

HATED Director Todd Phillips

by Erin Broadley for SuicideGirls (<http://suicidegirls.com/>)

GG Allin stands naked, facing a crowd of twitchy, New York University twentysomethings who wait nervously with bated breath for what the Murder Junkies frontman will do next. It's 1993 and Allin is about to begin his now-infamous spoken word performance that had him banned from stepping foot on campus grounds ever again. Writer and director Todd Phillips, then a junior in NYU's documentary program, is filming the event for a scene in the student film he's making. Someone in the crowd is eating a banana. The camera pans to GG, who now stands naked on stage. "I'm having a craving for a banana today," he mumbles, and then promptly shoves the peeled fruit up his ass. Chairs are thrown. Some laugh, some leave, and Todd Phillips never ended up graduating -- but that didn't stop "HATED: GG Allin and the Murder Junkies" from becoming the biggest grossing student film of its time -- launching Phillips' career, while simultaneously documenting the decline of Allin's.

Over the course of the film, Phillips chronicles the chaotic, punk rock brutality that seemed to accompany GG Allin everywhere he went -- from his difficult upbringing in a small New Hampshire town, to becoming the poster boy for public obscenity and indecent exposure, to his ultimate downfall as another drug addled musician who died in his sleep of an overdose on June 28 1993, just days before the documentary was set to premiere in New York.

Phillips went on to direct the hit comedies "Road Trip", "Old School", "Starsky and Hutch", as well as earn an Oscar nod for his hand in writing the "Borat" screenplay, but it's his first film "HATED" that remains one of his favorites to this day.

Prior to the recent release of the "HATED Special Edition DVD", SuicideGirls caught up with Phillips on the patio of the Four Seasons Hotel to chat about filmmaking, his experience with the Murder Junkies, and what to do when one receives a phone call from John Wayne Gacy...

Erin Broadley: You directed Hated: GG Allin and the Murder Junkies when you were just a junior in college. What was the creative atmosphere in the NYU film department like back then?

Todd Phillips: I got into filmmaking because I really always liked documentaries and at NYU, they have two very specific programs: one is like narrative filmmaking and one is documentary. I went into the documentary for a few reasons. First, there were less kids in the documentary department so you actually had a chance to make a film.

EB: Right, you actually had a voice.

TP: Yeah, you actually had a voice and you could do stuff. I went to the documentary department and basically took the same classes over and over again. There is only one documentary production class. Basically there's maybe 15 kids in the whole program and they approve seven movies a year and you have to pitch it just like normal. I pitched a movie about GG because I had always loved him and been sort of a fan. I mean, growing up in New York, I was into punk rock. I was turned on to GG young. I never really liked his music but I really understood the show of it, the spectacle of it. I just thought it would be a great documentary someday. So that's where it started as a junior project and it just became bigger and bigger. I kept working on it and it turned into a two-year project. I ended up dropping out of school because I didn't have the money to do both. It was that kind of story.

EB: Yeah, GG was very much the ultimate punk rock spectacle, especially in the late '80s and early '90s.

TP: Yeah, this is before Marilyn Manson so now [from a modern perspective] people look at [GG] and think it's like that. But if you really knew GG and knew where he was coming from...you know, when you do a documentary I think it's pretty much 70% subject matter that you choose. It's like with Some Kind of Monster which to me is a great film, a band on the verge of breaking up...

EB: I know, and the point where Metallica's therapist starts to act like he's actually in the band and suggests lyrics [to James Hetfield] -- when I saw that, it became like a comedy, almost.

TP: I know. Yeah.

EB: I know you've been asked before about the similarities and differences between your feature films that are comedies, versus your documentaries. I read an article where you discuss finding the comedy in Hated's heavy subject matter. It's not intended to be comedic relief but there are just these funny aspects of GG's day-to-day life. You can't make this shit up.

TP: That's the thing is the truth is stranger than fiction. If you wrote a movie about a guy like GG it wouldn't be as funny because you know it's all made up. You know what I'm saying? But the fact that this guy really existed and that people are really paying to see him...

