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## A New Slice of Nostalgia

A conversation with acclaimed director P.T. Anderson about *Licorice Pizza*, the '70s, and the enduring allure of the San Fernando Valley.

By Lina Lecaro

# P.T. ANDERSON SERVES UP A NEW SLICE OF NOSTALGIA

A conversation with the acclaimed director about *Licorice Pizza*, the '70s, and the enduring allure of the San Fernando Valley.

BY LINA LECARO

By definition, nostalgia is about wistfulness, warmth, and fond feelings for the past, but evoking it needn't always be driven by reliving simpler times. From the awkward innocence of childhood to the hormonal discovery of teenhood to the promise and scary freedom of finally becoming a grown-up, nostalgic cinema aims to capture the personal and relatable complexities of life within a particular time period.

The best movies do it visually and viscerally. Sets, costumes and props can recreate an era (and depending on the wardrobe department, some do it better than others) but it's the story and the director's approach to telling it that make or break it. Paul Thomas Anderson has become known for making it more than once, capturing the past in a dynamic and immersive way. In particular, his mastery of atmosphere, no matter the era, from the smoky casinos of his debut *Hard Eight*, to the coked-out pool parties in *Boogie Nights* to the rainy car rides of SoCal in *Magnolia*, stands out and puts him on the shortlist beside contemporaries (Quentin Tarantino, Cameron Crowe) and influencers (Robert Altman, Jonathan Demme) in terms of transportive filmmakers.

With *Licorice Pizza* he returns to his beloved San Fernando Valley – Reseda in 1973 to be exact – to chronicle the misadventures of Gary Valentine (Cooper Hoffman, son of Philip Seymour Hoffman), a 15-year-old child actor trying to find his way after gigs start to dwindle. Based on the experiences of Anderson's pal (and Tom Hanks' production partner) Gary Goetzman, Valentine's entrepreneurial spirit manifests into a waterbed business and later a pinball parlour, but it's his infatuation with Alana (Alana Haim, of the rock group Haim) that's at the aspirational heart of the movie. She's 10 years his senior so a romance is not in the cards, but she's drawn to him nonetheless. The film follows the pair's friendship and individual

struggles to find their callings.

In recent years, Anderson has worked with universally acknowledged acting greats like Daniel Day Lewis (*There Will Be Blood*, *Phantom Thread*) and Joaquin Phoenix (*Inherent Vice*, *The Master*) but his casting choices have mostly varied, from familiar powerhouses (Philip Baker Hall, John C. Reilly, Julianne Moore) to unexpected career-changing choices (Mark Wahlberg, Adam Sandler, Burt Reynolds). With his latest, he takes the biggest risk of all, casting leads who've never acted in a feature length film before. He's worked with Haim on music videos and shorts previously, and Cooper, a family friend via his father (who died in 2014), is a novice save for P.T.'s "home movies." Both pull off what's needed here, bringing touching realism as well as a Sonny & Cher-like chemistry to the screen. Sean Penn, Bradley Cooper, Tom Waits and Haim's entire real-life family add texture to this simple tale of self-discovery.

After a tough year, *Licorice Pizza*'s bittersweet Valley Girl journey is a refreshing flashback for movie fans and it signals, hopefully, an auspicious new phase for Anderson. His latest may be (once again) set in the past, but its climax suggests a hopeful future. And as the writer, director, husband and father shared in our thoughtful and unfiltered conversation, he's enjoying himself more than ever doing what he does, or at least he's trying to.

*(This interview has been edited for clarity and space in print. See LAWeekly.com for the full-length Q&A discussion)*

**LA WEEKLY:** To start off, I thought it might be enlightening to discuss reviews and the critical reception your films have received. Do you care about what the critics say and do you think about the reception at all before a film comes out?

**P.T. ANDERSON:** It's one thing when a writer takes the time to use their skill to describe



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things they felt from the film, that really gets you going and it makes you feel something. I've gotten very good reviews generally over my career. There's definitely been moments where films have been more challenging. But you appreciate the writers that you care about, or writers that clearly put their heart into it, being right there with you, even if admitting that they struggled with the film.

You're vulnerable when you put a film out. You've spent a lot of time making it, a lot of time dedicating yourself to this insane pursuit of a vision that you have to see through and you can put an armor up just in case somebody wants to kick you. And so when you find out that you don't need that armor, it's like dropping something to the ground, and it's this huge like, 'huh, okay, what was I so worried about?'

