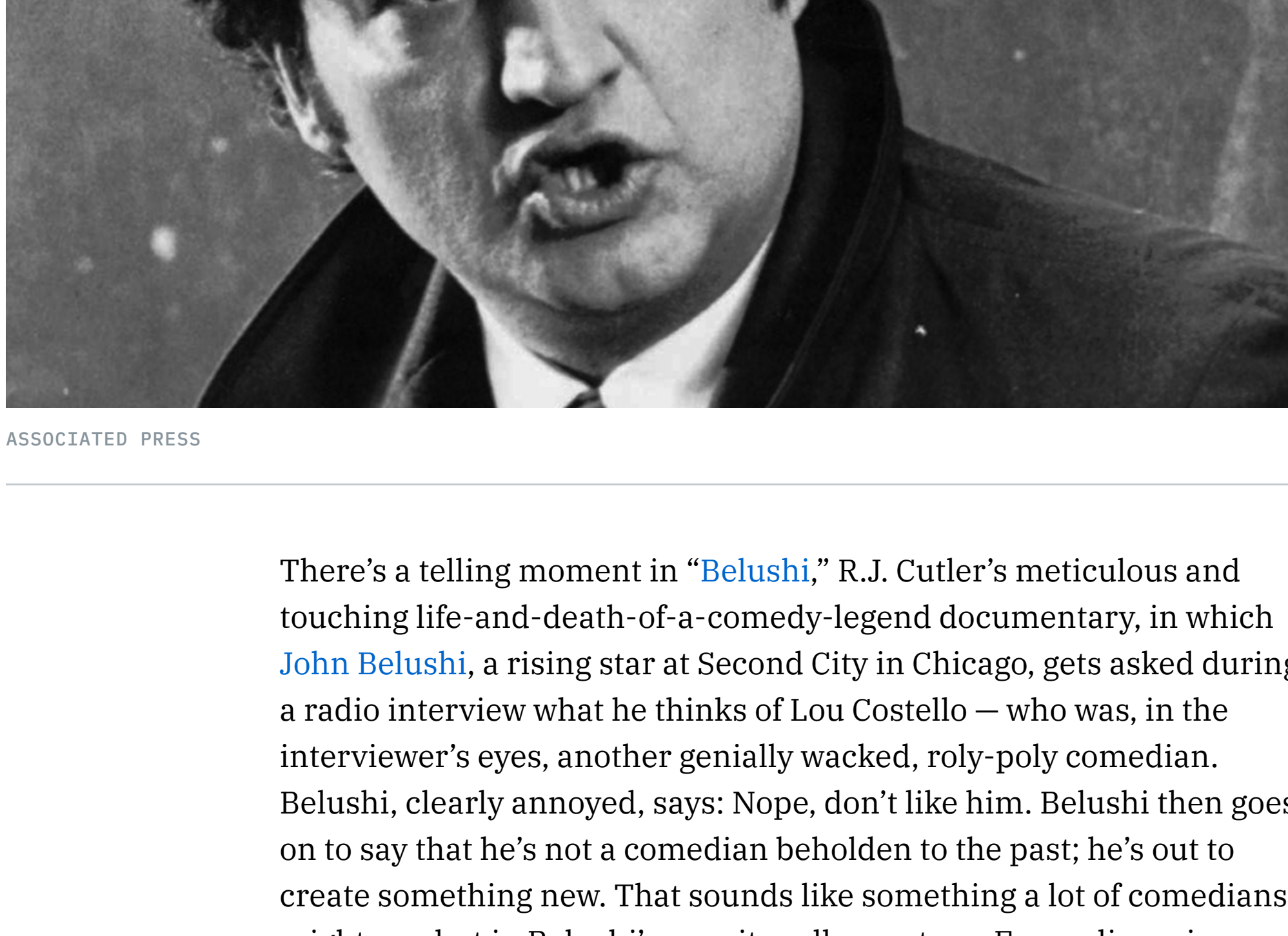
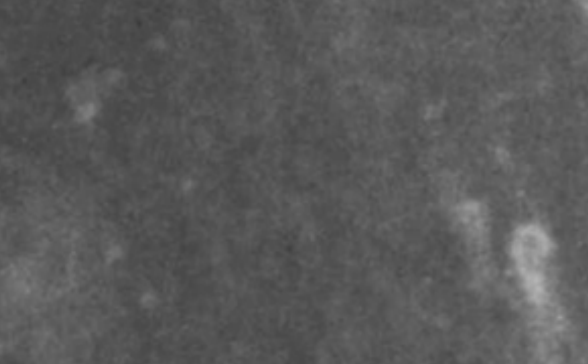