EB: Right. It's like it writes itself.

TP: Yeah, exactly.

EB: Well, you also talked about how with documentaries you almost have to create characters as well. What were some of the problems or strange rewards you found with the Murder Junkies crew, developing the characters within the bounds of this documentary?

TP: I think what I meant was that, to me it was never a big leap to go from documentaries to features. I think a good documentary has a beginning, middle and an end. A good documentary is storytelling and has character development so you know, in this film, in Hated it was the same thing, it was like, okay, you build your movie around your main character GG but you have this sort of circus that follows him around...like Unk the fan or the ex-guitarist who's thrown out of the band. He's sort of the antagonist of the film.

EB: Chicken John?

TP: Yeah, and you kind of just let stuff come out slowly just like you would a regular narrative film. I don't think Hated does it flawlessly because there's not too much of a narrative thread through it. But a movie like Some Kind of Monster they do do that so perfectly and when it's done in a documentary, to me it's just the best.

EB: One thing you are noted for is the level to which you are right in there in the action, participating in your documentaries. Where do you draw the line between being a filmmaker and becoming too much a part of your subjects' lives?

TP: For me, I grew up watching Nick Broomfield documentaries. You know Nick Broomfield? He did a great documentary about Heidi Fleiss. He did one about Aileen Wuornos. Yeah, Nick Broomfield -- he's like Michael Moore even before Michael Moore, but not so much political, more just character [driven] pieces. This was very much our approach with Hated and the movie I did after that called Frat House. I don't know if you've seen it. That one takes that concept even further. To me documentaries are basically about the journey, not the destination. So much about

the documentary journey is the process of making the film and you see a little bit of that in Hated and much more of that in Frat House, but I do think that came a lot from my seeing Nick Broomfield movies. There's no rule about what's in it, how much of that or how little, it's just whatever serves the story.

EB: You always hear these horror stories about people who get consumed by their subjects because they become too much a part of the work, instead of an outside observer, you know? They get swallowed up in it.

TP: But that's the fun about being a filmmaker and not a journalist. When you're a journalist your job is not to participate. But to me being a filmmaker is entirely different than being a journalist. As a filmmaker you can have a point of view and you can have an opinion on it and you can take sides. Michael Moore always gets attacked because they're like, "Well, he doesn't present both sides." Well, he shouldn't have to.

EB: He's not on the nightly news.

TP: He's not fucking Stone Phillips. He's Michael Moore and he's telling you his opinion. That to me is the biggest insult when people start comparing documentary filmmaking to journalism.

EB: Right, because there is a difference. But I think a lot of people don't realize that.

TP: Well, there's so much pseudo-documentary being done on "20/20" and "Dateline" and all these things that people don't even understand what the word "documentary" means.

EB: Right. Or maybe what "journalism" means.

TP: Or maybe what a "director" is. The whole point of being a director is having a point of view. So how are you going to direct a documentary if you're not going to instill your point of view on it somehow? There's nothing more frustrating to me than watching the news because it's like, "Well, how does this guy feel?" I always care about how the guy reading the story feels.

EB: Well, did you have a set point of view that you wanted to tackle this GG Allin film with?

TP: Well, the GG thing to me wasn't so much about taking sides -- because there are no real sides with GG -- as much as it was treating it like a real portrait of an artist like Don't Look Back with Bob Dylan. This is GG's Don't Look Back [laughs]. So really making a portrait of an artist and really treating it as straightforward as possible. There's a lot of funny stuff in there because his world is naturally a circus. But if you treat it kind of straightforward like that -- as a portrait of an artist without the wink, wink -- I thought it would be pretty funny and interesting.

EB: Right, right. How did you go about getting in touch with them? Did you already know them from going to Murder Junkies shows?

TP: I knew Merle from just being in New York and being in the scene a little bit. I started going to NYU and I approached Merle and just said, "Hey I want to do a documentary." Merle didn't know what the hell I was talking about. He figured it would be this little thing. He's like, "Well, GG's in jail right now." Which he was and I wrote GG in jail and GG called me from jail and said he'd do it but he doesn't get out for four months or six months, I think. That was fine, I had to put the money together.

