Oscar Week Feature: Top 20 Interviews of 2015, by Patrick McDonald

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on February 24, 2016 - 3:11pm

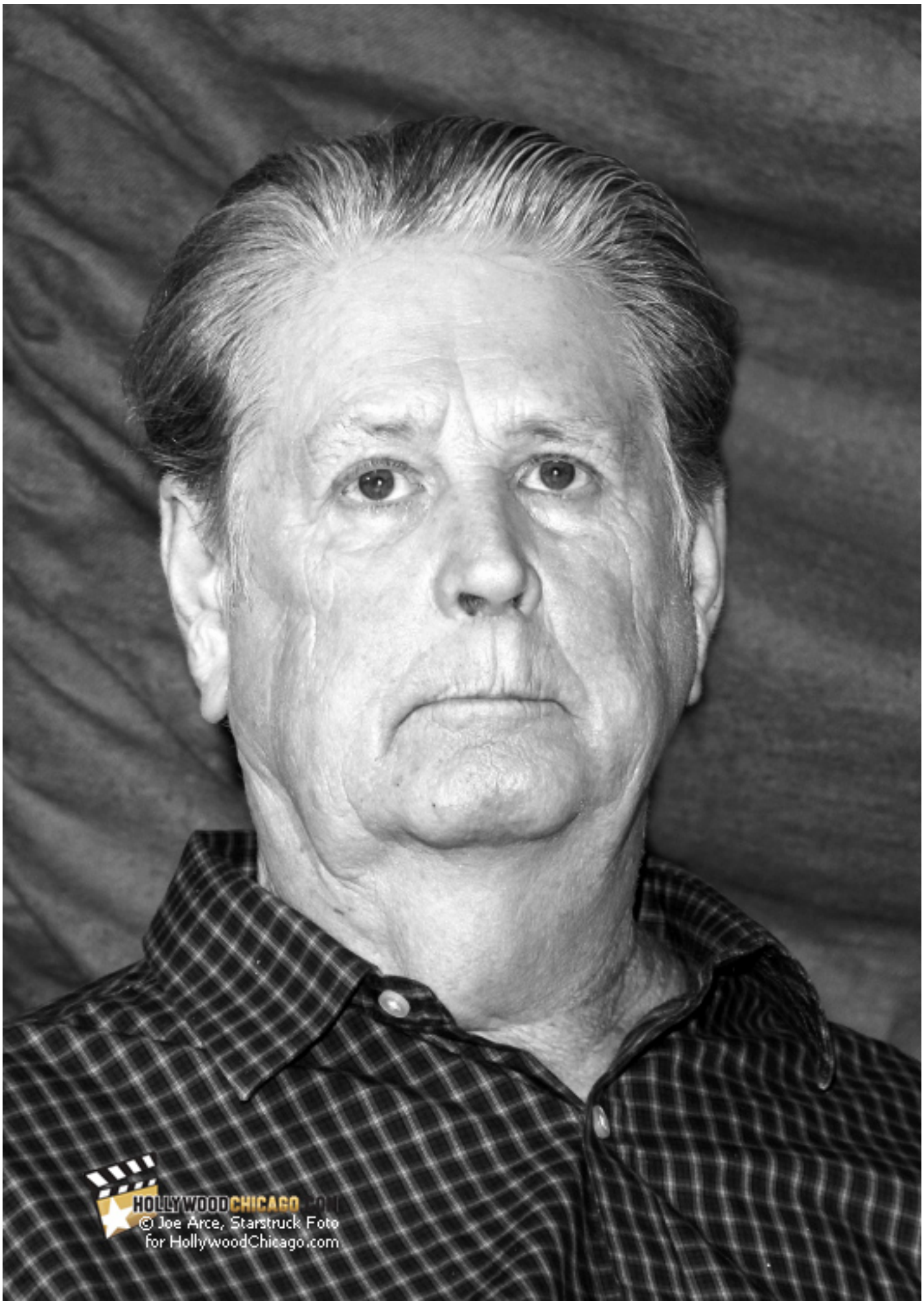
- Adam McKay [2]
- Ben Kingsley [3]
- Brian Wilson [4]
- Feature [5]
- Greta Gerwig [6]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [7]
- Interview [8]
- Jada Pinkett Smith [9]
- Jason Segel [10]
- Jay Roach [11]
- Joe Arce [12]
- John Cusack [13]
- Kevin Costner [14]
- Linda Gray [15]
- List [16]
- Mark Ruffalo [17]
- Noah Baumbach [18]
- Patricia Clarkson [19]
- Patrick McDonald [20]
- Sam Elliott [21]
- Spotlight [22]
- The Big Short [23]
- Todd Haynes [24]

