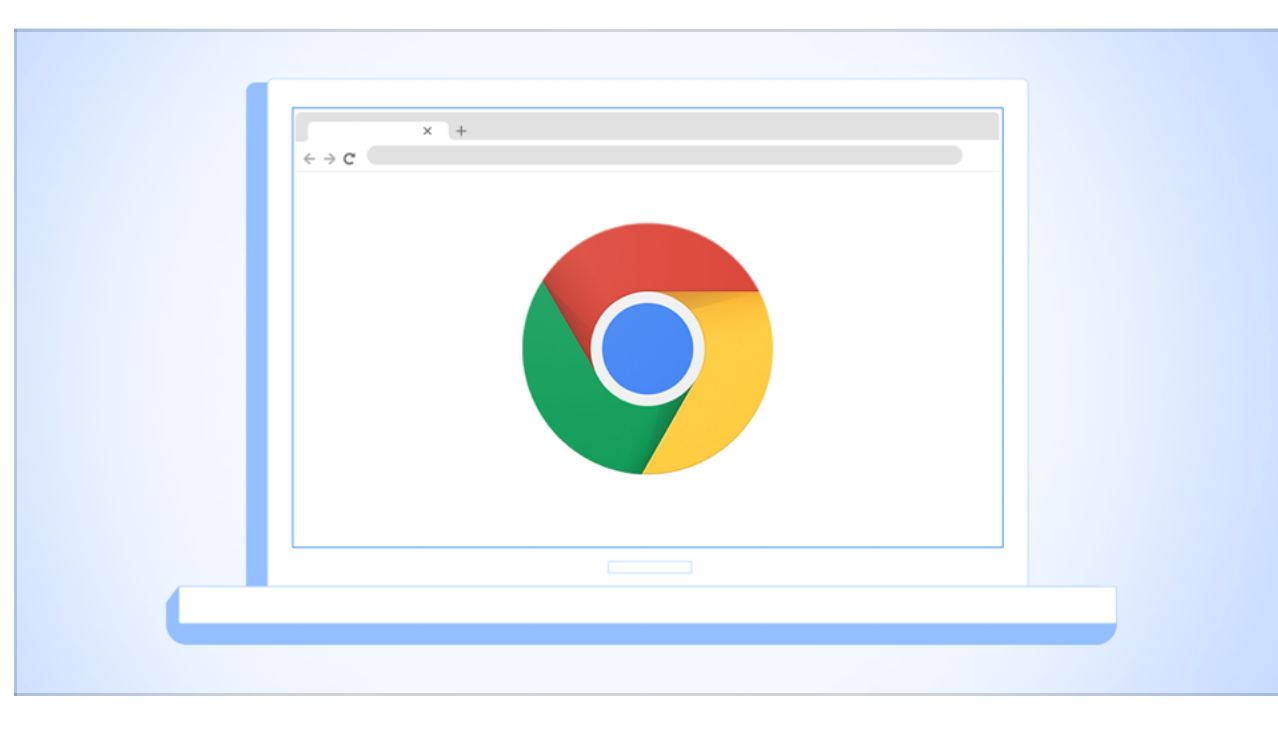


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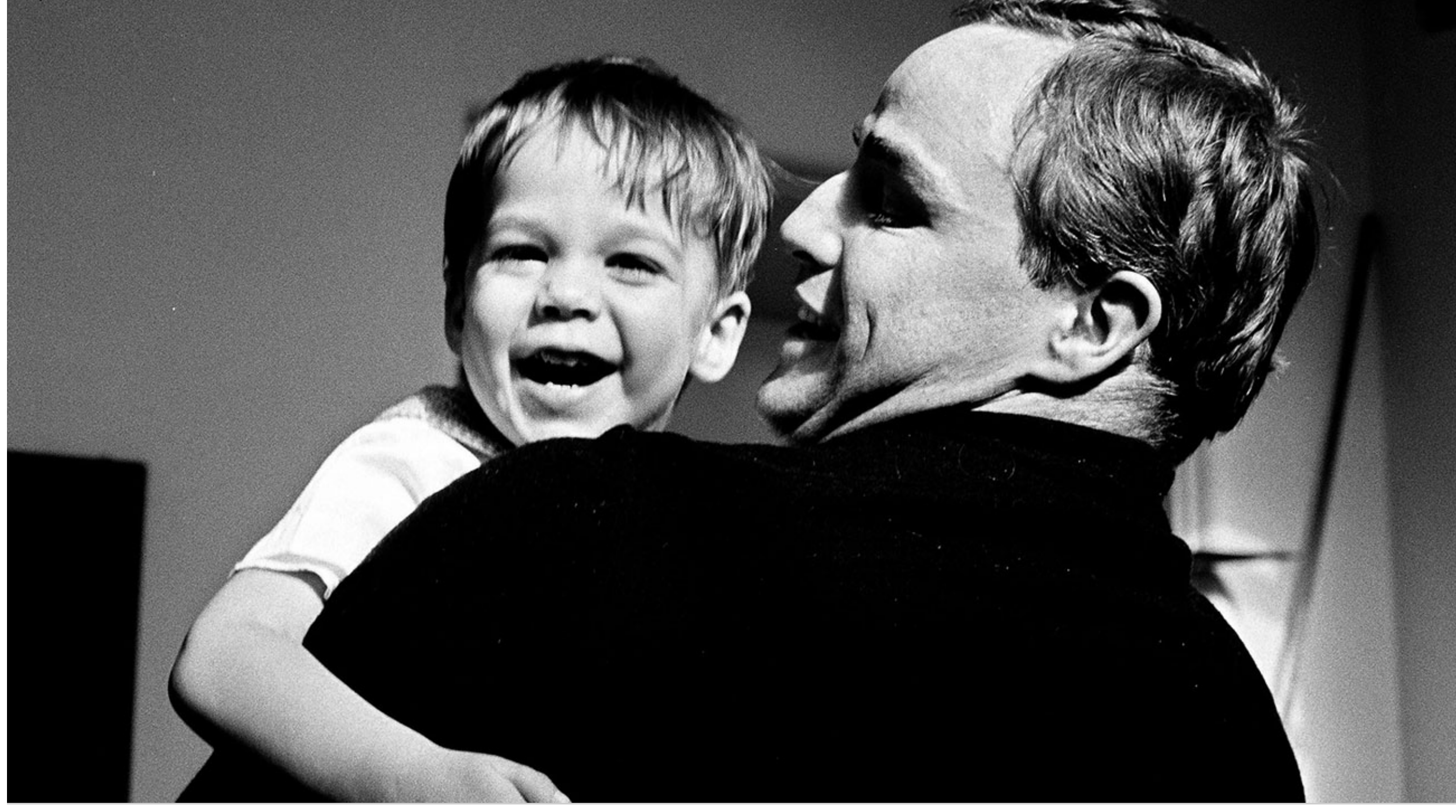
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# 'Listen to Me Marlon': Sundance Review

1:34 AM PST 2/4/2015 by Todd McCarthy



Courtesy of Sundance International Film Festival

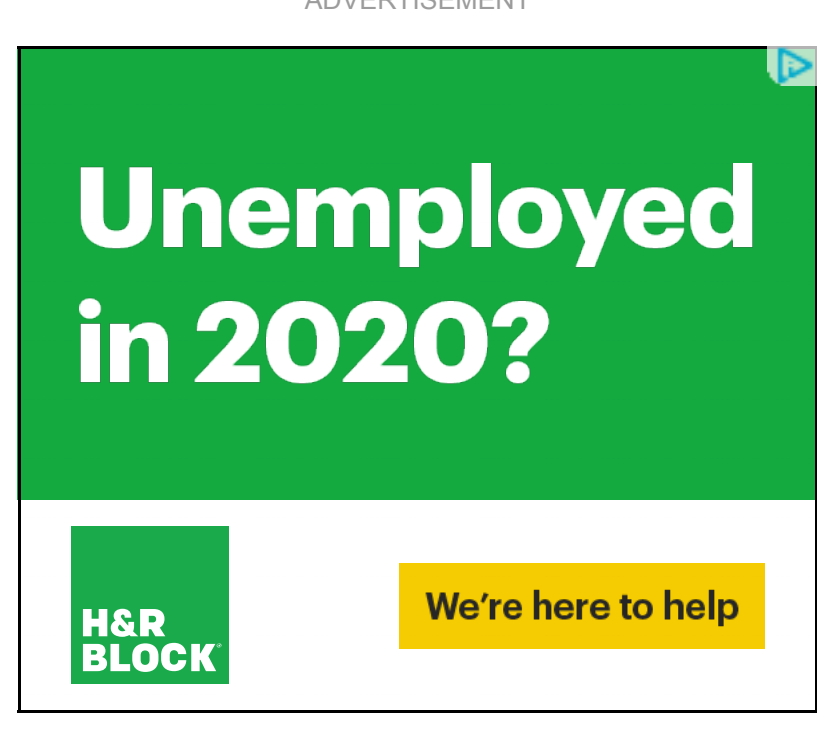
**THE BOTTOM LINE**

The acting legend speaks from the grave via revelatory self-recordings in this striking documentary. [Twitter](#)

With never-before-seen photos and film footage, British documentarian Stevan Riley delivers an enthrallingly intimate look at the brilliant, troubled and always charismatic screen legend.

