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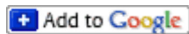
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Kaufman, Andy - The Death Of Andy Kaufman

[Wild Eye](#) // Unrated // July 26, 2011

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Review by [Bill Gibron](#) | posted August 11, 2011 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

The Product:

Like one of his signature bits, comedian Andy Kaufman's death always seemed sort of...surreal. It was never meant to be funny (lung cancer never is) and yet, even with all the seriousness and fatalism surrounding it, there was a sense of put-on, a sneaking suspicion that what was happening was nothing more than the greatest meta-prank ever attempted by likeminded lunatic performer. Of course, as decades have past and the Kaufman mystique has been supplanted by today's shrill confrontational stand-ups, few are focusing on the possibility that the man may have faked his own death. Sure, there are websites dedicated to the idea and long standing theories that hold little water, but it's time, not a lack of truth, that has hindered any real investigation or revelation. If writer/director Christopher Maloney has his way, however, his new documentary will answer the question once and for all. While **The Death of Andy Kaufman** sheds precious new light on the subject, it does suggest that this fixture of '70s and '80s entertainment can still have a major impact, even 25 years later.

The Plot:

After coming across videos of Andy Kaufman on Youtube, recent film school graduate Christopher Maloney realized he had found the subject for his new film. Always on the outlook for an unusual or intriguing idea, the life - and mysterious death - of the comic seemed perfect. After doing a bit of research, and tracking down those who would talk with him, Maloney started his examination. What he discovered was not so much the reality of Kaufman's dispirit media persona as how the reaction to same caused many to disbelieve an honest physical truth about the man. With precious little to go on and a few engaging Q&As (jester Alan Abel, brother Michael), Maloney comes to a startling conclusion - whether or not Kaufman faked his death may not be the real question. Why people tend to believe such a suggestion is.

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At first, **The Death of Andy Kaufman** looks like a cheap knockoff of real investigative reporting. No matter Christopher Maloney's intentions, grainy footage culled from websites and Internet sources always comes across as cheap and technologically hindered. Granted, in today's direct DIY mentality within all artforms, such a lo-fi approach is acceptable, but when tackling a major subject such as Kaufman, the lack of splash is specious. Luckily, Maloney knows how to put a film together. He gets pacing as well as the placement of important revelations. He accurately balances fandom with fact, uses as much information as he can get his hands on to both support and subvert his position. There is little new revealed here. Those who were alive during Kaufman's heyday remember the stories about faith healers, the obsession with large scale pranks, the confrontations with wrestlers on David Letterman (absent, more than likely over licensing of the clips), and the infamous TV specials and appearances. But Maloney manages to balance this with a nice level of sanity. No matter how crazy he was, there was a method to Kaufman's madness.

As a film, **The Death of Andy Kaufman** can't help but disappoint, if only a little. We fans, meaning those who first were fascinated by the comedian when he appeared as "the Foreign Man" on such TV staples as *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, need more than the basics to inspire our imaginations. After all, we were there when he became the master of *Taxi*, the 'World's Inter-gender Wrestling Champ,' bristled when he sabotaged ABC's *Fridays* in front of millions of viewers, and beamed when he befriended (and then chronicled) the lasting legacy of The King of Men, famed grappler Fred Blassie. Even with the hints that he had studied faking his own death, we still couldn't believe he could get away with it. Now, in light of how intrusive the media world is, it seems virtually impossible. Recent celebrity deaths such as Michael Jackson have garnered the same amount of speculation, but as TMZ and other outlets have proven, no stone, or story, or hoax will go unexplored.

So **The Death of Andy Kaufman** has to take a different tactic, and it does so with style and sentiment. We visit a hermitage in New Mexico and retrace the "truth" that is supposedly out there. Maloney explores the comic's legacy, as well as how his comedy "worked." He may skim over specifics, but in this day and age, with the time that has passed, that's all the ADD-addled attention span of 2011 can manage. He also falls in love - with Kaufman as a figure, with the stand-up as an artist, and with the man as a mischievous harbinger of antisocial spectacle. Maloney doesn't defend his subject, doesn't deify or deny him. Even when the material is mean-spirited and misguided (the whole wrestling women angle), the filmmaker simply outlines the situation and moves on. The end result is an overview and a final word, a distillation and a dissertation on what Kaufman and his career meant to many back then as well as what it could mean today. There is no mention of the Jim Carrey biopic or any other version of the tale. Christopher Maloney set out to discover if Andy Kaufman faked his own death. What he discovered was a reason to mourn a dead man instead.

The Video:

Considering that it's pulling from many sources - stock footage, online images and videos, camcorder interviews - the 1.33:1 full screen image for **The Death of Andy Kaufman** looks fairly good. It's not up there with your standard documentary fare, but for a decidedly DIY creation, it gets the job done. The colors are a bit dull and there's a lack of detail. Also, some of the material is marred by VHS tape skips and scrambles. Still, this is a decent

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DVD presentation. Not perfect. Not pathetic.

The Audio:

Mistake number one: Maloney needed to find a way to record the narration professionally. Whispering into a camcorder's microphone (or a computer input) renders your efforts cheap and lazy, something the Dolby Digital Stereo mix picks up on. The interviews comes off well as does some incidental music. Overall, the sound is just as acceptable as the visuals.



The Extras:

We get an interview with Maloney that explains the how and why of making the film. It's very insightful. We also get a collection of trailers for other Wild Eye products. That's it.

Final Thoughts:


The Death of Andy Kaufman creeps up on you. At first, you are put off by the bargain basement production values. Then, the subject matter takes over and Maloney has us hooked. By the end, we are listening with rapt intent as the comedian's brother Michael does his best to answer the obvious questions with politeness and polish. As a result, something that resembles a homemade homage earns the tag of a true documentary - as well as a **Recommended** rating. It may not be perfect, but then neither is its subject. Andy Kaufman will always remain an enigma in a profession that preyed on the audience's identification with and acceptance of their clown. In his case, this confrontational stand-up didn't care that the crowd thought. As long as it worked in his own insular world, that was all the support he needed. If he's not dead, he's long since lost the joke. If he is, this film does a fine job of introducing his eccentric style to a new generation.

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