

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mammoth Lakes Film Festival is going Up In Smoke

Sophia Stein · Monday, May 22nd, 2017

In what amounts to a brilliant subversive coup, the 3rd annual **Mammoth Lakes Film Festival** will light up the screen opening night, this Wednesday, May 24, with the cult comedy classic *Up In Smoke* (1978) — promising none other than **Tommy Chong**, the King of Dope (*Cheech and Chong* & *Dancing with the Stars* renown) in attendance. Watching the film *Up In Smoke* transports you in a time capsule back to the 1970s for a hilarious, nostalgic romp. The lexicon, the clothes, the characters, the prevalence and cavalier consumption of weed and drugs-of-all-colors speaks to the culture just prior to the rebranding by Ronald Reagan (“Just Say No”) and George W. Bush (“War on Drugs”), in their attempts to drape over the cultural divide.

This past November, Californians voted to legalize marijuana, while the Nation at large elected a President who — with the support of his Attorney General — has vowed once again to take a tough stance on anti-drug enforcement, targeting those states in violation of the Federal prohibition. Meanwhile, my friends in Colorado routinely brag about the refund checks that they are receiving from their franchise tax board on profits from regulated sales of the controlled substance in their state. What you may not realize is that back in 2003, Tommy Chong actually ended up serving nine months in minimal security Federal prison in Taft, California — ostensibly for selling drug paraphernalia in states where such sales were prohibited, but sub-texturally for the making of subversive art. Chong was targeted for punishment because he had profited so generously from creative works that the Feds believed “glamorized drug use” and “encouraged the corruption of the youth of our Nation,” as profiled in Josh Gilbert’s sobering documentary *A/K/A Tommy Chong*.

In addition to celebrating Tommy Chong’s birthday with him on opening night of the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival, you may even have an opportunity over the Memorial Day weekend festival to rub elbows with the brilliant indie filmmaker, screenwriter, author, and MacArthur genius **John Sayles** (*Lone Star*, *Passion Fish*, *Return of the Secaucus 7*, *Go for Sisters*). Sayles is being honored by Mammoth Lakes Film Festival with the **Sierra Spirit Award** in a ceremony on Saturday evening, May 27. Lead actor Vincent Spano will lead a Q&A with writer-director Sayles directly following a screening of *Baby It’s You* (1983, featuring a young Rosanna Arquette across from Spano). Notably, *Baby It’s You* was the only film to date that Sayles directed on which the studio retained controlled. Ever since, Sayles has always maintained final cut. I imagine that he will have some fascinating stories to share on that score.

In addition to film classics, this year’s line-up includes several festival circuit favorites: *Dina* (Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles) deservedly took the Grand Jury Prize for US Documentary at

the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. As the documentary peels back the layers on a romance between a resilient, older woman and her fiancée, it provides a disarming and penetrating exploration of intimacy. (Cinema vérité, à la Maysles Brothers all the way.) Director Joshua Z. Weinstein will be present for the Spotlight Screening of his Yiddish language film *MENACSHE*, which recounts the tale of an ultra-orthodox Jewish widower in a battle for the custody of his son. *Machines* (Rahul Jain), which won the Special Jury Award for Cinematography at Sundance, reveals the punishing realities of making a living from manual labor in a textile factory in Gujarat, India, an environment in which unions are systematically destroyed.

There are seven documentaries in competition at the festival this year, some highlights include: *Forever B* (Skye Borgman), a chilling portrait of a psychopath who targets his 12-year old neighbor; the intricately crafted and quirky *Strad Style* (Stefan Avalos), the story of a manic-depressive who wants to replicate a Stradivarius violin and the Austrian musician who vows to play the instrument if only it is constructed in time; and the edgy *Rat Film* (Theo Anthony) that holds up a mirror on human society through the prism of rat society. Likewise, seven narrative features will play in competition, including *Cold Breath* (Abbas Raziji), about a transgender mother raising her son in Iran; *Space Detective* (Antonio Llapur), a noir parody that follows an exiled space detective; and *The Erlprince* (Kuba Czekaj), the story of a gifted teenager who is hounded by his ambitious mother to pursue a lucrative science prize.

