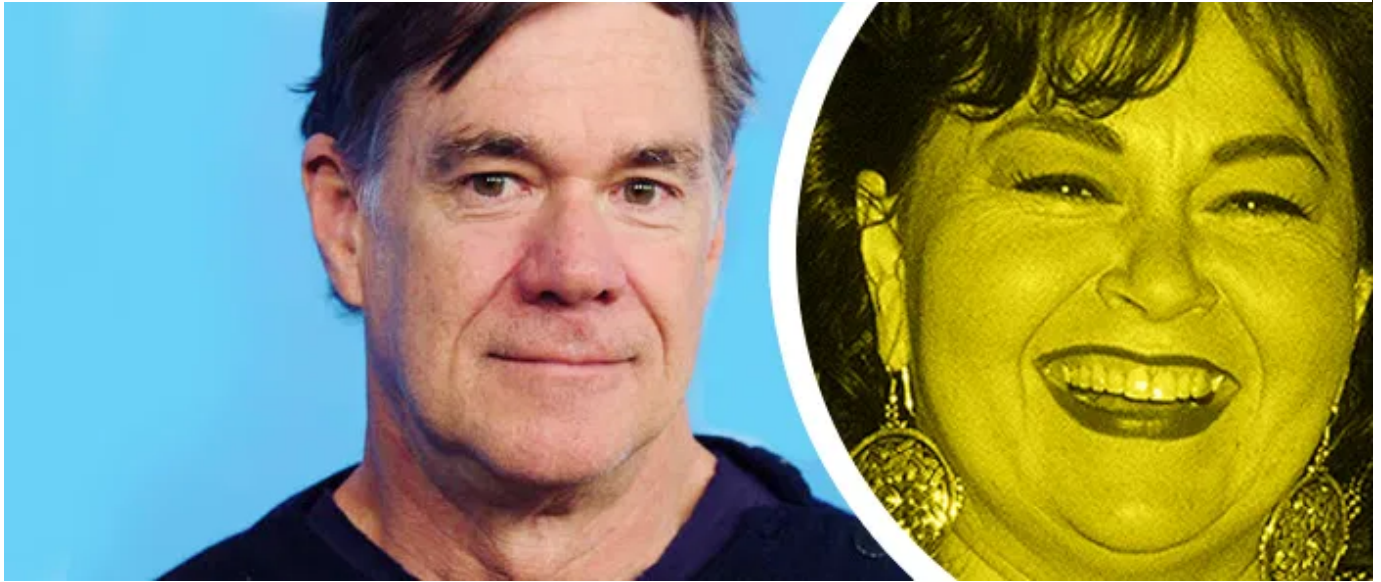


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EXCLUSIVE: 'DON'T WORRY' DIRECTOR GUS VAN SANT REMEMBERS MUCH DIFFERENT ROSEANNE ([HTTP://WEAREFLAGRANT.COM/EXCLUSIVE-DONT-WORRY-DIRECTOR-GUS-VAN-SANT-REMEMBERS-MUCH-DIFFERENT-ROSEANNE/](http://weareflagrant.com/exclusive-dont-worry-director-gus-van-sant-remembers-much-different-roseanne/))

By *Evan Lambert*

Imagine Jonah Hill's *Superbad* character, but wise and gay. Now imagine Joaquin Phoenix's rapper from *I'm Still Here*, but sad and wheelchair-bound. Now just imagine Jack Black but drunk, Rooney Mara but more backlit, a bunch of artful zooms, and that's *Don't Worry He Won't Get Far on Foot*.

Based on the memoir of the same name by Portland-based cartoonist John Callahan, *Don't Worry* follows the captivating — and at times powerful — journey of Callahan after a car accident leaves him bound to a wheelchair. However, the movie isn't so much about the trials and tribulations of a quadriplegic as it is about the inspiring recovery of an addict. Callahan, as played by Phoenix, grapples with Big Questions as he pursues group AA sessions led by a Jesus-haired Jonah Hill. And as an added bonus, these group AA sessions — introduced in non-linear fashion at the very beginning of the film — feature both Beth Ditto of Gossip and Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth. Plus, as a double bonus, Jonah Hill's character spends an entire scene shaking his booty. Finally, as a triple bonus, the movie features Jack Black as a rambunctious idiot who screws up Callahan's life forever. Perhaps the best bonus of all, though, is that Flagrant recently interviewed *Don't Worry's* director, Gus Van Sant.

