RANDOM LUNACY: videos from the road less traveled

A film by Vic Zimet & Stephanie Silber

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CAPSULE SYNOPSIS

“This guy makes Jack Kerouac look like he lived at home with his mother and went out on the road on weekends.” – Alec Wilkinson, THE HAPPIEST MAN IN THE WORLD

All happy families are not alike, as proven by the radically itinerant Poppa Neutrino, and his family band of self-taught Dixieland musicians. RANDOM LUNACY, directed by Vic Zimet and Stephanie Silber, follows THE FLYING NEUTRINOS as Poppa leads the family on a quest for pure freedom. They were homeless by choice, and for twenty years they documented their lives with an old HI-8 camera, capturing adventures that ranged from a stint in a Mexican circus to pitting a scrap raft against the Atlantic Ocean. Their greatest achievement – creating for themselves an alternate universe with a value system all its own. Down and out never looked so rich.

SYNOPSIS

Mainstream America might regard the family group of buskers who called themselves 'The Flying Neutrinos' as homeless. But they thought of themselves as sans domicile fixe, or homeless by choice; their name itself was taken from the scientific term for sub-atomic particles in constant motion.

Poppa Neutrino, the family patriarch, believes that 'rent is the thing that beats us.' His quest was about pure freedom for himself, wife Betsy, and the five children they raised on the road. His philosophy is based on the notion of nurturing a triad of heart's desires; if you dream them, you can have them. The family taught themselves how to play Dixieland jazz, and managed to eke out a living playing on the streets as they roamed the world from Mexico to Moscow. They slept in cars, old trucks, on empty beaches. Adventures included a stint with a Mexican circus, and with an ingenuity bordering on genius, building rafts from scraps of junk that they then would live aboard. For twenty years, the family documented itself with an old HI-8 camera, capturing an astonishingly intimate portrait of survival outside of conventional society, in a self-created alternate universe with a value system all its own.

At times, a life on the road felt like boot camp for the children. In a story that plays like a non-fiction version of The Great Santini meets Mosquito Coast, tellingly revealed family dynamics run from charged to tender. And, on the streets, safety was always an issue. The basics of survival informed everyday life, and the lessons were severe. But as a result, the kids developed extraordinary self-reliance, a process we follow as the film charts them into their adulthoods; how their respective lives have evolved is an eye-opener.
As Betsy Terrell tells it, “some people are nomadic by nature.” This was the spirit that inspired the mounting of a daring 1998 expedition into the North Atlantic aboard one of their homemade vessels with a crew of only four. The voyage was captured on video; the tears, the scares, the ineffable beauty, the moments of great joy.

In 2004, Poppa dreamed up an innovative football play, which he saw take shape on the field of play because his only taker, a high school coach on a Navajo reservation, believes wholeheartedly that “it might change football.” Here the story ends, but only on the screen. At 74, Poppa Neutrino remains a man who feels no one else in the world could be as lucky as he is, owning as he does absolute self-determination. Currently, Poppa Neutrino continues to film his travels, even as he plans more possibilities for adventure.

**RANDOM LUNACY** casts a searching gaze on what it means to be marginalized in our society, while at the same time examining what our choices have to do with our ultimate freedom, and most importantly, what has genuine value in a culture jaded by its own affluence.

This singular family story will resonate with anyone who dares to dream of a life lived free.
It was twenty years ago, in the hustle and flow of the Times Square subway station, when I heard the unmistakable brassy thump of Dixieland jazz cutting through the cacophony. As if pulled by fate, I made my way toward the source of the workmanlike strains of “When The Saints Come Marching In.” A crowd had already gathered, and as I pushed my way through, I knew the reason why – this wasn’t just any Dixieland jazz band.

A flaxen haired three-year-old girl was tap dancing, twirling to the beat her only slightly older siblings were cranking out; those three ranged in age from perhaps nine to fifteen. Ordinarily oblivious and cranky New Yorkers smiled with delight, clapping time. As for me, I watched transfixed. This group was right out of Central Casting, and I felt its calling.

Later, when the band took a break, I spoke to the children’s parents, the bearded band leader and his wife. They turned out to be “Poppa Neutrino,” a radically itinerant philosopher from his earliest memories, and his wife, Betsy Terrell, whom he had met ten years earlier, living under a dock in New Orleans’ French Quarter. They called their family band “THE FLYING NEUTRINOS,” named for the subatomic particles that travel the earth unobstructed.

I learned that this was the family’s second trip to New York. The previous year when they visited they were living in a car; as it turned out, not at all unusual accommodations for this family, which had also lived in trucks, buses, and home-made rafts, among others. I was hooked. Now I had to sell my partner on the fact that a film was in our future.

It takes passion to make a film. That passion is fueled by a deep belief that the story you have chosen is one that merits all the blood, sweat, and tears that inevitably accompany the process. For myself and my co-director, Stephanie Silber, this story was it. It spoke to our own choices, which paled, became timid, against those of this family, which defied all convention, and whose belief system and choices provoked our own examination of what we value.