Two of the most memorable films that I saw in 2016, were films that I screened at the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival. Jake Oleman's *Learning to See* follows the filmmaker's father from retirement at age forty from a less than satisfying career as a psychotherapist through his reinvention as an insect photographer of international repute. The film is a stirring tribute to a man who is intent on creating a satisfying and meaningful life for himself, and who manages to do so with such grace, so organically, and so intuitively, even while he has no assurances as to where his path will lead. The other film that really got under my skin to make a lasting impression was the documentary *Under the Sun*. When Russian filmmaker Vitaly Mansky was hired by the North Korean government to make a propaganda film of the coming of age ceremony of an eight year old girl as she is recruited into the National political party, the filmmaker surreptitiously used his outtakes to craft an undercover documentary capturing something truthful about the essence of life in the totalitarian regime. His camera gives witness to the death of innocence of this poor child, despairing in her awareness of her own entrapment as a victim of an authoritarian state, an actor in a drama over which she will exercise little to no free will.

What I want to suggest is that you are in very good hands with founding director Shira Dubrovner and programming director Paul Sbrizzi at the helm of the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival. The 3rd annual Mammoth Lakes Film Festival will screen 20 feature films over five days, along with short films and a Saturday morning animation showcase for kids and adults alike. Hats off to them as they have once again outdone themselves with a remarkable line-up of films and guest filmmakers.

On top of the film offerings, the Eastern Sierras have gotten record (by all accounts, mammoth!) amounts of snow this year. Dubrovner suggests, "On Thursday and Friday, our screenings don't start until late afternoon, so festival attendees can get in some nice skiing, and then see some great films in the later afternoon and evening." Little wonder that Mammoth Lakes Film Festival was named as one of the **Top 50 Festivals Worth The Entry Fee** by Movie Maker Magazine in 2017.

Up In Smoke has the original faking an orgasm scene; the precursor to *When Harry Met Sally*. I can only imagine how fun it will be to watch as part of an audience on the big screen. To whet your

appetite, I hope you enjoy my telephone interview with the witty and lucid Tommy Chong.



Sophia Stein: I just had so much fun re-watching “Up In Smoke” for the first time in many years. As you look back upon the experience of making that film, what stands out in your memory from that shoot?

Tommy Chong: It was our first movie. So I guess what stands out was the fact that we did it so fast. It was over before we knew it. We shot it in less than a month. And we shot it for under a million dollars. I think the total cost came out to about \$700,000. It was fast.

Sophia: Were there scenes that were particularly fun to shoot?

Tommy: Probably us driving down the road. That was part of our live show, so we had a lot of fun seeing it on screen. On stage, we used to mime all the parts — you know the smoking and all that. But now, here we were, in real time, doing the real smoking, real joints. It was so much fun.

Sophia: You mean that *mother of all joints*, that *super-sized burrito*, *fantasy joint* — that was a real joint?

Tommy: Yeah, well, you know, it would be unhealthy to smoke anything less.

Sophia: One of my favorite bits in the film is the “Hardhat-Lard Ass” bit.

Tommy: You see all that was ad lib with Cheech. Cheech is a genius when it comes to improv. You know, we’d set up the scene, and then we’d just go for it. Whatever would come out.

Sophia: Did you have a written screenplay or did you work from an outline?

Tommy: We worked from kind-of-like an outline. We would set up the situations — like our live show — and then whatever one guy said or the other guy said, we would respond or not respond, depending on what would be the funniest.

You know how they say, “Dying is easy, comedy is hard,” because when you write comedy, you rewrite it, and you look at it, and then you rewrite it, then you write it to death. Whereas when you improv something, it’s a One-and-Done thing. Can you redo it? Nah, you can’t. You know you can’t do that again; it’s an honest reaction that you’re having. When I started directing the movie myself – in fact, what we did with *Up In Smoke*, we wouldn’t rehearse. We would shoot the rehearsal just in case we did something that was genius. And that’s why we shot the movie in less than a month — because we never had to go over everything. We didn’t have to come back the next day and reshoot and do all that stuff. We just had it – One-and-Done!

Sophia: You were an uncredited director on the film. Lou Adler is the credited director. So what were your contributions to the film and what were Lou’s contributions, as you see them?

