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FILM

The Last Days of Gus Van Sant

Local legend leers into the final flashes
of Kurt Cobain's life

BY JOHN ESTHER

Continuing in the same aesthetic vein he traveled in *Gerry* and *Elephant*, gay Portland filmmaker Gus Van Sant takes a look into the hours leading up to the death of rock icon Kurt Cobain in *Last Days*.

Michael Pitt plays Blake, a thinly disguised Cobain effigy wandering around his decaying mansion, hiding from the other inhabitants (or "rabbits") of the house and jamming on instruments when nobody is around. Like he did in his past two films, Van Sant layers the simultaneous actions and discourses of the characters and the environment in order to create an atmosphere of impending doom rather than any analytical dissection about why Cobain died. (*Last Days* does not show Blake actually pulling the trigger, so those of us who Love to suspect foul play was involved in Cobain's

JE: How come you didn't shoot the film in Portland?

GVS: We couldn't find the right house. There were many of them in the New York area where people had built big houses where you could go in and shoot. The ones we had in Portland, and other places in the Northwest, the big ones, were either museums or a big one like the one Kurt Cobain lived in. They were places that had been decorated or they needed to be redone. They weren't something that struck our fancy.

JE: What does the film say about your own experiences in Portland?

GVS: When I first got any money going, from *Drugstore Cowboy*, I went and bought a big house. It was sort of one of the prominent



Gus Van Sant works behind the scenes with Michael Pitt.

death will not be offended.)

Just Out recently caught up with Van Sant in his "company town" of Los Angeles to hear about his latest endeavor, opening July 22 at Cinema 21.

John Esther: As the press notes suggest, your film is a setup for individual interpretations, yet you provide a lengthy Q & A in those notes, and now you are doing a press junket. When I last spoke to you about *Gerry*, you said you were reluctant to talk about your own work.

Gus Van Sant: I could talk about it, but I wouldn't talk about it in definitive terms as far as story, resolutions or whatever. I love to talk about stuff. I love to talk about myself. [Laughs] I love to talk about the craft. I love to talk about movies and so forth. But there are a lot of things about journalism that I sort of get queasy about. It's free publicity. In a case like this, I just feel like you're talking to journalists and you're promoting the movie to get free space. It's about getting something for free, and I always feel the movie should be able to fight for itself. It should be something people want to see because there's good word of mouth. If there's not, then you're just trying to sell it. I guess it's an insane guilt I feel.

houses in Portland. It was sort of like the cliché thing to do. We made movies in it, and we edited in the basement. Some of the people lived in the house during the films. We edited everything from *My Own Private Idaho* to *Good Will Hunting*. We made use of the house, but I guess the house was always too big for me. I didn't really know that. I just went and bought it because I could.

JE: Why do you remain in Portland? Do you think it influences your outlook on film?

GVS: Yes, a lot. I live there because it's great. It's the place where I went to high school. I've lived in L.A. for different periods of time, and I have a history here as well. I know a lot more people here than I do there because I'm working with people all the time that live down here. So this is my company town, but I'm living in a faraway suburb.

JE: Why did you name the character Blake?

GVS: It was just a name that occurred to me. It wasn't particularly William Blake, but after I said "Blake" I realized there's this William Blake cult that probably relates a lot to the character, or at least his poetry.