CHICAGO –The movers, the shakers, the prominent filmmakers – they've all gone through the interview filter by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com. What better way to celebrate Oscar week than to review the TOP 20 talks of the 2015, with many 2016 Oscar favorites among the celebrated.

The criteria for making the list are basically who the participants were, what they happened to say and what they were representing, The least reviewed film might have the greatest quote and the bigger stars or director might provide an insight that has stuck throughout the year. It all comes down to a magic 20.

The interview highlights are broken down by "Background and Behind-the-Scenes" and the "Memorable Quote" associated with each subject, and are often accompanied with exclusive photography by Joe Arce of HollywoodChicago.com. Six notables who just missed the list include (click the name) Cobie Smulders, [25] Jake Johnson, [26] Patricia Clarkson, [27] the Chicago Blackhawks "Golden Jet," Bobby Hull, [28] the intriguing director of "Entertainment," Rick Alverson, [29] and one of the great new director voices in Chicago, Jack C. Newell. [30] The following interviews represents the films, events and nostalgia of 2015. Happy Oscar Week!

Brian Wilson of "The Beach Boys"



Unbroken: Music Icon Brian Wilson in Chicago, May 18th, 2015
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: If there was a Mount Rushmore of Pop/Rock composers, the great Brian Douglas Wilson would undoubtably be carved in that mountain. He did some rare interviews for his biography film "Love & Mercy," and I nervously interviewed him backstage before a Q&A at Chicago's Music Box Theatre. He is famously reticent about talking in general, but to have a few minutes with the legend was number one in my book.

Memorable Quote: "*For the most part, everyone [The Beach Boys] stayed the same. They took to it graciously. We were never like 'we're the greatest group!' That kind of attitude just wasn't there, we stayed humble. Mike had a bit of an ego, basically he cooperated, but he would tell you if he didn't like a tune. He loved the early stuff I wrote for him, like 'Surfin' Safari,' 'Surfin' USA' and 'Do It Again.' I define love not so much through melody or harmony or lyrics or the song, but it is everything that comes together, that four-part blast that comes out of the speakers – creating more harmony – and in a way, love.*"

Click here [31] for the full interview with Brian Wilson.

Kevin Costner, Actor, Director, & Oscar Winner



Kevin Costner in Chicago, January 9th, 2015, for 'Black or White'
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Kevin Costner promoted a smaller and intriguing film he performed in last year, "Black or White," along with director Mike Binder and (rising) co-star Anthony Mackie. The three sat for a group interview, but he length of time was enough to get Costner to open up about my all-time favorite subject, the John F. Kennedy assassination and his role in the seminal film on the subject, "JFK."

Memorable Quote: "*I think everybody has a little bit of doubt [about the JFK assassination]. I sat up in that sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository for a long time, and I had a similar gun, pretending to shoot out that window for about four hours. I found it very hard to do. Now, you are that guy in the sixth floor window, and you know you're going to take a shot at the President of the United States, and it's taking a long time for his car to get into range. There was never even a consideration for the idea that by the time that limousine came into view, your tension would be absolutely out of control. I have a little bit of doubt that based on that tension, that one man could have made that shot. Having sat up in that window, that's what I want to say about it.* "

Click here [32] for the full interview with Kevin Costner, Mike Binder and Anthony Mackie.

