

## Transcript of the interview with Bill Simon by Betsy Walters January 2008

**Please note that this interview was conducted during the Writers Guild strike, which has since been resolved.**

*You're a longtime CINE jury chair, based in Los Angeles. Tell us a little bit about your professional history. Where did you go to school? How did you get started?*

Well, my background is really very unusual. I went to Cornell, and I got an electrical engineering degree. I spent four years in the Navy, two of them at sea, and then I discovered that the Navy had a filmmaking headquarters and I got myself stationed there. I wanted to produce and direct. They needed a writer when I arrived, so I started writing there. I got out of the Navy at the end of my four years and I've been freelance writing ever since.

For a long time [I was writing] corporate films, television documentaries, training films, all kinds of short films – hundreds of them. My wife doesn't like me to give the number because it doesn't sound possible! But I did that for a lot of years, and did a lot of films. And then about ten or fifteen years ago, a corporate executive I had been writing speeches for asked me to write a book with him, and so I became a book author. Along the line, incidentally, I also wrote screenplays on assignment and became a Writers Guild member, about fifteen years ago. And lately I've been walking the picket line.

*It sounds like you have quite a wide range of experience. What would you consider some of your career highlights?*

Well, certainly in the book arena, the first book that I did became a national best-seller because the guy that I wrote it with was given a job as CEO of Apple Computer just as the book was coming out.

In terms of films, I've done PBS documentaries, including a one-hour documentary for the *Smithsonian World* series when it was on the air. And my films have been everything from "how to fly types of military jet-fighter airplanes" to "why highways are a good thing for America." Also, I've done speeches for major corporate executives and some major corporate shows, including an international sales meeting for Apple Computer the year that the Macintosh came out. I also wrote the CBS Affiliates Meeting one year.

Among the books, some of the highlights are *iCon*, a biography of Steve Jobs that Steve helped make into a *New York Times* best-seller by trying to block its publication, and also a book about building the Pathfinder spacecraft and flying it successfully to Mars. [I've done] a book called *Gorgeous Disaster* about Deborah Lafave, the Tampa high school teacher who had sex with a fourteen year old boy and got prison time. That's going to be featured in an Oprah magazine article in March. And I'm working right now on books 24 and 25.

*That's incredibly impressive! And out of idle curiosity, speaking of numbers, what is the number of short films that you've written (if you don't mind me asking)?*

It's over 700.

*How did you first get involved with CINE?*

Washington, D.C. is my hometown, and it's where the Navy filmmaking headquarters is based (or it was then – it may still be), but I came back to Washington while I was in the Navy and was a member of the Washington Film Council. I met people there who were connected with CINE. I may not have been aware of CINE until one of my films was nominated and won a CINE award. It was a documentary in a series about various kinds of weather disasters – floods, volcanoes, hurricanes and so forth – and that's probably how I first became aware of CINE. Films that I've written have won eight CINE Golden Eagles.

*Do you remember when you chaired your first jury for CINE?*

I really don't! It's got to be at least twenty years.

*Take us through the process of a jury. How do you recruit jurors?*

Since I'm in the film community myself, I've always had a circle of professionals in my part of the country – in DC, in the San Diego area and now in Los Angeles – who are in the film community, so finding people who are professionals has never been a problem. And the advantage is that my circle isn't just of people like academics who know film more from a teaching perspective, or an intellectual perspective. My contacts have always been hands-on people – writers, DPs, narrators, directors, filmmakers and so forth. My next door neighbor is a film producer, and I'm a member of "Cornell in Hollywood," a bunch of filmmakers including some people who have produced major films that everyone knows. I'm surrounded by a filmmaking community, and putting together a jury is never a problem.

*And when you're evaluating films, what is the process that you go through? We do have a defined set of CINE criteria to use while judging, but beyond that what are you looking for in a film?*

Let me first say that one of the things that I have always tried to make a point of is making sure that the people on the jury represent different aspects of filmmaking. I mentioned having a narrator – in Hollywood, I have at least one or two actors – and DPs, producers. I try to get a range of people so that everybody is looking at the film that we're screening from a different perspective.

