

Interview: Jeff Garlin, Co-Directors Are ‘Finding Vivian Maier’

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CHICAGO – The story of a Chicago-based woman – who died in 2009 at age 83 – has become the subject of a remarkable new documentary. “Finding Vivian Maier” is a film about revelation, and was created by co-directors John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, with the support of Executive Producer and comedian Jeff Garlin.

The tale of Vivian Maier seems impossible. It began after her death with an auction of her storage locker, which contained negatives of her street photographer’s life – from the 1950s through the ‘90s. One of the directors of the film, John Maloof, stumbled onto her treasure by purchasing a box of these negatives. He then became her archivist, cataloging her photos, films, audio recordings and even material possessions, to reveal an artist of unique magnitude. “Finding Vivian Maier” is Maloof’s story, Vivian’s journey and the story of an artist’s life that easily could have been lost with her demise.

Aiding Maloof in telling the story is veteran producer Charlie Siskel, who had involvement in Michael Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine” and Bill Maher’s “Religulous.” He and Maloof became first time directors, structuring the film around Vivian’s photographic themes of human observation, families (Maier made her living as a nanny) and loneliness. Using Maier’s one-of-a-kind street photography, archives and interviews of those who knew her, the directors – with the use of connections and support from Executive Producer Jeff Garlin – conjured up an intersecting document of art and life.



Self Portrait of the Title Character in ‘Finding Vivian Maier’

Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Jeff Garlin got his comedic feet wet right here in Chicago, doing stage work at The Second City and stand-up in the club scene of the late

1980s. He appeared in the sitcom “Mad About You” from 1997-99, and got national recognition in HBO’s “Curb Your Enthusiasm” (2000-2011) as Larry David’s friend Jeff Greene. He is currently starring in the ABC-TV sitcom “The Goldbergs,” as patriarch Murray Goldberg.

Garlin came to Chicago on March 31st, with John Maloof, and Charlie Siskel chimed in via a phone interview. HollywoodChicago.com compiled this overview of their perspectives about their notable new documentary.

HollywoodChicago.com: John, were you the main ‘discoverer’ of Ms. Maier, or was there a movement to bring her work to the forefront again?

John Maloof: I did discover her. There were a number of people who bought her boxes at the original auction, but I purchased the largest one. As I began to archive it and discover that the work was good, I started to put it online, and it went viral from there. Now I’m promoting it, storing it and making sure it’s being taken care of - it was all me basically.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jeff, what element of the film and the journey got you on board with the documentary? What was it about Jeff, Charlie and Vivian did you want to make sure got to a released film?

Jeff Garlin: Natural curiosity and a desire to contribute to the world. I was curious about John’s story of discovery, I really loved Vivian’s world and I was able to offer what I could offer to John to make the film a reality. I brought [co-director] Charlie Siskel in. Oh, and I dated Vivian for a couple years, but we kept that out. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Charlie, what fascinated you about this project to make it your debut as a director? Was it the mystery of discovery or the person and artist that is Vivian Maier herself?

Charlie Siskel: It’s a great story number one, and that’s what drew me in as a filmmaker. But I wouldn’t wanted to tell the story if it wasn’t for her photo work. The images, and their number, are remarkable. She was an artist. And it was a dream to use all of this great material to tell her story. And we could tell it as a detective story, because we had the person who detected her.

HollywoodChicago.com: John, as the archivist you saw virtually all of Miss Maier’s photos and images. Which one was the inspiration that said, I have to know more?

Maloof: I can’t really remember, there were so many photos. I was new to this field, so I wasn’t really paying attention to that. In the process of scanning the work there were just enough great shots to spur me to keep going. It was addicting to uncover this never before seen work. That was what kept me going, the inquisitive nature that just wanted to see more.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jeff, what do you think is heroic about the life that Miss Maier led, or do you find it to be too sad to have any heroism?

Garlin: The thing that I think is heroic about Vivian is that she went out there and did it. And the fact that she had the confidence to get in there close to all these people and situations, that is heroic. The work that resulted from it, that is heroic.

HollywoodChicago.com: John and Charlie, you decided to focus a bit on the less savory elements of Miss. Maier’s mental circumstances. In analyzing both the artist and the person, do you think the artist would have existed if the imbalanced mentality of her did not exist?

Maloof: Who knows? Although she definitely had a compulsion to document. So many people who have compulsions and obsessiveness are able to take it out in their art. It’s a zone of creation that becomes necessary.

Siskel: In the film, we allow other people to speculate on Vivian’s mentality. She was a hoarder, and it could be argued that her photography – and all photography – is about the hoarding of images. But with Vivian it was more than just collecting the images, it was about making a statement with their beauty. My interest in her was about her art.



