

Episode 5: Bill Arceneaux on WUSA

Randy Mack: Welcome to Essential NOLA Cinema, a conversation between cinephiles about the past and future of New Orleans movies. I'm Randy Mack and really excited today to have film critic Bill Arceneaux here to talk about 1971's WUSA, a film that I had never heard of. It blew my mind when I saw it. Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman have been heroes to me for my entire life. I grew up about 25 minutes from where they lived and my mom actually took me to their house when I was a kid once. So, I thought I knew everything about their movies and then suddenly I discovered not only were they in a movie together that I had never heard of, but that it was shot and set in New Orleans.

BA: And that it's great. [Laughter]

RM: Yes, and in the height of the Counterculture Movement. Yes. All of that stuff just blew my mind. Then of course, Anthony Perkins. Norman Bates himself is in it, and Norman Bates was a huge Broadway actor and my mom was really active in Broadway too. Anthony Perkins actually stayed at my house when I was a kid.

BA: Oh wow, that's pretty cool man.

RM: There's a weird connection to like the top three cast members in this in a totally random way. [Laughter] So Bill, I always...

BA: I kind of want to discuss Anthony Perkins coming to your house, man, that sounds pretty cool. Especially that must have been like later in his life, huh?

RM: Oh yes, it would have been, boy, early 80s and I was like just a child so I didn't really know who he was and I had definitely not seen Psycho. He was just like a tall, skinny, awkward guy.

BA: Which he is in this movie. Very much, almost like way more pronounced than normal for him. You look at a movie like Orson Welles' The Trial based on Franz Kafka's The Trial. He's playing this very, I don't want to say like totally anxious guy, but he's put in a very panic-inducing situation that makes absolutely no sense. It's completely absurd, and that's the point, but all of this is being built onto him and it's just all this confusion, and he perfectly articulates it. You notice that pattern in all of his movies pretty much.

- RM: Perkins plays anxiety really well, and when he's cast as an everyman, there's an interesting spin on it. I always wonder if the Norman Bates thing really became like an albatross to his career because of the Spock syndrome, where you're suddenly so famous for one role that that's kind of what everyone sees you as and they bring those expectations to every other role you do.
- BA: It could be the case. It kind of reminds me of, I guess the modern-day example would be Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man, Tony Stark, but the difference with that is that he came into that role much later in his career. As a matter of fact, he came into that role in his redemption days when he was given a chance after years and years of drug problems.
- RM: Do you think Anthony Perkins is playing an everyman in WUSA or is he closer to the Norman role? Because I can see both sides of it. He's almost like both sides of his archetypes.
- BA: Well, I would say the film is in a few different scenes, specifically towards the climax, as we're reaching the climax, and also specifically in how those scenes are lit. There's a scene with the police officers, or maybe they're detectives, the G-Men so to speak, they come to his apartment in the rain, specifically a storm, lightning is hitting. What I love too about the lightning, it was very obviously studio lightning. It was like unrealistic heightened blue, but it was perfect. It was theatrical. It was supposed to set the mood and everything.
- RM: It made me picture like a grip on the side holding one of those metal sheets to get the thunder effect.
- BA: Right. So, the officers are basically coming there to intimidate him, because in one of the scenes prior, he was intimidating like a very high ranking - or maybe it was a middle ranking official in this big right wing conspiracy thing. They're shining flashlights in his face. They're like, "Hey boy, you better not be messing around, boy." They're doing that whole shtick, but the lights are focused solely on his eyes. It's like the Shatner Lightning, but it's not used to highlight like a heroic confident person. It's used to try to highlight there's something going on behind those eyes. That's a recurring thing as we lead up to the climax when what happens happens, and I'm sure we'll get into that. I think in those scenes, you can compare him to sort of a Norman Bates-ish descent into a radical and extreme action. Outside of that though, I think he was also

just an individual with ideals and heavy PTSD from - I guess he did some kind of social work in South America is what he alludes to a couple of times. [00:05:00]

RM: I bet he was in the Peace Corps.

BA: Yes, that's right. The catch is, I think that it was some form of anxiety and PTSD from the bad shit that he saw down there. So he comes up here to get a job in New Orleans. He's a charming southern gentleman type and lo and behold, he gets caught up in a conspiracy that completely goes against everything he believes in. Before that point, he was just this nervous, kind of timid but very charming and polite gentleman. Then, boom. Basically, becomes a less confident but very assertive version of Christopher Walken in the Dead Zone at the end. You know what I mean?

RM: Oh yes, that's a good parallel.

BA: So yes, there are some Psycho elements. That's a long-winded way of agreeing with that to a point, yes.

RM: So yes, I wanted to ask you, though, as a New Orleans native, you're born and bred, is that correct?

BA: Yes. I was born in Metairie along with both my brothers. I think we lived here as a family for like three years after I was born. Then we moved to Georgia for maybe a decade, something like that, but we eventually moved back and got re-acclimated to the area and the culture and everything. I've just absorbed everything about it. Before that, it was just something we did once or twice a year. Visit family and "Oh, the French Quarter. Everything is cool, but what is this? I don't get it. What?" I was too young before to really understand any of this. We heard legends and myths from our parents. My dad's family used to own, for a short period of time, the Embers Steak House. He would tell me stuff like, "Oh, supposedly the third floor is where Lee Harvey Oswald and all these other people developed the plot to kill Kennedy."

RM: Right. [Laughter]

BA: But then he would tell me stuff that was verifiable like Steppenwolf came in and they were dressed like dirty hippies or whatever and...

RM: You mean the band, not the theatre company, right?

