

## 'Belushi': Film Review

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Judy Belushi Pisano/Courtesy of SHOWTIME

BELUSHI

### THE BOTTOM LINE

*A loving but incisive cinematic tribute.*

## R.J. Cutler's documentary uses oral interviews to provide an intimately personal portrait of comedy icon John Belushi.

Take a moment to consider this sobering fact: John Belushi died 38 years ago. That it feels like yesterday is a testament to the lingering impact this comic legend has had on pop culture. That's why R.J. Cutler's documentary feels so relevant in its recounting of the actor's life in informative and moving fashion. What makes the film particularly special is its extensive use of vintage audio interviews conducted with so many of Belushi's loved ones, friends and associates, including his widow, Judy, Dan Aykroyd, Lorne Michaels, Carrie Fisher, Ivan Reitman, Harold Ramis, Jim Belushi, Penny Marshall, John Landis and many others. The net effect is to make *Belushi*, which recently received its world premiere at the Chicago International Film Festival before airing on Showtime in November, feel like the wake none of us were able to attend.

Those interviews, along with rare home movies, archival footage and clips from Belushi's theatrical, television and film appearances, form the heart of the film. They offer a deeply personal portrait of a comedy genius and complex personality who died in 1982 at age 33, the victim of his addictions and self-destructive impulses.

The film adopts a fatalistic turn from early on, when we hear the late Harold Ramis, who worked with Belushi at Chicago's Second City and other projects, comment that he first began seriously worrying about his friend when he saw him performing with Aykroyd as the Blues Brothers to a rapturous sold-out crowd at the Universal Amphitheatre. At that time Belushi was starring on *Saturday Night Live*, his film *National Lampoon's Animal House* had become a screen blockbuster and the Blues Brothers' album was at the top of the charts. It was such a heady level of success that Ramis feared Belushi would succumb to the inevitable excesses that would result.

Animation sequences provide an effective visual correlative to the account of Belushi's early years as the son of Albanian immigrants living in a Chicago suburb. He exhibited a flair for performing early on, obsessively studying the comedy routines of Jonathan Winters and Bob Newhart and performing for neighbors as a child. He briefly worked in summer stock before seeing Chicago's Second City troupe, which inspired him to pursue a career in sketch comedy. He and two college friends started the improvisational comedy troupe the West Compass Players before he joined Second City himself.

His career trajectory rocketed after that. He appeared in off-Broadway's *National Lampoon's Lemmings* alongside such performers as Christopher Guest and Chevy Chase, and then on *The National Lampoon Radio Hour* with an ensemble that included Ramis, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner and Joe Flaherty, among many others. This led to an audition for Lorne Michaels, who was looking for cast members for the first season of *Saturday Night Live*. Belushi told him at their first meeting that he wasn't interested in doing television.

The rest, of course, is history, as the film travels more familiar territory, including Belushi's intense jealousy of Chase during the show's first season; his instant screen stardom when he played "Bluto" in *Animal House*, resulting in his appearing on the cover of *Newsweek*; and his subsequent film career that included hits (*The Blues Brothers*), misses (*Neighbors*) and serious attempts to stretch himself as an actor in *Old Boyfriends* and *Continental Divide*.

The audio interviews, many of them conducted by Belushi's widow, Judy, not long after his death, provide deeply personal insights into the film's subject. Aykroyd discusses their intense friendship ("We fell in love the moment we met") and how he sensed that Belushi was foundering while working on a screenplay in Los Angeles shortly before his overdose. "I didn't get to him in time. I carry that with me forever," Aykroyd says mournfully, adding that at the time he was working on a screenplay that he was sure would bring Belushi and him a much-needed hit. That film turned out to be *Ghostbusters*.

Belushi's spiral into addiction is discussed at length. Michaels, talking about Belushi's behavior starting with the show's second season, says, "He was testing all his boundaries at that point." Landis says (with unintentional irony) about the making of *The Blues Brothers*, "I don't think we lost more than four or five days of shooting because of the drugs." Fisher, no stranger to addiction herself, comments that Belushi had conflicting feelings about his rise to superstardom: "He enjoyed it for a while, and then I think he felt hunted by it."

Home movie footage shot by Judy during a period of Belushi's sobriety at the couple's summer home in Martha's Vineyard provides a poignant glimpse of the normal life he could have lived. That his early loss left so much potentially great work undone makes the documentary as much elegy as tribute.

*Venue: Chicago International Film Festival*

*Production companies: Passion Pictures, This Machine Filmworks*

*Distributor: Showtime Documentary Films*

*Director-screenwriter: R.J. Cutler*

*Producers: John Battsek, R.J. Cutler, Diane Becker, Trevor Smith*

*Executive producers: Bill Couturie, Sean Daniel, Vinnie Malhotra, Andrew Ruheman*

*Editors: Joe Beshenkovsky, Maris Berzins*

*Composer: Tree Adams*

108 minutes



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