

**Interview with Jonathan Berman,  
Director of COMMUNE**

**How did you get the idea for the film and was there something specific that inspired you?**

I grew up on Long Island in the 1960's around that environment. You know just being a kid growing up around the 60's and 70's; this environment of the counterculture was always in the air, even in suburbia – maybe especially in suburbia.

As I became a teenager I started to get into the music of Jimmy Hendrix and all that, playing keyboards and in rock bands. So I always had that warm feeling towards that whole world as an alternative to us and the bland world of suburban Long Island life.

I was always intrigued by that and then was a Deadhead and into various counterculture ideas. The politics attracted me, and so when I was searching for my next project, I met this eccentric producer and was telling him about my film I was planning about barbecuing in the Carolinas and he, being a New York no-nonsense eccentric: “I just don't like that idea” and I said, “Well, what do you like?” because when you find, a co-producer, it is a good thing, and he said, “Well I like things that are off the grid” which literally means off the electric grid, that is alternative culture on the fringe. So that idea of things very much resonated with me, the idea of things being “off the grid.”

**How did you come into contact with the people of Black Bear Ranch?**

Well after that night, I did some reading and came across a book on the 60's communes literally called “The Sixties Communes” by Tim Miller, a professor and read a few pages on Black Bear Ranch and said to myself, “this is it.” I saw Black Bear as the epicenter of all the benevolent anarchy and theatricality and counter culture ideas that speak to me. Like the stories of people coming there and some fleeing and some loving it, and some being voted not to stay there in the commune but then staying there anyway... like it just seemed like a really... you know, THE manifestation of all those things, that psychedelic soup of ideas that was flowing through that period and it seemed like a good group of people to capture that.

So Tim said that I should contact this guy, Kenoli, and I was like “Cannoli? That's only something you eat in Little Italy” and he was like, “No, he's a really good guy, he's part of Black Bear,” and he just gave me his phone number and we just took it from there. What happened was that me and Zed, Zed Frick, our co-producer, and our camera person... we went to a kind of meeting, slash reunion of Black Bear... they said come up and we'll kinda see what you're all about... “You're the media”... they were very suspicious at first, a lot of the people. At this point a lot of them had moved off of the ranch, but as I found out, Black Bear was something that they carried within them rather than being just a physical place, something you find out as the film goes along, at least I hope that idea comes through... so yeah and so we got there, at this reunion and everyone knew each other and it was a little “hippie dippy” and somewhat older because people

from the 60's are mostly now in THEIR early sixties and fifties and so blew a horn and they gathered in a circle of a big group of people who were between the ages of babies until like 60 something and then one person yelled to us "Why are you here" and it was kinda scary and we had to explain who we were and what were they doing and you know, they kinda tested our metal. Many of became friends and worked on this film together... as subjects, friends, colleagues, even co-conspirators.

**You were talking about some of the skeptical attitudes towards and you and did you find that there were any characters/people that were hard to get hold of and maybe didn't want to work on the film?**

I think there was definitely some ambivalence, you know.. documentary filmmakers work as they go and actually this is kind of an anthropological film.. They are a tribe you know and the way some documentary filmmakers work is that they go in and they go in and they live with the tribe but I didn't do that so I didn't necessarily get that the instant connection that I may have gotten with some people and some people were just suspicious and some people. The experiences that some people had on Black Bear were similar to experiences people had when they took LSD in a way, or a psychedelic drug, or mushrooms... it was all over the map.

Some people had a great time and some people really, really had some heavy times and tragedy, and some people look back at it as a non happy time.. If you look beyond the fashion of that time – it was a very turbulent era, the Vietnam war was raging, people were unsure of themselves – people had just come out of the 50's and suddenly they were told that uptight sexuality was bad and now they were in reaction a lot – I always think of the Marlon Brando film "The Wild One" as a good representative of the beginning of that era... you know he's kind of a motorcycle thug and they ask him, "Well what are you kids rebelling against anyway" and he said "Well, what do ya got?" You know, and that's Black Bear. They were kind of pre-hippy anyway, a little tougher, less airy – at least they thought so.

**How has your opinion of communes changed from the beginning of the film until the end of the film?**

You know its funny because maybe you seek out in the films that you make, um, the opposite of what you have, I'm someone who is from The City -- New York -- and even though I have a family and tribe there, at least I eventually figured out how to have that and created that but I never wanted to live with a group of people because the idea of that scares the hell out of me you know, so I don't know if I have any idea per say of communes.

One thing that made it of note to me was that when I was growing up, my friend Paul, my last film you know, literally Paul himself and I would hang out in Paul's room and we would smoke pot and watch these crazy films from the 70's on TV late at night, like "Go Ask Alice"... all these films about hippies and communes and Dragnet etc, and say "wow what is that? It looks really cool" and we would have that image, not so much the news

image of hippies because we were too young for that but more of the movie image of hippiedom and that alternative culture and say that's kinda cool.

