



Magnolia Pictures

Presents

COCAINE COWBOYS

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY

BILLY CORBEN and ALFRED SPELLMAN

PRESS NOTES

118 min.; 35 mm.; 1.85:1; Dolby SR

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FILMMAKERS

Director/Producer

Producer

Executive Producers

Music Composer/ Performer

Director of Photography

Editors

Billy Corben

Alfred Spellman

Bruno del Granado

Daniela Manas

Jan Hammer

Armando Salas

Billy Corben

David Cypkin



SHORT SYNOPSIS

The cocaine trade of the 70s and 80s had an indelible impact on contemporary Miami. Smugglers and distributors forever changed a once sleepy retirement community into one of the world's most glamorous hot spots, the epicenter of a \$20 billion annual business fed by Colombia's Medellin cartel. By the early 80s, Miami's tripled homicide rate had made it the murder capital of the country, for which a *Time* cover story dubbed the city "Paradise Lost."

With *COCAINE COWBOYS*, filmmaker Billy Corben – whose first feature *Raw Deal: A Question Of Consent*, was a sensation at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival – paints a dazzling portrait of a cultural explosion that still echoes as Hollywood myth, evidenced by the latest manifestation, NBC/Universal's *Miami Vice*. Composer of the original "Miami Vice" theme, Jan Hammer, provides the score.



COCAINE COWBOYS

The history of modern-day Miami is inextricably linked to the boom in the cocaine trade there some 25 years ago. How and why this boom occurred is the subject of COCAINE COWBOYS, a thoroughly researched, fast-paced look inside the world of the South Florida drug trade and its henchman known as the “Cocaine Cowboys.”

COCAINE COWBOYS is presented almost as a triptych: the business of how cocaine was imported and distributed, the insanely copious amounts of money being made and its impact on the city’s economy, and the violence that consumed the city during this era.

Says director Billy Corben, “It was logical to give time to each facet of the drug industry: the logistics of the business, the money, and the violence, because each gave rise to the next. It was the way it unfolded in the era. But we also found this approach made for the most dramatic and powerful telling. Ultimately, we return to the subject of money, since after the smoke cleared from the Cocaine Wars, a stunning skyline had risen.”

The genesis of COCAINE COWBOYS took hold when Corben was introduced to former trafficker Jon Roberts.

“Ever since Sundance,” Corben explains, “people routinely approach Alfred and me with what they think are ‘great ideas’ for documentary subjects. Family, friends and strangers routinely introduce us to ‘interesting people.’ Well, one day I was actually introduced to a *really* interesting person -- Jon Pernell Roberts. I called Alfred and asked if that name meant anything to him. He instantly rattled off the guy’s entire life story to me -- Alfred knew all about this guy!”

Says Spellman, “Growing up in South Florida, I’d read every book written about Miami in this era. Billy and I had discussed for many years what kind of piece we could do about this era and it finally seemed we were onto something.”

“Once we had access to Jon, we set the wheels in motion,” Corben adds. “We were introduced to Mickey Munday shortly thereafter, they both agreed to speak on camera and Alfred struck a pen pal relationship with some of the more colorful incarcerated characters from the era who turned up in our research.”

Roberts is the slick, extroverted New York transplant, a former cocaine trafficker and distributor of over \$2 billion worth of cocaine for the Medellin Cartel. Munday is a pilot who smuggled over 10 tons of cocaine from Colombia to the United States.

“The key for us was to have access to crucial players who could relay their firsthand experience in each of our areas of focus,” Corben observes. “Not only the cops, lawyers and journalists who lived through it, but also the people who actually made it all happen. We needed to talk to the guys who smuggled tons of cocaine, made and spent hundreds of millions of dollars and also the guys who pulled the triggers on the MAC-11s.”



Both Roberts and Mundy did time for their crimes, but today are free men. However, as they share their stories with the filmmakers, even a casual viewer will notice that they continue to revel in their exploits.

Mundy, for example, talks about developing a number of ingenious coke delivery techniques, such as water-proof canisters with radio transmitters for open-ocean drops and the clever land-transport ploy of stashing drugs in cars and then using a tow truck to haul the cars to their destinations.

In the latter technique, Mundy explains, the tow-truck driver would have plausible deniability about his load in case he was pulled over by the police.

“I think Jon and Mickey were willing to talk because they understand the historical significance of their contribution to this era of Miami's history,” explains Corben. “Trafficking and smuggling were large and very important parts of their lives, for which they both paid a dear price. But I don't think that they're ‘proud’ of what they did *per se*. But Mickey, for example, *is* proud of his accomplishments as the engineer and architect who revolutionized the drug smuggling business. His audacious and creative strategies and equipment forever changed the way law enforcement dealt with traffickers.”

In addition to interviews with Roberts and Mundy, the film also uses archival footage of TV news reports to illustrate the extraordinary impact all of that money had on Florida's economy. We see stories about Miami banks running out of space to store cash deposits. Forced to buy sophisticated money counting machines, we see how the banks counted their piles of currency and then shipped them to the local branch of the Federal Reserve. One piece of footage reports that, on average, banks nationwide turned over about \$12 million annually to the Federal Reserve; but in Miami during that period, local banks were sending upward of \$600 million to the Fed. In the early Eighties, the Miami Branch of the Federal Reserve had \$6 billion cash surplus, greater than all branches in the US combined.