This family chose to go broke. We didn’t (though we went broke anyway). This family chose to be homeless. We didn’t (and, happily, retained a roof above our heads). This family was prepared for its travails; under Poppa and Betsy’s tutelage, they made a lifetime of studying adversity, so they were equipped to overcome it. They schooled themselves in impermanence, so as to turn it to their own gain in terms of learned truth and earned wisdom. Us…? Maybe not so much. But – our truth is this. There was an ineffable joy attached to this road less traveled that we took in bringing to life the adventures of The Flying Neutrinos.

And adventures there were many. As the family roamed the world, life was a three-ring circus, Poppa Neutrino recalls now. And not just figuratively – the family spent time with a Mexican circus; they used that experience to later form their own circus in that country, performing in the dusty playas of hardscrabble beach towns.
The odyssey continues. In a story with ongoing and malleable conclusions, this is ours: if you know anybody else who, like Poppa Neutrino, built a raft of scraps from the streets of New York and attempted to sail the Atlantic, we would suggest you get a camera and start making a film. It’s worth it.

-Victor Zimet
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FILMMAKER BIOS

Stephanie Silber – Co-Director, Producer, Writer

Stephanie Silber has worked in entertainment and the media for over twenty years. Her theatrical experience includes work both on the boards and behind the scenes, and includes associations with Playwrights Horizons and The Ensemble Studio Theatre. After a stint as a print journalist, writing primarily about entertainment, Silber began producing, writing, and directing long-form documentaries which have aired on outlets such as Court Television, The History Channel and The Learning Channel. Her short film, ENVIRONMENTALISTS UNDER FIRE, for the Sierra Club and Amnesty International, narrated by Gabriel Byrne, was recognized in 2000 with a Telly Award, and was represented at the Amnesty International Film Festival in Vancouver, 2002.

Victor Zimet – Co-Director, Producer, Editor, Camera

Victor Zimet has worked in the film and television business for thirty years. Along the way he collected an Emmy for producing and directing a magazine segment on the victorious 1986 Mets for WNYC-TV. During this period Zimet came across a street busking family, The Flying Neutrinos, on a Times Square subway platform; intrigued, he convinced WNYC to allow him to produce a short piece about the family. His obsession with this singular group of people would stay with him for the next two decades.

During the 90’s, Victor edited many network specials, and developed a stellar reputation at CBS, editing on various series including STREET STORIES with Ed Bradley, EYE TO EYE with Connie Chung, and PUBLIC EYE with Bryant Gumbel, during which he received another Emmy nomination.
In 2004 and 2005 Zimet had a hand in the ABC hit EXTREME MAKEOVER.

In 1999 Silber and Zimet founded New York based HOME TEAM PRODUCTIONS, which takes pride in the telling of extraordinary lives; its track record includes profiles on Robert Duvall, and Cyndi Lauper for BRAVO. The Duvall Profile was awarded both a Telly and an Aurora Award. In September 2005, Home Team premiered SONGS & STORIES, a portrait cum concert film about the late Irish blues guitar great Rory Gallagher, at NYU’s Cantor Auditorium, as part of the prestigious Special Events Series at Glucksman Ireland House. SONGS & STORIES was featured at the Westchester Film Festival and the Wild River Festival in 2006.

Silber and Zimet’s RANDOM LUNACY: Videos From The Road Less Traveled, was awarded Best Documentary at the Westchester International Film Festival in March, 2007. A month later, the film screened as Closing Night Selection at the New York Underground Film Festival to a sold out house and an enthusiastic crowd.
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David Pearlman – Co-Producer, Camera

David Pearlman decided to document his life in the mid-1980’s, after surviving a near fatal illness caused by the bite of a stray dog encountered during his travels in Mexico. For the next twenty years he faithfully recorded his life and his family’s as they traveled the world. RANDOM LUNACY represents the realization of one of his deepest desires.

Pearlman, who took to calling himself Poppa Neutrino after the life-changing revelations he experienced in the course of his illness, is no stranger to enormous achievement. He was on the road from early childhood, and made his wandering a laboratory for the development of thoughts and ideas around transformation. Through his own unique philosophy he discovered a way to live outside of society, successfully, and on his own terms.

Pearlman/Neutrino over the years designed and built a succession of seaworthy rafts for himself and his family to live aboard, as a way to avoid paying rent, which he believes to be a form of enslavement. He and wife Betsy Terrell pitted one such vessel against the Atlantic Ocean as the millennium approached, with only two additional crew aboard. At present he is gearing up for a solo raft voyage across the Pacific, attracting the press attention that seems to follow him everywhere he goes. He is the subject of a book by The New Yorker writer Alec Wilkinson, who had written an article previously about Pearlman for that publication. Pearlman is a member of the elite Explorers Club.

CREDIT LIST

Directed by
Victor Zimet
Stephanie Silber

Produced by
David Pearlman
Stephanie Silber
Victor Zimet

Edited by
Victor Zimet
Very special thanks
  Geof Bartz
  Lori Cheatle
  Peter Travers
  Coach Pita Olomua
  Pastor Floyd

  Scratch Mix
  Nenad Bach

  Final Mix
  Frank Egan

Additional Music
  Firstcom Music

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