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Death of Andy Kaufman, The (DVD Review)

24 Jul, 2011

By: [John Latchem](#)

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Fascination over the career of Andy Kaufman has barely waned in the decades since his untimely death in 1984 from lung cancer, with some enthusiasts even going so far as to claim he faked his death to perpetrate one of the biggest hoaxes in history just to amuse himself. Director Christopher Maloney took it on himself to investigate the veracity of these rumors in *The Death of Andy Kaufman*.

Maloney begins his documentary with footage of Kaufman and a group of people he probably plucked out of the audience lip-synching "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." The clip demonstrates Kaufman's offbeat style and the manic intensity to which he committed to his bits. Then we get shaky camcorder footage of Kaufman's snow-covered grave before narrator Maloney picks up the story of one of the most unique comedians/performance artists who ever lived.

The first part of the movie is basically a recap of information about Kaufman's career that will be well known to anyone who has seen Milos Forman's *Man on the Moon*, which starred Jim Carrey as the notorious funnyman.

But the story picks up shortly after Kaufman's death, when someone claiming to be Kaufman called Howard Stern's radio show.

Like in one of those YouTube videos that tries to expose a government conspiracy, Maloney lays out the case that Kaufman may have faked his death, starting with reports that Kaufman had openly discussed how to pull it off. He had sought the advice of Alan Abel, who faked his own death in 1980, and wrote a script for his Tony Clifton character in which the lounge singer dies from cancer similarly to Kaufman's fate.

Then there are reports of Kaufman sightings after his death, with him posing as a homeless person in Santa Monica or living with a new age cult in New Mexico.

There seems to be enough circumstantial evidence presented to convince everyone but the Casey Anthony jury that Kaufman might have actually faked his death.

But how would Kaufman do it convincingly? Did he find a lookalike who actually had cancer to pose for him and provide the body? Was his corpse an expensive wax doppelganger?

Maloney raises these questions but provides no real answers because ultimately he spends the back half of the film refuting the evidence and seems to conclude that Kaufman is really dead. Maloney says he prefers to spend his time exploring what drove the man while he lived, and the idea he faked his death is just a way of keeping the mystique of Andy Kaufman alive, even if the man himself is not. (Still, Maloney in the behind-the-scenes featurette "Chasing the Little Ghost" concedes he could be wrong.)

Part of the gag would be that Kaufman would return 20 years later. Kaufman's longtime collaborator, Bob Zmuda, even planned a reunion concert in 2004 and performed as Tony Clifton, but Kaufman did not appear. (Zmuda has publicly stated Kaufman is actually dead, making this concert kind of a tongue-in-cheek tribute show).

What makes *Death of Andy Kaufman* work as a companion to the pantheon of films starring and focusing on Kaufman is that Maloney has chosen to give voice to talking heads who aren't usually featured on Kaufman material.

The centerpiece of the film is a lengthy interview with Andy's brother Michael, who picks apart most of the conspiracy theories.

The whole point of Kaufman's shtick was for people to question what was real and what wasn't, and the nature of his comedy has given rise to the ultimate case of the boy who cried wolf, in that the way he lived

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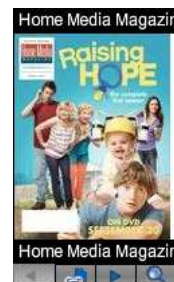
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his life gave everyone an excuse to doubt his death. And in a way, the film surmises, Kaufman wouldn't have it any other way.

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