BA: Yes, the band, not the theatre company or the super villain. So they're turned away and they come back. They're not wearing suits, but they are wearing ties and ultimately, they let them in and they just ate like pigs is what I was told.

RM: That's like a real WUSA moment too, because that's like the counterculture meeting the squares.

BA: Right. There's quite a bit of moments and stuff like that in WUSA, and I think most of them that I witnessed came towards the end.

RM: Wait, wait, wait. Before we get too far down that path. Let me ask you where did you go to high school?

BA: No, I went to high school in Georgia. We came here when I was 16, in early 2002. I went to a school in Gwinnett County. The very county that - actually, I was living in the very town that Larry Flynt was shot at. Lawrenceville, Georgia; Gwinnett County. I went to a high school that was kind of a, I don't want to say preppy, but it was definitely a much more affluent than we ever had as a family. Although we were doing okay. Collins Hill High School.

RM: Where did you first discover WUSA and what was your impression of it at the time?

BA: I discovered it like maybe a couple years ago. I want to say two or three years ago, I'm a subscriber to a video on demand streaming service called MUBI.com or just MUBI, M-U-B-I. I highly recommend it. Lawrence Garcia, a writer and critic, he wrote a nice little article on WUSA being kind of like a gem that hasn't really - something that's been forgotten essentially. I was absolutely fascinated and flabbergasted by it. Because in my college years, which were at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, I got involved in a film group. I'm still friends with all of them. Watching the movie, and we're just learning about the movie, I was like, "Oh my God, it's got some of my favorite actors." Paul Newman, Anthony Perkins, for example, especially Anthony Perkins. During that time in college, I discovered The Trial and I was just absolutely enamored by the movie.

Then of course you got the whole New Orleans setting. You got the powder keg of culture clashing. You got the counterculture. You got the deep south old tradition ways, the people in power locally that want to keep things in line. You got the poor community that are being exploited, some of whom don't know they are being exploited, some of whom do know. There's just so many things going on. I think the one takeaway that I got from this recent re-watch was how wonderfully crafted the production was in terms of nailing down the environment of New Orleans into the feel of not just the movie, but the setting itself and...

RM: Totally, I agree. Yes.

BA: You can hear the creaks. You can see the glistening lights coming off of the streets that are covered in rain. [00:10:00]

RM: It did a great job of showing all the different kinds of people here too. There's no sort of whitewashing or sort of privileging the... I thought they did a great job showing the diversity, not just racial and age diversity, but the economic diversity of the city. One of the first places Paul Newman visits is a church with a homeless shelter in it where he immediately hits up the priest for \$100.00 that he owes him from gambling from way back in the day before the priest was a priest.

BA: Right, the guy is not a priest. The guy...

RM: Isn't he? I thought he was a clergyman of some kind.

BA: Well, maybe he became one, but he's definitely not a genuine one. What I'm getting at is, he's definitely a schemer and a sleazy snake oil salesman type. [Laughter] He's still that guy. Even if sometimes he does good, he is still that guy. He even has a different voice when he's preaching and stuff to basically the Alcoholics Anonymous group that came in, some of whom are homeless, some of whom were just there to get some sort of support. They're the ones he can exploit. He can latch onto and get a little bit of money maybe or at least, recognition for something. The dregs if you want to call them of New Orleans society.

RM: Well, New Orleans has always been a very poor city and an African American majority city as well, and movies about New Orleans tend to favor either like the white upper class or the tourist side or the non-stop party dimension of it all. It was refreshing, especially because there are actually two introductions to the city. It opens with a parallel montage of Joanne Woodward entering and wandering her way through the Quarter and then Paul Newman entering, having his own individual paths. You see twice as much as you typically would of the character introduction. I thought for a second, it might be like a Next Stop Wonderland type of structure, which is - that was an independent film from the late 90s where it's a romantic comedy between two characters who never meet until the final scene.

BA: Oh, wow.

RM: Which was a very cool idea. Then so when they did meet, I was a little disappointed but I was also super exhilarated because they meet in Aunt Tiki's on Lower Decatur St., which at that time was called Jewel's Tavern. I've spent literally collective years in Aunt Tiki's. Outside, in the very places where Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward were conversing and meeting for the first time and all those shots on the interior of Jewel's back then, it really hasn't changed at all, except that the jukebox in Jewel's worked and the jukebox in Aunt Tiki's doesn't. [Laughter] Other than that, it was like nothing had changed. It was kind of remarkable.

BA: Well, that does, by itself, outside of the movie and in the movie says something about not just the city, but also what the movie is saying. As much as things should change for the betterment of everyone, there are always going to be some people that don't want it to change. They want things to stay the same because it only benefits them.

RM: Totally.

BA: That includes the facade of New Orleans. We got to keep this up, but we're not going to renovate, we're not going to clean it up, we're just going to leave it as it is. It doesn't matter if people get hurt. Fuck that. [Laughter] It kind of goes into that.

RM: Yes, as long as building developers and people who are related to people in City Hall get their share of the pie, it doesn't matter what the actual population goes through.

BA: Right.

RM: Yes. It's a funny thing of how the city has always had this divide, this interesting cultural divide of the white, I call them the plantation set, the uptowners, the sort of mansion-minded, the white flight kind of set who all left and who claim to love the culture so much but don't contribute anything to help. They're not doing anything about say the corruption in City Hall that makes none of our social services actually functional and so on. The standard of living, the wage stagnation here, the fact that it's a service industry town that hasn't seen any economic progress for the service industry since the 80s, all that stuff is all in the fabric of WUSA, which was released in 1970. [Laughter] It's amazing. It's like 50 years ago and it's literally the exact same issues. It's remarkable.