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'Belushi' Review: R.J. Cutler's Documentary Does Justice to the Ultimate Rock 'n' Roll Comedian

The life and paradox of John Belushi: He was a nice, sweet Midwestern guy who was also a born anarchist.

By Owen Gleiberman



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There's a telling moment in "Belushi," R.J. Cutler's meticulous and touching life-and-death-of-a-comedy-legend documentary, in which John Belushi, a rising star at Second City in Chicago, gets asked during a radio interview what he thinks of Lou Costello — who was, in the interviewer's eyes, another genially wacked, roly-poly comedian. Belushi, clearly annoyed, says: Nope, don't like him. Belushi then goes on to say that he's not a comedian beholden to the past; he's out to create something new. That sounds like something a lot of comedians might say, but in Belushi's case it really was true. Even a live-wire original like Robin Williams saw Jonathan Winters as a god, and Belushi did have influences (including Winters and Bob Newhart). But his wild-man school of comedy didn't emerge from the past. It grew out of the "Revolution is here, and it's on drugs!" era, and out of Belushi's own temperament — his what-the-hell magnetism, and his compulsion to push everything he touched to extremes.

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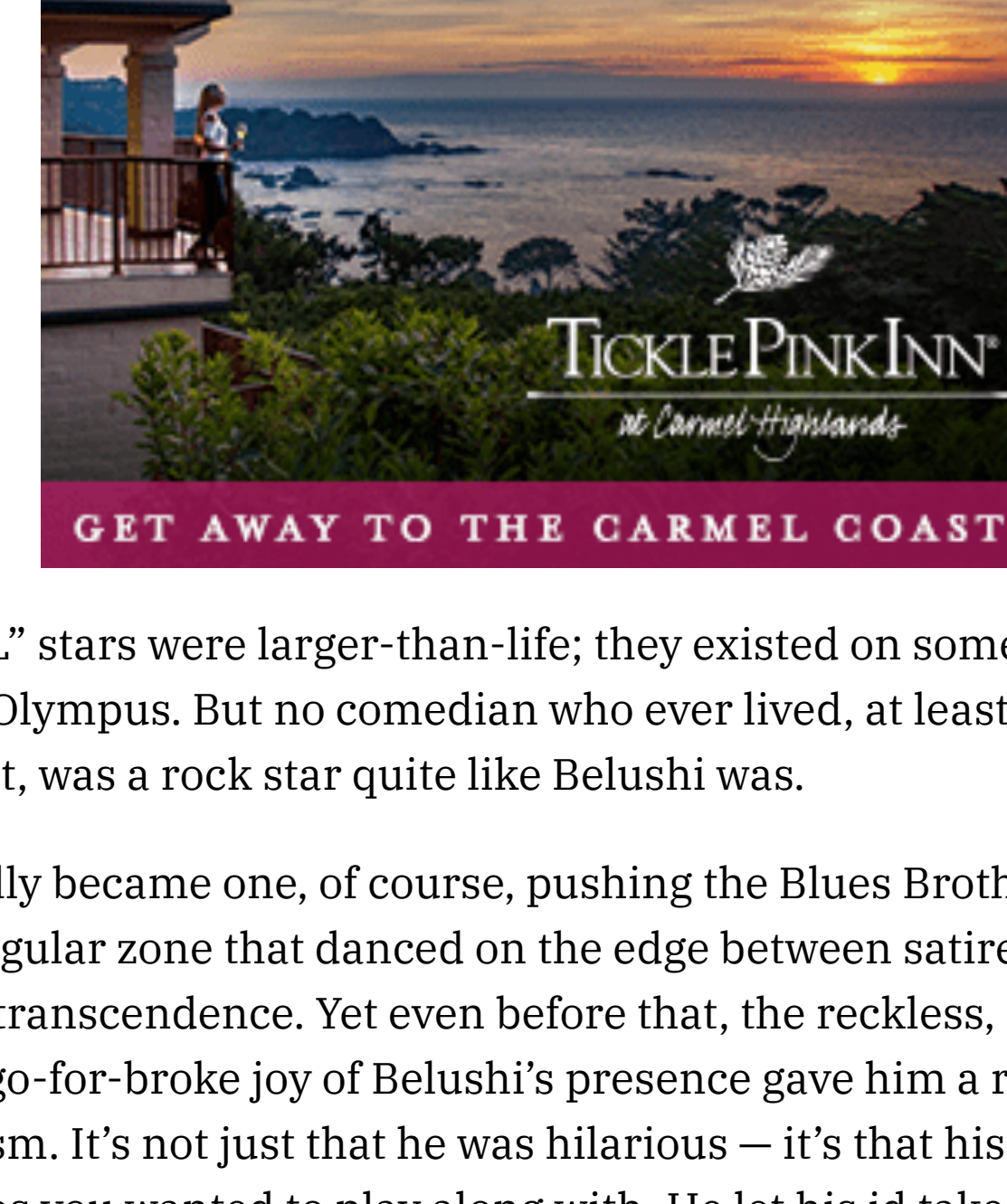
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It may sound like an evasion tactic when a documentary keeps insisting that its subject was a nice, warm, beloved person. But the fascinating paradox of John Belushi is that he was a loyal, gregarious Midwestern sweetheart who also happened to be the living spirit of anarchy. "Belushi," which in addition to the expected wealth of performance clips is built around an intimate array of photographs (plus Belushi's handwritten letters, which are marked by a plainspoken sincerity that feels a step removed from his public image), traces the many sides of that contradiction.