Tommy: Well, Lou really handled most of the police stuff — the Stedenko scenes, the bad guys, Val and the gangsters in Mexico, the nun thing at the border — that was Lou. But anything Cheech and Chong — and then the very ending — I directed. The first screening we had was pretty bad because Lou’s version was that it was all a dream. We were back on the PCH, and that it was all a

dream. Well, that didn't work and so I wrote and directed the last part where we're driving down the road and we're saying, "Hey, you know, we should be a band. And you can be our manager." And then I give Cheech a piece of hash and it falls on his lap and then he starts pouring his booze in there.

Sophia: That was classic. Lou Adler says that he was influenced by Robert Altman as a director. Who have been your biggest influences as a film director and as a comedian?

Tommy: Robert Altman for sure. In fact, Lou and I used a lot of Robert Altman's people – Lou Lombardo and all the Lombardo brothers were from Robert Altman. So we had that real life attitude. My influence as a director was Terry Malick. (70s – *Dirty Harry*, *Days of Heaven*) In fact, I tried to get him to direct *Up In Smoke*, and he gave me the best advice: "You should direct it yourself." So Terry Malick. Then as for comedy — No, I love Malick, period! He is probably one of my favorite guys. I like Quentin Tarantino now. As a comedian, I guess the Seth Rogen guys. There are so many now that are really, really good.

You know I grew up in a black culture, the jazz culture. So that's really the basis of all my humor. Red Fox, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy — that school of really honest, but really, really funny stuff.

Sophia: You know, as I was watching the film, I was wondering, do you remember sitting down to watch the film for the first time with your kids?

Tommy: [he laughs a wicked little laugh]

Sophia: At what age do you show them this film?

Tommy: You know, I'm Canadian. Kind of like a farm boy, not farm boy — but we lived on the fringe. We lived beyond the reach of building inspectors. So what I learned: we kids got more educated than my parents. They started relying on us for their knowledge in the hipness of what was going on in the world. Well, I did the same thing with my kids. I didn't ever dictate what they should watch or anything. My kids actually told me what they wanted to see. In fact, I remember taking my two oldest daughters, Rae Dawn and Robbi, to a drive-in to see a Don Knotts movie. It was a four-plex drive-in. *Bonnie & Clyde* was being played in the theatre behind us. So I looked around, and my kids were looking out the back window at *Bonnie & Clyde*. They had no interest in what's-his-name. So the kids really have always dictated everything at my house. And they still do to this day.

Sophia: Congratulations, you are a member of a special club. The Federal Government decided to make an example of you, sending you to jail in 2003 for "selling bongs" — which was legal in 48 of the 50 United States at that time. But through a convoluted scheme that sounds a lot like "entrapment" during the Bush administration with John Ashcroft at the lead, you ended up doing time in a Federal Penitentiary. You joked: "The bong — being the only weapon of mass destruction the Bush administration had found!"

Tommy: [wicked chuckle] Yeah. Yeah. It was worth it. I got a laugh. I did nine months, but it was worth it. I turned my sentence into a religious retreat. I really did. It was like I was a monk amongst a couple of monks ... because everybody in prison has a story. And it's far more interesting than the normal stories that you hear everyday. I met incredible people. I met a Reagan speechwriter who was doing time. And George Gilford — you know, "The Wolf of Wall Street"

— I helped him with his book. And then, like I said, I really got into the spiritual side of things. I still am. It just kept me going, and I loved it.

Sophia: Was there a particular anchor for your spirituality? Buddhism or Hinduism? Or was it just new age? What do you consider spirituality?

Tommy: My spirituality? I'll give you his name: Joel S. Goldsmith. Anything by him. He really is the guru. Emmet Fox — I got into Emmet Fox. The I Ching started me off. I had dabbled with all of this before. But when you're in prison, you have time. So I went into great depth with all these writers — but especially Joel Goldsmith. And interestingly, you know who else was into Joel Goldsmith? Elvis Presley, at the end of his life. I just read it somewhere. The spiritual side: what it does is explain why we have rules — you know, like the Ten Commandments. I remember seeing Bill Maher kind of pooh-poo the Ten Commandments, thinking it's just rhetoric — but the truth is, the Ten Commandments, especially, they are signposts of how to live a happy, productive life. Goldsmith on the other hand, explains that everybody is on their own trip. That there is no right way for anybody because everybody's here to learn. And that's what I had to do. I had to accept that, and learn it, and then not worry about anybody else. Just worry about myself. And take care of myself.