EB: Plenty of pre-planning.

TP: Basically he got out of jail and the real story is actually in the movie where, you know, he gets out of jail but he was on parole and he couldn't leave Michigan for a year. He goes, "Oh, well you've got to come to Michigan to film the movie." I'm like, "I'm not going to Michigan. This doesn't make sense," mainly because I had an NYU crew and we didn't have enough money to go to Michigan. I said, "I don't know man, maybe we should wait for your parole." He said, "Well fuck it, just send me a bus ticket and I'll just skip parole and come out."

EB: Wow.

TP: He was putting his band together. He jumped on a Greyhound Bus, literally, broke parole and we started filming them rehearsing, putting the band back together. Then, ultimately the cops caught up with him. You know he got arrested in Texas and was extradited back to Michigan and he basically served another nine months while we were editing the film for breaking parole. So he went back to jail because of the movie [laughs].

EB: Did you ever feel any guilt about that?

TP: It was kind of good because he was like, you know, he was out of my hair when I was editing.

EB: [Laughs] Right, right, he wasn't looking over your shoulder.

TP: It's kind of the perfect setup.

EB: Well, we were talking about the journey being important and not where the documentary ends up, but with GG's death happening right before the film premiered, does it bother you that other people have considered it, "Oh, what a lucky break for the PR machine ...lucky for the film that GG died." Does that offend you or bother you?

TP: No. Because, I mean, really the way we had it planned was GG was going to kill himself on stage. That was the whole point of it. I was going to talk him into doing it, no, I'm just kidding [laughs].

EB: [Laughs]

TP: No, that was just a crazy thing that happened and ultimately I was not happy about that, because I actually think had GG not died, and even Merle his brother says this, is that the movie really reignited them in a way. I think if he was around to enjoy that and grasp that a little more, I mean I could have seen GG being on the cover of Spin magazine. The movie just kind of helped in a way. I just think it would have been interesting. It would have been more interesting had he lived, for me, personally. I would have just liked to see where he took stuff. So, him dying was a bummer because I actually ended up really liking the guy personally. And that's awful. But it was even a bummer for the movie. You know, it might seem like a lucky break but it actually was a bummer.

EB: And you were there the night he died?

TP: I was there when he died. He was just, you know, he had done a show at the Gas Station. I was taking photos because I needed press photos for the movie. Me and GG had an interview the next morning with the Village Voice because the movie was opening in New York. And GG was shooting heroin and he was covered in blood at the show, bloodiest show I'd ever been to. The craziest show ever and we're hanging out at this guy's apartment on Avenue B. GG is shooting heroin and doing his thing and I'm taking pictures and GG passes out and he's lying there dead. I said to Merle, "Make sure GG shows up 10 AM." Make sure he's there tomorrow at 10 AM we have a meeting with this guy at the Village Voice. Merle's like, "Don't worry, he'll be there, he'll be there." The next morning, at like eight in the morning, Merle called me and told me he had died. It was crazy. It just really sucked.

EB: Was there anything that really happened during the course of this documentary that just kind of changed the way you saw him as a fascinating character? Were there any hidden myths that were proved wrong or proved right?

TP: Well, the thing about him was he was totally normal when he wasn't drunk. He was actually a guy you could sit down with and have a conversation with. He wasn't scary, he wasn't violent -- he was really fueled by drugs and alcohol and that really turned him into the guy you saw on stage and also the adrenaline of being on stage. But the point is, when you're off stage and not in that situation, he could hang out, he could take direction. I remember we were filming once on St. Mark's Place where I had him walking down the street and the camera got fucked up and I said, "Can you do that again GG?" [Laughs] And he was like, "All right, where do you want me to start?" He was a very normal kind of person; he wasn't an animal. He was really kind of a clever guy who just happened to get a lot of his anger and frustration out on stage and just had a totally unique stage performance. So that was kind of a surprise.

EB: Did you ever go back to NYU? What was the reaction among your peers while you were working with this?

TP: The movie was a big hit at NYU.