It shows us Belushi the popular high schooler who was also a grinning, sun-glassed hipster seated behind a drum set in a band called the Ravens. The Belushi who'd already fallen in love with Judy Jacklin, who he addressed as "Dear Jutes," writing her letters from an Indiana summer stock where he was supposed to be learning how to be an actor but, instead, discovered pot and "Sgt. Pepper" ("Whenever I hear it I think of you. Especially 'With a Little Help From My Friends'"). The one who told Judy, after seeing Second City, "This is what I want to do," though he also told her that she'd need to support them, because he never expected to make any money. (In the family, it was thought he'd take over his father's diner, but Judy says, "That was John Belushi 101. You don't do something you don't believe in.") And then there was the explosive showman who became a star at Second City, where he could walk onstage as Truman Capote and steal the moment with a cock of his head. Not to mention the up-and-comer who ruled "Lemmings," the National Lampoon's Off Broadway takedown of "Woodstock," with his impersonation of Joe Cocker.

At the time, there was a saying that "comedy is the rock 'n' roll of the '70s," a sentiment that applied to people like Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, and George Carlin — stand-up comedians who, through the power of their comic visions, had come to seem as incandescent as rock stars. Lenny Bruce was probably the first of them, though he self-destructed a bit too early (in 1966) to ever make it to the cover of Rolling Stone. But the fact that Rolling Stone, in the '70s, began to put comedians on its cover gave stand-up comedy a youth-culture cachet it had never had. That extended to the new stars of "Saturday Night Live," who within a year of the show's launch, in 1975, had come to seem less like a TV comedy-variety-show troupe than like the Beatles.



The "SNL" stars were larger-than-life; they existed on some cool comedy Olympus. But no comedian who ever lived, at least up until that point, was a rock star quite like Belushi was.

He literally became one, of course, pushing the Blues Brothers into some singular zone that danced on the edge between satire and retro karaoke transcendence. Yet even before that, the reckless, impish, defiant, go-for-broke joy of Belushi's presence gave him a rock 'n' roll magnetism. It's not just that he was hilarious — it's that his routines were solos you wanted to play along with. He let his id take over. When I would watch him do the Samurai on "SNL," it was so pinpoint but gleefully deranged that I assumed he'd been doing it his whole life. One of the fascinating things I learned from "Belushi" is that just before his "SNL" audition, John was at home watching TV and a samurai movie with Toshiro Mifune came on. He got the idea right there.

