LILYHAMMER on Netflix
Anne Bjørnstad & Eilif Skodvin:
Co-Creators/Head Writers

Described as “one part Fargo, a dash of Sopranos and a full serving of pure Scandinavian charm,”1 Lilyhammer effectively walks the line between dark comedy and crime-drama. A Norwegian-US co-production, the show was co-written by and stars Steven Van Zandt (who in fact portrayed deadly mob consigliore Silvio Dante on HBO’s The Sopranos). In this series, he plays fictional New York gangster, Frank “The Fixer” Tagliano—but not for long. In the first episode, Frank is indoctrinated into the Federal Witness Protection Program after testifying against his former mob boss. Frank chooses Lillehammer, Norway, a place he’d only seen on TV during the 1994 Winter Olympics, and a place so remote that Frank believes no one will ever find him. He’s also given a new identity as Norwegian-American immigrant, Giovanni ‘Johnny’ Henriksen. (For those confused about the spelling of the show’s locale versus the spelling of the title, Lilyhammer is in homage to Frank’s beloved dog, Lily—who’s killed in the pilot episode trying to protect Frank from an assassination attempt.)

For a sense of tone and plotting, consider the pilot episode’s main storyline:

*On his train journey from Oslo to Lillehammer, Frank (heretofore Johnny) impresses teacher Sigrid Haugli (Marian Saastad Ottesen), her son Jonas (Mikael Aksnes-Pehrson), and a man who later turns out to be a civil supervisor. Johnny befriends the Hauglis after doing them a favor. Settling into his new home, Johnny feels lonely and forlorn and tries to avoid the eccentric Northern Exposure2-esque locals.*

After a wolf kills Jonas’s lamb, and the residents complain that authorities are doing nothing about it (interestingly, wildlife in Lillehammer have more legal rights than humans), outraged city slicker Johnny recruits his new acquaintances, brothers Torgeir (Trond Fausa Aurvag) and Roar Lien (Steiner Sagen), to help him hunt down the predator. After killing the wolf and disposing of its carcass Jimmy Hoffa-style, the heroic hunters hide in a lake cabin owned by Jan Johansen (Fridtjov Såheim), a local NAV worker with whom Johnny immediately clashed

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1 Tom Hardin, Cultural Weekly, 2/19/14.

2 *Northern Exposure*, created by Joshua Brand & John Falsey, was a critically acclaimed 1-hour drama series that aired on CBS from 1990-95. It centered on a newly graduated doctor from New York, Dr. Joel Fleischman (Rob Morrow) who's required to set up his practice in the rural (fictional) town of Cicely, Alaska, where he struggles with culture shock and assimilation amid its eccentric locals.
upon arrival; finding and pilfering naked photos of underage girls ostensibly taken by pervert Johansen, Johnny is able to blackmail him to rubber stamp and expedite Johnny's own takeover of a local bar and club. Meanwhile, the supervisor, who heard shots and saw the Lien brothers in the woods the night Johnny killed the wolf, reported them to the police. However, when Johnny's neighbor, the ultra-suspicious police chief Laila Hovland (Anne Krigsvoll) and police officer Geir Tvedt (Kyrr Hellum) question the trio, the supervisor remembers Johnny's favor on the train and vouches for Johnny and absolves the Lien brothers from any blame.

Later, Hovland and Tvedt become suspicious of Johnny when he opens his nightclub, the Flamingo. When the local biker gang attempts to start a war with Johnny, he hires them to deliver the club's alcohol supply.

In a later episode, Laila gifts Geir a trip to his idol Elvis' mansion, Graceland, in Memphis. While stopped in New York, Geir learns that Johnny bears a similarity to vanished criminal Frank Tagliano and attempts to investigate.

*Lilyhammer* was shot on location during 2011, with the series premiering in Norway in January 2012. The series was commissioned by NRK1, and produced by Rubicon TV in association with Netflix and German-owned distributor Red Arrow International. The second season's production was delayed due to Van Zandt's schedule with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's Wrecking Ball Tour. The 8-episode third season began filming in January 2014, with Netflix remaining the exclusive U.S. broadcaster. *Lilyhammer* has been sold to over 130 countries worldwide.

I chatted via Skype with husband and wife/longtime writing partners, Anne Bjørnstad and Eilif Skodvin, who live in Oslo with their young son and daughter. Seemingly a million miles away from Hollywood, Anne and Eilif are down-to-earth, unpretentious, hard-working parents, equally thrilled and humbled by the unexpected global success of *Lilyhammer*.

**Neil Landau:** You've created such a fresh, unique show. Where did you learn to create such distinctive characters and plotlines as television creators?