BA: It's the exact same issues and on top of that, the city looks very much - believe it or not, for a movie that's about an ever-escalating decay of I guess morals and ideals and genuineness and goodness and all sorts of things that humidity can do to a person, the city actually, believe it or not, looks a little better than it does now. Not that the city is all completely gross or falling apart, but I mean it's like, "Have you been to the city recently?"

RM: I mean, I live here. [Laughter]

BA: Yes, right. Exactly. You know what I'm saying? Take a look around. We got a building with a couple unfortunately dead bodies that are still in them and a City Hall that could care less really, except when it's convenient for them to throw a tarp over it.

RM: Oh, you're talking about the Hard Rock Hotel, the debacle of all debacles.

BA: Yes.

RM: That thing is a monument to incompetence, corruption and stupidity. I think we should leave it up just to shame City Hall.

BA: Right, and we're going to demolish a couple of historical French Quarter buildings to take that building down like...

RM: I know, and that's just insult to insult because the site itself was a historic civil rights location that they tore down to put up their stupid hotel. Of course, we saw how that went.

BA: Yes.

RM: You saw how the in the whole round of whatever six months of finger pointing and counting, eight months now, everyone's got a subcontractor and a sub-subcontractor and a boss and a boss' boss. Everyone's pointing fingers. No one is to blame. They're just passing the...

BA: Passing the buck. Passing the looney. Yes.

RM: Exactly, and it's like you know no one's going to really take any heat for it. It's going to be the same contractors building the same crap because that's that plantation sets. It's all of those connections. Think of all the mayors who've gone to prison in the city, it's just about everybody. [Laughter]

BA: Right. [Laughter]

RM: It's crazy.

BA: They're kind of just the scapegoats even if it was their fault or it wasn't. "No, it's that person. Send him to jail."

RM: Yes, and, "Look, justice has been done." But of course, the people... it's the money behind the power I guess you might call it.

BA: That is part of the black heart of WUSA. This is not technically a happy movie.

RM: No.

BA: But I would argue this movie has a Terry Gilliam-ish sense of hope in absolute depression. There is like an escape. Kind of like at the end of Brazil when we pull back, and he's still being tortured, but he's now within his own mind. He's not recognizing what's going on outside. Terry Gilliam in interviews has been like, no, he won. That's his way of winning. He's not involved anymore in what's going on in the rest of the world, he's retreated, but he also won.

RM: How do you get that out of the ending of WUSA that ends with two of the three characters dead and...

BA: It's in that actually. It's not in Perkins' death. That's much more sad than what happens to Joanne Woodward. She plays it extremely well. I mean everyone is really good in this, but her in particular - I mean Paul Newman's got the charm and the wittiness. He's given all the awesome lines to say that are smartass and intelligent but really, he has no clue and nothing to go with in terms of his life. You got Anthony Perkins playing up the whole idealistic anxiety-filled individual who's guilt ridden and all this stuff. Then you got her who's completely stripped down. She probably wasn't fully educated in the public school system. I think she even says at one point she feels she's kind of stupid - those are her words. She doesn't use a lot of words in sentences. She keeps it very simple and to the point, but she's also pure in that way. Even though she's had to do some things in her life.

RM: Yes. She's not from New Orleans. Her character travels and is obviously a prostitute.

BA: Yes.

RM: Based on the conversation that the manager of Jewel's Tavern has with her where he asks her, "Are you independent-minded?" She's like, "Well, what does that mean?" He's like, "Look, independent, you can't hustle around here without representation." Suddenly I was like, oh wow, this is the language of acting too, representation and so forth. You have to be in the guild, that kind of thing. I thought that was a funny parallel.

BA: Oh, you mean literally about actors. [Laughter] Right. Yes.

RM: Yes. They must have chuckled about that on set, I imagine. [Laughter]

BA: I bet. I bet. Absolutely. It's nice to have fun with those kinds of things. To be a little meta without anyone knowing you're being meta. It was after the large-scale stadium rally riot which had all the feels of the inevitable end game of a "Make America Great Again" rally that everyone is just waiting for. After that, she's in jail because she got caught with marijuana and she's being led down this really long and hopeless hallway of just cells full of women that probably have her very history and experience. You're given all this time to really think about her place and throughout the movie, she's been this wonderful example of how you can be essentially forced into this crazy system of control where you almost don't have a destiny you can pick. It's almost like predetermined that you're going to be a poor woman who has to go out and hustle. But the movie end, her arc ends. She's in the cell. She sees the chain that is connecting the bed to the wall. It's like a prison bunk bed thing. While I can't say she was smiling - I don't know, there was something in the eyes that I felt that it was almost like this was her way out, very much like in Brazil. That was his way out. [00:20:00]

RM: I see that. Yes. The way I interpreted that is that she didn't believe Rheinhardt would come save her. The one person she thought she could count on...

BA: Wasn't coming. Yes.

RM: Yes, wasn't coming. I don't really know why she believed that in that moment. They just got separated on the floor of the thing and then getting pinched for the weed and the unfairness of that because it obviously wasn't hers is just the kind of arbitrary police bullshit that happens all the time in New Orleans. Bad situation breaks out, the police show up and just arrest all the wrong people.

BA: Right.

RM: There's a sense of unfairness, but it's not... And she must have gone to jail before and everything, but it seems like this is the straw that broke the camel's back. It clearly has something to do with her relationship with Rheinhardt, but it was not clear to me what that was. It was all played interior and there's a cross cutting there with a parallelism going on between the death of Anthony Perkins and the escape of

Rheinhardt and so on. I kept thinking, I wonder if this was amazing in the book, because I could not quite get a grasp of the specific emotional turns happening in the character. I kept thinking about Robert Altman's masterpiece, Nashville, which came out about six or seven years after this film. I wonder how much of that came from this.