Van Sant, who has spent the past thirty years blessing the world with gems like *My Own Private Idaho*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, *Milk*, and *Good Will Hunting*, trekked out to a Trump-owned (ugh) building in NYC last week to chat with *Flagrant* about the making of *Don't Worry*. As a bonus, he also brought along Kim Gordon, the Sonic Youth co-founder. Gordon currently comprises one half of the experimental electric guitar duo Body/Head, who have a new album, *The Switch*, out this week via Matador Records.

So read on to learn more about how Jonah Hill looks in Tom Petty drag and how Robin Williams and improvisation played huge parts in the creation of *Don't Worry*. There's even a surprising anecdote about Roseanne Barr that may throw some of you schadenfreude-lovers for a loop.

Gus Van Sant (third from right) flanked by "Don't Worry He Won't Get Far On Foot" cast at the Sundance Film Festival.

Flagrant: I was definitely not expecting to be in a Trump building today, but I appreciate the view.

Kim Gordon: Oh yeah. The hotel where we're staying used to be Trump as well. We're in the belly of the beast.

Flagrant: So I love the movie, I saw it last week. And Gus, I know that you were living near Callahan in Portland when Robin Williams and his wife approached you about turning his story into a film.

Gus Van Sant: Yeah, I knew John because he was in my neighborhood and I would see him around a lot. And then Robin Williams' wife called and they had two books. One was a Dan Savage book called *The Kid* and one was John Callahan's memoir. They were producing both films. I should've probably done *The Kid* instead, but Robin wasn't in *Kid*, he was producing it, whereas Robin was going to be John Callahan. So we developed a screenplay. And it sort of just went into the system and we didn't hear about it. And eventually, during this time of waiting, John Callahan was waiting too. And he was waiting long enough that at one point he said, "We're all going to be dead by the time this film's made." Which was a funny Callahan-style joke, but then Callahan died in 2010 of a respiratory condition and then Robin died in 2014.

Flagrant: I felt that the film's story beats about recovery comprised the more conventional narrative elements of the movie. What was it about this narrative of recovery that resonated with you on a personal level?

Van Sant: It was an amazing story. I was always either part of or on the fringes of different recovery stories. My own recovery is spotty and I'm still working on it. [laughs] But I knew a little bit about meetings, and I knew a little bit about group therapy, and I always found it fascinating. John,

in his description of it, was kind of a real graduate: somebody who's worked with people with disabilities as well as alcoholics. I think if they had a combination, that was his specialty.

Flagrant: Kim, what drew you to this project?

Gordon: Well, Gus. [laughs] I was in his movie *Last Days* [a 2005 film loosely based on the final days of Kurt Cobain], and it was just really interesting seeing his working methods. And I've known a lot of people who were drug addicts or alcoholics. I've never been to an AA meeting or Al-Anon [a group for loved ones of alcoholics] — although as someone with, I guess, a codependent type personality, somewhat had said, "You should go to Al-Anon, that would be helpful." So I was kind of interested to actually be in the middle of that

Joaquin Phoenix as cartoonist John Callahan in "Don't Worry..."

situation and see how that feels, and it also just kind of gave me insight into what my friends do when they go to meetings.

Flagrant: The film's opening therapy scene (<https://www.spin.com/2018/06/kim-gordon-beth-ditto-cameo-gus-van-sant-video/>) seemed so organic to me. I was wondering if there was any improvisation involved.

Gordon: Well, it was all improvised. My backstory was.

Van Sant: Your whole story.

Gordon: Yeah. I mean, the other scene I had done in *Last Days*, that was also improvised. I like improvising.

Van Sant: That was definitely the most fun: the group. We had our rehearsal period in an office. I think during that period I said, "You guys can talk. Talk whenever you want. It's a group." There wasn't like, "Wait for the line," that kind of stuff. Everyone could pitch in or add something. So I think there was already kind of a flavor of maybe a real meeting.

