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In 'Supermensch' Mike Myers Salutes Legendary Super-Manager Shep Gordon

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, June 11th, 2014

In his directorial debut, Mike Myers (*Wayne's World*, *Austin Powers*) pays tribute to legendary manager Shep Gordon, with a documentary that is by turns hilarious, jaw-dropping, and enlightening. "Ethical hedonist" and "mensch," Shep Gordon works his way into your heart, leaving an indelible and loveable impression.

The year is 1968. Fresh out of college, after a failed stint as a parole officer, self-proclaimed social liberal Gordon checks himself into the Hollywood Landmark Hotel where he becomes close companions with rising stars Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Alice Cooper and operates as their drug dealer. As a cover for his illicit activities, Hendrix suggests that Gordon assume the role of "manager" for Alice Cooper. Gordon cuts his teeth as a legitimate music manager molding Cooper's iconic rock persona and conceiving concert narratives to infuriate parents and incite the loyalty of teens everywhere.

As a music manager, Gordon is instrumental in launching to fame such acts as Teddy Pendergrass and Anne Murray and representing artistic greats that have included Pink Floyd, Blondie, the Manhattan Transfer, and Groucho Marx. Under the banner Island Alive and Alive Films, Gordon produces and distributes a slate of over forty films, including *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Betty Blue*, *The Whales of August*, *Choose me*, and *The Moderns*. Infuriated by the unfair treatment and exploitation of chefs, Gordon undertakes the management of French Chef Roger Vergé, Alice Waters, Wolfgang Puck, Emeril Lagasse, to name just a few, and ushers in the era of celebrity chefs. We witness Gordon's transformation from hedonist-hippie to practicing Buddhist yearning for a family of his own.

Gordon remarks how so many of the celebrities that he managed throughout his career have been damaged or destroyed by the fame that he helped them to achieve. For this reason, he was understandably reluctant to grant permission to Mike Myers to document his personal journey. We are grateful that Gordon relented because he is an infectious storyteller.

I had the pleasure to speak with the delightful Shep Gordon at the Taj Campton Place Hotel in a press roundtable discussion just following the screening of *Supermensch – The Legend of Shep Gordon* during the 57th San Francisco International Film Festival.



Shep Gordon, the subject of Mike Myer's documentary,

SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON. Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society.

Shep Gordon — is that your birth name?

Shep Gordon: My grandfather's name was Shepsil, and I was named after him: Shep Ezra Gordon. Growing up, Elvis Presley's B-side of "Heartbreak Hotel" was "Old Shep," about his dog who died. Do you remember that? "Old Shep," poor Shep.

Many of your accomplishments as a manager seem to have been grounded in your commitment to social justice. You conducted the business of music in accordance with personal ethical standards. The music industry has not traditionally been known for its "kosher" business practices. To what do you attribute your ethical approach?

Shep: I just did what I felt was right. I got very lucky with Alice [Cooper] as my first client. He had a really strong religious upbringing. He believes 100% in the idea of right and wrong. His sense of right and wrong is disciplined, learned. It was really easy for me to be ethical because I [was representing] an artist who was ethical.

The first time I met Sammy Hagar, he was in a group called Montrose. We had hired Sammy to open for Alice in Tampa, Florida in 1972. They were getting like \$500 or \$300, nothing. A hurricane came and blew the stadium apart. Couldn't do the show. We had no obligation to pay Sammy; we weren't getting paid. But I went into Alice's dressing room, and said, "Listen, *we* can afford to not get paid, but if they are only getting \$300 — that's gas money, that means they won't sleep in a hotel tonight. Let's just pay 'em." Alice agreed. Sammy couldn't believe that somebody actually paid him when they didn't have to. That was an ethical decision. Though I never thought of it as ethics, it just was the right thing to do. I was speaking to a Jewish journalist earlier about the social liberal DNA [of being Jewish]. My dad was a wonderful man really.



Shep Gordon and Alice Cooper, SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON. Photo courtesy of Dogwoof Global and Radius TWC.

How did Mike Myers approach you about making a film about your life story?

Shep: He loves my stories, and he felt that the stories told a cultural history of those decades. He wanted to tell that story. He had asked me for about ten years. I didn't really have any reason to want to do it. Fame is very dangerous and should only be flirted with if you do not need it for your income. I didn't [make my fortune from being famous]. I never planned to, and I never will. So there was no real reason to do it. I appreciated Mike's interest in telling my story, but that was a bit more ego for me than I could deal with. I don't consider myself that special. So I just said, "No, no, no, no, no ..." Then when I was in the hospital, heavily medicated, he got through to me. [He chortles.]

