camera in my hands since 11-years-old, but I also worked in radio and I was a phone screener at our radio station. So it's like, you're getting normal people who call in, and trying to find something about them to make them interesting, so the host of the show can have a conversation that people want to listen to. And I think some of those skillsets kind of allowed me to help make other people interesting in the documentaries.

Bryan Smith (43:33):

And I would guess, too, that the process of just making decisions, like a lot of decisions as a documentary filmmaker and pouring through footage makes you a- Just a better decision maker in the narrative film context.

Tommy Avallone (43:49):

Yeah. I don't- It's so funny, like so many- I worked with a couple of people that say: You just need to make a decision, doesn't need to be right or wrong. And I think a lot of people, when they first start working with me, think I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't agree to that. I mean, who knows, I may not know what I'm doing, but I feel like... I just, I don't like... I like thinking about things. I'm not a fast decision maker. Sometimes, if I'm really zoned in, I know exactly what I want, but if someone actually has- If someone has a question I'm like, "I don't know the answer." I don't want to just say it because there is that fear that you're like: I don't want to say the wrong thing.

Tommy Avallone (44:25):

Even with the documentary, the hardest thing to me about pitching things is people go, "What is your vision?" It's like, I don't know, man. I don't know how to make a movie until I'm making it, for real. I think I have a good way of collecting materials and collecting questions and answers and all that sort of stuff, but I do really feel the movie presents itself while editing., It tells you kind of really what it wants to be. An editor for a scripted movie, there's definitely ways to change it up, but in a documentary there's so many different ways to go,. And I mean, there was five different movies about Santa Clauses while we were making ours. And ours is completely different than everyone else's, it's just so many different ways. There's another Bill Murray Stories documentary, people will have different approaches for things.

Bryan Smith (45:17):

Yeah. Well, it sounds like they, in a documentary film context, when you're getting somebody to buy into a project or a collaborative project, they just have to have that much more faith in you,

because they don't have the vision, they don't have the script. And so what they have is you and your filmography and your ethos within your crew about how you approach storytelling.

Tommy Avallone (45:39):

Yeah. I'm learning the idea of, trying to- The take, you know, and trying to present as much as that upfront as possible, because I really like- No one wants to hear, "Oh, just trust me, we'll figure it out as we go along." But that's really it. And then you talk to any director it's really- You're just kinda- You have an idea, but you're kind of... I don't want to say lying, but you're just going- You're understanding what do you need to know now so you trust me to understand that the process will work?

Bryan Smith (46:11):

Right. That makes sense. So, tell us about This is Gwar. I see that's a project you're working on currently, and Thomas Lennon is involved.

Tommy Avallone (46:18):

Are you familiar with the band Gwar?

Bryan Smith (46:20):

Yeah... Back in the, I think they're from the eighties, maybe even the seventies, but I...

Tommy Avallone (46:26):

I think they dabbled in a bunch of those different decades, yeah.

Bryan Smith (46:28):

A very theatrical, metal band, right? I mean, a lot of cosplay and costumes.

Tommy Avallone (46:35):

Yeah, they're amazing. Scott's the director- His first documentary, The Orange Years, it should be coming out sometime this year or next year, it's all about Nickelodeon. But I knew Scott from that Orange Years documentary. And he had told me about his connection with Gwar, and I just- Gwar is one of those guys, or the one of those bands, that I knew of, couldn't tell you one song, but I knew they were in Beavis and Butthead, I knew they were in Empire Records. You just knew all of them, you just didn't know anything about them. And I was like, "Oh, let's do that." So far we've got to interview Weird Al, Thomas Lennon, Ethan Embry, Alex Winter...

Bryan Smith (47:16):

And how is Thomas Lennon involved? I see he's attached to the film.

Tommy Avallone (47:19):

Yeah, we interviewed him. He was on MTV during the same time they started being on MTV. He was on The State and stuff like that. The way The State kinda started, they're very kind of like punk kids as well. But it was just kind of speaking about MTV at that time. Gwar really wasn't played on TV, they kind of snuck through the back door with Beavis and Butthead. Beavis and

Butthead liked them on their show, which spoke pretty- I think there was even a video game where their whole job was to get to the Gwar concert. So, it was really interesting. And then Bam Margera, we interviewed Bam.

Bryan Smith (47:55):
Okay.

Tommy Avallone (47:55):
But we're kind of at a little bit of a pause with the interviews. Scott right now is just kinda editing what we have, but yeah. I mean, I who doesn't love Gwar?

