

DVD Review: 'You Don't Know Jack' Makes Case For Dr. Kevorkian

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on November 3, 2010 - 8:01am

- [Al Pacino](#) [2]
- [Barry Levinson](#) [3]
- [DVD Review](#) [4]
- [HBO Home Entertainment](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jack Kevorkian](#) [7]
- [John Goodman](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [Susan Sarandon](#) [10]
- [You Don't Know Jack](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

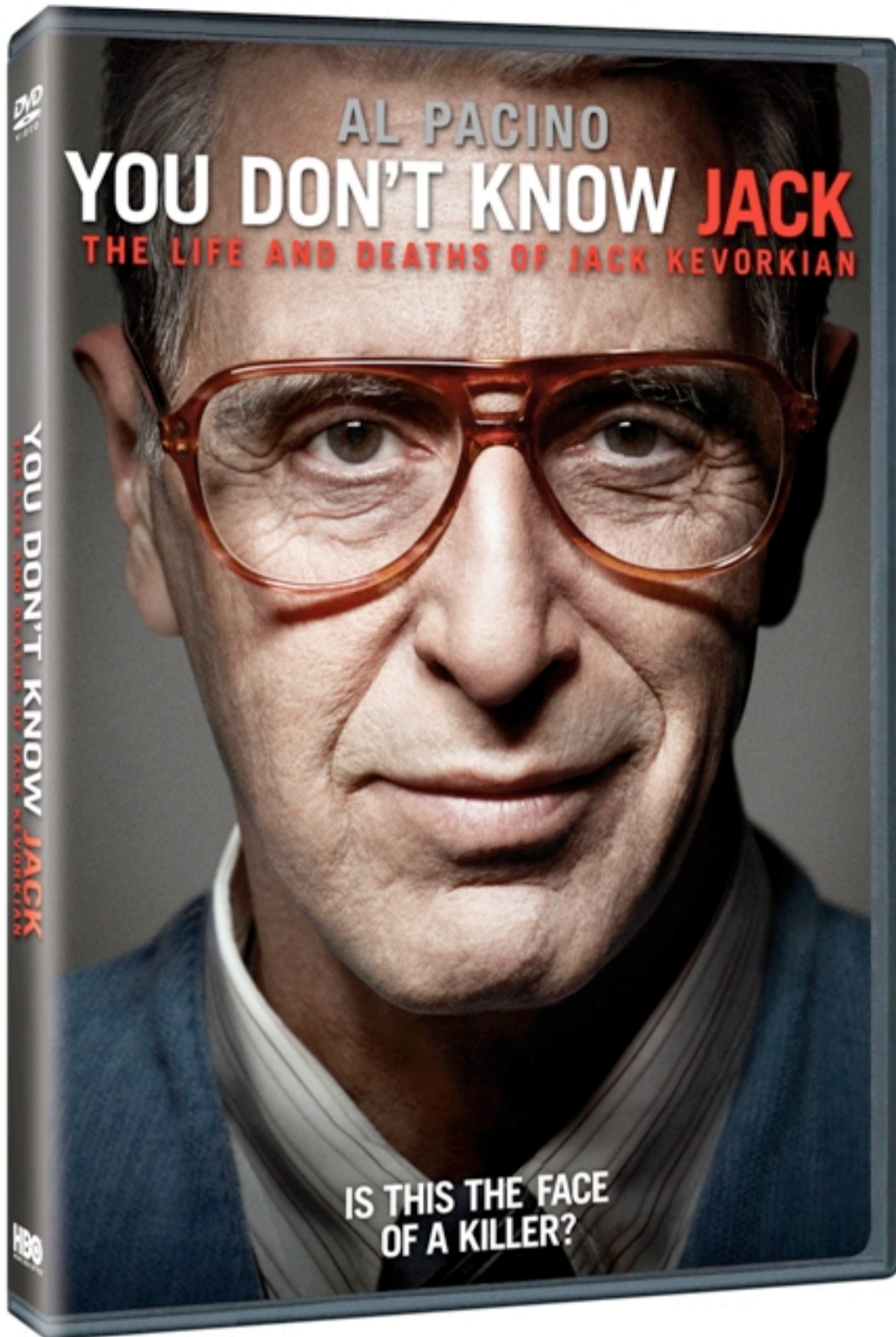
CHICAGO – It all seems perfectly simple to Dr. Jack Kevorkian. When a person is suffering, and recovery isn't an option, what's the point of elongating the agony? Should medical professionals force that person to live in pain or grant his (or her) wish to die in peace? The answer is a no-brainer for Kevorkian, whose perspective is unclouded by the complications of "religious dogma."

Barry Levinson's terrific HBO biopic, "You Don't Know Jack," paints an endearing and humane portrait of a controversial figure many deemed to be a killer. Though Dr. Kevorkian is depicted as a flawed and difficult individual, the film's perspective on his work is clearly one-sided. The doctor's no-nonsense approach to serving his patients resulted in his invention of the "Mercitron," a machine that offers a painless method for suicide. Levinson and screenwriter Adam Mazer view Kevorkian's opposition (mainly embodied by prosecutor Dick Thompson) as the sort of small-minded right-wingers that populate so much HBO fare.



