I was introduced to directors Victor Zimet and Stephanie Silber in 2007 when I reviewed their film "Songs and Stories." Though I didn't give it such a glowing review, the professionals I now consider close friends didn't waver in their persistence on winning me over in their talents and unique subjects for focusing their documentaries on and sent me "Random Lunacy" in 2007. Suffice it to say after watching that film I was won over by the filmmaking duo whose entire filmography has been strictly documentaries. And after chronicling the legendary Poppa Neutrinio and his life as a family man journeying across the world with his band of sons, daughters, and enduring wife, I had to keep seeing what the pair would put out there, and I had to pick their brains. The devoted and fiercely loyal married couple are known Victor Zimet and Stephanie Silber, a wosome of talented and humble filmmakers who love what they do, and they do it with a devotion that is admirable and true to the indie spirit. Also, it helps they're both loyal classic rock buffs like I am. The two took the time out of their busy schedule to let us pick their brain and here's what resulted out of random lunacy, the roads less traveled that they traveled for a reason, and some genuine good humor.

When was Home Team Productions conceived and what films do you specialize in?

Stephanie & Vic: The two of us founded Home Team Productions in late 1998. We had worked together on documentaries years prior, which was inspiring, then pursued individual directions (Vic editing for film and television, Stephanie doing a stint in print journalism prior to producing and directing docs for television). A few auspicious opportunities converged at the same time: Vic was able to lease an AVID at an affordable rate, and a friend/colleague drafted us for BRAVO Profiles Cyndi Lauper and Robert Duvall.

We have a passion for telling stories around artists and their process, and our indie projects have included a portrait of the late Irish blues guitarist Rory Gallagher, SONGS & STORIES, and RANDOM LUNACY, about the stranger-than-fiction adventures of the busking family called "The Flying Neutrinos." Poppa Neutrinio, a radically itinerant poet/philosopher, and his wife, sea captain Betsy Terrell, raised their five children on the road, living homeless by choice. Sadly, the world lost Poppa at the age of 77 in January, 2011. We also did a film about the New York City fixture, Irish roots rock band Black 47, NEW YEAR'S EVE IN TIMES SQUARE.

How has the film business treated you guys since you started documentaries?

Stephanie: You might say it was the best of times and the worst of times. We were doing what we loved, we were growing as filmmakers, we were learning all the time, which is indescribably enriching and exhilarating.

However, it's a rugged world out there for indies. It's often an uphill struggle. It's very difficult to find funding and to interest networks in new ideas. For us, we produced three indie films in the space of roughly six years, with other projects in the pipeline for even longer. We broke a cardinal rule of filmmaking – “Never spend your own money.” (Not to mention our time. We were often working "day jobs," albeit within the industry, and then using nights and weekends to complete our own projects, from shooting, to editing, to promoting.) Nobody wants to go broke. But a person doesn't necessarily choose art – art chooses us, doesn't it? And the rewards are immeasurable.

Vic: Somehow we’re still here; and I’ve always said they’ll have to kill us to stop us.

How long have you been in filmmaking?

Vic: When I was about nine or ten years old, my cousin Stevie and I made a ton of 8 millimeter movies. Then when I turned thirty, I made my first real documentary, CHASING A DREAM, which was propelled by my passion for the game of baseball. After a couple of other projects in the 80's, I became addicted to rotisserie baseball. I was excellent at it, and ultimately got bored of winning. So at the turn of the century, I returned to filmmaking with a vengeance. The past ten years, in terms of a body of work, is what I am most proud of.

Stephanie: Other than my involvement in the baseball films we did in the early 80's, I began writing, producing and directing full-time in 1996, with highlights including an hour-long film that was part of a series for The History Channel, THE GREEN BERETS; THE JEFFREY MACDONALD MURDER CASE for Court TV, and a short film for Amnesty International and The Sierra Club, ENVIRONMENTALISTS UNDER FIRE.

Most couples would decide to branch out on their own when seeking careers as filmmakers, why did you two decide to go at it side by side?

Vic: Stephanie is a good writer and I’m a good editor. (Plus, we only have to pay for one hotel room on the road.)

Stephanie: We’ve worked together and separately, but we share many of the same goals and sensibilities. Our skills and talents have always complemented one another. As a team we believe we maximize our potential. (That said – it ain’t always a day at the beach…)

Did either of you attend film school or did you learn by doing?

Vic: I studied marketing at Hofstra. (It was rumored that Francis Ford Coppola went there also, though I have no idea what he was studying.) I took one film class during my sophomore year, but unfortunately they were screening films like LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD, which I completely didn’t understand at the time. I didn’t pursue any other courses until I needed a couple more credits in my last year, so that summer I took some film courses to complete my degree. That’s when I realized that I really liked filmmaking. Then I was lucky enough to get a job at a production company carrying cans, putting away lights, and all the grunt work. I learned a great deal at that company, which did a variety of different kinds of films. At the time I found myself gravitating toward the editing side of it.