Sir Ben Kingsley, Actor & Oscar Winner



Sir Ben Kingsley in ‘Learning to Drive’
Photo credit: Broad Green Pictures

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Sir Ben was in town to promote the film “Learning to Drive” (with Patricia Clarkson, see third paragraph above), and his presence is one that fills any room, including where the interview took place. He is a consummate actor and philosopher, and spoke of many topics associated with creating the role in the film.

Memorable Quote: ”*Unfortunately my father was emotionally absent, and through his alcoholism was unreachable. So I’m very sorry to say that is very little that I derived from him, except in negative values. I had to live in a bubble as a child, and had to raise myself up and make my own choices. But, in the sense of that question – Babu is the word in India for Dad – look at the fathers I have portrayed in my career. I’ve portrayed Simon Wiesenthal [writer, Holocaust survivor], an amazing patriarch. Otto Frank, Anne Frank’s father was another, and Itzhak Stern in ‘Schindler’s List.’ I even portrayed Moses. All these men are great patriarchs and father figures.*”

Click here [33] for the full interview with Ben Kingsley.

Actor John Cusack



John Cusack in Chicago, May 18th, 2015, at the Music Box Theatre
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: John Cusack grew up in the Chicago area, and has had a magnificent run as a film actor as leading man, character actor and ensemble player. He was side-by-side with Brian Wilson during the “Love & Mercy” interview, treating him like a respectful son (he portrayed Wilson in the film). Cusack is an intensely intelligent and passionate his craft, and was doubly honored to portray Brian Wilson.

Memorable Quote: ”*When I was younger, they kept saying to me ‘you’ve done something good, so keep doing it.’ As an actor, I wanted to keep exploring. I think every artist can relate to Brian Wilson’s struggle to keep creating, and to be true to himself. That is not the easiest thing in the world when people want hits. So the idea, for example, that Brian did ‘Pet Sounds’ and the ‘Smile’ sessions while the pressure was for him to do what he’d already done, and every artist would think, ‘my god, don’t they realize what he was trying to do?’ We’re all not geniuses like Brian, but every artist relates to that struggle between commerce and spiritual creativity.*”

Click here [34] for the full interview with John Cusack.

Mark Ruffalo, Actor & Oscar Nominee for “Spotlight”



Actor Mark Ruffalo on the Red Carpet
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Mark Ruffalo's film career is on fire right now, as he balances the commercial ("The Avengers") with the prestige ("Spotlight"). He was on the Red Carpet as the recipient of the Gene Siskel Film Center Renaissance Award, a career overview achievement. The Red Carpet interviews are trickier, but if you ask the right question you can get good answers, especially with the lively and engaging mind of Mark Ruffalo.

Memorable Quote: "*What people love about actors are their unique qualities. So the more an actor can live authentically within their own individuality, that's what people are looking for. So I say put down all the magazines that just emphasize fame, and maybe pick one or two actors that you can steal from, and then make it all yours. Then run like hell. [laughs] Stella Adler used to say, 'the young actor feels that they have a greatness inside of them, that they want to give back to the world.' That was a big, important truth for me, and kept me going when things were not so great. So maybe looking for the greatness in the people that I play is something I hold onto as an ethos.*"

Click here [35] for the full interview with Mark Ruffalo.

Actor Jason Segel



Actor Jason Segel for ‘The End of the Tour’
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: The über-popular actor Jason Segel had a breakthrough in 2015 with the lead role in “The End of the Tour.” In the film, he portrayed author David Foster Wallace (“Infinite Jest”) and created a scenario with the author’s last stop on a difficult book tour. Jason, of course, it also a comic actor, and talked also about his involvement with “The Muppets” and “Freaks and Geeks.”

Memorable Quote: ”*What I do think David Foster Wallace expressed exceptionally about depression is beautifully written in ‘Infinite Jest, and that passage in the book was even in the movie. He makes the metaphor about people jumping out of a burning building. And he asks, in terms of defining suicide, what could be so terrifying about jumping out of burning building as an escape from it? That’s a very poignant way of describing the depth of depression. I don’t think I am educated enough to really have an intelligent opinion about the pharmaceutical drug aspect of depression. It’s an incredibly easy thing to have an opinion, it’s a much harder thing to have an informed opinion.* ”

Click here [36] for the full interview with Jason Segel.