We sort of laughed because in the films someone would take LSD and jump out of the window and you know maybe that happened once or something but the person was probably already unstable and would have done it anyway (laughing) terrible... So I didn't really have any particular image except knowing that communal life itself wasn't really something I would particularly want because of dirtiness, but probably could use it anyway. Peter Coyote who is in the film talks about how he couldn't deal with the messy part of communal life, and you know I'm a private person so you know...

**Would you live in a commune now?**

Would I live in a commune now? I think I would live in a cooperative housing kind of environment where. I don't know that is a good question... maybe if there was a trial period. I would definitely need my own house with me, a lover, kind of standard American life... live the way the pilgrims had it, to get together with your neighbors – or the way some people in suburbia have it, the rural life... in Black Bear for instance, some people just lived there in the country like the song “Going Up The Country” – who sang that song?

The idea of going back to nature has been a theme through the western civilization even from the very beginning, you know get back to get ourselves, back to the garden... so this is one of the early manifestations of that and rightly so because this group of people is very eclectic and very eccentric and some of them very committed.

**Which one of the characters that you interviewed do you think really warmed up to you the most or you really felt like you related to the most?**

That's a good question. I would say definitely Elsa. Elsa is like, I don't know how old she is now but she was telling me stories of hanging out with Janis Joplin, tripping out one day with her and her son, and everyone was having a good time but Janis was having a bad trip, you know, just looking at the dirt (laughing). So that's Janis...

Elsa has been around a long time and I feel very connected to her as an artist, and what happened was that I made my first cut of the film and I showed it to the Black Bear people, a lot of different people and some people said, “well this sucks! This isn't us” and others said “maybe we should make our own film” and some guy I didn't even know showed up out of the woodwork and said “we'll get an editor ourselves and we'll cut it together out here in California” and I was like “who the fuck are you? You know? I've been working on this for three years (laughing). And someone wanted to start again.. all these voices.. and then Elsa got up and said “Leave Jonathan alone. He's creating art.” Actually finally some Black Bear kid sent me an email and said: “Don't let it get to you...it's always like this.” He made me understand that the seemingly insane conversation was an essential part of their trip.

So, yeah Elsa's come along on to some festivals with the film... and I also kind of connect with Coyote as another working artist and as a Jewish male from the East Coast, that's what he is, and as someone who works in the media.. And he was also there in the Sixties from the beginning... Also Richard Marley as the tough ass Brooklyn guy -- Elsa's ex, Richard was kind of a beatnik friend of Ginsburg and that crowd but also very connected to progressive movements in the U.S. I felt very connected to Richard; he wanted a better world, the sweetest guy, because a lot of the communes didn't stick together because of greed... they put the deed in Richard's name for the land in 1968 for 22,000 dollars and he held it and then in 1986 he gave it back when they figured out how to turn it into the land trust.

When I first called Richard he was like "I'm not going to be in your fucking movie". Something like "I'm not doing it" and I was thinking great, this is going to turn into something, some sort of myth when's he comes around and does it. Which he did. I always think of myths when I start to get ideas for these movies. This idea of kind of going back to Joseph Campbell... this kind of hero as old man who is sweeping up, the janitor, and that's who Richard is in the movie this old, crusty super of the building, who turns out to be the working class hero. I love this paradox. And at the end of our shooting he was like "You guys are alright." Richard was half Irish and half ghetto Jewish and he was a communist spy on the waterfront. Literally working for the Soviets. His mom was the editor for the socialist/communist paper, "The Morningstar."

Now he gives another idea of how that world meant to the people from the Depression because for Richard, he would see people getting kicked out of their buildings like my father would. and you would move from building to building because they would give you the month for free. People would get thrown out in the street and Richard saw the Communist party who he said would come and move people back in and help them out... and wow people were actually helping people out in the streets... so it was a whole history there, the red diaper baby thing; and he came to the waterfront and got involved in the union thing as a longshoreman and some of the espionage stuff.. one of the first Westerners in the Czech Republic. I think it shows through the films I make that there is a kind of affectionate connection with the people that propels the story along, hopefully.

**You said you had to cut down or cut out of some of the stories in order to make the film flow. How many people did you actually interview?**

I don't know... I'd say around 40 or 50. It was actually kind of a casting process so we might do five minutes with certain people and realize it wasn't right. One could take the Black Bear story and make a ton of different films about it. I just kind of went with my intuition and who seemed to be strong and who was willing too. We talked to a lot of different people and just started narrowing it down, thank god.