BA: Well, I think I might be able to fill in some gaps here. At least in my interpretation. There are these three individuals: Newman, Perkins and Woodward. They're on their own paths essentially, their own roads and all roads lead to WUSA in one way or another and what WUSA ultimately represents. It's like this system of put down fear and control and exploitation, all these different things that have been affecting their lives in one way or the other. In Perkins' case, he decides to actually take action. He's got a totally different arc and each of them have specific arcs. He gets stomped to death, rather violently by a crowd of people that he was hopefully trying to enlighten in some way. I'm sure he realized that by doing what he did, he wasn't going to save them specifically, but he was definitely doing this because he felt it was the right thing to do for everyone.

RM: Right. It's interesting that it wasn't like he was trampled to death by accident as people were fleeing the arena. That the stomping was very deliberate. It was basically like a lynching...

BA: A version of it.

RM: ... that ended - that instead of a hanging, but with a group beat down.

BA: Yes. Okay.

RM: I think there's a point somewhere in there about the violence of the masses.

BA: Yes. He gets stomped to death basically by a crowd who literally points him out like, "He's got a gun. He must be the guy that tried to do this." It reminded me kind of - not to get back to Trump - but at some of his rallies people would not just yell and shout at someone that Trump would point out, they could potentially get violent. At any point, if Trump were to say one word...

RM: Yes. Yes. He's pointed out journalists in the crowd in the past and the crowd turned violent on the journalist.

BA: There you go.

RM: So yes, but I mean we're talking 50 years ago.

BA: Right, yes.

RM: It's scary how prescient it is.

BA: It's amazing. Okay. Then there is a parallel here that now they're economically speaking and speaking with regards to desperation in their own lives and the feeling of helplessness and all that, they share that with everyone else that's being hurt and put down in the movie, but they are also still white. So, he's getting essentially lynched.

Then in the next scene Joanna hangs - now she hangs herself, so it's still a hanging though, but it's not a racially motivated hanging. It's not really - remember in the Hateful Eight when the movie ends with Samuel Jackson and Walton Goggins hanging Jennifer Jason Leigh?

RM: Yes, I remember.

BA: I remember very vividly thinking, "What is Tarantino trying to say, if anything here?"

RM: I don't think Tarantino means anything when he does something. I mean Tarantino is like, he's the embodiment of white privilege filmmaking.

BA: [Laughter] Oh, yes. Well, I can see that, but definitely there was something going on there maybe that he wasn't intending, but I couldn't figure it out. So, I came to that conclusion about Joanna's ending based off the parallel to what happened to Perkins. Neither of them deserved what ultimately happened to them. They were also victims of an unfair and unjust world, specifically America, and even more specifically, the Deep South.

RM: If you look at the triptych, you have Anthony Perkins who's very naive and idealistic and clearly comes from a little bit more of a privileged background than the other two. Paul Newman is an alcoholic and that's one of his controlling forces. Then, Joanne Woodward is basically controlled by her poverty. You have Newman controlled by alcoholism, her controlled by poverty, and Perkins controlled by his idealism. All three characters are sort of ultimately ineffectual in making anything kind of happen and it's almost like three archetypes of failed... Yes, three archetypes of failure.

I wonder if the film's moral is that don't be any one of these things. Newman's lesson is if you don't control your personal demons, you're going to end up with nobody and not being able to do anything. Perkins' lesson is if your idealism isn't grounded in reality, you're going to take it too far and end up being self-destructive. Woodward's lesson would be something like you can't live a fantasy, educate yourself and expand your horizons or something to that effect. It's total speculation on my part. I mean, it's a theory. Because it feels like there's...

BA: No, that's okay.

RM: ...a political meaning to it but I wonder if the meaning is more in the archetypes and less in the complete narrative. Because it is a triptych and there are three stories. Maybe it's got three lessons instead of one big lesson.

BA: I think it's probably got more than three lessons actually, but definitely the triptych are the keys here to at least finding clues to what those other lessons could very well be. There are just many aspects here. I guess we haven't really gotten into the overall conspiracy going on. It's not an unbelievable conspiracy in any regard. It's actually

something that I think has been documented as actually happening in our reality many times over.

RM: Are you referring to the welfare system, what Perkins uncovers?

BA: Yes. Well, he's working as a I guess an independent contractor - to bring up that word again...

RM: A tool of the man.

BA: There you go. He's a tool of the man, but he doesn't know it. She might have an idea that she could possibly be one, but he doesn't know it. He thinks he's doing some sort of survey going home to home, community to community to get information on families and individuals who have been receiving welfare, what their lives are like, so on and so forth. The person that's I guess his supervisor, if you want to call him that, he's basically giving Perkins these instructions, "Go to these places. Take down this information and bring it back to me. Maybe take some pictures along the way." He starts to suspect, "There's something wrong here," and he feels like it's related to WUSA in some way and one thing leads to another and he in fact discovers that the people that run WUSA, which is a very right-wing radio network - I guess reminiscent of One America News maybe?

RM: It's Fox News, essentially. It's a...

BA: Fox News essentially. Yes.

RM: It's a talk radio station pretending to give news out but it's really giving alarmist propagandist right wing spin. The agenda is keep white people afraid of poor black people, and that's where the welfare component comes in. Because the survey that Perkins is taking are basically designed to keep people off welfare, not keep them on welfare. So, that's where Perkins hits the wall ideologically and goes into a tailspin.

BA: [Laughter] Well, the data being - I think the way I understood it was in the scene where he begins to figure it out, he goes to his supervisor's headquarters if you want to call it that. It could have very well been a plantation he retrofitted. I don't know.

