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## DVD Review: *The Death Of Andy Kaufman*



It seems that whenever a celebrity dies the conspiracy nuts come out of the woodwork. In the case of Andy Kaufman (1949 - 1984), the belief that his death was a hoax is so strong that people are still waiting for him to reappear. Because of the way he lived his life, and the various events he staged, Andy is a perfect subject for the whole "faked death" theory. The recent DVD release of *The Death Of Andy Kaufman* explores this phenomenon, and the various reasons it is still believed even 26 years after he passed.

A lot has been written about Kaufman in the years since his death. One of the main themes is that he was ahead of his time, which is certainly true. There is also the "performance art" aspect to his life, which had not really come into vogue at the time either. The stunts he pulled are legendary now. Wrestling women as the "inter-gender" champion and the subsequent feud with Jerry Lawler, performances at colleges where he did nothing but read *The Great Gatsby*, and his often disastrous appearances on late night TV were acts that his audience did not understand. Why is *Taxi's* lovable Latka Gravas acting so strange, we wondered.

When it was announced that Andy was suffering from a rare form of lung cancer, many assumed that it was just another one of his pranks. His death in 1984 did little to quell the persistent notion. In fact, in death he became even more popular than ever. Acclaimed director Milos Forman's *Man On The Moon* (1999) ignited a great deal of interest in his career, as did biographies by Bob Zmuda and Bill Zehme.

Bob Zmuda may have known Andy better than anyone. As his partner in crime, Zmuda played a huge role in Kaufman's best-known bits. He often played a heckler at Andy's concerts, but perhaps his most brilliant contribution was Tony Clifton. The character of Tony Clifton was invented as a sort of washed up Vegas-style lounge singer. The overweight, profane has-been was everything Kaufman was not. He smoked, drank, ate huge steaks, and caroused with cheap whores when not insulting his audience, all the while denying that he was Andy Kaufman. The hilarious revelation in Zmuda's book was that half the time it was Zmuda himself playing Clifton, which made Andy's denials partially true.

Playing with the media was one of the things the two of them craved, so in 2004 Zmuda honored Andy by bringing back Tony Clifton. Although it was

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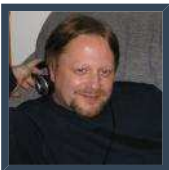
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#### about me



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I'm an old music biz vet, been working and writing about this stuff for a good 25 years now. I've been published in a number of magazines, including Alternative Press, Factsheet Five, B-Side, Backlash, and Seattle's Rocket, where I spent ten years, up until their unfortunate demise. I'm fairly opinionated about music, but have extremely catholic tastes, so you will find a wide variety of reviews here. There will also be reviews of older, obscure items whether they are recent reissues or not,

never explicitly stated, the implication was that after 20 years, Kaufman was ready for the denouement of his elaborate ruse. Zmuda staged some Tony Clifton concerts in the Los Angeles area, but Andy Kaufman never showed up.

*The Death Of Andy Kaufman* is a new documentary by Christopher Maloney which investigates the whole faked-death phenomenon. I suppose a "spoiler alert" is in order here, because Maloney never finds any evidence supporting the theory. What he does find is Andy's brother Michael, who he interviews at length. Michael Kaufman reiterates the basic facts, and that is about it. There does seem to be a tinge of bitterness in his voice when he mentions how show business people such as Bob Zmuda are the ones the media always go to for comments, rather than family members. But he certainly does not feel that Andy is still alive.

Maloney's camera travels to suspected hiding spots of Kaufman, such as the homeless enclaves of Santa Barbera, and Taos, New Mexico. The Lama Foundation in Taos is an interesting stop. This pseudo-commune seems to be where Maloney expects to find Andy. The latter-day hippies who inhabit the place seem incapable of remembering what they had for breakfast this morning, let alone if someone resembling Andy Kaufman had ever lived there.

For believers, there are four main reasons behind the hoax itself. First is the fact that Andy had often discussed faking his own death, and spoke to Alan Abel about it. Abel had actually done it, among other pranks in his lifetime, and Andy was fascinated. Big surprise there.

The second reason has to do with hair. Again, the evidence is less than compelling. When Kaufman was being treated, his hair fell out. This is quite common with cancer patients. There is a famous photo of Andy with a mohawk, which he said he liked better than having bald patches all over his head. Later he was photographed completely bald. The big news here is that he did not lose his eyebrows or chest hair. The idea is that he simply shaved his head, and there never were any cancer treatments.

Next we come to the curious case of one Nathan McCoy. This was something I was previously unaware of, but Nathan McCoy is the pseudonym that Andy was checked in under at Cedars-Sinai when he died. It is very common for celebrities to check into places under assumed names, is it not?

Finally we come to the state of his career at the time. It was not doing well. He had been banned from *Saturday Night Live*, and *Taxi* had been cancelled. Even wrestling had pretty much played itself out, as the Lawler feud had finally ended. The thought is that since things were at such a low point, a faked death would be just the shot in the arm his public profile needed.

Flimsy evidence, to say the least. *The Death Of Andy Kaufman* breaks no new ground, except to flesh out what the conspiracy theories base themselves on. There is also plenty of public-domain footage of Andy in

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concert and wrestling. The interview with Michael Kaufman is probably the most intriguing aspect of it, as the family's thoughts have never been publicized before. The only extra included is a ten-minute interview with writer/director Christopher Maloney.

In the Andy Kaufman tale, there is very little new ground left to be uncovered, as *The Death Of Andy Kaufman* bears out. Still, if one is interested in the reasons behind the whole affair, this DVD is worth watching.

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