

## Interview: Director Douglas Tirola on ‘Drunk Brilliant Stoned Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 19, 2015 - 11:13am

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CHICAGO – Before the days of 24/7 internet access to every form of entertainment that exists, there were eras of radical performance expression that changed the landscape of attitudes toward everything – think of The Beatles evolving music and also changing social culture. The roots of another evolution, especially in comedy, began with a modest humor magazine that brought together the right mix of anarchists and misfits. What they did would influence comedy for years afterward, and their story is told in “Drunk Stoned Brilliant Dead: The Story of National Lampoon,” directed by Douglas Tirola.

“National Lampoon” Magazine was a national publication founded in 1970, that was spawned from the Harvard Lampoon, and brought together a team of 1960s-influenced comic radicals that changed the way humor was conveyed. No sacred cows existed on their pages, and the magazine also broke out into signature comedy records, stage performances and radio shows. This cottage industry featured the early works of future comic mainstays Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, Harold Ramis, Richard Belzer and Christopher Guest. The magazine staff also featured influential writers like Chris Miller, Michael O’Donoghue, P.J. O’Rourke and John Hughes. Without Lampoon, there would have been no “Saturday Night Live,” “Animal House,” “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” “Waiting for Guffman” or “Ghostbusters,” to name a few of the media legends that came from their roots.

# NATIONAL LAMPPOON DRUNKSTONED BRILLIANTDEAD



Poster Art from Douglas Tirola's 'Drunk Brilliant Stoned Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon'

*Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures*

The producer/director of the documentary, Douglas Tirola, is a veteran filmmaker with credits that include "The Lucky Ones" (2003, executive producer) and "All In: The Poker Movie" (2009, director). He spoke to HollywoodChicago.com via phone regarding his initiative for tackling the subject of National Lampoon and its impact.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In the history of when Harvard Lampoon became National Lampoon in the early 1970s, what moment in that process really sparked this new wave of comedy?

**Douglas Tirola:** In the way I tried to tell the story, I saw it in a 'Dirty Dozen' kind of way. If life is like an eternal high school cafeteria, where different-yet-similar groups sit together – jocks, stoners, popular kids, etc. – it's like someone went to that cafeteria of life and picked the best and the brightest from each of those tables, then brought them into National Lampoon to work.

For me, the moment comes together when the Harvard guys – Michael O'Donoghue, Brian McConnachie, Anne Beatts and the like – combined with the smartest party people and sprinkled with a bit of the Midwestern comedy influence, like Doug Kenney and John Hughes. Then with these great editors and writers, Michael Gross the Art Director comes in and gives it an aesthetic look and feel. That was the supporting guy that made the whole thing gel.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did that realization merge with your desire to tell their story?

**Tirola:** I am fascinated with those cultural moments based around groups, everywhere from the expatriate movement with Ernest Hemingway



during the Paris 'moveable feast,' the Algonquin Round Table, the Beat Generation, the British Invasion of music and Punk Rock of the 1970s. Those moments when certain people come together – not by any great design, but truly by happenstance – and something really extraordinary happens.

To me, the National Lampoon was one of the last identifiable stories that was similar to those examples, but hadn't yet been told. It was like a college that was better known for what their 'alumni' did later in life, like 'SNL' and the John Hughes movies. Hopefully, the film will remind everyone that they were also great when they were at the National Lampoon.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Many actors from the early 1970s The Second City in Chicago participated in the development of the National Lampoon. How influential do you believe the Chicago voice was in the National Lampoon sensibility?

**Tirola:** As a New Yorker who loves the Midwest, including having a stint where I lived in Chicago, it was hugely important. There are two specific reasons in my mind. One, they brought those common experiences that are outside the bubble of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco – like their upbringing, the different high schools and colleges, and the mark of being a Midwesterner. The other thing was The Second City itself, where these performers learned a craft that included writing. So you had actors who could also write, and they had polished performing skills. You could see it in everything that the Lampoon went on to influence.



National Lampoon's 1973 'Lemmings:' Chevy Chase (right breast), Christopher Guest (center) and John Belushi (left breast)

*Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Chevy Chase was interesting as an interview subject in the film, especially as he was relating an anecdote about John Belushi in their Lampoon stage days. In your observation, how has Chase come to terms with his humor legacy and his fellow comedians along the way?

**Tirola:** When I interviewed Chevy, he was modest about his contributions to the Lampoon radio and stage shows. He had a great line in the film, 'when you're young, you believe that anything can happen, and the world is filled with infinite possibilities.' In that statement, he's reflecting back on that point in his life during the interview. I do think he has come to terms with his legacy, and his fans really love that time in his career.

I got the impression from him that he loved John Belushi. There has been many opinions about whether John admired Chevy, but when I interviewed Judy Jacklin [Belushi's wife], she indicated that any issues John and Chevy had were in the past by the time John died.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the points made in the film is that 'Saturday Night Live' cherry picked the best of National Lampoon and launched a new brand from that style? Where do you see the Lampoon influence in SNL today, if at all?

**Tirola:** I don't believe they cherry picked or stole the Lampoon performers. The National Lampoon had an opportunity to do a late night show on NBC before SNL, and it never happened. The producers of SNL saw an opportunity, and the Lampoon was on their radar. These were the best comic people out there. As far as the influence, it came from the original idea of Lampoon, was to make social commentary through humor. We still see it out there, and we certainly see it on 'Saturday Night Live.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Once 'Saturday Night Live' took hold – with the influence of the National Lampoon team so apparent – how did it evolve the culture of comedy at the time, in your opinion?

**Tirola:** Well, think of comedy on TV before Lampoon made their mark. It was about Carol Burnett, Flip Wilson and 'Laugh-In.' Those

sketches looked and sounded like an Metro Goldwyn Mayer movie musical, it hints at reality, but there is nothing real within it. Then along comes Lampoon, and their doing parodies on the New York phone book. So as SNL began, their parodies looked nothing like an MGM musical, or the TV sketches that came before it – it reflected the real world around us.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You interviewed so many people in association with the Lampoon era and that time in comedy. Was there a quote or an observation from an unlikely source that seemed to sum up what you were after, as far as the history you were documenting?

**Tirola:** Henry Beard, one of the founders of National Lampoon magazine, expressed how because we shared so much culture at that time in the American experience, the parody of the magazine was able to thrive. That was a big idea. Another one of the themes that ran through the interviews was the reflection that you come together with a certain group of people at a certain time and special things start to happen. Those were the big reveals that came about that I was excited to tell in the film.

If I were able to make the Ken-Burns-style-rocking-version with cocaine sprinkled on top, with several more hours, there were many more stories that I would have included. Maybe they’ll be in the DVD extras. [laughs]

*“Drunk Brilliant Stoned Dead: The Story of the National Lampoon” is in select theaters now, including Chicagoland at the Wilmette Theater, 1122 Central Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois, and through digital download. See listings for theaters, show times and download websites. Written and directed by Douglas Tirola. Not Rated.*



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