RM: No, yes, that building was amazing. It's the one with the split staircase, right, and the stairs down the middle where the camera does that crazy two-story tall boom down from the second level to the first. I was like, "What?" You're right. It's like the set of Django Unchained.

BA: Yes, yes. Yes, yes. Right, right. That's another thing too to bring up. There's a lot of really good production design and photography.

RM: On location maybe.

BA: Yes. It all feels very tangible. Anyways, he's talking to this guy. The guy is basically like... Perkins is trying to get down to what is happening but the black man is like, "You come in here asking what's happening? I should be asking you what's happening?"

RM: No, he's the voice of reason.

BA: Right, he's like...

RM: He's trying to keep Perkins from getting in trouble. There's a clear sense that this guy has an authority on this information from his experience and from years living in the city, and Perkins has basically just wandered into town with his long lens, black and white camera, and he thinks he's going to like save the system.

BA: Yes, and there you go. There we have it. Each of these three characters are not technically from New Orleans. Not that it's wrong to be a transplant, but they haven't been here long enough to have a full root in what's going on. But immediately, he's like, "No, I got to figure out why I'm being hoodwinked." [Laughter] He basically lays out like, "Look, this data you're getting is not helping anyone but people who want to kick these people off of their benefits". [00:30:00]

RM: Exactly. It keeps the people in power in power.

BA: Well, here's what I'm getting at. It's like they have these different dummy organizations between the guy that's running WUSA and then on the low end, the "Lord of the Slums" that I've referred to. "Get the information, bring it back to me," and all of this is to basically build sentiment in the community.

RM: I think they wanted to have a bunch of statistics on their side when they make their case on the air, but that's not why he was doing the survey. The survey is for the city's welfare department. He's working basically for City Hall and the collusion component comes in is that the people running the welfare program and the people running the radio station are like Country Club golfing buddies who hang out at the Playboy Club and live in the same suburb.

BA: Oh. Oh God, the Playboy Club scene. Oh man. We could talk almost all day about that.

RM: My jaw hit the floor when that scene came around. I was like... [Laughter]

BA: Yes. Like, "Fuck." For two reasons. One being the scene itself. The setting. The setting by itself and the production design.

RM: Did you catch the location where it is?

BA: No, actually I don't know where it is. Where was it?

RM: I'm pretty sure that's Common St. in the CBD. Just on the other side of Canal.

BA: Wow. Okay. That's pretty interesting. That actually makes a lot of sense that that's in the CBD. Oh, it's a private club, but it's also full of tacky, ridiculous...

RM: No, no, it's full of dealership owners and chubby rednecks. [Laughter]

BA: [Laughter] Everything in that club looks like it's Chuck-E-Cheese for man-child adults from the South who want to think that they're some kind of authoritative influential figure who's more important than he really is in reality.

RM: Yes, exactly.

BA: It's so weird too. It's like ripped right from Trump's life.

RM: It's what Mar-a-Lago is based on I'm sure.

BA: When Trump went into the White House and I guess got settled into the Oval Office, one of the first things I noticed that changed was the curtains behind him. They were now gold looking. I think he doesn't understand, I guess what fashion or...

RM: I grew up on Long Island Sound in the Northeast about 65 miles from Trump central in the 80s when he was calling for the execution of the Central Park Five and trying to make himself into a star and showing up on talk shows and publishing the Art of The Deal and naming hotels after himself and all that crap. He has never had any taste whatsoever.

BA: Right.

RM: [Laughter] He's an embarrassment of style and aesthetic. Not to mention...

BA: At the very least...

RM: ...a moral black hole, sucking everything into it. He's always been a cancer. I mean, that's why New York hates him so much. New York understands him on a fundamental level that nowhere else in the country does. There's a great line that Trump is what a dumb person thinks a rich person is like.

BA: Right, exactly.

RM: Somehow, that's been his entire "career," is just basically pulling shit over on rubes who think rich guys are cool.

BA: Exactly.

RM: Trump is like an aspirational figure for goombahs from Staten Island and apparently the South too. The South loves him.

BA: Yes.

RM: It's one of those things where you wonder if it's a chicken and egg almost. Is Trump taking advantage of a corrupt culture or is Trump corrupting the culture? And the answer is yes.

BA: Just to finish up about that club. It's so fucking awful. Anthony Perkins walks in there and he doesn't really seem to blink or hesitate and look around like, "What the fuck is this place?" I think he alludes to his family being involved somehow in the legal system. I think he has a judge as an uncle or something, but he's walking around and you see the branding on the shirts, not just the women, but on the men too. They're wearing like tuxedos or some shit.

RM: Yes. Hugh Hefner was a pioneer of branding.

BA: Someone actually designed like an outline of bunnies. The same image of the Playboy Bunny essentially or maybe it was a knock off of it all over them.

RM: No, no, that's what Playboy Clubs actually look like. That was not set dressing. That's exactly what it was. I mean, Playboy Clubs were all over the country at that point. Playboy started in the mid-50s and created these jazz clubs, which eventually morphed into cocktail lounges and then gentlemen's clubs and all those euphemisms. They weren't quite strip clubs and they weren't quite brothels, but the idea was that it's entirely for the upper class. You mentioned Larry Flynt before. In *The People vs Larry Flynt*, which is one of my favorite Miloš Forman movies, there's a scene where Woody Harrelson picks up Playboy and says, "Gentlemen, this magazine is mocking us."

BA: [Laughter] Yes.