Actress Greta Gerwig



Greta Gerwig and Lola Kirke Promote ‘Mistress America’
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: The deep and abiding actress Greta Gerwig was briefly in Chicago to promote her underrated “Mistress America,” with co-star Lola Kirke. Gerwig is one of those “names” who react and has a perspective in exactly the way you would think – she is basically the real deal. The set-up was rather chaotic. Kirke was late and Ms. Gerwig was radiating the atmosphere with a blast of her philosophy. It was an epic ten minutes.

Memorable Quote: ”*I am interested in strivers and strugglers, those kind of characters that are like the strugglers in the great American literature and cinema. When, for example, I think of ‘Citizen Kane’ and his insatiable craving to be more, especially based on the limited opportunities of his past. Brooke [‘Mistress America’] didn’t go to college, she’s self educated – clearly smart but not erudite. Brooke is always needing to prove herself. Those strivers you see in literature generally are not women. I think giving female characters an epic struggle, even if it’s just epic to them. I think it’s a distinctly American psychology, but also New York City represents the epicenter of where people go who want to make something of themselves.*”

Click here [37] for the full interview with Greta Gerwig and Lola Kirke.

Actor Sam Elliott



How the West is Won: Sam Elliott in ‘3:10 to Yuma’
Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: If there was a vote for a modern day John Wayne, all ballots would be cast for the great character actor Sam Elliott. Known for his Western roles, Elliott branched out in 2015, as he was cast for the film I interviewed him for – "Grandma," co-starring Lily Tomlin, and had another great turn in "I'll See You in My Dreams," opposite Blythe Danner. When you have one of the most movie-historical Western stars, you have to ask him about Westerns.

Memorable Quote: "*It's all mythic at some level, in the way we've viewed the Western genre forever. Whether in literature or film, we've talked about the ideals and the character of cowboys – but for me it is an ideal of form, in an idealized time. Everything was black and white in those types of Western stories, and I think the Western went to hell when it became more gray in nature. When it became more inwardly psychological rather than a man against nature, or man against man and the nature of himself. That to me is the most interesting part of that time. The simplicity of Westerns has always intrigued me – there is a real beauty in that.*"

Click here [38] for the full interview with Sam Elliott and director Paul Weitz ("Grandma").

Actress Jada Pinkett Smith



Jada Pinkett Smith n 'Magic Mike XXL'
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Jada Pinkett Smith has been in the news of late, for her outspoken and passionate views on diversity in the film industry and at the Oscars. When I interviewed her, it was for the 2015 film "Magic MIke XXL." Ms. Smith is one of the "first ladies" of Hollywood, quietly managing her family and her career, in partnership with husband Will Smith. It's tough to be controversial when talking about Magic Mike and his XXL. But did you know she once fronted a metal band?

Memorable Quote: "*One the reasons why I created Wicked Wisdom is because I'd always been a metal head, probably because I was black and female, and it wasn't really for me. Part of my purpose was being in a metal band was to reject that idea. Metal music is about breaking down all the boxes. That was a helluva box to try to break in that arena. [laughs] But to me the idea was – within that scene – to open my eyes and expand those beautiful ideas. The music itself, the culture itself, is all about breaking the rules and breaking outside of the construct. In those breaking of the rules and construct, let's also see who is accepted within this art form. That was really the purpose.*"

Click here [39] for the full interview with Jada Pinkett Smith.

Actor Thomas Haden Church



Thomas Haden Church for 'Max'
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: One of the steadiest character actors working, with roles as diverse as wacky Lowell in the TV's "Wings," Jack in "Sideways" and Sandman in "Spider-Man 3," Thomas Haden Church was promoting the excellent family film, "Max" when I talked to him. The film actor's life is full of adventures, and Church has certainly had his experiences.