**Let's talk about L.A. and specifically the Valley in the '70s, a decade you capture so well. As Generation Xers and L.A. natives, we have a certain perspective on things. I think our generation is the most enamored with nostalgia, especially here. We don't get enough credit for our influence on the present either. Do you have any thoughts on why that is and why kids who grew up in the '70s seem almost obsessed with reliving it?**

You remember the generation before us talking about the '60s and how great they were. I think we probably just sort of rolled our eyes. I mean, a bunch of dope-smoking, peace signs and things we probably dismissed. You ask yourself, 'Am I getting old? Am I delusional or was it better?' I don't think it's that simple. I think it's both. I think, obviously, there's no mystery anymore. And I think that's a bad thing. In the film what becomes apparent – they're two friends trying to find each other and they have to run to the streets or to visit the restaurants that they shared together. They only have landmarks of their relationship to go back to... this kind of thing couldn't happen in a film set today. By the way, we've had this acceleration of the past few years. If our innocence hadn't been lost before, I mean, it's way in the rearview mirror now after everything we've all been through. I'm too nervous and too hopeful about the future to be a fuddy duddy saying, 'Yeah, we had it all and it was great back then.' But it was great.

**I agree. I'm a parent as you are and I think you have to stay positive about the future when you have kids. But there was something special about the post-60s era, before computers and technology became so dominant. We lived through that transitional period of the internet changing things which is pretty crazy if you**

**really think about it.**

I'm just remembering how the emergence of the internet felt so optimistic initially. It felt like this socialist platform everyone could contribute to and everything was going to be equal and wonderful in the same way that people thought about the '60s as a revolution – how magnificent it was going to be and everything was going to change. And then it only took a few years before it was all completely fucking ruined.

**It's true, but I think we stay optimistic and maybe try not to be like our parents, bitterly boasting the good ol' days. And yet, your films are proof to a lot of us who grew in the '70s that it was. From the clothing to the music to the simplicity of just hanging out with friends on a Summer day. You really recreate it all so beautifully and I think that it's alluring to watch even for someone who didn't live through that time, especially backdropped by neighborhoods that look familiar no matter where you're from. Can you explain a bit about the way you shoot and think about the look of your scenes?**

When we were filming this movie we started last August and shot through November. Many, many days, unfortunately, there were fires. And there was sort of a light red and it was constantly diffused with smoke. And I was remembering – we'd be standing there and it looked exactly like it looked in the early '70s with all the smog. We look back and we reminisce about how wonderful that time was, but let's not forget, there were days we weren't allowed to go outside and play because there were smog warnings. The air quality was so bad, particularly in the Valley because it gets trapped between the Santa Monica Mountains and the San Gabriel Mountains.

**In general, the film has an authentic, almost documentary-like feel. These people seem real as do the situations. Can you comment on the things you did to achieve that?**

Obviously, we kind of make a lot of noise about shooting on film. So that's a very strong leg up in terms of authenticity. But here's the thing I think that you're touching on – you can use a camera from 1972, you can have filmstock from '72. Okay, you can do all that if you're lucky enough to round all that up, and that can help, but it's the people that you're looking at more than anything in a movie, right? And no one has any makeup on.

**Right. Actually seeing skin is different and striking even. What about the clothing?**

We generally don't have a large budget and I think early on, like with *There Will Be Blood*, I soon figured if you can get the costumes right,

it adds a lot. Because with *There Will Be Blood* we were outside for most of it, and in the desert, so we didn't have big elaborate sets to try and sell you on the period. All we had was the actors and their costumes. I realized you absolutely have to get the costumes right because that's what's draping on the actor and that's the main portal into the past.

With this one, there was always something that I was basing on my real life. Somebody that I knew, or somebody I knew once removed. My older sister had this friend and she used to always wear this t-shirt that said "I'll try anything once." So I was like, let's get one of those.

*The classic 70's statement t-shirt... Like her "You've Come A Long Way Baby" tee, which was the Virginia Slims cigarettes slogan. I love that. As a vintage clothing collector, I must say the research and references are spot-on. The stylist did such a great job, especially with Alana's outfits.*

Mark Bridges was a costume designer on every film with me and he can do everything, from the clothes in *Phantom Thread* and *There Will Be Blood* to 70's t-shirts, equally as well.

*Alana really embodies the period. The whole ensemble makes for such a varied cast of characters. It was a pleasant surprise to see Tom Waits and even choreographer Ryan Heffington on screen. Of course, you have big stars like Sean Penn and Bradley Cooper. Can you tell us a little bit about your thought process in assembling this cast?*

Sean Penn I've been trying to work with over the years and I wrote something that I thought would be delicious for him to play. I always fantasized about giving him a nice haircut, putting a suit on him so that he could really inhabit



that kind of character that I grew up loving, the William Holden older actor type.

Ryan Heffington was doing a lot of these dance tutorials during the beginning of the pandemic and Maya, my wife, was watching them. I would see them and I thought, 'oh, I wonder if he would ever come play the part of this sort of dancing man servant to a Hollywood producer.' If you've ever seen the movie *S.O.B.*, a great Blake Edwards film from 1978, Stuart Margolin plays a very similar part. And I modeled the character after that. I was so excited to have him come and do it. That was our first couple days of shooting and he was terrific to work with.

Sean suggested Tom and I was so angry that I hadn't thought of it first. I was salivating at

the prospect he would do it and we asked him and he said yes. That'll go down as one of my great memories of ever shooting anything - the weeks with Sean Penn and Tom Waits and Alana and Cooper at the *Tail of the Cock* restaurant.