DVD Rating: **4.0/5.0**

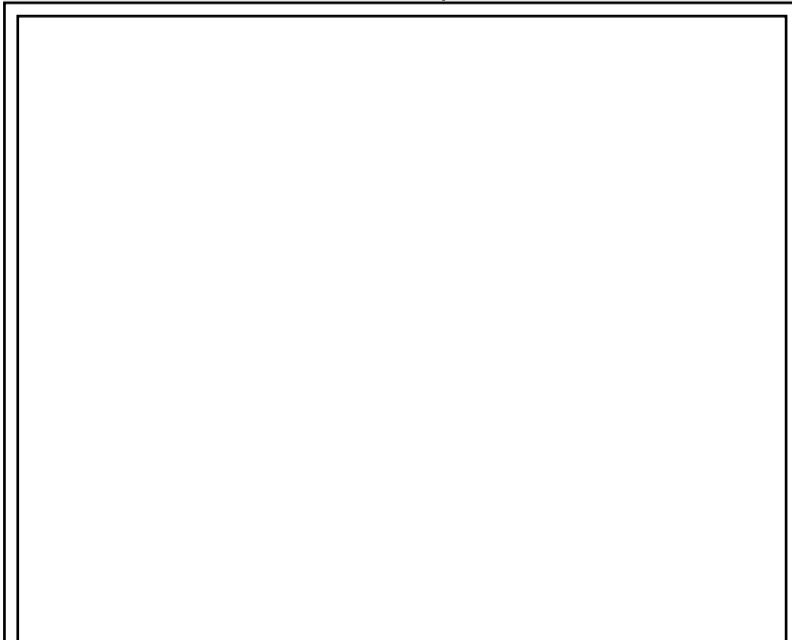
Yet "Jack" has every right to be an opinionated film, since its subject matter has been widely misinterpreted by the public. The ruling that led to Kevorkian's eight-year imprisonment was outrageous in its injustice. Prosecutors dropped their assisted suicide charge and went straight for a murder conviction, a move consciously made to erase sympathy out of the courtroom by not allowing families of patients to testify. Levinson's film functions as an effective rebuttal by including the actual video confessionals of Kevorkian's patients, which put to rest any shadow of a doubt that their fate was not only desired, but humane. There are echoes of "Vera Drake" in the film's portrait of a well-meaning caregiver being persecuted by a society unwilling to accept his violation of rules backed by archaic religious text. After Kevorkian is convicted of murder, thanks to an outdated common law, the doctor shows up to court dressed in a wooden pillory costume, hilariously mocking the case's inherent madness. Yet when Kevorkian decides to represent himself, and fire his opportunistic yet devoted lawyer, Geoffery Fieger, he ends up being his own worst enemy, sabotaged by his inability to navigate the justice system.



You Don't Know Jack was released on DVD on Oct. 26, 2010.

Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

I've gotten this far through the review without mentioning the actor who plays Kevorkian, partly because his Emmy-winning performance is so immersive that it's practically invisible. There aren't enough superlatives to adequately describe the subdued greatness of Al Pacino's work, which is easily his best since his last HBO project, Mike Nichols's masterful 2003 adaptation of "Angels in America." Apart from impeccably channeling Kevorkian's body language and vocal pattern, Pacino captures the contradiction of a man who is both refreshingly honest and profoundly private, while holding his emotions in check. When Kevorkian reveals his fiery side, Pacino doesn't resort to his usual brand of verbal fireworks. He disappears entirely within the grounded soul of his character, while bringing out the best in his stellar ensemble. Danny Huston finds the right blend of smarm and smarts as Fieger, while Susan Sarandon injects sharp wit into her role as right-to-die advocate Janet Good. There are some wonderful exchanges between Pacino and Brenda Vaccaro, as Kevorkian's sister, who emerges as the initial life force behind his crusade. And as the withering Judge Cooper, Rondi Reed chillingly epitomizes the cold objectivity of the justice system with a heartlessness that would've impressed Nurse Ratched.





Al Pacino delivers one of the year's best performances in Barry Levinson's *You Don't Know Jack*.

Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

"*You Don't Know Jack*" may not be a flat-out masterpiece like HBO's other recent biopic, "*Temple Grandin*," but it's still a fine and important picture anchored by an extraordinary lead performance. It also offers further proof that the network has a knack for bringing out the best in its directors as well as its actors. "Jack" is unquestionably Levinson's most accomplished work in ages, at least since "*Wag the Dog*." I'm sure even he was surprised to find himself losing the Emmy to "Grandin" director Mick Jackson, whose best known film is still 1997's turkey, "*Volcano*." One thing is certain: there is no better breeding ground for talent on television than HBO.

"*You Don't Know Jack*" is presented in its 1.77:1 aspect ratio, accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and unfortunately includes only one extra: a 10-minute featurette previously available on HBO. Cast sound bites are accompanied by brief reflections from the real-life Kevorkian, as well as Neal Nicol and Geoffery Fieger. With typical bluntness, Fieger claims that he was the more effective advocate for Kevorkian, primarily because he could be more objective about the issue (the issue being Kevorkian). Whenever the feisty doctor is on-camera, he's such a stitch that you wish he was the subject of his own documentary. In fact, HBO already granted this wish when it aired Matthew Galkin's intimate documentary "*Kevorkian*" in June. That would've been an ideal extra on this disc. But Kevorkian still manages to deliver a few memorable and insightful lines on the lone featurette. He refers to his playfully grotesque paintings as "poor man's surrealism," recalls the time he and Nicol got hepatitis from one of their "research projects," and even reveals his own sedate philosophy on death, which sounds like the setup to a Woody Allen punchline: "It's part of nature. You're all going to die. What's wrong with it? You just go into nothingness. Big deal! You came from nothingness. Was it so bad?"

'You Don't Know Jack' is released by HBO Home Video and stars Al Pacino, Susan Sarandon, Danny Huston, Brenda Vaccaro, John Goodman, Cotter Smith and Rondi Reed. It was written by Adam Mazer and directed by Barry Levinson. It was released on Oct. 26th, 2010. It is not rated.



[13]

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