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Paul Thomas Anderson's hilarious and intimate 'Licorice Pizza' tour of the Valley



Alana Haim and Sean Penn in a scene from Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza" filmed outside the old Billingsley's restaurant at the Van Nuys Golf Course, a stand-in for the defunct Tail o' the Cock. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

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Paul Thomas Anderson is behind the wheel and we're headed north on Balboa Boulevard to the Van Nuys Golf Course, a nice little pitch-and-putt that the filmmaker knows, like just about every nook and cranny in the San Fernando Valley, quite well.

Back in the day, he'd come out here and play a round with friends in the early evening, then walk over to the bar at Billingsley's steak house, sip a beer or three and watch the Dodgers game on the little TV mounted in the corner.

Billingsley's closed in 2004, but the building — and the red leather booths and low bar inside — remain. Anderson shot a scene here for his audacious, operatic, Valley-set 1999

drama “Magnolia” — the dinner date with John C. Reilly and Melora Walters where they promise to tell each other the truth — and he returned again for his latest film, “Licorice Pizza,” re-creating, with loving care, another defunct Valley restaurant, the landmark Tail o’ the Cock. (Perhaps “landmark” is a bit much, but not if you celebrated your uncle’s birthday with a prime rib dinner there or heard the great stride pianist Johnny Guarnieri play on a Thursday night.)

It’s a warm autumn day, absolutely perfect unless you’re into the whole four seasons thing, and Anderson and I are roaming the west Valley, an idea that neither of us wants to claim (“I heard this was your idea,” I tell him. “I thought you wanted to do this,” he responds, laughing) because it could easily deteriorate into a conversation between a couple of old-timers whining about how a beloved Ventura Boulevard coffee shop has been demolished and turned into a Sephora.



Inside the Van Nuys location of the long-shuttered Billingsley’s restaurant, here playing the role of the now-demolished Tail o’ the Cock for a scene in Paul Thomas Anderson’s “Licorice Pizza” with, from left, Tom Waits, Alana Haim and Sean Penn. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

“This is a dangerous one, isn’t it? You start getting into nostalgia. You just teeter. It’s this edge of sounding *cranky*,” Anderson, 51, says. “Don’t forget, it wasn’t that long ago that nostalgia was considered kind of a medical condition, something that dissuades you from moving forward or living in the present. But it’s pretty hard not to be nostalgic these days — even for last week, for that matter.”

He starts laughing. “I’m not nostalgic for the ’70s. But I am nostalgic for at least let’s say ... I don’t know ... five years ago.”

Yet it’s 1973, not the recent past, that’s the setting for “Licorice Pizza,” a laid-back, loose and thoroughly lovable coming-of-age story that finds Anderson returning to his home turf (“Boogie Nights,” “Punch-Drunk Love” and the aforementioned “Magnolia” were also set amid the Valley sprawl), a choice, he says, that was “not on his bingo card,” but the writing — begun while he was stuck on another project — took on a joyful momentum that he had no inclination to fight.



Alana Haim and Cooper Hoffman star in Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza." (Paul Thomas Anderson / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

It's the story of a 15-year-old hustler named Gary (played by Cooper Hoffman, the son of Philip Seymour Hoffman, who was a dear friend and frequent collaborator of Anderson's), a showbiz kid and gifted entrepreneur who meets the older Alana (Alana Haim of the sisters band Haim, another Valley institution) on his school picture day and insists she join him for dinner at his favorite restaurant, Tail o' the Cock.

She shows ("This *isn't* a date," Alana informs him), setting into motion a love story that also encompasses gas shortages, waterbeds, Hollywood producer Jon Peters, chaos in the hills of Encino and summer nights spent listening to Vin Scully on the transistor radio.

As we're driving around the same streets Anderson traveled by bike as a teenager, he's telling me about this biography he's reading about Billy Bitzer, D.W. Griffith's groundbreaking cinematographer. A transplanted New Yorker, Bitzer complains about the same things Angelenos gripe about a century later: out-of-place palm trees that provide no shade, eucalyptus trees dripping sap, what the Santa Ana winds do to his sinuses.

"Nothing changes," he says. "A hundred years from now, all those grievances against L.A. will still be there."

We arrive at the golf course, park and, once I figure out how to open the passenger door ("That button there ... the one you have your finger on," Anderson tells me. "It's for

millennials only ... like myself. An old-timer like you can't figure out how to get out of a Tesla"), we head to the pro shop, such as it is, to see if we can get the keys to open the old Billingsley's. The guy behind the counter obliges without asking any questions.



Inside Billingsley's restaurant at the Van Nuys Golf Course, dressed up for "Licorice Pizza" as the Tail o' the Cock. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

Soon enough, we're inside the space where Gary and Alana (not to mention Claudia and Officer Jim from "Magnolia") first get to know each other. "Good memories in here," Anderson says, walking over to the bar. When I mention that if the place was open today, there'd probably be a TV in every corner of the room, he responds, "Don't get me started! *Do ... not ... get ... me ... started,*" but, really, it's too late. He's off. "It just destroys the ambiance. Spaces should not be lit by televisions!"