**Marlon Brando** reveals himself posthumously as he never publicly did in life in the remarkable documentary *Listen to Me Marlon*. Making marvelously creative use of a stash of audio recordings the actor privately made plus a striking amount of unfamiliar and never-before-seen photos and film footage, British documentarian **Stevan Riley** delivers an enthrallingly intimate look at the brilliant, troubled and always charismatic screen legend. This Showtime presentation would be a good bet for limited theatrical exposure before it settles into home-screen eternity.

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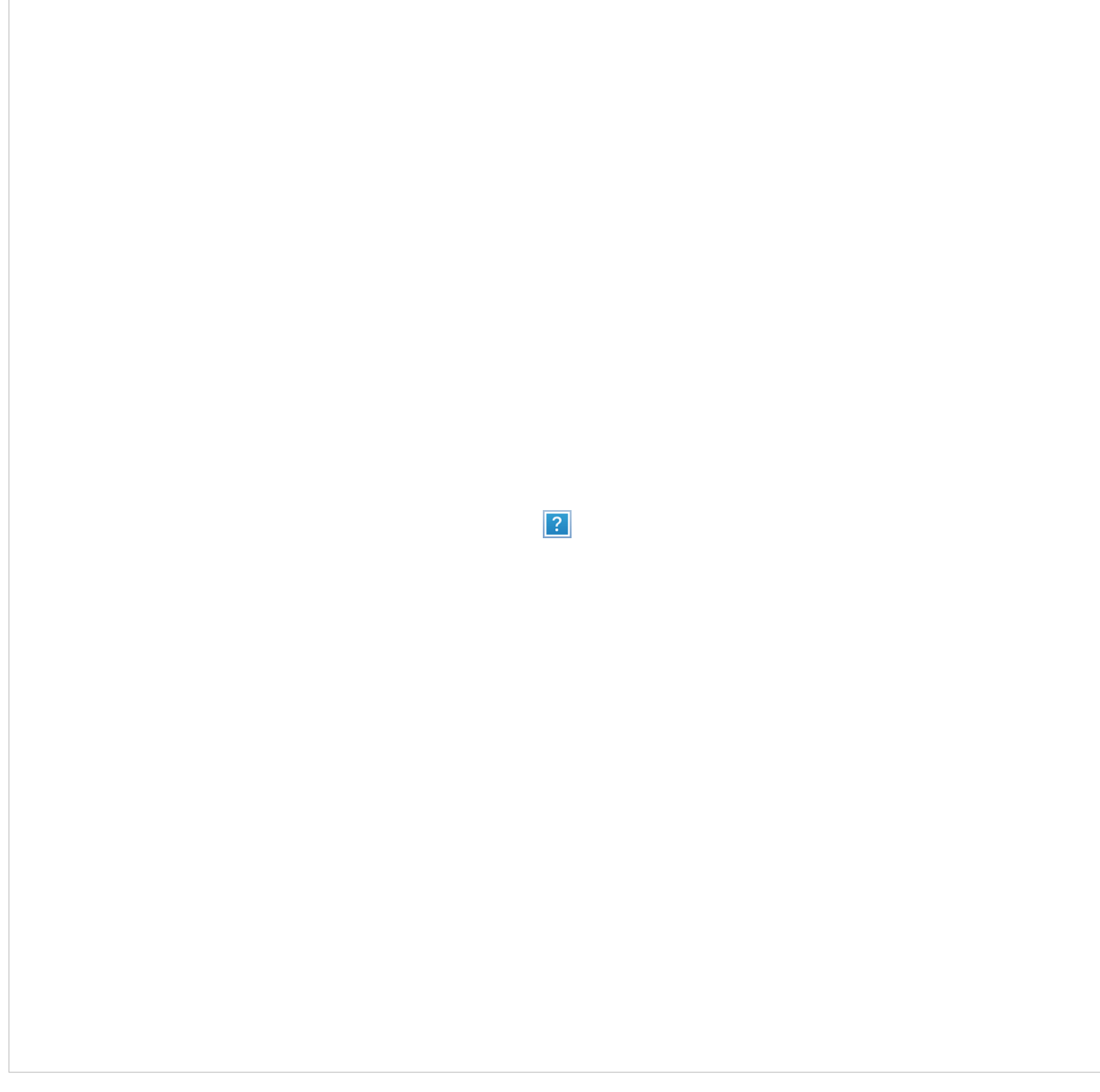


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Interviews with Brando were almost always an extension of his acting in which he would play whatever role suited him for the occasion — earnest, playful, difficult, flirty or droningly cause-specific. In his later years, he scarcely gave interviews at all. What he did do, however, was record about 200 hours of frank talk on all manner of subjects, including much reflective, philosophical and personal commentary that is absent any of the b.s. or cagey hide-and-seek aspects of many of his on-the-record utterances. (The filmmaker also tracked down every TV and radio interview the actor ever gave as well as private recordings journalists had made.)