From the start, the politics of Belushi at "SNL" were dicey. Lorne Michaels wanted to create a network show that would be an "upheaval," but John, with a certain swagger, told Lorne that he hated television, which didn't exactly win Michaels over. Belushi's attitude was: I'll let you have me on your show. And once cast, he was tormented by the competition he experienced between himself and Chevy Chase, who got all the media attention. But Chase was so popular that he was snapped up by Hollywood almost overnight, and with that, says Michaels, "the thing that John most hoped for, that he would be the alpha male, had now happened."

Michaels compares Belushi to Ralph Kramden, because he had a blue-collar vibe, but Belushi was really a gangster surrealist. Elizabeth Taylor choking on a chicken bone. The Samurai. The decathlon champion who smoked and ate little chocolate donuts. Joe Cocker — the so-perfect-it's-as-mesmerizing-as-the-real-thing impersonation. The way he would transition from sane to a spinning-off-his-chair tornado on Weekend Update. And the "Cheeseburger, cheeseburger" sketch, which was based on Belushi's father, but the fact that you had to order a cheeseburger — it was the only word Belushi said on the sketch, all with the feeling that he'd beat you up if you *didn't* order one — made it the purest punk.

The Belushi paradox was also at the center of his drug addiction. Anyone can become an addict, but Belushi, for someone as devoted to cocaine as he turned out to be, didn't appear overridden with demons. Comedians are famously tormented on the inside, but Belushi's comedy grew out of happiness. The entire concept of the Blues Brothers came down to, "This is what me and my buddy Aykroyd fantasize about doing. So we're doing it!" On his 30th birthday, in 1979, the Blues Brothers' album was number one, John was the star of "SNL," and "Animal House" was the top-grossing comedy of all time. (I also think it was the single most *influential* movie on American life of the last 50 years.) "Animal House" caught the quintessence of Belushi, in that the dirty secret of Bluto is that he's actually rather sweet.

So what started Belushi's slide down from the mountaintop? He actually got clean for a year, living with Judy on Martha's Vineyard. But the late Carrie Fisher is interviewed in the movie, and she makes the penetrating point that John, in trying to kick drugs on his own, without rehab, never dealt with the fundamental challenge of sobriety: that it can be boring, and that the feelings you're covering up come rushing in. And while the documentary acknowledges that Belushi was grasping for a new screen image (in films like "Continental Divide" and "Neighbors," where he played ironically civilized dweebs), it seems clearer, in hindsight, that Belushi's career was in a serious bind. In a sense, he'd graduated from anarchy; he had outgrown it. But how did one turn a polite, owlish Belushi into a crowd-pleaser? My guess is that had he lived, his future might have been in sitcoms.

It's possible to think of his infamous death at the Chateau Marmont in 1982, from a combined overdose of heroin and cocaine, as a horrifying fluke. But apart from the fact that the drugs he was on were deadly, people had been talking about Belushi in terms of self-destruction from almost the moment he became famous. In the 1978 Rolling Stone cover story on him, Michael O'Donoghue is quoted as saying that the same impulse that makes Belushi great will ultimately destroy him. He was right. In the film, Belushi's own letters betray his fear that he had reached the point of no return. Yet there can be a puny hint of intentionality to all that. Belushi was a bighearted person who craved no limits. In some terrible way, he went out like the rock star he was.

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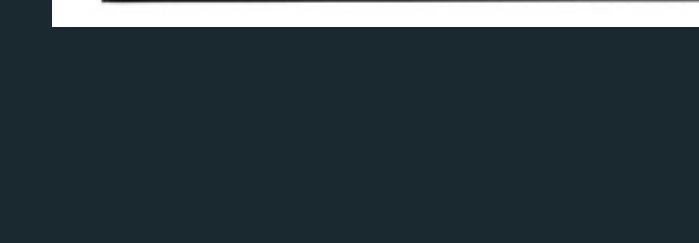
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