RM: Entirely for that whole thing, and that's what that Playboy Club is for. When Perkins storms in it, the reason he doesn't really acknowledge any of that stuff is because for the class - he's basically going into enemy territory. These are the clubs, the smoke-filled rooms of metaphor that people refer to are things like the Playboy Clubs.

BA: Right.

RM: That's where deals get made and judges rub elbows with real estate developers and money gets passed around.

BA: It's the lion's den, so to speak. What's horrifically sad and funny about this particular scene is, okay, he's walking in with this attitude. He's storming in, "I got to see these guys right now." He's going to give him the business and everything and he kind of does but the thing is, we're slowly getting used to this really tacky club which is presumably like we're saying a private, exclusive, VIP, plays just for the elites of that local community, the city. This is what they think they should be surrounded by?

RM: These are poorly educated rich people. You ever heard the phrase Redneck Riviera? Like this is Redneck Riviera chic. [Laughter] This is what the eighth-generation good old boys think is like the Life of Riley basically.

BA: Yes. It's so sad how generations after generations, but it's like they just devolve over time from wherever they originally were to some fucking asshole jerk at a buffet in a private club that is literally like a chain restaurant.

RM: I thought the casting was perfect for that guy. As well as a lot of the kind of people in power were cast so well. [Laughter]

BA: Right, like the guy he confronts.

RM: They don't have that intimidating, supervillain vibe that they might in like a badly made movie. They all look like the real thing, which is you see these people and you're like, "I can't believe these people have power over anything."

BA: Yes. Right. Right.

RM: But yet they do and you have to deal with it.

BA: It reminded me of Donald Trump Jr. taking that photo of himself in the woods, wearing what he thinks woodsman-ish, lumberjack clothing is, but he's got that stupid Beavis and Butthead smile on him because he's the son of a guy who says he's very rich and he's from a family that has been rich for a long time now.

RM: You said earlier that you were going to jump out to the... what your big picture interpretation of the film is, I'm dying to hear it.

BA: Okay. This was actually like I think the one, two, I think this is on the third page of notes that I wrote. [Laughter]

RM: That's quite a notebook you got there, Bill. How many pages of notes did you take?

BA: Third out of five that are horribly organized and scrawled with quotes and stuff but basically, I start questioning things towards the bottom of the third page. Let's see. Survey is a sham to stir anti-welfare sentiment, more racial disparity - okay. These are all obvious things. Aggression and incendiary discontent, but then below that, okay. These are words with question marks next to them: power, control. These are basically like I'm trying to think, "Okay, what is the ultimate ...

RM: Theme.

BA: ... reason for these elites to be doing this stuff? Are they looking for more of what? Need to feel important? Need to have their life justified? Legacy?" And I wrote, "For a system that nobody benefits from, the system just exists to exist."

RM: That's a great point. It's status quo for the purpose of status quo. "We've been in charge, we're always going to be in charge. We've been in charge, we have to stay in charge." Et cetera, et cetera.

BA: Right, and we don't know why. There is no answer as to why. "Oh because we're white." Well, but white is a construct.

RM: Also, white and wealthy, yes. It's economic power and racial power intertwined.

BA: The chicken and the egg or chicken with its head cut off or...

RM: We've spent a lot of time talking about the establishment. How do you feel about the counterculture's depiction in the film, the hippies in particular? There's only a handful of scenes with hippies in them in the film.

BA: But there is one very important scene with the hippies.

RM: Yes, and I couldn't tell if they were supposed to be taken seriously or as parodies. They walked this really interesting ambiguity between wise and definitely more street smart than Perkins, right?

BA: Yes. [00:40:00]

RM: But at the same time, they seemed very cartoonish, and the fact that Rheinhardt's hanging out with them like cool ass Paul Newman, vintage peak Paul Newman is hanging out with a bunch of guys from Central Casting who look like the cast of

Welcome Back Kotter or something, smoking weed. What they're saying is so abstract that I can't tell if the movie's quite laughing at them. Especially the scene where they're like, "What's happening out there, man? Look, watch the taco trucks man, that's what's happening."

BA: Okay, well - yes. Yes, I love that line.

RM: The girl says, "Yes, man, like, look at Walgreens."

BA: "Look at Walgreens, man. It's down the street, it's happening right in front of us, man. It's on another..."

RM: I had no idea there even was a Walgreens in 1970.

BA: I love the scene for starters. One, if we call it typecasting, cartoonish typecasting, it's still kind of accurate in this case. I know I've seen many movies from that time, and even now that feature heightened theatrical hippie characters but then you see interviews like real documentary interviews with young people from the 60s and a lot of these particular hippies are very much as they're depicted. Yes, they're heightened for effect in this movie too, but I think there's a lot of truth to what they're doing and truth to what they're saying.

RM: So, you think the - I'm trying to interpret - are you saying that the movie takes them seriously then as a...?

BA: I think it's like a half and half. I think they're definitely having fun with that scene, the movie. Stuart Rosenberg who was the director, I think he's definitely having fun with the different tempos of that scene like, okay, you got these characters over here. They're drugged out of their minds and they're saying weird philosophical shit that is also kind of stupid at the same time, but when I was listening to it and I was trying to understand it, I was like, in a really stupid way, that makes a lot of sense actually. It's kind of like you're drugged out on a porch somewhere and you're looking up at the sky and you see all the stars at night, and you're like, "You know, man, sometimes I think the stars are like God's salt and one day, he's going to eat us."