Brando's estate initiated the project, but there isn't the slightest trace of cosmetic cover-up for appearances' sake on any score. (The only things "false" here are the shots of the interior of Brando's Mulholland Drive home, which was torn down some years ago; duplicate versions of some rooms were re-created on a soundstage.) What comes across is a man with identifiable and specific psychological issues, which, thanks to both extensive psychotherapy and even self-hypnosis, he was able to articulate better than anyone else could. Yet he was never able to conquer other demons and baggage. His frequently voiced contempt for acting and many of his films is evident but, refreshingly, so is his deep commitment to certain roles and his extensive preparation for films he took seriously, including later ones such as *The Godfather*, *Last Tango in Paris* and *Apocalypse Now*.



The film's title refers to the admonition by one side of Brando to another in the recordings. A fascinating choice Riley makes is to occasionally employ a digitized 3D image of Brando's head that the actor had made for himself in the 1980s with software called Cyberware. Technicians animated this so that it looks like a stylized line drawing of Brando is speaking the words we hear him say. It's the closest we'll probably ever have of an impression of the man risen from the grave and addressing us in his own words.

With the help of the private photos, Brando's troubled, mostly rural Midwestern youth is sharply evoked. His formative period was marked by his mother's alcoholism and early exit and by his father's abusiveness and variable measures of disdain, which continued through his son's massive success. The psychological problems that ran through his son's entire life, as presented here, and that surely impacted his own behavior toward his 12 children, seem almost entirely traceable to his father.

He admits he felt "dumb" and had "a great sense of inadequacy due to my lack of education" but also a tremendous "curiosity about other people" that fed directly into his acting. The crucial mentor (among other things) for him was his acting teacher **Stella Adler**, whose strong personality comes through vividly in some terrific clips, as does New York City itself in wonderfully unfamiliar late '40s snippets. If he hadn't become an actor—he says it was the first thing he ever did that he was good at—Brando speculates that "I could have been a con man."

Other rare footage shows him learning the life of a paraplegic for his first film, *The Men*; behind the scenes in hitherto unknown color shots of the making of *On the Waterfront*; seriously rattled by an unruly crowd at the premiere of *Guys and Dolls*; and a subtext-filled TV appearance with his father, after which Brando says he never wanted his father anywhere near his first son, **Christian**.

This arc is sadly completed later on in connection with the tragic deaths of his first two children, Christian and **Cheyenne** — the former served time for killing the latter's boyfriend at their father's home. The trial was a terrible ordeal for Brando, although worse was to come with Cheyenne's suicide and Christian's early death.

Stating that he was drawn to *Mutiny on the Bounty* because of his "contempt for authority," he quickly thereafter began his long, bumpy career as a social activist, first with the civil rights movement in the South, then with Native Americans. His escape was Tahiti and his private island there, places that brought out his most effusive, unreserved enthusiasm. Frustratingly, there's no mention of Brando's single, enduringly fascinating directorial outing, *One-Eyed Jacks*.

From what he says here, he took his work in *The Godfather* very seriously, not as just a needed payday. By contrast, he resented that **Bernardo Bertolucci** "stole some things" from him on *Last Tango*, then also claims that on *Apocalypse Now*, "I rewrote the entire script."

Ultimately, Brando's story, as told by the man himself, is moving, poignant, troubling and sad. Due superficially to nothing more than the tremendous girths they both achieved in their later years, it's easy to draw a certain comparison between Brando and another great artist of the approximate period and same geographic origins about whom there similarly lingers the feeling that he achieved less than he might have — **Orson Welles**. To an armchair psychologist, it seems that what perhaps held back both men the most was a lack of discipline quite likely fostered by untidy, vagabond childhoods.

But, while various aspects of his life are indisputably sad, *Listen to Me Marlon* is a tonic for Brando fans due to its delivery of such an unexpectedly fulsome, intimate and fresh portrait of a character more complex than any he ever played.

*Venue: Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema Documentary Competition)*

*Production: Passion Pictures*

*Director: Stevan Riley*

*Writer: Stevan Riley*

*Co-writer: Peter Ettegui*

*Producers: John Battsek, R.J. Cutler, George Chignell*

*Executive producers: Andrew Ruhemann, Avra Douglas, Mike Medavoy,*

*Larry Dressler, Jeffrey Abrams*

*Director of photography: Ole Bratt Birkeland*

*Production designer: Kristian Milsted*

*Editor: Stevan Riley*

*Co-editor: Peter Ettegui*

*100 minutes*