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As told to J. Bennett, 2518 words.

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On maintaining creative control

Director Tom Stern and producer Noa Durban on the benefits of inter-generational collaboration, documenting underground culture accurately, and why you don't need to go to film school to make a movie.

Why did you decide that The Butthole Surfers needed a documentary?

Tom Stern: I think they're a really important band in rock and roll history. Their story isn't known widely enough. There's a cadre of fans that are very passionate, and people who are into music know them. A lot of people have heard of them because they had that hit, "Pepper," but most people just have a vague idea of who they are. They don't really know.

Their history is so interesting and so important in the larger picture of rock and roll history, music history, and even American cultural history at large because they were part of the American underground. They were maybe the biggest or most influential underground band of the '80s, and they really had a big influence on Nirvana. Kurt Cobain liked the Buttholes a lot. He went to see their shows all the time. He met Courtney Love at a Butthole Surfers show. [Butthole Surfers frontman] Gibby [Haynes] and Kurt were good friends. Not that this is the focus of our film, but their careers intertwined in dramatic ways. Gibby was in rehab with Kurt just a few days before Kurt killed himself.

Back then, there was this real separation between mainstream and underground culture that was interesting historically because it's not really there anymore. The underground was a reaction to the Reagan era that was so conformist and conservative. The whole ethos of the Reagan era was, "Fall into line and don't be weird," and The Butthole Surfers were the pure antithesis of that.

You filmed the Surfers back in the mid-80s at CBGBs. Was that your first encounter with them?

TS: I first saw them at the Pyramid Club, I believe, when I was a sophomore at NYU. This was 1984, I think. Instantly, I was blown away. I just thought they were so cool. Then I went back and saw them a few days later at CBGBs. The Buttholes were so unique, so different from the other underground punk and post-punk music of the day in that they broke all these rules. Hardcore and punk rock had become this rigid, formulaic music. The Buttholes threw away the formulas and tried mixing things up in such interesting ways.

They were playing to underground crowds of 100 or 150 people at the most back then, but all those clubs were always sold out because the word of mouth about the band spread really fast. Everybody who was into cool underground music was into them. The pop music of the day was okay, but it was that not that dangerous, or interesting, or provocative on an art level. The Cars are good songwriters and everything, but if you're really into art and music, you want something more interesting. And the Butthole Surfers just were so interesting.

They have a silly, profane name, but they're also really smart. [Guitarist] Paul [Leary] and Gibby are two genius artists who came together and reacted together in this really combustible but exciting way—Paul being the musical genius and Gibby being a conceptual art genius and also a genius frontman in the way he totally rewrote the book and turned the band into this circus in which he was the ringleader. It really was this surrealist or Dada circus—using crazy stagecraft to produce spectacular visual dissonance and spectacle. He pushed the idea of what's psychedelic into strange new realms that were more like what you'd see at an art museum by some artist like Joseph Beuys or Marcel Duchamp, who was an artist that really influenced Gibby. So if you love art and punk rock, these guys just fucking nailed it.

You mentioned the psychedelic aspect, and I think that's one of the interesting things about the Butthole Surfers. Most of the punk bands of the '70s and '80s specifically rejected psychedelia as hippie nonsense, but the Butthole Surfers embraced it. Was that part of the attraction for you?

TS: Well, I loved psychedelic music. I loved the Beatles and Pink Floyd. I loved punk rock, too, but I think a lot of people loved both. Even though Johnny Rotten wore a T-shirt that said, "I Hate Pink Floyd," I think he was just being provocative. And like you said, the Buttholes embraced that. They had monster riffs and this thunderous rhythm section with two drummers playing these tribal beats that just put you in a trance. You felt like you were at some kind of ritual, or "What the fuck is going on here?" It didn't feel like just a rock show. It was a crazy spectacle with crazy juxtapositions. I think the band is all about really intense juxtapositions—the beautiful and the horrific.

It's fascinating—to me, anyways—that Paul Leary and Gibby Haynes have backgrounds in accounting, which one tends to think of as a straight-laced, conservative profession. What's your take on that?

TS: I've asked them about it, and it's one of the mysteries of the band that I can hopefully shed some light on. I can't give you the perfect answer, but I hope by the end of the film we will know why, because that fascinates me as well.

The documentary is still in progress. You two are on your way to shoot some interviews as you're talking to me. Tell me about some of the challenges of making this film so far.

Noa Durban: I think one of the major challenges is trying to show the band to different generations. I'm 28, so I got to know them through their later stuff, like, "Who Was In My Room Last Night?" from the early '90s, when they were signed to Capitol Records. So a lot of people don't actually know about their crazy heritage of spectacle live shows that are like art collections. Unfortunately, there wasn't a way to document it that well because it was all done on VHS and crappy stuff that you used to bootleg shows, so it's hard to capture the full experience. That's one of the main challenges for this movie, I would say: To recreate that feeling without relying on just using old footage.

How are you dealing with that?

ND: We want to bring in animators and approach it with a creative outlook. We don't want it just to be talking heads and archival footage, like, "Here's some stuff you can find on YouTube, and Henry Rollins is talking." We want to try to recreate the experience through the movie. It makes the job harder for us, but also more creative, satisfying and fun. And we can't just rely on footage because there is not a lot of good footage.

TS: The cool thing about the publicity you get from Kickstarter is that fans come forward with footage they have. That's already happened. I was just watching some footage this morning of the infamous Danceteria show in '86, which was Kathleen the dancer's first time onstage with the band. It was a legendary outrageous performance, and I'd never seen it, so it was amazing to watch.

ND: It is rumored that there was some sexual activity going on onstage, but I don't want to give away too much, because that's one of the things that we are exploring in this movie—what was myth and what was real.