A big theme of that era and you get a little bit of it in the film, in the 70's there was this book called "The Whole Earth Catalog" telling you "Here's how to do Composting" and "Here's how you do.. you know, free telephone calls" or your own plumbing, and so on... The idea of sharing information orally and for free -- like the open source computer

crowd. One of the question for us when we came to Black Bear was “How did you get here and who told you about us?”... and there was that sense.. and you know I could have made a very different film if I had wanted to. I guess I could have shown some horrific thing there were many, and some are in there (laughing).. or they could make their own film and it could be a good double feature (laughing)...

**You have some pretty funny people from the public, you know, neighbors, and I’m wondering how they reacted to the idea of you making a film about Black Bear? They were such stand out characters... especially the gentlemen in the beginning...**

Oh, you are talking about Hoss Bennett and Merle. They were great and the locals were incredible. One of the things I learned in the process, and I don’t know if you get this in the film, but I saw that the hippies became more redneck and the rednecks became more hippie. So then they became aware of each other and then you bring in the Indians/Native Americans and Hoss was a Native American, Merle’s friend... they were buddies and pals and it was weird because it was like a piece out of a Tom Robbins book -- there was this environment with these young hippie-ish women who was Hoss’s nurse, and drunken Merl and the cousin, and the roosters in the junkyard...and it felt like there was some kind of magic in the air.

In that part of the Northwest, there were a lot of locals that were kind of loner-miner types and at first they kind of those “Ohhhh there they go, a bunch of hippies movin in down there, and there are mating, you know, flower children” and stuff, kind of a freaked out buzz around all of that, but it was all in a very, very remote area and I don’t think they even had phone service until about 18 or 20 years ago... almost a 3<sup>rd</sup> world.. almost all natural forest and according to some people the government would actually like to just get everyone out of there so that they can sell off the land to International Paper or to other corporations which is what they seem to be doing.

So they have more time up there and the locals really take their time talking and telling their stories and I was going up there as a city person thinking that I could get the whole story in a couple of days and its not like that.. you could ask one person a question.. and there was this one old man that was talking and smoking his pipe, which I later realized was a pot pipe and he was half hippie/ half redneck and we started talking about Black Bear and all the good things and the bad things about it and suddenly the conversation had shifted and we were talking about the molecules on your hand and connecting that to the peptides in your brain and I was like following this conversation for forty five minutes on one tape and its incredible. I came really wanting to impose my view on how people should communicate... like come on and give me the snappy, witty answer and they couldn’t necessarily do that. Up in Siskiyou County, you stop your car when you run into someone because there are so few people, that they park their both cars in different directions and they ask “How is Jim, how are the kids” maybe bring out a beer or a joint and talk about the neighbors. It’s a good way of transmitting information. It’s like the internet but more fun.

I don't think that cell phones still work there, it's beyond rural wilderness. After Black Bear made it through that first winter the locals and hippies got more together.. They discovered the Native Indians, one tribe especially called the Karuk. There's a lot of tribes up in that area. Michael Tierra met with them and they taught folks about herbs and they would bring over wine and fish and the people of Black Bear would have their thing going too... with their garden but they never grew pot there because they always understood that it might endanger the land.

**Do you think there is a point where the story ever gets lost?**

I don't think that the story ever gets lost but you need to remember that we edited this thing over a period of a year. The editing part of the film was quite a process... I am a very big fan of traditional storytelling – other nontraditional ways are good too but I seem to have my hands full of traditional ones and I think they work for me. Structuring almost 130 hours of footage into a story that had a beginning, middle and end into a way that made sense definitely took some time.

I started with one seasoned editor and we had a fancy loft in NYC with a view of the Chrysler Building, editing a film about rural California in black leather jackets on the Lower East Side, of course. She left quickly and suddenly, muttering something about how she was “too old to do this kind of job” and how she had a mortgage and stuff. So we moved down a step to a less fancy environment and my new editor Marisa was great, a hard worker and then she thought it was done, but it definitely wasn't so I met this famous script supervisor named Michael Taylor and he was becoming an editor and Michael poured himself into the project. And then I moved out to California and it was me editing with an intern that I met from Craig's list and he worked really hard and then he was burnt and then it was just ME editing in my in my 2<sup>nd</sup> bedroom, and then finally I was editing on a LAPTOP, and I watched it and I gave in. I had heard from the festivals but I knew that it was *something*. And it was somehow now all OK, the not getting into Sundance or Slamdance, because it was late in the game after Thanksgiving. But I knew the film would find its way.

Of course minutes later Slamdance called and said we want to show the film, we love it, and that's led to lots of opportunities.. The whole process edit took over a year, probably two, with test screenings to see how many stories and characters audiences could mentally handle in one film, because we had months where people weren't even getting the plot.

I showed an middle period cut to one guy who was an executive producer and writer, kind of a famous character from the 70's who co-produced *Days of Heaven* and he said “I can't believe... I really wanted to like this.. and he said: “I can't believe this is the same filmmaker who made *My Friend Paul*. This is just terrible” (laughing) and I said don't beat around the bush – tell me what you really think!” (laughing)... I actually like that kind of honesty... and we have pages and pages of notes of interviews with 30 or 40 people that we tested the film with and some of them liked it and some of them didn't.

