



# Anarchist in Tweeds

Paul Goodman Changed My Life revives '60s icon

**Paul Goodman Changed My Life:** Directed by Jonathan Lee. Cinematography, Benjamin Shapiro. Editor, Kimberly Reed. Music, Miriam Cutler. Starring Paul Goodman. JSLFilms, 2011. Not rated. 89 minutes. ★★★★★☆

Here is a generic yet timeless tale of young readers turned on by an author influential enough to have a movie made about him: Born and raised in a small town that always seemed cramped, stagnant and terminally dull, our young man senses that something is missing, and that he is alone. He moves to the big city, where he enrolls in community college and works part-time at a coffee shop. His dreams snuggle close to his chest: he wants to be a writer, and he is gay.

These hidden hungers drive his search, his need to devour and understand, and — living among millions of souls in this seething metropolis — he's introduced to strange worlds he never knew existed: exotic foods, men dressed as women, drugs that make you dance, books that would never be shelved in his hometown library.

He reads voraciously, as though mapping uncharted territory through zones of great beauty and great danger. A customer at the coffee shop hands him Henry Miller, which leads him to Knut Hamsun, then onto Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Reich and, finally, Paul Goodman. When he reads Goodman, it's as though the author is whispering into his ear, answering his every question — even those he didn't realize he had.

This story of discovery was common among the disaffected youth of the '50s and '60s, though these days not so much. A new documentary by Jonathan Lee, *Paul Goodman Changed My Life*, is a lovely introduction to an utterly unclassifiable individual who served as an early icon for those who rejected the conformity, coercion and corruption of post-war consumer America. An inspiration to the New Left and co-founder of Gestalt Therapy, an early voice against the Vietnam War and a proudly out bisexual, Goodman was one of his generation's most charismatic and polarizing figures.

As William F. Buckley noted while introducing Goodman on *Firing Line*, a television clip that opens Lee's film: "Mr. Paul Goodman is, roughly speaking, everything." Buckley's not kidding. Brilliant, bisexual, inconvenient, practical, an anarchist, novelist, poet, original, talkative, reclusive, mischievous, a humanist, pacifist, playwright — just a few terms used to describe this endlessly compelling and now oddly forgotten figure.

Buckley's words, while expressing awe, also contain a classic backhanded dismissal. Indeed, Goodman was the anti-Buckley. He is best known for his 1960 book *Growing Up Absurd*, which argued that the rise of juvenile delinquency was not an epidemic to be quashed but a signal that society itself was rotten. Old news now, but at the time of publication Goodman's words were viewed by mainstream, middle-class America as shocking, maybe even dangerous.

Lee's documentary is a love letter, and if it waxes romantic in tone (Goodman himself was a Romantic to the core), it remains admirably unsentimental in its candid portrait of this difficult man. Unlike documentaries that take a more archival and sequential approach, this film is structured around Goodman's ideas and their socio-cultural impact; Lee provides the rough outlines of Goodman's life — a New York Jew, raised fatherless, taught here and there, knew so and so — but he is more concerned with the era of Goodman's greatest productivity and broadest success. This he treats with the subtlety and depth due a thinker of Goodman's avidity and influence.

Through footage of Goodman and recent interviews with friends, family and artists like Susan Sontag and Grace Paley, a touching portrait emerges: The epitome of the rumpled, tweedy professor with his thick glasses and corncob pipe, Goodman was that rarest of human beings: A restless soul born fully awake and perpetually dissatisfied with the hypocrisy, corruption and violence surrounding him. He was incapable of being other than what he was, and his struggle for liberation was not theoretical, but ceaseless and practical.

Lee's documentary sets Goodman's achievements in the context of the '60s student upheavals, and places him, intellectually, in the company of such legendary gadflies as Socrates and Thoreau. It would be impossible to make a boring documentary about such a wildly engaged, intellectually vivacious person. Lee, however, forgoes the easy path, turning his documentary into a work of art — a tribute as well as an elegy to where we went wrong as a society — in this crazy country where Kardashians and Ke\$ha are household names, while mention of Goodman (no, not John, *Paul*) elicits a confused shrug.

*Paul Goodman Changed My Life* opens Friday, Dec. 9, at Bijou Cinemas; the 6:15pm screening that day will be followed by a moderated Skype discussion with director Jonathan Lee; info at bijou-cinemas.com

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	<p><b>THE WAY</b> directed by Emilio Estevez</p>								
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