"I loved the whole vibe of the Tail o' the Cock," Anderson says of the Studio City restaurant, which was on Ventura Boulevard near Coldwater Canyon. "It was my version of Hollywood royalty. But that royalty was not the Clark Gables and Spencer Tracys at the bar. It was Hanna-Barbera animators, commercial directors, writers and voice-over artists, mixed in with families and grandmas."

"Licorice Pizza's" version of royalty dine here too, in the form of a William Holden stand-in played by Sean Penn, who takes Alana to the Cock for drinks and dinner not long after she auditions for a role in a movie modeled on "Breezy," the 1973 May-December romance starring Holden and directed by Clint Eastwood. In the middle of their evening, the Holden character is talked into doing a motorcycle stunt on the golf course, an incident that Anderson took from a hazy memory.

“There was a place near here that I never went to on Ventura and Petit called the Ram’s Horn,” Anderson tells me as we head back to the car. “Sonny and Cher went there a lot. It was a place where [local news anchor] Jerry Dunphy would always sit at the bar and then split to do the Channel 9 news. The legend is he’d leave his drink, say he’d be right back and go do the 9 o’clock news and be back by 10 to finish his drink.

“But the real story, which we stole and twisted around for the movie, is that I remember hearing as a kid that [motorcycle daredevil] Evel Knievel came in there one night and jumped 10 cars on Ventura Boulevard. And somebody was like, ‘I was there. I saw it. He was so drunk, he never made it out of the parking lot. He slammed into a parked car.’ And that always stuck with me, that legend of Evel Knievel at the Ram’s Horn.”

Another thing that stuck with him ended up being the opening scene of “Licorice Pizza,” the photo day encounter between Alana and Gary. One day “forever ago,” Anderson was walking through his Tarzana neighborhood, passed Portola Middle School and saw all the kids lined up on the blacktop to have their pictures taken. He noticed a young boy pestering a uniformed girl. It was just enough for him to say, “That’s a good premise for a movie.”



Alana Haim and Cooper Hoffman in a scene from “Licorice Pizza” shot at Portola Middle School in Tarzana. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

Then, over the years, Anderson’s friendship with producer Gary Goetzman, a former child actor who, yes, opened a waterbed store in Encino called Fat Bernie’s Environmental Living — which, as in the film, later became Fat Bernie’s Pinball Palace — gave him stories that he took, polished and embellished. There was indeed a waterbed delivered to Peters’ home in the Encino hills, though the real events weren’t nearly as dramatic.

“Classic selfish writer mode,” Anderson says, smiling. “You steal like a vampire what you need and leave the truth laying on the floor somewhere behind you.”

The final and most defining piece was Anderson's friendship with Haim, the woman, the band, the whole family. The three sisters and their parents are all in "Licorice Pizza," featured, most memorably, in a scene that illustrates the dangers of bringing an atheist to a Jewish family dinner.

If anyone loves the Valley as much as Anderson — and, aside from a brief stab at NYU film school and a brief spell living in a Santa Monica apartment ("What am I doing here? What's that smell? Fresh air? I've got to get back to the smog"), he has spent his whole life here — it's the Haims.

As we crisscross these neighborhoods, I ask him how it feels to have all those decades of memories stacked up.

"Well, Glenn, let me tell you," Anderson says, adopting a heightened tone, like he's speaking with Barbara Walters, "I remember at a certain point, *at a certain point*," and Anderson breaks up laughing because he's self-conscious about answering questions like this.

And yet he's completely genuine in the way that he embraces the Valley — shortcomings and all — as his home, so he finishes the thought. "I remember at some point thinking, 'You know, I am *not* going to be like my dad shuffling my kids up and down Ventura Boulevard to Little League practice.' And yet here I am, and I'm so happy doing it."



The fictional version of Fat Bernie's Pinball Palace, originally in Encino, shot in Chatsworth for Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza." (Melinda Sue Gordon / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

We're back on Balboa Boulevard and Anderson can't resist taking me through Encino Village, the neighborhood that sits on the old RKO lot where "It's a Wonderful Life" and countless westerns and TV shows were filmed. (He later sends me a link to a spooky "Dragnet" episode that was shot there, just before it was bulldozed.) John Wayne built a beautiful house nearby, which Anderson toured before it was torn down around 2003. "Everything was oversized for the Duke," Anderson says. "You stood at bathroom and kitchen counters and they were like chest-high!"

Turning on Ventura Boulevard, we soon arrive at the old storefront where Goetzman opened his waterbed store and, later, pinball palace. It's now a tanning salon, though Rudnick's, the kids clothing store next door, is a holdover from the old days. "I asked Mr. Rudnick if he remembered Fat Bernie's and he said, 'I do. I just remember those f—bikes out front!'" Anderson says.

"Licorice Pizza" was a family-and-friends project. Anderson's wife, the great Maya Rudolph, is in it. So are their four children, playing a variety of parts ("They're everywhere," he says. "Give them a different haircut and they're an extra over here"), as well as many of their neighborhood friends. Because everyone knew each other, it fostered a warm, intimate camaraderie that can be felt in the finished film.