**Have you gotten any other people in the commune world involved with the film – for example it is screening in New York and L.A. soon and have you contacted many people there about it?**

There is a lot of people supporting the ideas expressed in commune as well as various forms of collective living itself. We welcome those wanting to help create a grassroots system or plan to get the information out there for people to know about us and the screenings but we don't necessarily have the manpower to do that now and you know we love to show it and share it to open discussion... and not just give it to communities and ask them if they can use the film but how can we help you with the work you are doing... like would it help you to have a 12 minute module of the film because we are open to that... we want to help them with their work in some companies like BioDiesel or changing the government to a more progressive system or something like that so... not trying to fit our round peg in their square hole.. but see what they want and see how we can help them.

**You have this amazing old footage of Black Bear. How did you get it and where did it come from?**

I think it was Sir Edmund Hillary who said something like “all good things happen when you really commit to something” and that's what happened when we started to really commit to the project, then things started really popping up. Like people from Black Bear said you should really look into getting footage from this film called *Milestones*, that's the color footage, this Robert Kramer, the avant-garde filmmaker shot here, he did this sprawling epic, colorful documentary... so that's where that came from. Then the black and white stuff was really crazy. It appeared from Elsa through Martin who knew this guy who knew another guy who did this thing called the Tribal Vision and he traveled around the country in a van and filmed going from commune to commune... something between the internet and the Pony Express. He shot with the first portable video camera called the Port-a-pak, really fascinating, a giant portable video camera which was revolutionary at that point.

He got the gear and he filmed the people at communes and people could say hi on camera and then he would just take it on in his van to the next place and folks could watch it there. 20 or so years later, this guy Loren had these tapes somewhere in his basement in Oregon just rotting away, literally reel to reel video tapes and I called him and he finally got back to me and we managed to save that footage which also contains some really rare native American footage and we transferred it at the Bay Area Video Coalition where they have one of the last Port-a-Pak machines, one of those should be in the Smithsonian because it is one of the original video cameras. In the modern format we looked at the footage and at first there was only like a half hour of Black Bear and we were disappointed because we had paid to transfer 10 hours of footage,.

Marisa our first editor, looked at it closer, I'm not that good with faces, but she looked at it and said, “Hey.. is that.. I think that is Elsa” and we got so excited and then it became really obvious that it was Elsa but it was hard because we had been looking at just raw

footage... It was an amazing find and really saved the film.. has a lot of texture.. a lot of authenticity. They have tremendous photograph archive... like 3,000 photos, including some shot by Jock Sturges which are great but we wound up not using, they were almost too good, didn't fit the homemade nature of the film...

### **What are these people doing now?**

The original Black Bear Ranch people are... many of them wind up doing – if some of them were involved in progressive activities before then they continue doing that and even if the Black Bear experience revolutionized them, it didn't change who they are. They had similar goals... yes, one guy is a land developer, although I suppose he would say he does “Green Building” and he probably does, I don't know. Elsa is an artist, Richard was a building super and a revolutionary; Osha is an activist lawyer and artist, Peter Coyote who was a regular visitor is now an actor and political activist. A lot of people taking what they learned back to the city -- Kenoli is working and living with a cooperative housing group.

People in Black Bear now... as I said they managed to save the place unlike a lot of other places and are looking to turn it into a Land Trust, which everyone who has spent a winter there is part signatories so in order for it to be sold, then everyone who ever wintered there would have to agree... they concocted a legal scheme that would keep it free land forever

Now what happens is that it is a perfect place for suspect types to hang out... when Jerry died, the Deadheads dispersed and a lot of them went up to populate Black Bear. It's been tough, having its ups and downs and periods where only one or two people live there, but maybe in the summer more. They are definitely actively looking for people to come up and look over the ranch – right now I think there may be 4 or 5 people and I think they started for the first time to ask people a few simple application questions.... There's been a kind of sullyng of the hippie scene with drugs, not just the sort of “mind expanding” vibe anymore but now taking more violent drugs or just a more rattled perspective on life, like people in the rural territories taking meth. A commune could be a perfect place to hide out and they the Bears, want to stay away from that.

So they are looking for new people.. And one thing I didn't mention is that while a lot of the people from Black Bear went back to the city, a lot settled in the area, many took what they learned from the ranch and remained up there. There is something called the Salmon River Restoration Council and they are working with other environmental activists and likeminded groups to help enact progressive laws and protect the environment, a multi-million dollar effort, various things with dams and working with tribes... I've heard it's one of the most underdeveloped watersheds in the world, a big chunk of delicious wilderness land up in Northern California.

### **Thanks**

Thank you. And leave it on.

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