Memorable Quotes: "*[On 'Sideways and Paul Giamatti] We'd both gone through rigorous audition process to land the roles, by the time I talked to him for the first time. I got on the phone with him, and we talked for four solid hours. It was in the Summer of 2003, and we talked from when the sun was fully out until it was completely dark. We had crazy common interests – Louis L'Amour cowboy novels from the 1970s, the author Cormac McCarthy and the rock group Iron Maiden. As soon as we got together for the film, it was like a brotherly love affair. After we spent that time together, we'd be doing a number of promotional tours, and even in a big crowd – like a magnet to steel – we would find each other within minutes.* "

Click here [40] for the full interview with Thomas Haden Church.

Director Julien Temple



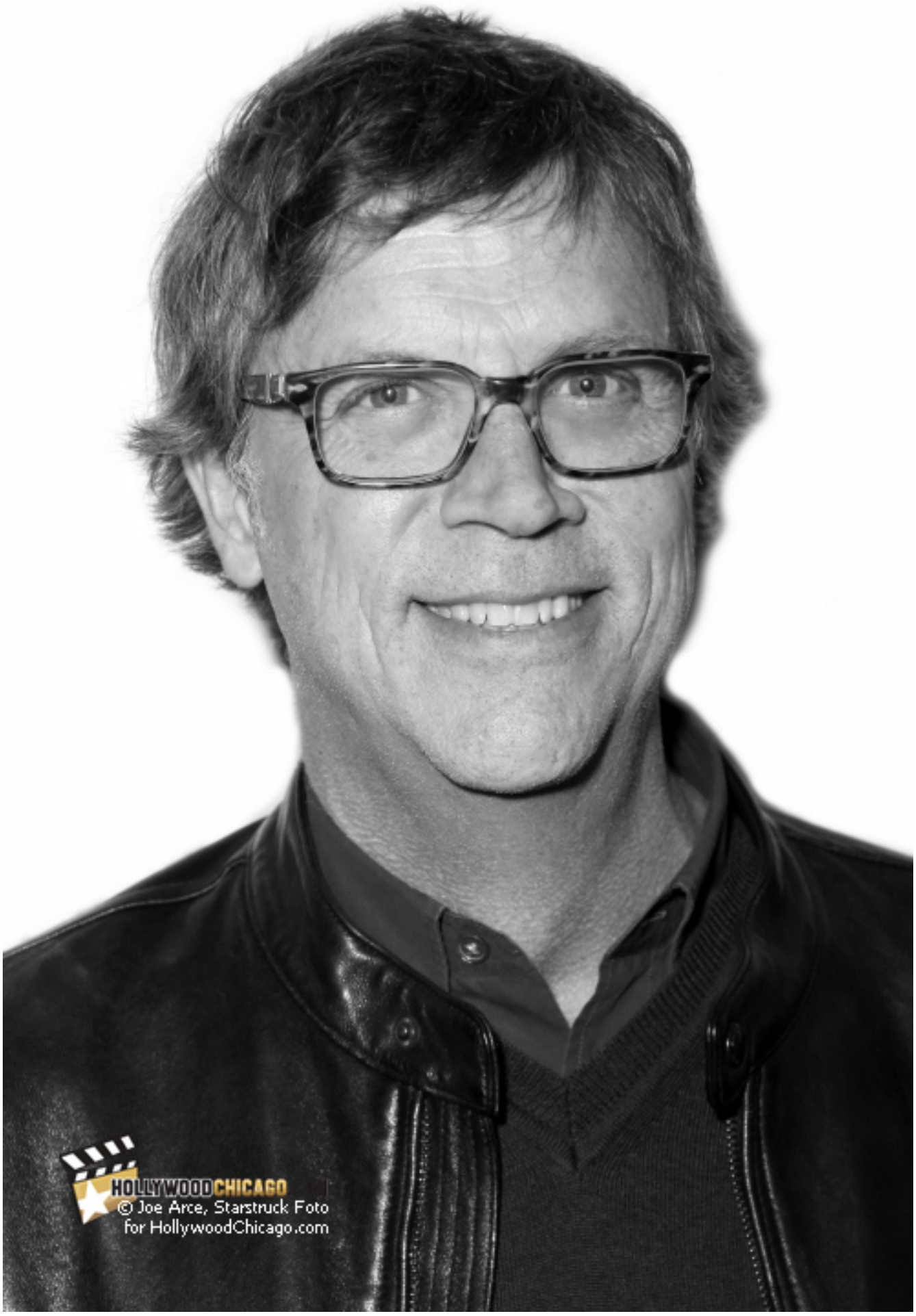
Julien Temple (center), with CIMMFest officials Gary Kuzminski and Shannon Flynn, April 18, 2015
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Julien Temple is a legendary rock documentary and narrative filmmaker, with credits such as “The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle” (about the Sex Pistols), David Bowie’s “Absolute Beginners,” and “Joe Strummer, The Future is Unwritten.” He received the BADASSS Award at Chicago’s CIMMfest, a springtime film and music festival that is life affirming, and is still (and always was) a cheeky bastard.

