

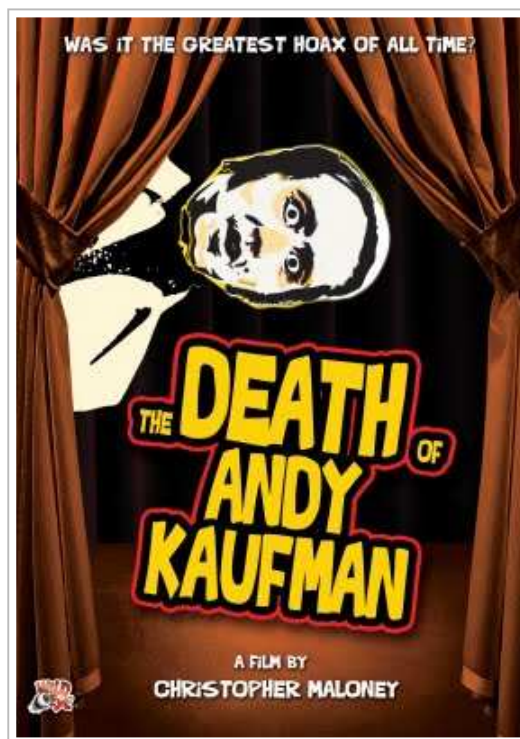
## FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 12, 2011

### DVD Review: The Death of Andy Kaufman

Text © Robert Barry Francos / FFanzeen, 2011  
 Images from the Internet



#### The Death of Andy Kaufman

Produced, written and directed by Christopher Maloney  
 Wild Eye, 2011  
 80 minutes, USD \$15.95  
[Wildeyereleasing.com](http://Wildeyereleasing.com)  
[MVDvisual.com](http://MVDvisual.com)

As with so many of others of my g-g-generation, I found out about Andy Kaufman from watching early *Saturday Night Live* broadcasts. The rest of the world would discover him as Latka Gravas, on *Taxi*, but for us college students, it was his regular appearances on late Saturday night. Therefore, it seems appropriate that what starts off

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#### About Me

[Robert Barry Francos](#)  
 Currently living in Saskatoon (email at [RBF55@msn.com](mailto:RBF55@msn.com) for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the

this documentary directed by Christopher Maloney is a full clip from that show where Kaufman gets audience members on stage to lip sync to Billy Williams and His Cowboy Rangers' "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." It would also have worked if Maloney had shown clips of Mighty Mouse lip sync, the Foreign Man (who would develop into Latka) doing imitations, including a killer Elvis, or any of a dozen other of his early oddball bits.

After the opening bit (obviously from an old VHS tape), Maloney takes us to Andy's grave at Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, NY (just east of the Queens border), clearing the snow off the stone to clearly read the name. For the next while, Maloney takes the viewer on a ride on the life of Andy Kaufman, from his rise, to his bizarre performance art (can one really call it stand-up?) where he either naps in a sleeping bag on stage, or eats cereal for his entire allotted time, to his in-your-face misogynist wrestling period where his popularity plummeted. Kicked off *SNL* and out of his Transcendental Meditation group (so much for peace, love and understanding), having *Taxi* cancelled, and an audience that was so confused by what he was doing that they couldn't find the humor any more, he faced a questionable future.

By the time he announced he was diagnosed with cancer, either his fans didn't believe him, or his ex-audience seemed to no longer care. *Oh, that Andy!* His truly had been a life of "Cry Wolf."

Maloney clearly shows how Andy had thought about faking his death before he actually loosened the coil. In fact, he had met with Alan Abel, famed hoaxer extraordinaire who actually *did* manage to convince the media he had died, and they printed his obit - just to have him show up a week later. *Tah-dah!* Andy believed this was brilliant, and questioned him about it. By the time he did come down with a rare form of cancer, one he had already ascribed to his character Tony Clifton, it seemed that it was one more shtick. This reminds me of two stories: one is when actor Dick Shawn was performing on stage, he had a heart attack, and everyone laughed as he collapsed; by the time people realized what was going on, it was too late. Similarly with Jackie Wilson, he used to do a twirl and collapse while singing, and one time he did it, the audience didn't know he was having a stroke, and again a delayed reaction caused him to be mentally handicapped and hospitalized the rest of his life due to lack of oxygen to his brain.

While in the middle of radiation treatments, Andy went to the Philippines to try to get some psychic healer to help, who was charlatan. Pictures circulated, and in 1984, in a hospital under the assumed name of Nathan McCoy, Andy died surrounded by family and loved ones. I had heard at the time that comic Elaine Boozler - his ex-girlfriend and long-time friend - was there, but haven't seen any reference to it since, including on this DVD. I am still waiting to hear her talk about it (she did discuss it in an issue of *Esquire* back then), and she would have been a nice coup to get for the documentary.

wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at [jerseybeat \(dot\) com](http://jerseybeat.com) (slash) quietcorner (dot) html. And the beat goes on.

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Faced with Kaufman's past as a derisive and trickster Loki character, Maloney went on a personal journey to find out some truth on whether Andy had faked his own death or not. He started with a collection of questions which were decent, but some I knew the answer to beforehand [in brackets below], which didn't really solve the bigger mystery. For example, photos of him at the time have him bald from radiation treatments, but he still has eyebrows and chest hair. Another is that even though he had a Jewish burial, he had an open casket [while the tradition is to have it closed, it is not unheard of for there to be an open one, and I have been to a couple like that]. Thirdly, why does the tombstone say "Andy" rather than the usual full name of "Andrew" [you can put anything you want on a tombstone; Elvis Aron Presley's stone says Elvis Aaron Presley, for example]. Then there is why he was in a room assigned to the aforementioned Nathan McCoy [my guess it was his "travel" name for privacy, such as Paul McCartney registering under the name Ramone, which is how the Ramones got *their* name].

Meanwhile, we are presented with many partial clips, interviews, and video examples of Andy's career, and photos of his illness and funeral.

The third chapter of this story is a rare interview with Andy's brother, Michael Kaufman, who explains some of the answers to Maloney's questions, and is open about what he believes happened (I won't give it away). This is one of the pieces that make this documentary so strong.

As a character / narrator, Maloney is passable. He has a droning kind of voice (probably trying to match the seriousness of the topic) which gets tiresome, but the subject matter definitely pops and keeps the viewers' interest right to the end. Taped in 2008, this was released a couple of years later.

After the feature, there is an 11 minute Q&A short by Robert Hauschild recorded in 2011, titled "Chasing the Little Ghost: The Making of *The Death of Andy Kaufman*." With title card questions, a now short-haired Maloney answers about his own motives and findings, having had a decent period to process all the information he collected and presented in the documentary, which makes the short also worth viewing.



**Bonus Video:**



Posted by Robert Barry Francos at 12:01 AM

Labels: [Andy Kaufman](#), [Christopher Maloney](#), [Elaine Boozler](#), [FFanzeen](#), [MVD](#), [Robert Barry Francos](#), [stand-up comedy](#), [Wild Eye](#)

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