



Val

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108 minutes

Rated R

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English

Color

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Synopsis

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For over 40 years Val Kilmer, one of Hollywood's most mercurial and/or misunderstood actors has been documenting his own life and craft through film and video.

He has amassed thousands of hours of footage, from 16mm home movies made with his brothers, to time spent in iconic roles for blockbuster movies like *Top Gun*, *The Doors*, *Tombstone*, and *Batman Forever*. This raw, wildly original and unflinching documentary reveals a life lived to extremes and a heart-filled, sometimes hilarious look at what it means to be an artist and a complex man.

A conversation with directors Leo Scott & Ting Poo

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In performances that range from the sublime to the serpentine, Val Kilmer has never been easy to pin down. A 1981 graduate of Julliard School—at 17, he was at the time the youngest student ever accepted into its prestigious acting program—Kilmer's Broadway debut was in 1983's *Slab Boys*, and his early roles in film comedies led to a pop culture standout moment as Iceman in 1986's blockbuster *Top Gun*. He gave an iconic performance as Jim Morrison in *The Doors* (1991), a cult-fave turn as Doc Holliday in *Tombstone* (1993), a well-reviewed Caped Crusader in *Batman Forever* (1995), and sly character turns in films as diverse as *Heat*, *Thunderheart*, *Pollack*, *The Salton Sea*, *Spartan*, and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. Along the way, Kilmer developed—some may say cultivated—a reputation for marching to the beat of his own drum. While acting in and directing the one-man show about Mark Twain he had been working on for over a decade, Kilmer was diagnosed with throat cancer, which went into remission but led to a tracheostomy—a surgical hole in his windpipe that allows Kilmer to breathe but which impacted his voice, which Kilmer wrote about in his wide-ranging, revealing 2020 New York Times–bestselling autobiography, *I'm Your Huckleberry*.

In the remarkable and intimate documentary *Val*, directors and editors Leo Scott and Ting Poo not only document Kilmer's mission to bring his *Citizen Twain* to audiences, but provide a view into Kilmer's life through video footage Kilmer—born on the last day of the 1950s—shot beginning in his childhood in Chatsworth, California, and continued through his rise in film and theater. In the often decades-old videos, Kilmer reflects on family, lifelong artistic endeavors, the death of his younger brother Wesley in 1977, and his drive to find truth in the illusion of performance. As Kilmer captures behind-the-scenes moments during many of his biggest films, including casual

moments with friends and costars, in private he wrestles with what acting truly means to him in revealing moments that help make *Val* a rare glimpse into an artist's personality and passions.

Here, the co-directors—each experienced editors making their directing debut—discuss sifting through the thousands of hours of footage Kilmer, now 61, had stored in boxes; shooting the balance they found between Kilmer's Hollywood history and his present-day struggles and success; and the cooperation of Kilmer's daughter Mercedes and son Jack, including Jack's recitation of his father's first-person narration for the film.

How did both of you come to the project?

LEO SCOTT: I was editing a half-hour comedy for VICE Films called “The Lotus Community Workshop,” directed by Harmony Korine. Val played himself as a motivational speaker from an alternate reality. I didn't meet Val at the time that was being filmed, but as I was editing, his performance was just so incredible and so out there, and I never grew tired of it—and as an editor, eventually everything wears you down, but he never did, and I wanted to tell him that. Harmony gave me Val's email and I wrote to him, and he replied in about 45 seconds.

At the time, Val had been working on his Mark Twain one-man show *Citizen Twain* for about 10 years, workshoping it in various cities and filming those performances, and I began editing those together for him so he could judge his performance. Then, after I left London for the U.S., my first film was *Palo Alto* (2014), which coincidentally starred Val's son Jack Kilmer—though a very Val thing to say is that everything happens for a reason. It was around that time that Val asked me to help him digitize his personal archive.

Production Notes

He said he had boxes and boxes of tapes that he had filmed over the years. Normally people exaggerate these things — but, in Val's case, he under-exaggerated how much he had. Those boxes were sort of a museum of the last half-century of different formats: Film, video, 3/4 inch, Beta, mini-DV, a lot of formats that had since been discontinued. Val was always using whatever the newest format at the moment was. I put my hand into a random box and the first VHS tape I pulled out was from 1985 on the set of *Top Gun*.