*The Bradley Cooper scenes are so good, too. Definitely the funniest part of the film.*

He's an incredibly dynamic actor. He's got incredible range. He can do it all and I've been wanting to find an excuse to work with him for quite some time. This seems like a perfect opportunity to let him grow his hair, grow his beard and away we go. That's one component of it that I think is pretty clear. But I think what added to it, and what made it really achieve a different kind of lift-off is that it was the first thing we shot, and we only had five days with

him. And so he got to set the table for these two young actors who've never done anything before. And I can remember we consorted, we schemed, and I told him, 'you're going to give these two an entrance into movie acting.' He got to come out and chew the scenery and completely intimidate them. Which was right for the scene.

*Cooper Hoffman is very endearing. You obviously knew him as he's Philip Seymour's son. When you offered him the role, was he into it right away or were there concerns because it was such a big part?*

He was very hesitant and wanting to know more details. This is a very, very good indication of a strong, intelligent young man. It would not be a good sign if he had just suddenly said,



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'Yeah, sure. What are we doing?' His response made me feel really good. But it didn't take long after we read it with Alana, and did some practicing and improvising, then he was hooked.

**Was he pursuing or studying acting at all before this role?**

He never said I want to be an actor. He showed an aptitude for it in home movies that we would make so I asked him if he thought it would be something he'd be interested in talking about or trying. And he reluctantly said yes.

**Wow, that's incredible. Do you think he'll continue to act? I think about Mark Wahlberg and how you put him front and center in Boogie Nights. People mostly knew him as Marky Mark and he became a big movie star afterward. Do you see these two going on to become big movie stars?**

I would never say 'my crystal ball says'... but what I will say is that their natural talent is enormous. And in Alana's case, she has a day job at the moment. So what's wonderful about that is that she doesn't need it. Cooper is still young and wants to pursue his studies... it's there for him if he wants it, and it's not going anywhere if he wants it, but there's no rush.

And talking about Mark - there's so many good actors, and there's not that much great material. Actors get a role and then they're asked to play that same role the rest of their lives. This is a very common thing. And it's a drag because most actors have a lot more to offer than just one thing. So sometimes you're casting a person, not on what they've done, certainly not on their experience or on the roles that they played previously, but based on who they are as people when you meet them.

**You obviously like working with certain**



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**actors repeatedly. After watching a bunch of your movies together recently, including Inherent Vice, I noticed that your partner Maya Rudolph has a cameo in that and she has a cameo in Licorice Pizza as well. Do you guys consult each other on your creative endeavors and projects?**

Probably far less consulting than you'd think, but only because we have four children. The majority of dialogue that happens in this house revolves around four children and the inner workings of this family. So at a certain point, dialogue about each other's work is kind of an afterthought.

**Well, it's really nice to see her in your films.**

I know. There's a particular moment that I like very much in *Inherent Vice*. When she has a scene with Joaquin Phoenix and something is mentioned about his ex old lady Shasta Fay and

right as the scene ends Minnie Riperton's song *Le Fluor* comes on. Minnie was her mother. There's a good 15-20 seconds where you get to see Maya on the screen with her mom singing. It's one of those magical moments. I kind of remember doing that in the editing room late at night and coming home to her to tell her about it.

**Music is so important to your films. Every song choice in Boogie Nights is perfect and of course, Magnolia's music from Aimee Mann and John Brion sets that tone. Everyone from Suzi Quatro to Wings to David Bowie are highlighted in Licorice Pizza. Can you talk soundtrack choices?**

The basic rule of thumb is you use music from that year or around that time. You have to balance things out with a song that will fit the story; a song that the characters would be

listening to or that would emerge from a radio. But you have to be OK with cheating from time to time. Meaning our story takes place in 72-73. But the Suzi Quatro song is '75. You have to be open if the song helps your story. I think that one, which is heard about 8 minutes in, tells the audience this is what the film's about. 'Our love is alive' and we're 'stumbling' into this thing and we're wandering into either a brick wall or a yellow brick road and we have no idea which.... You can't depend on music to tell your story. If you don't have the foundation of a strong script or the actors aren't delivering. Music is not going to save you. It will feel hollow. You can't make the mistake of using a song in lieu of respect for your characters.

**Speaking of music, Licorice Pizza is a record store chain that older Southern Californians remember fondly, but there are no references to it in the film. Did you have trepidation about using it?**

At a certain point, you realize that about .0001% of us know what it is. So there's a regional component that might be upset. But then I thought, well what does it do for me? It reminds me of my childhood which is kind of good enough. You reverse engineer some justification, meaning, well, she's kind of like licorice and he's kinda like pizza and they do *not* go together, but somehow it just kind of works. At a certain point, I felt like I had to go with something instinctual that felt right. Anything else seemed overly simplistic. I thought, 'Does this feel like the film?' Yes? Ok then do it.

**Read the full-length conversation with P.T. Anderson at LAWeekly.com. Licorice Pizza is in select theaters now. It goes nationwide on Dec. 25.**



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