**Eilif Skodvin:** We were both originally comedy writers.

**Anne Bjørnstad:** We started working together in 1999. At that time we had already worked a couple of years apart on different shows. We wrote for sketch comedy shows, but mostly late night shows similar to Conan O'Brien—also more topical and politically incorrect panels. We also wrote for comedians on stage, and we’d written a half-hour drama series on TV2 in...
Norway. In the early days, NRK and TV 2 were the only drama commissioners here, but with exposure to other territories and the Internet and Netflix it's a completely different TV market.

**NL:** Yes, we tend to be so America-centric. There’s a whole world of original TV programming in other countries that most people in the US have no awareness of. One of the exciting things about Netflix is that they’ve united the world through a variety of programming. Ted Sarandos’ [Netflix’s Head of Originals] wife was a US Ambassador, and he’s like the Ambassador of Entertainment. Netflix is all over the world.

**ES:** This was a great surprise for us, to have our show on Netflix with half of the dialogue in Norwegian with English subtitles.

**AB:** We thought that Americans would be sceptical because of the subtitles.

**NL:** How did the show end up as a Netflix “Original” series?

**ES:** Steven Van Zandt was the visionary for getting the show into the US market. When we pitched the show we thought we’d make a Norwegian show and see what happens. He said, “No, this can travel.” He saw the opportunity with Netflix.

**AB:** At that time, Netflix wasn’t something we’d heard of in Norway.

**ES:** Steven was like, “How are we going to pitch this? Will they want to dub it?” And Ted Sarandos said, “No, we’ll subtitle and air it as is.” It was, at that time, a very surprising attitude.

**AB:** I think it was a bold move to pick our show to be the first on Netflix. It’s such a strange show in many ways.

**NL:** Having the Norwegian and keeping the original language is one of the things that makes the show so good. You aren’t making fun of Lillehammer or its citizens. You’re showing the authenticity, texture, and nuance of the characters and their lives. I want to visit Lillehammer now! Sure, it’s a freezing cold climate, but there’s such warmth that comes through each character. The high value placed on community and family is refreshing. When I watch, I can tell you really love this community and your characters. Nobody is just black and white. It’s very grounded and rooted in real emotion. I’ll admit that when I first saw only the pilot I presumed it would be the same fish-out-of-water gags, but with each subsequent episode it just got better and went deeper. It seems like you made the show you wanted to make.

**ES:** Yes, absolutely. For us it was a fun collaboration with Steven Van Zandt. We wrote it with him, and he brought his New York sensibility to our knowledge of Norwegian culture.
AB: It’s good to hear that you feel the warmth. We want people to laugh.

NL: I feel like only you two could have written this show. It’s a wonderful combination of local color, authenticity and specificity. How did Steven Van Zandt get involved with this project?

AB: We had this idea of a mob guy who wanted to relocate in Lillehammer because of the Olympics held there. I think the idea came about a few years before working with Steven. We thought it could be a good idea for a movie or a book. We didn’t think it could be a TV series.

ES: The last decade or so, we’ve been experiencing more TV series that are basically movie concepts. They have more characters and longer arcs, and we sensed having this idea—we’re working in TV, maybe we should try that. We got some interest and started working on Episode 1.

AB: We were in our summerhouse and had just had our first child. We had always thought Steven would be a nice choice for the lead. We wanted someone American and recognizable.

ES: We also knew that Steven would understand this type of idea because he produces music in Norway and Sweden. He would understand that this isn’t just a show about a mob guy sleeping in the snow, but a clash of cultures. It’s social ethos clashing against a social democratic quiet way of life—communities quite opposed to the lone strong man. We had a feeling that he would understand that part of the story. And we basically saw that he was playing locally with this band in Bergen.

AB: So we set up a meeting through some contacts in the music industry. We packed the baby and we went to meet him. The girl who set up the meeting for us was freaking out because we had brought our 6-week old, but Steven understood from the first moment that this was going to be something else. Our first meeting with Steven and our baby had a bit of a Lilyhammer vibe.

ES: Basically our first meeting with Steven was great. He had a lot of business appointments that day and hearing this pitch, a fresh idea, was invigorating. We knew it would be a creative partnership from the get-go. He invited us to New York and it was important for him to be creatively involved. We also felt that it was good to co-write the show and have the other perspective in the writers’ room. When we had a draft of Episode 1, we sent it over and started talking it over. We really never had any other ideas for the lead. He was our first choice, and we’d met him quite early.

NL: Were there any large changes or suggestions that he had that were different from your original vision, things that were important to him in the early stages that you hadn’t thought about until he got involved?
AB: Of course. We were creative partners so there were certainly things we wouldn’t have thought of. We had this idea that the character comes to Norway and wants to start a bar, but hadn’t thought much about how the bar is supposed to be. That was something he felt strongly about.

ES: It's difficult when you work closely with someone to say, “This was my idea.” It’s a genuine partnership from that moment on.

AB: It’s not like he wanted something and we wanted something else. We came together and made something together. And it would have been different without him.

