

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.



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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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 streets and playas of hardscrabble coastal 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 documenting 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. Like Neutrino himself, RANDOM LUNACY continues to make its way around the world, appearing at screenings and festivals.

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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

Written by
Stephanie Silber

Photographed by
David Pearlman
Jairus Cobb
Sarkis Baharoglu
Victor Zimet
Leslie Ronald
Donna Londagin
Thomas Brown

Music by
The Flying Neutrinos
Todd Londagin
Nenad Bach
Klapa Navalialia

Hello Sunshine Goodbye Blue
Angel In Blue
Playing By The Rules
Free
Sweet Harmony
Written and performed by
Ingrid Lucia

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Pastor Floyd

Scratch Mix
Nenad Bach

Final Mix
Frank Egan

Additional Music
Firstcom Music

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REVIEWS

Peter Travers / Rolling Stone

Movies like to pretend they're different, but *Random Lunacy* really, truly is. The gifted filmmakers Victor Zimet and Stephanie Silber have grabbed themselves a subject who can wiggle off any hook, so they avoid glib judgements and do the smart thing by wiggling right along with him. It turns out to be the only way to tell this questing, quicksilver story. The subject is Poppa Neutrino, the name David Pearlman, now 74, has been calling himself for decades. And since a neutrino is "a sub-atomic particle in constant motion," the name fits. Poppa doesn't work, pay rent, listen to doctors or kiss institutional butt. He prefers to invent his life as he goes along, whether he's building a raft out of scraps and sailing the Atlantic, inventing a new football play or touring the world from Mexico to Russia with his band, the Flying Neutrinos. But don't discount the intellect that Poppa uses to back up his wit and daring as leader of his tribe. That's right, tribe. Family is what you call the Waltons. The collection of wives, children, step-children and believers who make up the Neutrinos defies categorization. And so, using Poppa's own videos to augment their tale, Zimet and Silber throw us into a life that intoxicates, infuriates and leaves us panting for each unique and unforgettable adventure. Prepare to be wowed.

The Village Voice by Nathan Lee March 2007

"...a lively documentary portrait of old-school boho Poppa Neutrino and his peripatetic brood."

The Portland Mercury June 2007 by Courtney Ferguson

Don't miss opening night with the compelling *Random Lunacy: Videos from the Road Less Traveled*, a documentary about the travels of a nomadic Dixie jazz-playing family. Led by the charismatic Poppa Neutrino, the family builds several rafts to sail the Mississippi, joins the circus, and plays in a band in Russia. The Neutrinos documented their exploits over the course of 20 years, resulting in a sweet, honest, and inspiring film—by far the standout of the fest.

The Oregonian June 2007 by Shawn Levy

Take opening night, for instance, when everything you might associate with the word "family" gets tossed away like an empty gum wrapper. "*Random Lunacy*" is a film composed of videos shot on the road by the Neutrinos, a self-dubbed family that's kind of like a ragtag performance art project making its way around the world. Directors Stephanie Silber and Victor Zimet will be on hand to offer testimony and explanations.

REVIEWS 2 (CONT.)

Willamette Week Online June 2007

Take *Random Lunacy: Videos from the Road Less Traveled* (7 pm Thursday, June 7), a documentary that follows a resourceful drifter who dubs himself Poppa Neutrino and, between interviewing for magazine profiles, manages to drag his family across Mexico, found a circus and drift across the Atlantic on a raft made from used parts. The filmmaking, like the life, is simple by necessity and richer for it.

Captain Doug Ross "Gypsy Spirit" Cruz Bay, St. John, USVI

RANDOM LUNACY was a real thrill to see. As a fellow captain and a man with over a hundred thousand miles on the high seas I was in absolute awe with the courage the Poppa Neutrino clan went through on crossing the Atlantic. The best true life story I have ever seen and it had a way of really bringing out my emotions of empathy and understanding. I was brought to tears of joy throughout the movie. Thank you for sending your film about the personal human adventures of those who choose to live free. I see from the extras that you guys have a real love for humanity. Bless you and all your endeavors.