EB: Yeah. It did become one of the biggest grossing student films at the time. Right?

TP: Yeah, it did. The movie ended up getting a theatrical release but I remember we had the premiere at NYU and GG had just gotten out of jail and he came out to New York to see the movie and we had two packed screenings and GG came to the second one and was totally drunk and when that guy Chicken John comes on in the movie, GG gets pissed and he starts screaming at the screen and going crazy and he throws a bottle at the screen but he hits someone in the front, this woman, and cuts her face open.

EB: Oh shit.

TP: The whole theater empties out and it was like the worst premiere ever but kind of funny and very GG-like. The whole theater piles out and the movie doesn't end up being shown at NYU. It was totally sad.

EB: When you went back to his hometown in New Hampshire, how was that whole experience as a filmmaker?

TP: Yeah, I mean we lied to everybody. I mean the first thing you learn about when you are doing documentaries is you have to lie to everyone. I remember the teacher told me at NYU said, "You know, the first rule about documentaries is lie. Lie to everybody, lie to me, I'm going to lie to you. If anybody tells me why I told you to lie I'm going to lie and say I didn't." [Laughs] The thing with a documentary is oftentimes, lying is a strong word but misrepresenting you do all the time. So when we went up to his hometown I remember telling them that we were actually doing a special on GG for MTV because I didn't think they were going to care about a student film. We wanted to make sure we were taken seriously. They thought it was the real thing and they showed up. So, yeah, I think we told those guys we were doing something on GG for MTV. They were all kind of surprised that MTV was doing something. They were happy to cooperate with it. It wasn't that deceptive. It was just the only way to get in there.

EB: How was that experience with getting John Wayne Gacy involved to do the promo poster for the film? Was he a big GG fan to begin with? I know Merle collects serial killer art.

TP: No, no, GG was a fan of John Wayne Gacy's in a way that certain people are fans of serial killers. That's never been my thing, necessarily but I thought that would be an interesting was in because at the time John Wayne Gacy was selling portraits that he was doing in jail. So I thought, "Well maybe I should contact Gacy, get him to do the movie poster for the film, sell the movie poster, and then have money to do the film. There was a mercenary reason for doing it; I needed the money and didn't have any. So I wrote to Gacy in jail, I wrote him a letter, saying, "I'm doing this movie about GG Allin. I know he's a big fan of yours. I know GG visited you twice in jail." And he called me, actually, from death row. You get this bizarre, "You have a collect call from" and then he's like, "John Wayne Gacy calling from Menard Correctional Facility." And then you accept it and then I talked to him for a while and he basically agreed to do it if I sent him 50 dollars for art supplies and filled out his bio sheet. Then he would continue to call me for like six months every Saturday. He would get an hour of phone time and he would spend it with me. I wasn't really into that whole thing [laughs]. That's never been my thing. I'm not a fan of serial killers; I wasn't fascinated by it.

EB: Right. You weren't waiting by the phone for your weekly call.

TP: Yeah. So it was a really weird time but ultimately I talked to him, he painted the poster, and we made the film. We sold a lot of them but it was a weird way to finance a movie.

EB: For most, your movie has become the definitive, landmark film for anybody that is interested in GG Allin. What were your thoughts behind releasing the special edition 15 years after the original?

TP: Yeah, we just wanted to make it as complete as possible, but, you're right, even without all the extra stuff, the film stands because it really is the ultimate portrait of GG and really the only thing done of him. Fifteen years later I still look at that movie, I'm still proud of it. I'm proud of how we made it. I'm proud of how we did it. I'm very proud of how it turned out. It's really rough and raw and we didn't have a lot of money so it reflects that but I'm glad we

didn't have any money to make it. You know, you look at it and you wouldn't do it much more differently if I had \$50,000 as opposed to \$15,000. [Laughs] GG liked the movie. When he finally did see the whole movie, I remember he gave me a hug.

The Special Edition of HATED is available now through Music Video Distributors. For more information go to www.mvdb2b.com

web address: <http://suicidegirls.com/words/HATED+Director+Todd+Phillips/>