RM: Okay. "What if the Earth was a giant kernel of popcorn and we're like the salt on it? And what if we're about to be eaten because we're in God's movie theater and that's why the sky is dark." [Laughter]

BA: Right, exactly. Yes. Maybe this is because I'm a critic and I'm very analytical of things and I try to see the positive in almost anything. So, when it comes to this scene which might very well be just hippies saying bullshit while Paul Newman, the nihilist who's also drunk and a little high is also heightened, has that personality of his that's coming out much more aggressively and mean-spirited and violently as a result, and the hippies around him are just kind of like going with it. Like, yes, they're feeding off this. I think there's still nuggets of some truth there to what they're saying and how they're

behaving. My favorite line, this wasn't from the hippies, but this was from Newman. He says, he's giving Perkins some advice at the very end of their conversation, he says, "Drop dead while you're surrounded by friends."

RM: That's very New Orleans.

BA: Yes. I was like, "Oh my God." That kind of wraps up the ultimate apex of what he's about throughout the movie until maybe the end.

RM: Yes. Maybe you can interpret him as sort of the representation of hedonism then if that's his thesis statement.

BA: Yes, maybe. I mean, I think hedonism is probably how he just deals with everything to avoid the fact that everything is falling to shit and even if you know it, you can't do anything about it. So, just have fun. It was definitely not in a helpful way, I can tell you that. It was like coming from a sense of desperation and hopelessness, which is very prevalent in the movie from Newman.

RM: I love this performance from him. It's one of those great dark Newman performances that he gives in movies like Hud for instance, where he's just a dark son of a bitch, and he worked with Stuart Rosenberg a ton of times. This is the guy who directed Cool Hand Luke for him in '67 and he went on to work with him four or five more times over the 70s and 80s. That's up there with Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood. I mean, it's crazy. So, they must have really liked each other and must have respected their aesthetic. Newman, this is his follow-up film to Butch Cassidy, and so he must have... I mean, that's a full Movie Star, capital M, capital S, role, and I think he wanted to get back to his real Strasberg method actor roots and do something dark and challenging and play somebody who was not necessarily heroic or likeable. He did a great job and it was just nice to see him in that mode.

BA: Right, and it was an absolute pleasure to see it. I want to say I read somewhere, possibly Wikipedia, it may have been in a review though, that Paul Newman, when he was asked about the movie I think years down the line, I think he said something like that was the most important movie I've ever done.

RM: Oh, nice.

BA: Yes. Something along those lines.

RM: Well, Paul was, as just a human being, Paul and Joanne were huge philanthropists. He gave over like I think half a billion dollars to charity over the course of the run of Newman's Own products. They were basically supporting a charity and they're just dyed-in-the-wool leftists and that kind of political statement was very important to him as well. He took acting seriously, but the movie business, not so much. He has a great quote. I mean, if you want to know what this guy's kind of ethos was like, they asked him... He married Joanne Woodward in the 50s, I believe, and it was one of those

relationships that was just you expected him to die the day after she dies, or some kind of horribly romantic thing like that. When they asked, “Do you ever get tempted? You work with all these beautiful movie stars. Do you ever get tempted to fool around with any of them?” He said, “That’s crazy. Why go out for hamburger when you have steak at home?” [Laughter] So I’m going to ask you a question because I had this crazy idea this morning thinking about this movie as a sort of speculative what-if situation. Do you remember what the big literary event of 1969 in New Orleans was? There was a novel written in ’69 that is one of the defining novels of New Orleans.

BA: What?

RM: Confederacy of Dunces. John Kennedy Toole committed suicide after sending that book out to publishers and getting rejected. The book was never published until around 1980 when Walker Percy, the novelist and Tulane professor, got the manuscript from [Toole’s] mom. In a parallel universe, imagine if Walker Percy or somebody got the book in ’69 and it became the hot book of that year, and Newman and Woodward were looking to work together with their friend, Stuart Rosenberg, again, and they’re like, “Let’s shoot a movie in New Orleans. I’ve got this book here... (what WUSA was based on) a book called Hall of Mirrors by Robert Stone, a 1967 novel. Or we have this other book, it’s more of a satiric comedy about a guy name Ignatius Reilly, maybe we can have you guys, maybe Woodward to play the mom and Newman could play his boss and so on and we could set it up - and then you could have had another movie kind of also about the counterculture, but we’d have with this crazy comic character in the middle.”

BA: Right. It would have a little bit more of a kind of a lifted spirit to it.

RM: Yes, it wouldn’t be as heavy hearted as this for sure, but that’s an interesting thing. Because that could have happened if Toole had not committed suicide and the book had gotten out, it’s possible that this production would have been a production of that instead as the next hot novel. We’ll never know, of course, but it’s interesting to think about.

BA: We will never know. Although I do know David DuBos is writing right now an adaptation of, what is it? The making of that book or the something like that? I forget what it’s called, the actual story.

RM: The John Kennedy Toole Story?

BA: Yes, I think so. I think it’s called Butterfly in the Typewriter.

RM: That’s interesting.

BA: He was contracted to do it. I’m not sure, but he’s working on it and that’s very cool.

RM: They both talk about the counterculture. As somebody who... I moved to New Orleans in 2006 after Katrina, basically into the aftermath. There was this Americana boom in the rest of the country and all the 20-somethings started wearing overalls and playing

banjo and everything. New Orleans had this crazy boom of influx from other parts of the country of people who love the old-timey-ness and the roots music here. New Orleans never left that. We're sort of immune to trends in that way. It's like New Orleans goes in and out of style as America goes through its trendy phases.