"I kept thinking, 'Why haven't I done this before?'" Anderson says. He laughs at the memory. "It's hard to imagine doing it any other way now."

When Anderson shot the scenes with his kids and their friends, particularly the grand opening at Gary's pinball palace, he noticed the looks of astonishment on their faces when they arrived on set. "You really had this?" they seemed to be saying.



Cooper Hoffman in a “Licorice Pizza” scene shot at a Chatsworth location set up to look like Fat Bernie’s Pinball Palace. (Melinda Sue Gordon / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

“That ability to hang out and get some free Pepsi and let it spill into the parking lot and find the corners where you can maybe make out, maybe meet somebody. It felt like a wonderful bridge between being a kid and being an adult,” Anderson says of the vibe. “It’s not a bar. It’s not a coffee shop with the fussiness and poetry that go along with that. It’s your own personal safe place — or even dangerous place — to go.”

We’re now sitting in the Balboa Golf Course parking lot off Burbank Boulevard in Encino. The clubhouse makes the best grilled cheese sandwich in L.A., Anderson proclaims. (That’s what his kids say, at least.) Which makes me think of “Licorice Pizza.” I know Anderson had trouble coming up with a title for the film. Southern California natives of a certain age know the Licorice Pizza chain of record stores, which had locations all over the Valley. But why call the movie “Licorice Pizza”?

“If there’s two words that make me kind of have a Pavlovian response and memory of being a child and running around, it’s ‘licorice’ and ‘pizza,’” Anderson says. “It instantly takes me back to that time. And it’s somewhere between that and just absolutely giving up the search for something that makes sense. It’s a hard film to title.

“We called it ‘Alana and Gary’ for the longest time, but I thought I’d had my fill of two given names for titles. I’m happy with it now. It feels good. You think of titles like

‘American Graffiti.’ ‘Fast Times.’ ‘Licorice Pizza.’ Good. All right, let’s stick with that company. Those are films that I thought about so much when I was making it.”

“Dazed and Confused,” I offer.



Sean Penn and Alana Haim on a motorcycle in a “Licorice Pizza” scene shot at the Van Nuys Golf Course.
(Melinda Sue Gordon / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

“Dazed and Confused,” Anderson affirms. “You know what’s a great title: ‘Everybody Wants Some!!’ You like that film?”

“Oh, I love that film,” I answer, because if you’ve seen this 2016 Richard Linklater comedy, you’ll probably say what Anderson is about to say: “F—, what a good film! And so underrated!”

“It’s such a great hang movie, just like all those other ones you mentioned,” I say. “You know, the weird thing is, I’ve only seen it once.”

“Me too!” Anderson says. “And I think about it all the time. I think about seeing it again, like once a week, ‘C’mon, it’s time to watch “Everybody Wants Some!!” again.’ I remember it being very long and this absolute slow burn and working its way to its

ending. When it comes to the light touch of my contemporaries, Richard Linklater is the king.”

Anderson opens his door. We’ve been sitting in the car for a while and we’re starting to bake because it’s autumn in the Valley. But I’m still thinking about the light touch. “Would you say that’s what you were going for in this film, that kind of feeling? Would you say ...”

“C’mon let’s get out!” he pleads. OK. I find the magic button that opens the door. He looks at me. “Would you say ...”



Writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson, right, on the set of “Licorice Pizza” with camera operator Colin Anderson. (Melinda Sue Gordon / Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures)

“Would you say that’s something you’re known for as a filmmaker, the light touch? Because I don’t know that people think, Oh ... a Paul Thomas Anderson film ...”

“The light touch?” he answers, laughing. “No!”

“As a film aficionado, your memory goes to what Billy Wilder was always able to do, which was *very* f— little, or at least making it appear that very little was being done,”

Anderson says. “And that the accumulation of all these things ends up having, hopefully, some weight or resonance. But throughout it, you also, hopefully, don’t feel any of that at work. That’s the heavenly place that you aim for, particularly with a story like this, a story of young love.”

It’s too hot for grilled cheese. We order a couple of iced teas and start talking about the movies we’ve seen lately and what it’s like to put out a movie right now. “Licorice Pizza,” which opens today, will play in L.A. exclusively at the Regency Village Theater in Westwood for a month. Anderson tells me I’d be shocked to learn how few Angelenos know where Westwood is, even people living on the Westside. (“Is it playing on the Promenade?’ ‘No. It’s in Westwood.’ ‘Is it playing Century City?’ ‘No! *Westwood!*’”)

For those on the fence (or in the dark), an empty store nearby has been transformed into a Fat Bernie’s Pinball Palace. Bring your quarters.

“We’re trying to have fun,” Anderson says. “It’s easy to have fun when there’s so many people involved who’ve never been in a movie before. Whatever crusty, old man vibes you might have about the logistics of putting a movie out disappear when you look at their faces: ‘We’ve got a movie coming out!’ ‘Yes. we’ve got a movie coming out.’”

“It’s true. And I’ve got the waterbeds in my garage to prove it.”