Myers has described you as a "mensch." What does "mensch" connote to you?

Shep: Mensch — I think the definition is a man of integrity and honor. I haven't ever actually asked Mike exactly how he got the name for the film. When we started the project, he asked me if I would open up my archives to him – which I did. One of the things that I have always kept, are note[cards]. Whenever anyone has sent me a note, I've always kept the note because I love that

medium. I love being thankful. Saying thank-you seems a dying medium to me. I thought that maybe someday I would put all those notes together in a “Book of Thank-You’s,” just to show how it’s such a nice thing to get a thank-you note.

Mike asked me, “What is your most treasured note?” I had two. One was from Lillian Gish, from when we opened her movie. She wrote: “Hey, kids, good luck tonight.” So beautiful — “Hey, kids.” [The other note was from] Norman Lear who called me a mensch. I believe that’s where Mike took the name. For Norman to call me a mensch, was like, “Oh, my God! If my dad ever knew that the guy from *All in the Family* called me a mensch, he would be the happiest guy in the world!”



*Mike Myers, director of the documentary SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON.
Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society.*

Your friends and colleagues in the film talk about you with such regard and affection. When you were watching the film for the first time, what was your reaction to this outpouring of adulation and gratitude?

Shep: I was really humbled. I was amazed how many people gave up stuff that most public figures would never have given up. Alice claiming, “I would have been two years and gone” [without my assistance]. That from an artist who is an icon in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame! Sylvester Stallone (our image of this tough, macho guy) talking about anybody being better than him at anything!?, about wanting to emulate anyone!? Now I can watch it and accept it, but it was weird. I asked Mike Myers, “Do you write these things for them?” My first thought was maybe they were scripted. “No,” he reassured me. It gave me a warm feeling to know that I had friends like that. Michael Douglas drove in a few days ago and did the Tribeca Q&A with me. Just amazing.

Where do you think you would be today if you had not ended up stopping off at the Hollywood Landmark Hotel where you met Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix who suggested that you manage Alice Cooper, those many years ago?

Shep: I was with my partner Joe Greenberg. We probably just would have kept on dealing — or tried to do something else, I don’t know. My whole life has sort of been like that. If I hadn’t been at the restaurant that night when Mr. Vergé came in, would there be celebrity chefs today?

As the creator of the celebrity chef, I imagine that you must be a bona fide “foodie.” What are your go-to, favorite restaurants in San Francisco?

I love The Slanted Door. I love Hubert Keller and Fleur de Lys. I think Hubert is one of the most gracious gentlemen on the planet, who really wants every customer to have the best night of their life, in the Vergé tradition. I love the restaurant here in the Taj Campton Place Hotel where I ate last night. It’s an Indian chef who is just sensational, a one star Michelin restaurant. Nancy Oakes’ Boulevard. She’s amazing. My first trip where I brought Mr. Vergé to San Francisco, we did a promotion at Postrio. Wolfgang came up, and I told them both that I would take them to lunch. I am trying to think, where can I take these two icons? Where do you take Wolfgang Puck? I had heard about this Sports Bar that made really good comfort food. So I took him to the Sports Bar, and it was there where we met Nancy Oakes, cooking in a sports bar. Tonight, I’m going with Sammy Hagar to try Michael Chiarello’s new place, Coqueta, down on the

Embarcadero.

When you look back over your varied and illustrious career, is there anything that stands out as your greatest triumph?

Shep: I think the thing that I am probably proudest of is the celebrity chefs and creating a new category. The celebrity chefs is very rewarding for me because they were really underserved. Also, Alice Cooper. Alice and I are just like brothers. I almost take that too much for granted, that's so much a part of me — because I know how much [his act] changed the world, and how important we both were to it.



Shep Gordon, SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON.

Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society.

You and Alice were at the epicenter of music of that time. What do you think about the evolution of the music industry today?

Shep: The biggest difference I see today is the quality of people at the record companies and the reason that they are there. In the old days, the record company mentality was that their job was to support artists, who maybe got hit singles — hopefully. Their job was to support artists. Now if you say “the artist” at any of these places, it's almost like you are talking a foreign language. It's singles. Nobody even thinks about albums; they don't exist any more. No one thinks about the journey of a songwriter, what the emotion is, where they are going, how they move from here to there. It's how much pyro. Which maybe is good or bad, I don't know, but it's different than what I know. Lady Gaga is one of the few things that has come out that has had some music to it. The rest of them are just hit records. A series of hit records instead of hit artists.