TS: As Noa was saying, we have this creative challenge of trying to recreate or give the impression to our viewers of being at a Butthole Surfers show back in the day. So we're really thinking outside the box. I want to do some stop-motion and/or puppetry where we build miniatures of those venues like CBGBs and the I-Beam in San Francisco, and actually create animations that put you in that space, in that world, surrounded by the mayhem, and recreate all the spectacular visuals that they created back in the day.

As you mentioned, you're funding this documentary through Kickstarter. What kind of conversation did you have about that before you decided to launch the campaign?

ND: We want to do this movie independently, as we mention in our sizzle reel, and one of the main reasons is that we want to maintain creative freedom. We have the blessing of the band, and we don't want it to be just like a manufactured, pre-produced movie by a big streaming channel. We want to be able to control the material, so it's really handy to have platforms like Kickstarter, where you don't have to compromise. You don't have to sign away your artistic license, and you can still get the backing and the money to make shit happen. It's the best thing for indie. It's the best thing if you don't want to do a presale because you're afraid you won't make it.

The other thing is that our executive producer, Paul Rachman, who directed the very iconic documentary, *American Hardcore*, was an advocate for going this route specifically for those reasons. And I come from a digital marketing background, so we didn't have to outsource that part of it. We could keep a small staff. In that way, it's also cost-effective to do it through Kickstarter. If you know what you're doing, it's a cost-effective way to raise money.

You put together a trailer or "sizzle reel" that really does its job of getting people excited about the film. Can you tell me about the process of putting that together and the decisions that went into it?

TS: That's a great question, because I thought it would take two weeks to cut the sizzle reel but we just kept having to push the deadline because it was actually really hard to put together. It was really hard to figure out how to position the film and how you want to introduce yourself to the world and pitch the film, essentially, to investors or supporters.

So, we went through a lot of different versions. In one version, I was cutting a little montage to set the stage and explain what the American underground was in those days—with bands like The Cramps and the Minutemen and Black Flag and the Bad Brains—to try and show how the Buttholes were different. But then you're like 15 seconds in and you haven't mentioned the Butthole Surfers, so that doesn't work.

ND: Because I come from the business and marketing world, I don't like promotional videos that are too long. We want to keep it short and sweet. So, I kept telling him, "It needs to be shorter. It needs to be shorter. There's too much information." So then we kept editing it and dialing it in, and we finally settled on about three minutes.

TS: It was a long, agonizing process—although it was fun when we finally cracked it. But for a long time, we were sort of like, “Goddammit, how do you do this so fast? How do you make it pop?” As a filmmaker, I wanted to make it pop and really have a great pace, because I’m all about pace. I even want to cut the film based on the songs. That’s off-topic for this question, but I think that’ll be what makes it sing, no pun intended—finding the structure to tell the story of this band in a musical way. The songs are going to help us tell the story.

The fact that you two are from different generations seems to be a huge advantage in making this film.

ND: I’m learning a lot from Tom. He’s a legend in what he does, and I’m a fan. That’s how I got to meet him, actually—through being a fan. And I’m learning a lot of lessons from his experience, but I think it’s also valuable to have someone like me who’s coming from a newer generation and is very digitally oriented. Because we are using these modern platforms to promote this stuff, I think that’s where I came in handy.

TS: Yes. Noa is an absolute lifesaver, because I was on this Quixotic quest to make a Butthole Surfers movie, but with no particular schedule. And I definitely don’t have the digital marketing skills and the networking skills that Noa is really proficient at. She’s mastered that world of digital connection, and she’s also got a brilliant logistical mind. She whipped us into shape, and I couldn’t be happier. We’re on a tight schedule to finish a cut a little less than a year from now to get into a major film festival.

Tom, you went to film school at NYU. I think a lot of young people wonder about the value of that these days because college is so expensive. What did you get out of film school, and do you think it’s worth it?

TS: That’s a really important question for young people, especially with college as ridiculously expensive as it is in this country. I’d say film school is worth it if you can afford it. I wouldn’t take out loans to do it, though. I was lucky that my parents had saved money for my college, and they paid for it—I didn’t have to take student loans—and college was not as insanely expensive when I went to school. But I didn’t want to waste my parents’ money. That was a big burden on my mind.

It was worth it for me because I ended up meeting people that I later worked with—people like Alex Winter. We met freshman year at NYU, and we were a creative partnership for 12 years. And that was crucial to establishing myself because Alex was acting as well, and *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* was this surprise hit. Before that film, we were slogging away in Hollywood trying to write screenplays. But after that film, we got into people’s offices to pitch them. They suddenly took our meetings, and that helped us get *Freaked* made. The people you meet are everything in this business. So if film school helps you make connections, it could be worth it. But there’s a lot of other ways to do that now, of course.

ND: Like you can reach out to your favorite director on Instagram and end up producing their movie! I didn’t go to film school, and I’m now producing this movie, right? I generated those connections on my own basically because I’m a relentless person. If I want to do something, I lock jaws on it and I do it. So if you don’t have the money for film school, that’s also an approach. Both approaches are correct. You can go to film school, but if you don’t push yourself, it doesn’t matter. You can also only push yourself, and that’s all that matters.

Noa Durban & Tom Stern recommend:

Butthole Surfers – *Butthole Surfers EP*

Butthole Surfers – *Psychic... Powerless... Another Man’s Sac*

Butthole Surfers – *Locust Abortion Technician*

Butthole Surfers – *Independent Worm Saloon*

Butthole Surfers – *Electriclarryland*

Name

Tom Stern and Noa Durban

Vocation

director and producer

Fact

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