Kim Gordon in "Don't Worry."

Flagrant: Kim, what was it like working with Jonah Hill?

Gordon: He's fun, he's funny. He was just really friendly. He was just like, "I'm doing Pilates now." Well, I don't want to give away all of his secrets.

Flagrant: Fair enough. Gus, what did you feel Jonah brought to his character that made it pop? It was already a fantastic character.

Van Sant: Halfway through the book, you've kind of seen that Callahan needs some help. But all of a sudden, Callahan, who doesn't really relate to AA, is there and he doesn't know why he's there. There's a lot of businessmen and he's uncomfortable. He's really nervous. And then there's this guy [Hill's character] who, as Callahan says in the book, is irreverent and he's "rocking a Tom Petty look." Just the "rocking a Tom Petty look" sort of gave a certain image to him that — if the guy is at this Portland AA meeting and standing up and talking and looking like a Rockstar — gave the story a strange atmospheric attraction.

Phoenix and Jonah Hill in a scene from "Don't Worry."

So if it were [*Milk* star] Josh Brolin playing that character, maybe not. [laughs] But when we first met with Jonah, he mentioned the line because

that's the only reference you really get to what he looks like. And he thought that he was attracted to the idea. So then we thought, "Okay, if you're going to rock that look, we should try it out. You should come over to my house and we'll have Joe, my boyfriend, get one of his wigs or buy a wig and we'll see." And so he did, and I put a leather jacket on him because I thought maybe Tom Petty would wear leather jacket, and he looked pretty good. And also I think it made him feel different and act different, which is always really good.

Flagrant: Jack Black was a really cool and unexpected choice for the character of Dexter. Was he your first choice, and if so, what about the character made you think of him?

Van Sant: It was always Jack Black because Dexter was described as the loudest guy at the party, who is having a conversation with you all the way across the party, when you're like, "Who's this guy? We're talking but we're like yelling at each other." I didn't know anyone that could do that, except I'd seen some things that Jack was capable of doing. So I always thought of Jack, and I just assumed that he wasn't going to say yes, because to me it was so much like Jack that I thought he wouldn't want to play somebody close to him. Although I guess I was wrong.

Flagrant: He busts out some awesome dramatic acting in a later scene with Joaquin Phoenix. How many takes did that require?

Van Sant: Maybe only three takes per side. But everything they're saying, they're both making up on the spot. There's no script. Jack just came to our restaurant and there was literally no script. They were just going on their own characters.

Flagrant: I noticed you made a really good use of split screen and horizontal and vertical wipes in the film's montages. Of course there's a practical usage for that, but what were your artistic reasons for including it in the film?

Van Sant: That was a suggestion by Ted Hope, who was the executive of Amazon [the movie's distributor.] When we first met Ted he was like, "With your next draft of this, just make it as crazy as you want." He seemed to want to go farther than I was going in my screenplay. And then after we shot the film and assembled it, he saw the first cut and he thought that we could also go farther visually. And he said in the hospital scene [in which Callahan rehabilitates] that we should try a montage. So I thought, "Let's have different panels going by, like a screensaver."

Flagrant: It looks like I'm running out of time. Kim, what's up next for you?

Gordon: Well, I've got a Body/Head record coming out (<http://bodyheadmusic.com>). That's coming out July 13, the same day as Gus's movie premiere. And we're going to be doing some dates – East Coast and West Coast dates.

Flagrant: And Gus, the world needs to know: Was Roseanne Barr already unhinged when you directed her in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*?

Van Sant: No, she was very businesslike. I also remember something she did in 1991, so it was before *Cowgirls*. We [in the Portland community] had a fundraiser to fight an anti-gay initiative in Portland called Proposition 13, which, if it had passed, was meant to disallow gay state workers. So all gay teachers. And Danny Goldberg, he was ACLU ... He joined us to have this fundraiser at my agent's house. And Roseanne came with Tom Arnold – that was her husband's name – and they were the biggest donors. So just to add a positive note to all of that.

Gordon: How times have changed.

Roseanne in a scene from "Even Cowgirls Get The Blues."

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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