I know this is in the instructions, but I try to make a point of it anyway: I ask everyone not to make comments, either favorable or unfavorable, during the screening of the picture or during the judging period until everybody has finished scoring. And then, before going on to the next film we have a discussion of what everyone admired in the film, and what they didn't. The comments, especially since the people have come from different parts of filmmaking, are often quite varied but also quite enlightening, and people have even taken a different view of the film and asked for permission to change their score after hearing the comments of different people. I don't know how CINE would feel about that, but I allow it. If someone realizes that they missed some strength of the film or even some weakness of the film and wants to change their vote as a result, I think that's appropriate.

*Sure, and I think that's just part of the process of viewing and evaluating film. Sometimes it takes some time to think about it, and let it set in.*

*Like we said, you're a longtime jury chair and you've shown a great commitment to CINE over the years, for which we're extremely grateful. What do you find fulfilling about the work that you do as a jury chair?*

That's a very good question. The opportunity it provides for seeing films on a wide variety of subjects, and sometime in a variety of filmmaking styles, is one of the principle things that makes this worth doing for me. It keeps me in touch with short film in particular, although if you look back over the types of juries that I've been doing you'll see that I've sometimes had hour-length and feature-length shows to screen, but those are the films I see routinely (and I'm a member of the Writers Guild Film Society, so I see films almost every weekend). To see what filmmakers in different areas who are doing documentaries or travel films or historical films, to see the different perspectives they sometimes bring to it is one of the big rewards.

*Earlier, we touched upon the fact that you're a Writers Guild member, and the Writers Guild is in the middle of a contentious strike right now. We at CINE have just established a new division as part of our competition that we call the New Media Division, for content for the web and mobile devices. We think this is a great step forward, and it's an important issue in the world of media. In fact, that's one of the issues that writers are striking over – revenue from and ownership of this kind of content. What's your take on the proliferation of this new media, as a Writers Guild member and in general?*

You know, on the picket line this subject has come up a number of times, the possibility that writers might very well do something that a number of them have been doing during the strike: making videos and putting them up [on the Internet] themselves. But ten years from now, it is certainly a possibility that the studios and the networks and cable companies won't be the channels that writers have to work through anymore. Writers may be doing their own work and putting it up for sale on the Internet. The whole industry could change, and change in a way that makes the writer much more central to the whole process of creating film.

*It's definitely a rapidly evolving atmosphere.*

And that's one of the reasons [for the strike], despite some articles I've seen that say that the writers are unhappy with their leadership because they want the strike to be over and they want to go back to work. I wrote the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* recently complaining about an article like that because in the fifteen or twenty years I've been a Writers Guild member I have never seen the Writers Guild membership as unified over anything as they are over this strike. There really is a very strong feeling that we're not going to let happen what has happened in the past, agreeing to terms that turn out to be very bad for the writers.

*Well, it's a very contentious atmosphere. And as the strike shows, the film and entertainment industry can be rather fickle sometimes. As someone who's an established member of it, what advice do you have for emerging filmmakers? If you were starting out, what would you do?*

You know, the truth is that for people who want to get into major feature film production, of the kind that is largely based in Los Angeles (of course a lot of features are made with money and with productions that come from other parts of the country), but a shocking number of people who are established in the industry got a foot in the door because of somebody they knew. [It's about] developing contacts with people who are working within the industry – a guy you went to high school with and haven't talked to in ten years, or somebody's uncle or nephew or cousin who might give you an entrée into even a mailroom job at an agency. A really surprising portion of the people now working in this business got their start through somebody who knew somebody. And I think that would be a piece of advice that most people might not hear elsewhere. Looking for somebody who knows somebody perhaps means starting at the bottom, not producing a great short or even a low-budget feature and trying to get started with it. That's possible, but a great many people in the business did not get started that way; they got started by having somebody bring them in to work through a contact or somebody who knew someone working in the business.

*And that's one of the things at CINE that we try to promote for emerging filmmakers – besides the competitions, and that line on their résumés that say they're Golden Eagle winners – but also these networking opportunities. Because like you said, they're really important.*

*Bill, thank you so much for your time today, and for your continued commitment to CINE. You're certainly one of our best, and we really appreciate it.*

Thank you.