Jeffrey M. Freedman Writer, Co-Producer "*Vivaldi*" (2008)

I watch a lot of documentaries, particularly those that don't fabricate, compromise or limit spontaneity. '*Random Lunacy*' is in a class by itself in this area. Hard-earned wisdom, unfettered freedom and a fascinating perspective on how a totally unconventional, risk welcoming existence can yield all of the basic and substantial rewards of life all of us aspire to and most of us are too encumbered by convention to obtain. Watch it for yourself. Get your kids to watch it or if you don't have kids have one or borrow some and get them to watch it. A must-see film distinguished by its lessons about how to enjoy what is possible and survive what is probable in this wonderful life.

REVIEWS 3 (CONT.)

Cinema Crazyed Review by Felix Vasquez Jr. 8/16/07

Very few people in life have the ability to drop everything, be rid of all sorts of city life vices, and go on the road to live the life they want to. Very few people actually have the courage to do so, and risk losing their family in the process. Poppa Neutrino is one of those people. He's a man who isn't rich or famous, or even that well known, but at the end of the day he can tell us that he's lived his life how he's wanted to, and no one can take that away from him. This is the subject of the latest documentary from the directing team of Victor Zimet and Stephanie Silber.

"Random Lunacy" is the chronicle of a man named Poppa Neutrino who lives like a hermit in the city, collecting trinkets and garbage to create houses, while his family tells the story of how he picked his life up and went out onto the road. Living in makeshift floating homes and trailers, Neutrino, and his family traveled all over the world living off of what they could find, and acted as a nomadic musical troupe who performed as the "Flying Neutrinos" and learned to get by.

Though it may sound like material for a sentimental little family film, it's really the true story of the group of people who lived like nomads using their abilities to get by, all the while revealing the hardships they experienced. Alienation, social awkwardness, angst, and their inability to learn their place in a world where they had no actual home, the story in "Random Lunacy" is told through a series of home videos that Neutrino and his wife took throughout the years exploring their adventures and their tribulations. Through these videos we see the children wax insightful about their parents, their irritation with constantly running around unable to make actual friends, their unorthodox education that Poppa and wife Betsy defend, and of course their performances for crowds in various circles including their favorite locale, Mexico.

Zimet and Silber thankfully never exploit the interviews here, and gather very objective commentary from Neutrino's children all of whom fondly remember even the worst moments, including Neutrino's son Todd suddenly getting very sick on the road, along with Neutrino's firm life lesson to his children on possessions being fleeting. Neutrino and his family is a compelling bunch, and I honestly could have watched their home videos for hours. Even without the interviews, and commentary, the Neutrinos are such an interesting group of people who had the most unusual life, and still grew up to be basically well adjusted, if not a bit strange. But Zimet and Silber really just sum up what this documentary was by the exciting climax, with a perilous journey that ends in something rather beautiful, and words simply weren't needed. "Random Lunacy" is a documentary about a compelling man who raised the all-American family, who lived the ideal life as they viewed it, and if that's not American, then I don't know what is.

Zimet and Silber bring forth a unique and entertaining documentary chronicling one of the most fascinating family's in America, raised by one of the weirdest men ever depicted on film. Sure enough though, Poppa Neutrino will become a favorite, come festival time.

REVIEWS 4 (CONT.)

Bad Lit Review by Mike Everleth 8/31/07

The tyranny of stuff. George Carlin does a funny routine about how home is just the place where you keep your stuff — while you go out to get more stuff. He even has a comedy album out called *A Place for My Stuff* that features that routine. On a similar note, in Buddhism (or at least my limited readings on the subject), one of the “Three Poisons” is Attachment, which says it’s definitely ok to own stuff, just don’t become too emotionally attached to it. But, come on, who does that besides Buddhists?

