

ACTIVISTS OR TERRORISTS?



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

TIM LEWIS APPEARS IN THE OSCAR-NOMINATED *IF A TREE FALLS* By Camilla Mortensen

“I got involved in what some people call activism, but I really don’t like that term,” Tim Lewis says. The tall, thin 55-year-old with piercing eyes prefers to simply be called a videographer. Lewis and his video camera have been everywhere in the Northwest when it comes to documenting protests and police wrongdoing — the WTO riots, the Warner Creek blockade, the pepper spraying of downtown tree-sitters, the Tasing of pesticide protester Ian Van Ornum — Lewis documented all of it. The Tasing incident led to a grand jury subpoena that was later dropped, and the pepper spraying led to the Eugene Police Department being chided by human rights group Amnesty International.

These incidents, as well as some of his wayward ways, have made Lewis not the most popular person with the EPD. But it’s both his videography and his involvement in Eugene’s activist scene that led to Lewis’ appearance in the Oscar-nominated documentary *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*. Lewis’ work is much like he is: One minute it’s high-level commentary on social issues, the next minute, it’s raw and a little rough for a general audience.

Lewis documented the almost yearlong Warner Creek blockade, in which activists prevented the Forest Service from logging a forest burned by arson. Warner Creek marked the debuts of the careers of several mainstream environmental advocates. It was also where many of those later affiliated with Earth Liberation Front became frustrated with the fight to save the environment and turned to more extreme measures, like arson. Daniel McGowan, the subject of *If a Tree Falls*, went on to become a little of both, but his

involvement with ELF actions landed him a terrorist label and seven years in federal prison.

McGowan and Lewis are not the only appearances of Eugene or Oregon-linked activists in the film — Civil Liberties Defense Center attorney Lauren Regan, Earth First!er Jim Flynn and other familiar figures, including local law enforcement, lend their voices and experiences to the documentary. These appearances allow the film to question why environmental activists who didn’t physically harm anyone are labeled terrorists, while allowing those affected by the arsons to speak as well.

Tim Lewis sat down with *EW* before leaving for the Academy Awards.

How did you get involved with the movie?

A friend of mine was actually trying to find me some work. I needed some cash and so he went on Craigslist, looking under video and shit like that, and saw this listing of someone looking for a cameraman to video some court hearings that were happening.

I sent them an email, and I said, “I think I know what you guys are doing and I think you want to get a hold of me because I have some footage you might be interested in.”

We started dialoguing, Sam Cullman (co-director/cinematographer) and I, and Marshall Curry (director). They had to get my trust the first couple weeks and then they got it because they were very genuine and very real. They became my friends. It’s been a joy to work with them.

How did you actually become part of the film? You were in quite a bit of it.

I was, and that sort of surprised me. I was just one of those

people they interviewed. But I guess with my knowledge of the ’90s and of Eugene and having participated in or filmed some of those events, they just felt that my ability to tell that background story was integral to their movie, so they used me.

So, probably off the record, but did they have to edit out a lot of your cursing?

Oh, that doesn’t have to be off the record. I really did try not to curse because Marshall did say that this will be on PBS. I said, “Ok I’ll try my best.”

There were a couple things. I did say “balls,” “fuckers” and “up his ass,” and that was about it (pauses). I think. Yeah, I toned it down for the production. But I think they probably did edit a lot of stuff out.

How did you get involved in activism, the forest protests and documenting the police?

It started at Warner Creek. I was primarily a video producer and a film producer. I wasn’t an activist; I wasn’t involved with any politics. I knew it was a good story.

We only thought it would take a week, but it lasted a year. I sort of got sucked into it at that point; I didn’t want to be a bystander. I didn’t want to be some reporter objectively reporting.

I Gonzoed, I guess, and dove in to be part of the Warner Creek campaign. I wanted to tell their story. I got to know the people. When the ruling came down, I was in a bar getting drunk and they were going “We gotta go, we’re setting up a blockade and everything. You have to come with us — we need a camera.”

I was like, “No, I have no sleeping bag. I don’t have any clothes.” They got me a sleeping bag and clothes and put