Memorable Quote: ”*[On meeting the Sex Pistols] I came to the top of the loft, with a worm’s eye view of the band’s practice, silhouetted in front of these big windows. Remember, the style of the moment was flairs and long hair, and here were these guys had skinny legged skin tight jeans, big fat feet, with brothel creeper Teddy Boy shoes. mohair jumpers in yellow and black, and short, spiky hair which I had never seen before. They were like insect men from Mars. Who the f**k were these guys? I listened to them for awhile, and when they stopped playing I approached them with ‘I’m doing this film in my film school, would you do the soundtrack?’ Their reply? “F**k off, you middle class c*nt.” I thought, okay…*”

Click here [41] for the full interview with Julien Temple.

Director Todd Haynes of “Carol”



Todd Haynes at the 51st Chicago International Film Festival
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Director Todd Haynes is an auteur…you immediately recognize his films once they unspool. In 2015, he made the film "Carol," which garnered a Best Actress nomination for Cate Blanchett at the upcoming Oscar ceremony. Set in the 1950s, "Carol" could be a companion piece to his previous "Far From Heaven." His 1987 premiere film was notorious, "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story," (currently out of circulation) and he had a perspective on whether it would see the light of day again.

Memorable Quote: " *I always bring it up to my lawyer every now and then. [laughs]. And another reason we have to revisit it is because there is a restoration going on right now for the film through UCLA and Sundance. I hope it's water under the bridge, but Richard Carpenter is a complicated individual, and he's also entitled to his own opinion on how his sister is depicted. The film has lived on and survived, and to me is ultimately is an affectionate celebration of Karen Carpenter. I hope that wins out in the end.*"

Click here [42] for the full interview with Todd Haynes.

Director Jay Roach of "Trumbo"



Bryan Cranston and Jay Roach On the Set of 'Trumbo'
Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Like Adam McKay (below), Jay Roach is breaking from his comedy roots (the "Austin Powers" films) and has started to comment on current events ("The Campaign") and past American indiscretions (2015's "Trumbo"). "Trumbo" is about the Communist witch hunt of the 1950s, told through screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. Bryan Cranston has an Best Actor nod at the upcoming Oscars, and Roach has added another exploration of the "American Nightmare."

Memorable Quotes: "*[On Dalton Trumbo] He was obsessed with justice. He always said he fought so many fights, all seemingly different, but all about the concepts of fairness and justice. When something so unjust as the black list happened, he would come to life in a certain way. In his life, Trumbo uses wit and comedy to fight these very high-stakes battles. I hope I can now use my ability to communicate, without being too precious or serious. It's good to have some levity, even as you're facing some really dark times, and mix it up a bit.*"

Click here [43] for the full interview with Jay Roach.

Director Adam McKay of "The Big Short"



Adam McKay (left) and Steve Carell Discuss a Scene in 'The Big Short'
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: McKay is another comedy director (the "Anchorman" series) who broke out into more serious fare in 2015. He has been nominated for Best Director, and the film he helmed – "The Big Short" – is nominated for Best Picture at the upcoming Oscars. "Short" is a brilliant dissection of the economic meltdown at the end of last decade, and McKay is using his box office power to both cast and produce this new part of his career. This is the second time I interviewed the man, and he never forgets his Chicago roots (in The Second City) and he is serious about his opportunity to comment on current and vital events.