Bryan Smith (48:04):
Well, yeah. Even if you've never bought their albums or listened to their music, they're an iconic presence from the eighties.

Tommy Avallone (48:11):
They're just really- They're really smart at just dipping their toe into pop culture every couple of years to remind you that it still exists. You know, when they're Jerry Springer, The Daily Show. They're just so funny.

Bryan Smith (48:23):
So, that project, how long do you expect it to take, to complete and be in a film festival context?

Tommy Avallone (48:31):
We would love for it to come out next year, but with COVID and all that, it's like just trying to- So much of it's already shot, but we- There is a little, a couple more things that we want to get and it's just making sure we can get them.

Bryan Smith (48:47):
So, do you find, we have a couple more minutes here before you have to get to your doctor's appointment.

Tommy Avallone (48:52):
Thank you.

Bryan Smith (48:52):
But do you find that there are challenges for documentary filmmakers in terms of just putting food on the table and making a living that are always going to be there? And if so, how do you manage the cashflow situation. Because you're working for literally years and years at a time on a project, and these are speculative projects, I would imagine because they're not all gonna get into film festivals. They're not all going to get distribution. How do you go about providing for your family and just making sure that you're taken care of and treated fairly in business?

Tommy Avallone (49:28):

I mean, it's very difficult. It's very, it's very tough. And you just have to... Did you ever see Batman? Was it... Dark Knight Rises?

Bryan Smith (49:37):
Was that, which-?

Tommy Avallone (49:38):
The last Christian Bale movie, the last one of the trilogy with Bane and Catwoman?

Bryan Smith (49:45):
No, I did not see that one.

Tommy Avallone (49:46):
It's a good movie.

Bryan Smith (49:48):
Is it good? Okay, I'll check it out.

Tommy Avallone (49:50):
So, Batman is like stuck in some cave- Some hole or something like that. And it was like Bane had broke his back, and there's a way out where you could swing over to this, there's like a gap, and you just have to run and jump. And everyone holds onto this rope to try to get to the other side, but when they fail to swing down... And it's just very difficult and no one got out. But Batman gets out by doing it without a rope, because when you're running and you have that rope, you have that safety, you can't kinda go that hard. But when- If you're not going to do it, you're just going to die.

Bryan Smith (50:28):
Right.

Tommy Avallone (50:29):
Make it.

Bryan Smith (50:31):
Okay.

Tommy Avallone (50:31):
And I think that's one of those situations where you just have to be that- Kind of have that kind of mentality of knowing that there's no safety net, you just have to do this. And I've been able to provide for my family for a couple of years now, and it's just 'cause I have no net. You know?

Bryan Smith (50:50):
Yeah, no plan B.

Tommy Avallone (50:50):
Exactly.

Bryan Smith (50:52):
I think if you have a plan B and- You know that no matter how hard you try to ignore the fact that there is a plan B, your decision making is going to be affected, I think in some way. You're not going to commit as hard to a certain path, if you know you have the plan B, which is probably an easier plan.

Tommy Avallone (51:11):
I mean, and I can only speak for myself too, I've worked in a situation and know enough people that believe in me that it's been able to work out. Talk to me next year, maybe I'm working somewhere else. But that's kinda my attitude.

Bryan Smith (51:30):
Yeah. Well, Tommy, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you and I learned a lot actually. So, thanks. Thanks for sitting down with me. Appreciate it.

Tommy Avallone (51:37):
Oh, no problem, man. Thanks for having me. I hope certain parts, I didn't sound negative or anything like that, you know?

Bryan Smith (51:43):
Not at all, not at all. No. This has been a great conversation and looking forward to hearing what my listeners think.

Tommy Avallone (51:50):
Cool. How good are you on that ukulele?

Bryan Smith (51:53):
Terrible. I'm much better with the guitar, and I still have a banjo back there as well. I inherited from my dad.

Tommy Avallone (52:02):
That's what I meant. I'm so sorry, I thought that was a ukulele, that's a banjo.

Bryan Smith (52:05):
Oh, I've got a ukulele up there too on the side. But yeah, I'm not good on the banjo or the uke yet, but that's one of my goals.

Tommy Avallone (52:14):
Yet is the most powerful word. There's this whole Sesame Street song on that word, yet. So it's all out there.

Bryan Smith (52:22):

Right on. Tommy, thanks a lot.

Tommy Avallone (52:25):

Thank you so much, man. I appreciate it.

Bryan Smith (52:26):

Alright, you take care.

Bryan Smith (52:28):

Hey, thank you for listening, and I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so, I have a favorite ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle @dreampathpod. And, as always, go find your dream path!