The 60s here must have been out of control when you think about how prevalent hippie culture was and the kind of freedom, the lawlessness of New Orleans... The counterculture plays a huge role in Confederacy of Dunces as well as WUSA, the sort of ultra-progressive politics that exist here, exist hand-in-hand with the kind of libertarianism or anarchism depending on the person you're talking to. It's really interesting to consider that the city was probably full of hitchhikers who didn't know anything about New Orleans, but they just love peace and freedom and drugs, man. At the same time, it was probably full of well-intentioned do-gooders coming to town because a lot of the 60s was fueled by kind of idealism left over from the civil rights movement and so forth. Although I guess by the 70s, it was becoming more of a fashion statement than an ideological statement. I thought that was really interesting as a time capsule.

RM: Yes, definitely.

BA: There's an interesting movie to be made hypothetically that's a period film about New Orleans in the 60s where you have the hustler culture, the service industry culture clashing with the 60s kids who are coming into their power in a way. It makes one wonder, what other kind of lessons you could draw from this movie to make a future film that would be really cool. What do you think, Bill?

BA: Yes. Well, I think I'm going to draw back from my notebook. There are two quotes here actually. One was a conversation between Woodward and Newman. She's telling him a story of how she got the scar on her face and there was a conversation she was having with some boyfriend or husband and the guy just cut her because she said something and she says, "I must have said the first thing that came to my head." Then he responds, Newman says, "Well, you can't do that in Texas," but this next thought that I had was basically a clash between the 60s and the 70s or the transition, and I wrote, "The promise of the 60s meets the brick to the face of the 70s."

RM: Interesting.

BA: That was my way of saying it, but there's this line from the cartoon show, it was a Nicktoon called Rugrats. There was a bit in there where one of the neighbors gets angry at the main character's parents, and she's like, "Get with the program. The 60s are over and we lost."

RM: Yes, that's - I mean that's a line from the Big Lebowski as well.

BA: Yes, right. Exactly. There you go, right?

RM: “Get out, you bum.” Whatever he shouts at him. So, as an avid film connoisseur, if someone was to make a movie about the counterculture, maybe a modern-day version of a counterculture movie in New Orleans, what elements would you think would be good to include?

BA: I guess it depends, of course the time and place, but New Orleans is kind of immune to like you said, trends. So, if an independent filmmaker wants to make a movie that involves counterculture thinking, maybe apply to contemporary politics and culture and people, I would say draw from the things you’ve observed and how you interpret them. Maybe do a little bit of research, but don’t violate your own interpretation, your own observations. That’s the uniqueness of the story. Don’t be afraid to get out of your comfort zone. Don’t stay within the iconic parts of New Orleans. Because you’re just going to find the stuff you already knew. Venture out. Don’t be afraid to go to - I mean don’t just go down a street that obviously looks like it’s going to lead to your death or something. I don’t mean people killing you, I mean like a pothole. [Laughter] Avoid those pothole streets because more often than not, you’ll go down a neighborhood and you won’t get attacked. So, don’t be afraid.

RM: Exactly. Yes. Get to know your city. That’s great advice. Totally.

BA: Get to know your city. Get to know your neighbors. Just talk to people.

RM: That’s an awesome note to end on. Let me ask you a final question. If you just get to pick one, imagine a great filmmaker, your favorite filmmaker, political filmmaker comes to town and he’s going to do a movie about politics in New Orleans, and he asks, he says, “Bill, I want your insight on this. I have a choice. I can either make a film about Trump’s America from a New Orleans perspective or I can do a film that takes place entirely within New Orleans about the schism between the downtown working class African American population and the Uptown White plantation set. Which movie would you rather see?”

BA: The second one. That’s vastly more interesting to me. I mean, yes, the whole Trump versus everything kind of thing, that’s already playing out in real time. Again, it’s a story that we’ve said multiple times, so I would be more interested in the challenges that regular neighborhood people who have these things imparted on them from outside forces that they really can’t do a lot to control directly.

RM: Right, it’s systemic disenfranchisement but it’s happening at a local level instead of a national.

BA: I would like to see more stories with whatever details you can find from your own interpretations or from other people’s interpretations that highlight those areas of the city and all the quirks and all the weirdos. [Laughter]

RM: All right, Bill. Well, thank you so much for being on the show. Whoa, a bug just fell on me. Crazy. I left my side door open and I guess it flew in. Yes. Thank you so much for being on the show. A fantastic movie. I'm sure you brought it to everybody's attention because this is a real deep cut, as they say. I put 120 some odd movies on my list to choose from and I knew it wasn't comprehensive, but I couldn't imagine there was a Paul Newman movie from the modern era that I had missed, lo and behold, there you go— WUSA.

BA: I had to make it just a step more difficult sort of.

RM: No, that means the system's working because the whole point of this podcast is to educate myself and pick the brains of the people in the local film community and hopefully people listening can learn a thing or two somewhere along the way as I learn as we go. Yes. This is fantastic.

BA: Just as a special note to listeners who want to watch this movie, it is hard to find. It's not really in print, DVD or Blu-ray, although I think there might be a few Blu-rays out there. I got it. Don't ask me how exactly, but I'll say the internet is full of wonders.

RM: BitTorrent.

BA: It also might be on YouTube too, so.

RM: [Laughter] Well, we can always delete that if you want.

BA: No, it's okay. Leave it in, it's fine.

RM: Tell the people where they can find your writing and you on the socials and all that.

BA: I'm on Twitter @billreviews and I have a blog, neauxreelidea.com. That is N-E-A-U-X-R-E-E-L-I-D-E-A dot com.

RM: Excellent. Thank you so much, man. We're going to be dropping this episode in, I'm trying to do the math... I got to take off my shoes to count but I think you're episode five or six and that means you're going to be out in late June, early July.

BA: Oh nice. Okay.

RM: Cool.

BA: By the way, I've had an absolute blast.

RM: [Music] Subscribe. Rate. Review. Tell your friend. Et cetera.

-END-