Chicago Street Photography in 'Finding Vivian Maier'

Photo credit: Sundance Selects

HollywoodChicago.com: Jeff, we currently live in an age in which I could have taken 30 street pictures on the way to this interview, had them printed on high quality paper, and if everything lined up have a gallery show by next week. What, in your opinion, have we lost due to the instantaneous nature of the digital image of today?

Garlin: Self control? [laughs] Because of the internet, reality television and that type of fame, people have lost a sense of what it takes to be great, and how much work is necessary. All the work and thoughtfulness it took for Vivian – besides her tremendous talent – those all go together.

You could have a show, if you took your 30 pictures and printed them up, but it would probably be extraordinarily bad. The digital age has not only taken away the idea of what it takes to be great, but also of how bad everybody really is. I will see stand up comedians and think that they are horrible, and then I overhear them telling another comedian how great they were. They just don't get it, and digital has changed it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Back to the directors. Loneliness is a theme towards the end of Vivian's life. How much of her artistic sensibility was embedded in her loneliness? And what does her discovery have to say about the lives of forgotten and lonely people?

Maloof: In the context of her photos, you see Vivian's life – what she thought about and what she liked. We illustrated that in the last part of the film – her pictures were increasingly about lonely people. She had an empathy for them, and maybe she felt like she was heading there.

Siskel: In making the film. These are the themes we wanted to raise about Vivian, and have people draw their own conclusions. Vivian was engaged with the world, I would call her an extrovert. And she was engaged with people when she liked them. Was she lonely? I think Vivian has the life she wanted, a life taking these wonderful photographs, and preserving them meticulously. We might see it as lonely, but I don't think Vivian would see it that way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jeff, how has the experience of doing a network sitcom like 'The Goldbergs' different from other sitcoms you've done, and from the more free-wheeling nature of 'Curb Your Enthusiasm'?



Jeff Garlin and John Maloof in Chicago, March 31, 2014
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Garlin: ‘The Goldbergs’ is tightly scripted. I do improvise a bit, and they use it. But I don’t necessarily have to. Shows like ‘The Larry Sanders Show’ and ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm’ changed the landscape of television. ‘The Goldbergs’ are a natural extension of the traditional sitcom, but that tradition was also changed by the groundbreaking work of the shows I mentioned.

HollywoodChicago.com: Charlie, you have been involved in a couple of controversial documentaries. How do you think the influence of ‘Bowling for Columbine’ and ‘Religulous’ keeps having an influence in culture beyond their release dates?

Siskel: Yes. If they are well made and entertaining, movies have a way of cutting through to a lot of people, especially when hot-button topics like religion and gun control have gotten a bit stale. ‘Bowling for Columbine’ and ‘Religulous’ used humor and specific new stories that were weird – like the getting a gun for opening a bank account in ‘Bowling’ – that cut through the disagreements regarding gun control. I thought everybody thought it was crazy.

HollywoodChicago.com: And certainly Bill Maher has given some of a position to atheists – who don’t get much of a voice in society – when you and he made ‘Religulous.’

Siskel: I do think it was something important that what we were doing, and that the topic wasn’t off-limits.

HollywoodChicago.com: John, I’ve heard that there is a Vivian Maier feature film in development? What qualities of her personality would you like to put into a feature, and who do you envision portraying her?

Maloof: When we were at the Toronto Film Festival we met with Christine Vaschon, President of Killer Films, and she is working on it. I honestly just want to be there as a resource, I’m not going to be involved in any biographical film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jeff, what colleague from your Chicago days best represent them? And what influenced the phase in your career when you knew it was time to leave Chicago and go on to the next performance challenge?

Garlin: Again my move from Chicago to the next phase was about curiosity about what I could do next. New York City turned out to be the logical next step. As far as a Chicago artistic influence, knowing Harold Ramis was very much a highlight of those days. He always told me ‘never meet your heroes.’ He was right about that, but not about himself as a hero. Meeting him, getting to know him, had a profound effect on me. And also I feel like I represent Chicago in everything I do.

HollywoodChicago.com: What personality trait of Vivian Maier do you all most relate to?

Maloof: I really relate to her obsessive compulsiveness.

Garlin: Her tenacity to get what she wanted. That is something I can really relate to.

Siskel: I would love to say I have the determination and sacrifice that she had, opposing the odds that were stacked against her, even though I think she took more risks in that sacrifice. That is what true artists do.

“Finding Vivian Maier” has a limited release, including Chicago, on March 28th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Written and directed by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, Executive Produced by Jeff Garlin. Not Rated.



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