ES: He comes from a more dramatic world. We are comedy writers, so there was a balance that we had to find. But I see it as a show we made together.

NL: I love the blend of humor and danger. It could have been a high concept movie. You created a way to sustain the show over multiple seasons. You have the crime story, the love story, the labor union, the customers at the bar. One of the most compelling aspects of the show, besides the clash between this Italian mobster in Lillehammer, is the tension between the locals with the Arabs and Muslims. You have a microcosm of the world. So while Season 1 is about new beginnings, Season 2 seems to focus on the themes of integration and assimilation. Are there a lot of Arabs living in Lillehammer and why was it important to introduce other immigrants?

ES: Like all European countries, we have immigrants in Norway. We have significantly less than Sweden, but for us the immigration theme was important for the story from the start because we wanted Frank Tagliano to be an immigrant in Norway. We wanted him to go through that experience. It’s prominent in both seasons.

AB: He isn’t some ordinary “helpless” immigrant. This is someone who will strike back. The idea is Frank comes to Lillehammer and it’s not quite what he expected. And the region got an immigrant who is different from what they expected, too.

NL: I found the tension between the locals and the Muslim family, in particular, fascinating. You can see how being in Lillehammer is changing Frank and he’s becoming more open-minded. It shows how acceptance instead of exclusion can bring people together. It’s a great undercurrent running through the stories. Because Steven lives in New York and you shoot on location in Norway, how did you work the logistics for production? Do you cross board episodes and shoot all of his scenes, in all or most episodes, at once?

ES: Yes, as much as possible. Steven would travel here for extended periods of time. He has also been touring and there has been some back and forth.
**AB:** The first season he was here for 1 week, then a week in New York, and the next week here in Oslo.

**ES:** He has a good work ethic. He doesn’t mind working a little bit to achieve his aims. For us, it was nearly impossible to write very much before production started because, when we started to work with Netflix, they wanted the second season in 5 or 6 months, and we don’t have writers’ rooms. It was just the 2 of us and Steven. And then we hired 2 or 3 other guys for the next seasons.

**AB:** When we were writing and filming and editing the show, all of the processes were going on simultaneously.

**ES:** A lot of European shows, you’ll find people starting production with 8 episodes already written.

**AB:** Normally, the production companies aren’t comfortable going into production without the scripts written in advance.

**NL:** What’s your writing process for the episodes and the season?

**ES:** It’s different, season to season. We are originally comedy writers, as we said. We like to have a broad picture of where we are going and then outline each episode in large detail and write it. But we don’t have a detailed arc of each character; we keep it broad. For the first season we knew the New York guys would come to get Frank in the end, and we had a big picture idea of what would happen, but not very detailed.

**AB:** And we knew Norway was going to be an antagonist to Frank. We had this idea that in every episode he was going to be confronted with a different part of the Norwegian system.

**ES:** For Season 2 and even more for Season 3, we did more detailed, longer, storylines in advance of writing the episodes.

**NL:** Did you talk about a theme? How important is an overarching theme for you for the season and each episode?

**ES:** I would say the themes, such as integration, were important but not on a seasonal level.

**NL:** Season 1 was produced by Rubicon TV in Oslo. When did Netflix come on board?

**AB:** Netflix got involved towards the end of our shooting Season 1.

**ES:** Still, they were quite important to have the resources to make it, the music for example.
**AB:** We had some extra months of post-production.

**NL:** I love the music. It sets the tone and adds a whole other layer. The jazz juxtaposed with the more local folk music.

**ES:** That's Steven's vision for the music. He wanted original music. And if he hadn't gotten Netflix on board, it would have been quite different.

**NL:** How has having Netflix air the show changed your lives and your careers?

**AB:** It’s been extremely interesting to be part of this digital television revolution. I’d never heard of Netflix before Steven mentioned it. And when I told people it sold to them they all said, “Net-what?” It was just some foreign streaming thing at the time. No big deal. In just a couple of years, everyone has Netflix and everyone watches it. It’s been interesting to be part of that. It wasn’t something I expected to happen in my career. Our daily lives haven’t changed that much, basically because we have small children.

**NL:** It appears that Season 3 is the final season. Do you know what you’ll be doing next?

**ES:** We also work with other projects for different channels in our market. What was great about this experience for us was to make an international show. We met Steven and there was no design, no producer having a vision to bring different cultures together.

**AB:** Our idea was not designed to make funding easier. Everyone is always looking for co-production. This was how our idea was from the start and it was so great to be able to explore it.

**ES:** That will change our approach going forward. If we have an idea with another person in a different culture, we’ll pitch it to them and fight to have an international audience. It’s exciting to work with people from different backgrounds. Musician turned gangster actor, writing together with some Norwegian comedy writers—that’s a great experience for all of us and is something we’ll explore in the future as well.

**NL:** You are a great inspiration to all of us. It all starts with an idea. You followed your dream—and it came true.