“We have an outstanding resource in South Florida called the Wolfson Florida Moving Image Archive,” says Corben, “a collection of decades of local news packages, tourism films, private home movies and every other piece of film and video about Florida they can find. The archival footage in COCAINE COWBOYS comes primarily from the Archives. Everyone at the Moving Image Archive was extremely supportive of the project.”

To give viewers a sense of the very real violence wrought by the Cocaine Wars, the filmmakers devote a considerable amount of time to an on-camera interview they completed in prison with convicted contract killer Jorge “Rivi” Ayala. At once relaxed and revealing, but somehow never remorseful, Rivi recounts hit after hit he made on behalf of his boss, the “queen of cocaine,” Griselda Blanco (“La Madrina,” also known as the Black Widow).

A Colombian with an insatiable blood-lust, Blanco is credited with almost single-handedly creating the heartless bloodshed for which Miami became infamous in the 80s as she warred with other dealers. Retired police Detective Al Singleton explains that when Blanco moved her operation to Los Angeles in 1984, Miami's unprecedented homicide rate plummeted. As



COCAINE COWBOYS draws to a close, we learn that Blanco was never apprehended and is still at large.

COCAINE COWBOYS confirms that Miami in the 80s was ground zero for the nation's violent cocaine business, but it also shows how drug-smuggling made the city what it is today; how the cash that overwhelmed the banks helped fund many development projects that permanently changed the skyline.

The cultural landscape was also changed as Hollywood exploited the violence and crime in such films as SCARFACE and the "Miami Vice" television series and the new MIAMI VICE film opening from NBC/Universal this summer.

Corben hopes COCAINE COWBOYS will become a part of the "Miami cannon."

"For decades," he observes, "audiences have had a fascination with all things Miami -- particularly material inspired by our most notorious years. Oliver Stone spent a lot of time down here researching his screenplay for SCARFACE, which not only faithfully adapted the Howard Hughes original, but ingeniously incorporated an abundance of historical facts into his otherwise fictional American Dream story. COCAINE COWBOYS puts all of that into context and proves how true to life those works of fiction actually are."

Though COCAINE COWBOYS is a nonfiction history, anyone who sees the film will likely think of it as a zippy, fast-paced chronology...an impression to which the film's editing style and Jan Hammer's score surely owes a great deal.

"Co-editor David Cypkin and I set out to devise an editing style that would best serve the story," Corben explains.

"The first thing we were faced with was an abundance of material -- 160 hours of interview footage, 50 hours of archival footage, 1000 still photographs," he continues. The challenge was packing all this incredible information and these fascinating stories into something under two hours. Fast cuts, loud music, lots of white (no fades to black -- only white) all seemed to work best. As we shaved the movie down to its current running time, the pace began to quicken to the point where people would say, 'Wow, it feels like you're on cocaine watching this movie!'"

Director Corben credits producer Spellman with securing Jan Hammer for the score.

"Alfred called up Jan's manager and sent him some info on the project and a copy of RAW DEAL, and the response was extremely positive. So Alfred and I went up to Jan's farm in upstate New York and screened about 45 minutes of rough footage from "Cocaine Cowboys" for him and that settled it -- he was in!

"After that, we worked entirely by phone," says Corben. "We sent Jan videotapes, had hours-long spotting sessions on the phone, and he would email music files or ship down CDs. He wrote the



theme music about halfway through post-production so that we could edit the main title sequence to his music.

“I’ll never forget the first time I heard it, that twanging electric guitar put the ‘cowboy’ into COCAINE COWBOYS. And the rest of the score is just as amazing -- as good, if not better than his best "Miami Vice" material. Jan writes the best driving-in-Miami-at-night-with-the-top-down music!”



ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Billy Corben, a South Florida native, has worked all over the world as a producer, director, actor and writer for over 20 years. Corben and his producing partner, Alfred Spellman, formed their first production company in 1994 while both were sophomores in high school, and together they made several award-winning shorts.

RAW DEAL: A Question of Consent (2001), the duo's first feature documentary, was selected for the 2001 Sundance Film Festival where it played to great acclaim and not a little controversy, motivating a story that ran on page one of the notorious *New York Post* written by the paper's film critic. A harrowing look at an alleged gang rape that took place at a fraternity house on the campus of the University of Florida at Gainesville, RAW DEAL was shaped by Corben and Spellman by inter-cutting a series of *Rashoman*-like interviews with amateur video footage that was actually taken by the participants in the alleged gang-rape, footage that became available to the general public when the local prosecutor entered it into evidence.

RAW DEAL was rather famously acquired for theatrical distribution out of Sundance by Artisan Entertainment, though the company failed to release the film and has since been acquired by Lionsgate. In the meantime, RAW DEAL aired to great acclaim on the BBC and Spellman and Corben managed to get the rights to the film back from Artisan. RAW DEAL is an important part of Tanya Horeck's academic book Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film, published by Routledge in 2004.

Since RAW DEAL, Corben and Spellman launched their Miami-based production company, rakontur, with longtime collaborator David Cypkin. rakontur is currently in production on a documentary series entitled CLUBLAND, which chronicles the cutthroat world of the South Beach nightclub business.