TING POO: Leo and I became friends and collaborators when we worked at the same editing house. About 8 years ago, I went over to his house and he had a bunch of editing stations set up in his garage and he was digitizing all these old tapes from Val. Leo scrolled through some footage, and I was blown away and said, 'You have to make something out of this!'

A few years later in 2018, the doc I edited ("Heaven is a Traffic Jam on the 405") had just won an Oscar for Best Documentary Short, and I was looking for my next project. I asked Leo about Val and whether or not they were still making something together. He said the project and the *Citizen Twain* play were both on hiatus due to Val's illness but he was recovering. I offered to start digging into the footage and Val gave his blessing and encouragement.

The footage Kilmer has on those tapes is extraordinary—intimate professional moments as well as his thoughts and feelings from over 40 years of acting, all of it very much seen through his unique point of view.

LS: There was a lot of trust involved in this project, obviously. It can be difficult to look back at things from your past. From our very first conversations, Ting and I were convinced about the idea of telling this story in the first person, since so much

of the material was from Val's point of view. This form of storytelling however would require even more participation from Val, to make sure we were being true to the life being told through his words throughout. It was quite a journey for Val, as well as for us.

TP: Val himself hadn't seen a lot of the tapes since he shot them; he was so busy, a lot of the time he would just shoot them and throw them in a box. There were 8 and 16mm film reels we had transferred his brother Wesley had shot, amazingly creative mini movies that they made together. So, for him, it was very emotional to see some of these things for the first time, and for us a privilege to be trusted with putting them together.

Kilmer's recent autobiography, *I'm Your Huckleberry*, hit the best-seller list last year. How did his throat cancer and tracheostomy, which he isn't hesitant to discuss in your film, impact the making of *Val*? He continues to work and paint and make physical art, and his productivity, as we see, is tremendous.

TP: Obviously, Val's illness was a huge milestone. If he hadn't gotten ill, perhaps Act 3 of this documentary would have been bringing his stage performance as Mark Twain to Broadway. But despite there being a fork in the road, there is just as much for an audience to glean from his recovery and unstoppable creative spirit.

LS: Val is a creative force and has never really stopped making things. In recent years his creativity has had to manifest itself in different ways and in particular he has been more focused on his physical art, though that is also something he has done his whole life. There were times over the decades when he was making documentaries on specific topics: There was an

anti-nuclear, anti-war documentary he was making immediately after *Top Gun*, and he toured the world with a small crew, all shot on 16mm film.. During the filming of the 2000 sci-fi drama *Red Planet*, he hired a film crew to make a hugely ambitious doc that was going to merge the shooting of that film with an environmental, Earth-in-crisis-type of documentary. He was shooting something else around Wonderland a few years later and around that time became deeply involved in scrapbooking, with his friend and artist collaborator Ali Alborzi, who also later came full circle to help produce this film.

TP: Val's art and scrapbooks became such an important visual element for us and we tried to make the film itself feel like a cinematic scrapbook. Scenes and transitions aren't meant to feel perfectly set up and the logic behind some of the cuts is sometimes purely a visual or thematic juxtaposition or about connecting time and geography. This was a stylistic choice that we hoped would create an impressionistic collage of his life.

The footage Kilmer filmed during his childhood and teen years has a rich sense of Americana, alongside the creativity of he and his brother Wesley, who, as Val recounts in the film, drowned after having an epileptic seizure in 1977.

TP: Val said one of the things he loves about this film is that it brings his brother Wesley back to life and really pays tribute to him. That was very important to Val, because Wesley is always with him, in his heart and on his mind. The film tries to show how that creative spark he shared with his brothers has been a source of strength and healing for Val throughout his life.