Memorable Quote: "*The trick with [Steve] Carell is simply that he is one of the most prepared people you'll ever meet. Whether he's doing 'Anchorman' or 'Foxcatcher' he's a guy who works really hard. And another thing about Carell – he has one of the great noses for B.S. I've ever encountered. He knows when the scene is not working or it's not truthful. I've done takes with him that I thought were great, but he'll say there is more and want to do it again. I've learned to trust him on that, he knows where he can get to. It really clicked on this film, the two of us would chase down that truthful moment.* "

Click here [44] for the full interview with Adam McKay.

Director Noah Baumbach



Director Noah Baumbach
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Noah Baumbach had two major releases in 2015, “While We’re Young” and “Mistress America.” He did a rare promotion tour for “Young,” and it was just endlessly fascinating to probe the background of his great cinema statements like “The Squid and the Whale,” “Greenberg” and “Frances Ha.” I also like the accompanying photograph – Baumbach strikes me as a no-nonsense guy, and the photo seems to capture that.

Memorable Quote: ”*It’s interesting, I court this notion of autobiography whenever I get feedback. With this film, people were assuming I was Ben’s [Stiller] character, and I thought ‘you see me as a stunted filmmaker?’ [laughs] That doesn’t mean that there isn’t elements of me in the characters, but they’re not all extensions of me. I was looking for characters that fit in the narrative and comic form.*”

Click here [45] for the full interview with Noah Baumbach.

Director Paul Feig of “Spy”



The Interviewer and Director Paul Feig

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Paul Feig is one of the funniest writer/directors working right now, and he has proved it time and time again. On TV ("Freaks and Geeks," "The Office," "Arrested Development"), and in films ("Bridesmaids," "The Heat"), Feig has created a bright and poignant style of comic farce that has staying power after multiple views – how many times have you watched "The Heat" on cable? This is the only photo I will include with me in this article, only because it's a perfect example of personalities in motion (I dressed up for Feig because of his reputed sartorial splendor). One more note: In the original publication of the interview, I mistakenly gave co-creator credit for "Freaks and Geeks" to producer Judd Apatow. Mr. Feig's wife wrote me personally to correct this egregious error – it was all pure Paul.

Memorable Quote: "*I just relate to funny women more, and I find their comedy more humorous. I've always been a sensitive guy, sort of made fun of as a kid. So besides my fellow sensitive guy friends, all other guys were this army waiting to kill me. Guys can be very aggressive, so I just found girls to be goofier. It was more pure and fun. Those are basically the people I found to be funny, when I started writing. I've always struggled to write for men, interestingly enough, I equate it to a woman trying to write for a guy. I have a very feminine take on the world, I guess.*"

Click here [46] for the full interview with Paul Feig.

Director Alex Garland of "Ex Machina"



Lead Actor Alicia Vikander Talks On-Set with Alex Garland for ‘Ex Machina’
Photo credit: A24

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Alex Garland, one of the most original sci-fi film writers of recent years (“28 Days Later…,” “Sunshine”) made his directorial debut in “Ex Machina” in 2015. “Ex Machina” is nominated for Best Original Screenplay at the upcoming Oscars. The film is a magnificent overview of the near future, regarding man’s interaction with technology, as a somewhat mad tech scientist (portrayed by Oscar Isaac) creates android beings that look like alluring women. With multiple social statements and symbols, “Ex Machina” is one of the most powerful and best films of last year.

Memorable Quote: ”*What I really thought about is that if you produced a consciously thinking machine, it would be like the development of a child and an evolutionary change. And with children, what we want most of all in our anxious interaction with them, is that they’ll outlive us all. If we have a life, we’d want our children to have a life that is better. So the idea that conscious and emotional machines would have the same existence that we do, and would survive environments that we can’t, doesn’t seem scary to me as much as exciting and good. The circumstance wouldn’t be separate from us, it would be a continuation of us. I’m more alarmed by humans than machines.* ”

Click here [47] for the full interview with Alex Garland.

Producer Gigi Pritzker