Stephanie: Absolutely learned boots on the ground. But as a non-traditional college student (read, um, older), my study of literature informed my love for storytelling and feel for story structure.
Who influenced you to seek out documentaries as a form of artistic expression?
Vic: When I first got into the film business, my first credit was on WOMEN IN CELL BLOCK 7. I was also cutting trailers for Kung Fu movies and exploitation films. After a feature that I cut called THE ASTROLOGER (later re-titled SUICIDE CULT) I got a job on a docudrama for NBC entitled LIFELINE. When I saw how editors such as Geof Bartz (PUMPING IRON) and Milton Ginsberg were making real people’s lives as dramatic as fiction films, my aspirations to cut Hollywood movies fell by the wayside. A year or two later I made my first film, the documentary CHASING A DREAM.

Stephanie: New Yorker articles, particularly profiles; ditto Rolling Stone articles (Hunter Thompson a big favorite, as well as Mikal Gilmore); Norman Mailer, notably THE EXECUTIONER’S SONG; to name only a few documentarians, Albert and David Maysles (Grey Gardens knocked my socks off), Werner Herzog, Errol Morris, colleagues and friends such as Louis Gorfain, Hank O’Karma, Geof Bartz, Joe Sucher and Steven Fischler; Peter Weir, for his non-docs, PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK, THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY, and THE MOSQUITO COAST, for their fictionalization of stories based on fact.

The independent film market is choked with horror, comedies, thrillers and almost every other conceivable genre by filmmakers trying to prove themselves, why are documentaries so much more a draw to make for you?
Stephanie: Because they are closer to the bone, since the stories are true.

Vic: Basically because I can’t write, and any fiction story that I’ve attempted has always ultimately seemed incredibly lame. I realized that leeching off other people’s real stories was the way to go.

Why do you think documentaries and non-fiction in general are so popular in today’s film market?
Stephanie: People tend to want more substance and meaning in their lives in these difficult and confusing times. Docs also tend to offer a global perspective and insight into the lives of others that more mainstream “Hollywood” films don’t offer as readily or as truthfully.

Vic: Because real people let you shoot them and you don’t have to pay any goddamn actors, so you can probably make the film cheaply. Also, kidding aside, what I have found on the festival circuit is that a bad doc can still be worthwhile watching if the subject is good. A bad fiction film is just plain hard to watch.

What’s the most important lesson you two have learned while making documentaries?
Vic: That it’s a lot like crime, it doesn’t pay.

Stephanie: To never, ever give up. And to learn as much as I can from our subjects, who have ignited my curiosity, passion, and courage.

Why do you think America is so compelled by the documentary in the modern film age?
Stephanie: Could be we’re looking for some truth in a world of lies.

Vic: Hopefully it is a counterpoint to the puke that oozes out of the television screen in the name of reality TV.

Do you think mock documentaries hold the same insight into the human soul as documentaries can and do?
Vic: Last year I saw EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, and I really don’t know how much of it is mock or not, but I found it exhilarating, and its commentary on the art world to be very insightful. We also made a short film with Jenny McCarthy, even though she didn’t know she was in it. The film, THE SEARCH FOR JENNY, was all true, but it bordered on mockumentary, which is what is truly so wonderful about this art form that seems to exist without rules.

Stephanie: Two words – Christopher Guest. Not only is he hilarious, but he somehow brings a poignant humanity to his characters that mirrors real life, only bigger and funnier. We come away “getting it,” whether we know it or not.

Which film among your array of projects has been your favorite?
Stephanie: I love them all like children.

Vic: I think in some ways RANDOM LUNACY was the most complex film that we have made up until this point, so while I love each film that we’ve made, passionately, I usually use that one to represent my sensibilities, and therefore, as far as the assholes who are looking for something slick, we don’t have to waste each other’s time.

How has the reaction been toward your documentary “Random Lunacy”?
Stephanie: That’s a good question, and one we’re constantly asked. People tend to be polarized by the extreme life that Poppa lived with his family; they seem either to get it or not. There is often a very angry reaction from people, while others are completely enamored, blown away by the notion of such absolute freedom, which of course comes with its own price. I do think there is a middle ground – we cannot all live completely outside of the conventions of society as the Neutrinos so successfully did, but we can adapt some of the philosophies to our own lives, and be the better persons for it.

Vic: Sundance, Tribeca, IDFA, and other elitist festivals couldn’t reject us fast enough. Being selected as the closing night film at the 2007 New York Underground Film Festival, and a month later being invited to open the Portland Underground Film Festival, was a great honor for us. We’re underground and proud of it. We were lucky enough to get into a number of festivals over the course of three years, with the highlight being chosen for the Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers, during which we screened in eight states, ten cities, over the course of twelve days. We met people of all ages who responded to the film, with a surprising highlight being a packed house in Montgomery, Alabama, where young 4-H Club members delayed going to the dance planned for their next activity in order to participate in a very lively Q&A.

