

SBIFF: Andrew Davis Interviewed

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Acclaimed Director Talks His Documentary 'Mentors: Tony & Santi'



By **Josef Woodard**

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Of the many documentaries being screened at this year's Santa Barbara International Film Festival, acclaimed director Andrew Davis's *Mentors: Tony & Santi* wins extra points for multi-layered context and concept. At its center is the friendship — and mentor-protégé relationship — of two prominent photographers, Santi Visalli (87, and a Santa Barbara resident) and Tony Vaccaro (97). Their decades of important work — from WWII forward — producing iconic imagery for *Look*, *Life*, and other outlets are treasure troves, visually capturing history and humanity.

Via the handiwork of Davis and his producer/editor/co-cinematographer Ethan Boehme, *Mentors* blends magnetic scenes of the two legendary veterans reminiscing,

waxing philosophical about photography, swapping Sophia Loren stories, cutting each other's hair, and cooking with a hypnotic cavalcade of striking images from their archives.

Before our eyes, in rapid montage succession, we're fed shots of JFK, a young Robert De Niro, Frank Lloyd Wright, the Beatles, Alexander Calder, Marlon Brando, Lauren Bacall, Federico Fellini, Lina Wertmüller, Marcel Marceau, and countless other subjects, alongside artful visions of urban environs, life during and after (and between) wartime, and much more. It all adds up to an experience of concentrated time travel, counterbalanced by the affable here-and-now rapport Visalli and Vaccaro share in a room together.

Davis, a noted feature film director whose credits includes *The Fugitive*, *Holes*, *The Package*, the Santa Barbara-based *Steal Big, Steal Little*, and numerous thinking person's thriller/action films, brings a deft touch to *Mentors*. Last week, we met for a breakfast interview at his Riviera home, which affords dazzling views of the mountains and the Pacific. He humbly considered the views and grinned, "Not bad for a Chicago kid who grew up by the steel mills."

But Davis is hardly the archetype of an untouchable, aloof Hollywood celebrity with a Santa Barbara hideaway. Moving to town in 1984, he and his wife, Adrienne, raised their children, Julian and Jenna, here and have been active community members.

Mentors, Davis surmised, "came about as a kind of labor of love. It was a fluke, and it possesses you after a while. Then you give birth to something, and you have to take it to nursery school."

It was through meeting Visalli and hearing about his potent bond with Vaccaro that led Davis into a serendipitous launch of the film. At a party in Santa Barbara, Davis asked Visalli if he'd ever heard of Tony Vaccaro. "He looked me in the eye and said, 'I wouldn't be here without Tony Vaccaro,'" Davis recalled. "He started explaining their relationship, and I thought, 'I've gotta interview these guys. They're not going to be around forever.'" So Davis, along with Boehme and Santi's son, brought cameras to shoot the subjects for two days in New York state.

"[Visalli and Vaccaro] were so loveable and charismatic and turned out to be this odd couple, this love story," said Davis. "But it was couched in a context of world history, being artists, helping each other." On making the documentary, Davis explained that "the only game plan was to try to get as much out of their story and their history. They are world observers. They have been around the fanciest and the poorest people, in war, being bombed. ... I was just trying to find areas that would be of interest about their relationship."

In terms of still images to draw on, Davis was dealing with an embarrassment of possibilities. "There is a lot to work with, a rich library of imagery to help integrate with these stories. It's like you have a bunch of gold and diamonds thrown at you and you have to figure out how to make a bracelet out of this," Davis laughed.

Although most of Davis's film work has been Hollywood feature films, his background includes brushes with both documentary work and still photography, a passion in his Chicago childhood. After studying journalism, he pivoted into film as a cameraman, serving as a second unit cinematographer on the streets of Chicago during the riotous '68 Democratic Convention, for Haskell Wexler's celebrated, semi-realist film *Medium Cool*. More recently, he was part of another Chicago protest film with Wexler, during the Occupy Movement's NATO convention demonstrations in 2012, for the film *Four Days in Chicago*. Davis also shot a documentary about the making of his respected 1978 music-related indie film *Stony Island*.

At present, Davis is developing at least two projects — a novel and then screenplay, spun off his political thriller *The Package*, and a new take on *Treasure Island*, based in New Orleans. But shooting *Mentors* planted a seed of an idea — to create further documentaries about other mentor-protégé relationships, “maybe develop a series of other stories about mentorship,” said Davis.

4-1-1 | *Mentors: Tony & Santi* screens Tuesday, January 21, 7 p.m., at the Lobero Theatre. See sbiff.org.