LS: When they were kids, Val and his brothers Mark and Wesley would inventively remake movies in their own DIY way. Wesley was the budding director of the three. When you see clips from

those films, it's clear Wesley really was a young genius. As well as the mini movies, Val kept all Wesley's paintings, cartoons and storyboards. It was particularly memorable coming across a Batman illustration from the mid 70's. I'm sure Wesley would be proud that his brother actually became him twenty years later.

Toward the start of your film, Kilmer says that he's always wanted to make a film that explores "where the actor ends and the character begins." Val shows how all his art is personal, and his son Jack narrating helps merge all of that as well, doesn't it?

TP: There is behind-the-scenes footage that will be of great interest for fans of movies and fans of Val—simply the amount of Doc Holliday tattoos that exist in the world because of Tombstone are extraordinary. In addition to the films he's famous for, there are other moments he filmed that are fascinating, for instance when he's on the set of 1996's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, a famously trouble-plagued production. In terms of the "place when the actor ends and the character begins," throughout our filming of him, Val would say, "This is just another Val Kilmer movie, where I'm playing myself as the main character." As interesting as all the behind the scenes stuff is, the really powerful parts of our film are from his own story, the personal stuff that he was so open to sharing, which are the things we can all relate to: the death of a family member or the birth of our children. The consistency with which Val films his kids Jack and Mercedes, being a father and wanting to film them during their lives, are some of the most touching scenes in the film. And for Jack to use his voice to help tell his father's story adds another layer to everything that's being said.

LS: Val just absolutely loves his kids so much. Jack and Mercedes both were big contributors to the film and Jack's

narration added something so powerful and touching, as Val wasn't able to narrate. Jack was the only person who could do it if it couldn't be Val. We decided to set up early on in the film that it is Jack narrating by showing him in the studio, but it seems that people soon forget as he really does sound like a young Val and Jack brought the whole film to life with a great performance.

The scenes of Kilmer on stage as Mark Twain illustrate how important Twain is to him, and how much of himself has gone into writing, directing, and starring in the play.

LS: Val has dedicated so much of his life to that and went so deep into that project—first as a film he tried to get off the ground, then he made it a one-man play, and then he workshopped that in numerous cities and hoped to take it to Broadway. He was involved in it 100 percent, from the writing, directing and producing all the way down to props and lighting design. It was crucial to do justice to that project in our film, because Val did choose so often to pursue that instead of other acting projects. After he had to stop touring in 2014, when he wasn't able to use his voice, he would still be very active with it and toured with a film of the play as he was continuing to heal. He would do Q&As with audiences after he screened it. Nothing can keep him down. Though he is not touring the play, he remains deeply involved with promoting Twain within education.

There's an interconnected quality to all of that, in how Kilmer has used acting and art to understand and express himself, which he talks about so often across the decades of footage he's recorded that we see in *Val*.

TP: In many ways the film is a celebration of that creative impulse. Over and over again in the film we see Val trying to

commune with the spirit of each character he inhabits, trying to distill out of them something universal and true. He would record himself practicing and auditioning for various roles, so we got real insight into his process. He would refine his performance, and sometimes, like with Hamlet, there would be multiple performances done at different times and we'd get to see his interpretation of that character evolve. What is clear from all that footage is the astonishing amount of work he put towards every character he played, and that the end result didn't come about by accident or talent alone, but from incredible dedication.

LS: There was something so deliberate about the way Val would observe and document his life, with a knowingness that it would be used for something bigger one day. To those people who know him well, Val is a deeply spiritual man with profound wisdom and complexity. He's also probably the funniest person I have ever met. Hopefully the film gives a glimpse into all this.

About the filmmakers

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Leo Scott

Leo began editing commercials and music videos in his hometown of London nearly 20 years ago. In 2013, he edited Gia Coppola's directorial debut, *Palo Alto*. He conceptualized, produced, and edited the film *Gozo*, which won Best UK Feature at Raindance in 2016. His frequent collaborators include Harmony Korine, Die Antwoord, and Garth Davis. He is a partner/owner at Cartel and has edited many award-winning commercials including Under Armor's iconic "Phelps" campaign which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2016.

Leo met Val Kilmer while editing Korine's segment of the experimental feature, *The Fourth Dimension* in 2012, and they have been friends and collaborators ever since.