Sophia: I find it so ironic that, on some level, you were imprisoned for the character that you played in *Up In Smoke* and on stage for all those years. For this “subversive art” that you had created, that made you so successful. At this moment in history, where our freedom of speech is really under assault –

Tommy: George Bush and Ashcroft look like geniuses now. Everybody pines for the George Bush era.

Sophia: In November, the referendum passed to legalize marijuana in the state of California. In programming *Up In Smoke* for the opening night, founding and artistic director Shira Dubrovner did so with the intention to celebrate this victory. Since the referendum has passed, however, I haven't heard much news about it. I know that you're a legalization advocate. Can you tell us where things are at legally in the state in the present time?

Tommy: Well, the medical still trumps everything else. I was just in a dispensary, and a guy tried to buy some pot there, and they couldn't sell it to him because he had to show that he had a medical card and that he lived in the state of California. So they're still very particular about laws like that. But it really is, if you're black, you're in trouble. It always was and it still is a racist law. So that hasn't changed. And whether it will change ...

Sophia: I heard that you're touring with Cheech presently?

Tommy: Yeah, yeah. But his name is not Cheech. Have you read his book yet? The book is titled, “Cheech Is Not My Real Name ... but Don't Call Me Chong!” So I just call him Pendejo. [*asshole, Spanish*]

Sophia: Originally, he quit your act because he didn't want to play that Chicano character. He wanted to pursue a legitimate acting career. So when you're out on the road today, do you guys play those characters or are you doing something different?

Tommy: My son is the stage manager and writer of the show, so he puts Cheech to his changes,

makes sure that he is Cheech. The name may not be Cheech, but when he is on stage doing the show, he's Cheech.

Sophia: You've said, "Dope is sex. If you can't relate to that, forget it. Other than that get into religion." Do you remember the first time you tried marijuana? What were those circumstances?

Tommy: Well, I was in a jazz club in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. 1957. And a jazz musician named Raymond Ma, a Chinese guy, a bass player, he came back from California with a Lenny Bruce album and a marijuana joint. He handed me both together, and he says this is for you. I put the joint in my pocket for later. And Raymond lit up his own joint — he had another joint. It was the first time I ever tasted it or tried it. And I was eager, I wanted to try it. I was a little apprehensive because of, you know, what we'd been taught at that time — that you'll go crazy and kill your mother. So I ... And that joint lasted me about a month. And I still have that Lenny Bruce album. And then, I think right after that, close to that time, I decided that I could learn more on the street than I could in school. And so I quit school. It was my second attempt at trying to get a high school education, and I failed miserably. I got through grade ten, and then half of eleven — that's the best that I could do. And then I just went on the road and became a blues musician.

Sophia: Is it true that The Jackson 5 opened for your band?

Tommy: They did. We were responsible for them becoming as big as they are. Yeah, they opened for us in Chicago.

Sophia: So your film is screening at the Mammoth Lakes Film Festival — on your birthday. Have you been to Mammoth Lakes before?

Tommy: Not that I remember. There's a good possibility that I have been there ...

Sophia: I was there for the festival last year, and I had the best time. You're going to love it! I broke my ankle and will be hobbling from screening to screening on crutches.

Tommy: Oooh. Well, get some Chong's Choice, that'll fix you. It won't heal your ankle, but it'll make you feel happy!

Mammoth Lakes Film Festival – Official Website

From LA: By car, 4 hours and 45 minutes up the US-395. Or Alaska Air into the Mammoth Lakes airport, just five minutes from town.

From SF: Take the scenic route in the direction of Tahoe then south on US-395, approximately six hours by car. Please note: the Tioga Pass will be closed through July.

Cheech & Chong — Tour Dates

John Sayles Official Website

Sierra Nevada Resort & Spa – Official Sponsor of Mammoth Lakes Film Festival

Top Image: "Up In Smoke" Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

*Bottom Image: Dina Buno and Scott Levin, “**Dina**,” directed by Dan Sickles and Antonio Santini. Winner of the Jury Prize, U.S. Documentary, 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.*



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