I believe as truth that “the real phenomenons” come out of rebellion and hatred by parents. I was a perfect victim of it. My kids would play hip-hop, and I'd make them leave the house or shut the door: “How could you listen to this shit?!” The underwear came up higher, the more I talked to 'em. I realized as I was doing it, here it was again ... I was a perfect part of the equation.

We learn in the documentary that you adopted and co-parented four children with a former girlfriend. Yet, having a family of your own and a biological heir remains a dream deferred. In the end of the film, you hold out hope that this dream might still be possible. You say: “I have still maybe — “

Shep: “— a little squirt left in me.”

[We share a big laugh.]

So, on your press tour or as a result of this very “mensch-ie film” (that anybody who sees cannot help but fall in love with you), have you met anyone?

Shep: I haven't met anybody. I have had women stand up and say that they want to have my baby. I've gotten some emails. I don't know if I am available. I know I say it, and I know I think it, but I don't really know if I am available. I feel like maybe I'm blocking it because if anything I'm moving more in the other direction towards isolation. So good question.



Shep Gordon and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON.

Photo courtesy of Dogwoof Global and Radius TWC.

Part of cultivating a spiritual approach to life is the way you frame your own story. How has the Dalai Lama helped shape your thinking about your personal story?

Shep: Finding some way to wake up in the morning and be happy is really to me the essence of this journey. Although he never ever said this to me, this is not attributed to him whatsoever!, after being so privileged to spend a little time with the Dalai Lama, what I took away was this: When he would look at this glass, I could almost see him see the miracle in the glass first, then he saw the glass. Or if he looked at that picture, he would see the miracle. Or you: “What a miracle!” I think that when you see the miracle in something, you can’t be anything but happy. So I try. That sort of practice helps me, cause I’m like every other person — I beat myself up, and I question everything. When I get into a valley, I try and think of the miracle. I will look at the door and say, “Wow, what a miracle that is! ... Oh, I guess I’m one too.” [Big cackle.] Just a little trick to try to force the bootstraps up a little bit.

At this stage in your life, what gives you the most joy?

Shep: Being with my [adopted] grandkids. The innocence and the smell. The innocence particularly is just — so beautiful. I took my eighteen month old to do a red-carpet with me in New York, and the only word she knows is “mama.” So when the movie ended, I got up on stage, and she screened “momma, momma, momma.” Although I live in a world of complete non-innocence, I have always been attracted to innocence. I think that’s why I love Hawaii so much.

The film does its best to encapsulate the entirety of your professional career and contributions across many industries, on many ventures. Was there any part of your professional journey that got left out? Aspects that there was not sufficient time to explore in a 90-minute documentary?

Shep: A lot of people got left out. There is nothing I ever accomplished that wasn’t a team effort. The person I felt was most left out of the story was my partner from the early days, Joe Greenberg. I put that card up [in the end credits] to recognize that even though it was my story through Mike’s eyes, the “I” was really “we” – me and Joe Greenberg.

It’s funny, the kids that I adopted, their grandmother came to the screening. She’s ninety-two. She felt left out. (Never mind, what happened to Michael Eisner.) “It is a great movie, but you left me out, I’m the matriarch, I’m the reason they’re all here!” [Big laugh.]

There were a lot of things in the movie that I was not happy with, and Mike and I talked about them. Some things he took out, some things he left in, but it is his movie. I felt very uncomfortable when Mike asked me that question about what did the house cost and what is it worth now. “Well just answer it, and let’s see how it plays,” he said. I felt *more* uncomfortable afterward, but he felt it was very important as a filmmaker to put that in. Saying my mother was cruel was very tough for me to watch. That was in a long sentence about how much she loved me and how much I loved her, and her love came out in a really weird way, and to me it was cruel the way her love came out, but it was her love. So that hurt. But he’s a filmmaker. He’s telling a story.

I love that he calls it “Legend” instead of “Reality.” I love when Mike uses [a title to comment] “Not True” about the Pablo Picasso story, because, it wasn’t true (I guess), but it makes it real. I have no idea what’s true in my life anymore?! I took so much acid in those days, I just don’t know. I don’t even know what I know. [Huge laugh.]

You know, two of the kids were left out; Mike only interviewed two of the four. Documentaries are always a limited budget. You don’t have the luxury of a big thing. It’s Mike’s movie. Sometimes I feel like a chair in his movie. But an interesting chair. So there’s not any one incident that I care about, it’s more the people who got left out. So many people.

Top Image: Shep Gordon, the subject of Mike Myer’s documentary SUPERMENSCH: THE LEGEND OF SHEP GORDON. Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society.

Supermensch: The Legend of Shep Gordon — Official Website

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