Ting Poo

Ting majored in film at Columbia University, after which she worked at @radicalmedia for almost 10 years cutting both commercial and long form content. In 2008, she edited the documentary *Britney: For the Record* which, at its premiere, was the most highly anticipated and watched program ever to air on MTV. She has worked on both independent features, and documentary series and is interested in storytelling across all platforms. In 2015, she co-edited her first VR piece, *The Displaced*, which won the Entertainment Grand Prix at Cannes and earned her an Emmy nomination for *New Approaches: Current News Coverage*. Recently, she edited "Heaven is a Traffic Jam on the 405" which won an Oscar for best documentary short.

Val Kilmer Filmography

Top Secret! (1984)	The Missing (2003)	American Cowslip (2009)
Real Genius (1985)	Blind Horizon (2003)	Hardwired (2009)
Top Gun (1986)	Spartan (2004)	Double Identity (2009)
The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1986)	Mindhunters (2004)	Bloodworth (2010)
The Man Who Broke 1,000 Chains (1987)	George and the Dragon (2004)	MacGruber (2010)
Willow (1988)	Stateside (2004)	Gun (2010)
Gore Vidal's Billy the Kid (1989)	Bounty Hunters (2004)	The Traveler (2010)
Kill Me Again (1989)	Alexander (2004)	Kill the Irishman (2011)
The Doors (1991)	Trudell (2005)	5 Days of War (2011)
Thunderheart (1992)	Champion (2005)	Blood Out (2011)
True Romance (1993)	Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (2005)	Twixt (2011)
The Real McCoy (1993)	The Ten Commandments (2006)	Deep in the Heart (2012)
Tombstone (1993)	10th & Wolf (2006)	Breathless (2012)
Batman Forever (1995)	Moscow Zero (2006)	Wyatt Earp's Revenge (2012)
Heat (1995)	Dead Man's Bounty (2006)	7 Below (2012)
Dead Girl (1996)	Played (2006)	The Fourth Dimension (2012)
A Century of Science Fiction (1996)	Déjà Vu (2006)	Riddle (2013)
The Island of Dr. Moreau (1996)	Have Dreams, Will Travel (2007)	Planes (2013)
Wings of Courage (1996)	Conspiracy (2008)	Standing Up (2013)
The Ghost and the Darkness (1996)	American Meth (2008)	Palo Alto (2013)
The Saint (1997)	The Love Guru (2008)	Tom Sawyer & Huckleberry Finn (2014)
The Prince of Egypt (1998)	Felon (2008)	Cinema Twain (2016)
At First Sight (1999)	Columbus Day (2008)	Song to Song (2017)
Joe the King (1999)	2:22 (2008)	The Snowman (2017)
Pollock (2000)	XIII: The Conspiracy (2008)	The Super (2017)
Red Planet (2000)	Delgo (2008)	1st Born (2018)
The Salton Sea (2002)	The Thaw (2009)	Jay and Silent Bob Reboot (2019)
Hard Cash (2002)	The Steam Experiment (2009)	A Soldier's Revenge (2020)
Masked and Anonymous (2003)	The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call - New Orleans (2009)	Paydirt (2020)
Wonderland (2003)	Streets of Blood (2009)	The Birthday Cake (2021)
		Top Gun: Maverick (2021)

Credits

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Directed by Leo Scott & Ting Poo

Cinematography by Val Kilmer

Executive Producer Ben Cotner

Co-Executive Producers Emily Osborne
Sarba Das

Produced by Val Kilmer
Leo Scott
Ting Poo

Producers Andrew Fried
Dane Lillegard
Jordan Wynn
Brad Koepenick
Ali Alborzi

Associate Producers Jack Kilmer
Mercedes Kilmer
Tom Stratton
Lauren Bleiweiss

Edited by Ting Poo
Leo Scott

Credits

Co-Producers	Suzanne Greenfield Christopher Noviello
Music by	Garth Stevenson
Post Production Supervisor	Christopher Noviello
Music Supervisor	Angela Asistio