Meanwhile, here in Los Angeles where I live, the place is filled with the homeless. And why not, right? If you’re going to live without a roof over your head where do you do it except where it’s relentlessly sunny and nice most days of the year. In my neighborhood alone, we have quite the few “regulars” that are always out and about somewhere, or the guys who hang out around my train station. But mostly they seem to hang out down at the beach communities, like Santa Monica and Venice. What I’m getting at, though, is that when you see the homeless, not very many of them, if any at all, seem like they’re particularly happy about their situation.

Now, in *Random Lunacy*, we’re introduced to a guy who a) doesn’t enjoy owning stuff; and b) is absolutely ecstatic about living on the streets. His name’s Poppa Neutrino and, at the time of this writing, he’s either 74 or 75 and has been basically living the windswept life for all of those years. It all started because his mother suffered from a terrible gambling addiction, which forced her and her son to move to a different flophouse every week. Then, as an adult, he developed a philosophy where the only life worth living is the one that is in constant flux. He’s never settled down and apparently has never stayed anywhere longer than a couple of months.

In a lot of ways, living the (seemingly) carefree life does sound appealing. Neutrino has lots of crazy adventures, has been all over the world and done some things hardly any other human has accomplished. Especially when you see just how happy and contented Neutrino is with his lifestyle choice, you start to think that the dude is really on to something. Seriously, he looks just like your average homeless person, except he seems to have retained all his marbles. I mean, the guy is smart, but it’s really unbelievable just how happy he seems. To be so content with the world and himself, even when his adventures have led him straight into the jaws of death, the guy seems to be overjoyed with just being alive.

For a considerable amount of Neutrino’s worldly wanderings, he did it with family in tow. And not a conventional family by any means, but how surprising is that? He’s been married four times although the only one we’re introduced to in the film is his last one, Betsy, whom it seems he spent the most time with. Accompanying Neutrino and Betsy are their one biological daughter, some kids from a previous Neutrino marriage and other children from troubled homes that were basically “adopted,” at least spiritually, if not legally. The group would then literally sing for their supper and perform on street corners and such places as *The Flying Neutrinos*.

Most of the film is constructed via Hi-8 video shot by the Neutrinos during their time on the road, including the time the bunch joined a Mexican circus for several months — an experience that ended with the Neutrinos going off and starting their own fledgling circus for a time. The family documented all of their travels from New Orleans to New York City to Russia to Spain and, I think, a couple other places I’m forgetting. How they managed all this isn’t really clear. I kind of would have liked a little more information in the current day family member interviews, but then the film probably would have gotten bogged down with too much minutia. As it is, the

film moves at a nice pace from one insane story to another. You almost can't believe these people accomplished all of these things and if it weren't captured on videotape first-hand, nobody probably would.

But, the nuttiest story out of all of them? First, Neutrino's main hobby is building rafts. Not Tom Sawyer, two-man kind of rafts, but big yacht sized rafts made out of garbage and whatnot. On one of these contraptions, with Betsy and two other adult friends (the kids stayed home — thank God), Neutrino sailed across the Atlantic and, again, recording the entire voyage on videotape. We see the crew go through various meltdowns and periods of despair, as well as start worrying about starvation after the trip takes months longer than they anticipated. But when it's over, it's as if it was all just another big fun adventure.

And the film plays as if it's one big adventure, too. Poppa Neutrino's zeal for life is infectious and while maybe a lifetime of wandering may be a little much, you think maybe hanging out with the guy for a couple of weeks might be a hoot. Except, I'm a homebody and I'd probably get freaked out after a couple hours in real life. Also, with all the archival video footage, I'm glad the film was produced after the kids grew up to be responsible adults. It's amazing how well together they all are as they reflect back on their insane childhoods, which they also seem to recognize as being insane. Otherwise, if I saw just the kids on the road, I'd be worried about how they'd turn out. But they've turned out just fine.