Part Two of “Lensing with Love” >>>

Like 11
LENSING WITH LOVE: INTERVIEW WITH DOCUMENTARIANS

STEPHANIE SILBER & VICTOR ZIMET

3/14/11
Felix Vasquez Jr.

Which documentary has been the most difficult to film?
Stephanie: RANDOM LUNACY.

Why’s that?
Stephanie: It consisted of twenty years of raw footage shot on the streets of the world by Poppa Neutrino and the family, cobbled together with our own footage and interviews, was a perfect example of a film created in the edit room. It was a dauntingly complex story, with a lot of disparate characters, and many, many events, including a successful sail across the North Atlantic on a homemade raft. I was blessed and lucky to have Vic at the helm there. It is magic to watch him work, to bring a story to life ex-nihilo.

Vic: I’ll have what she’s smoking.

Have you ever formed such a tight bond with one of your film subjects you found it difficult to part with them when filming was finished?
Vic: We consider some members of Black 47 to be good friends. A current subject, Nenad Bach, has over the course of many years of filming his story become one of our best friends. Robert Duvall, however, whom we personally adore, has yet to respond to our sending him RANDOM LUNACY, as we have always thought he would be perfect to play Poppa Neutrino.

Stephanie: We fall in love with all our subjects. They will always belong to our hearts. Happily, in the case of the Neutrinos, we’ve remained close since 1986, when Vic discovered them playing Dixieland jazz for spare change on a Times Square subway platform.

How have the festival circuits treated Home Team Productions?
Vic: Overall, no complaints. Although to be quite honest, we have probably been rejected by four festivals for every one that we got into. We’ve won some Best Documentary awards, one being from the Connecticut Film Festival in 2009 for RANDOM LUNACY, and are very grateful that the subsequent years, including this, 2011, they have reprinted the film.

Stephanie: We feel so privileged to have taken RANDOM LUNACY on the road! We loved our festival circuit experience. Exhibiting the work, talking about the work, meeting so many interesting people and fellow filmmakers, was just so fulfilling. There’s a camaraderie that feeds the imagination and sets the creative juices flowing. We share our war stories, our frustrations, our occasional triumphs. And just traveling to different places in the country and the world is a joy. It was kind of the Neutrino lifestyle lite.

Has traveling and filming with your significant other affected your work as a director?
Vic: There was a lot of screaming and yelling and crying on the road during the Southern Circuit Tour. Usually during our process there is a lot of screaming, yelling, and crying. Emotions are heightened, and I can only hope that some of that makes its way into the work.

Stephanie: I believe my work is the better for it. We have each other’s backs. Plus, we get to talk about the project late into the night, and we share the good times and the bad. That creates a real bond. Importantly, we’re able to communicate non-verbally, a glance, a nod, a gesture, and that expedites the process.

What upcoming projects is Home Team Productions working on?
Stephanie: Currently we’re in post production on a more in-depth look at B47 and its erudite frontman, Larry Kirwan, a playwright, novelist, memoirist and all round renaissance man; as well as a profile on the Croatian composer/musician/peace activist, Nenad Bach, who left his homeland to follow his dreams in the United States. Nenad has created a new world music, incorporating the ancient a cappella folk music of his native land with his own inimitable brand of rock.

Vic: Although I would like to do a film about one of my oldest friends in the film business, Terry Levene, who in the seventies distributed such classics as DR. BUTCHER, MD (stands for Medical Deviant), and SONNY CHIBA: THE BODYGUARD, and a myriad of other such cult films, I need to get off my lard ass and do it.

Where can fans and movie lovers look for you guys next?
Stephanie: We just returned from Poppa Neutrino’s jazz funeral in New Orleans. I have a feeling a short doc will be born of that incredible experience.

Vic: We’re gonna call it SONG OF THE GODS as a tip of the cap to Neutrino, who upon the completion of RANDOM LUNACY (after the film had been mixed, locked, and the DVD’s mass produced) wanted to strip out all of the music and replace it with sitar, and further, wished to retitle it SONG OF THE GODS.

And finally, what advice do you have for any aspiring filmmakers out there hoping to film a documentary of their own?
Stephanie: Be honest. Be brave. Be able to take rejection, without taking “no” for an answer. Allow the subject to shape the story, and get the hell out of the way.
Vic: Go for it. The filmmaking process is one that is exciting and humbling and ultimately it is about connection. Don’t be afraid to let your humanity show. Then, rob a bank so you don’t end up like us. Let me know if you need a good getaway driver.

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