

AFI FEST FILM REVIEW: Belushi (R.J. Cutler, 2020)

Description

Posted and reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the virtual 2020 AFI FEST presented by Audi.

Belushi, from Showtime Documentary Films, directed by award-winning, filmmaker R.J. Cutler, reveals the complicated, singular, and too-short life of a beloved American icon who helped change American culture and comedy, John Belushi, a once-in-a-generation talent who captured the hearts and funny-bones of audiences around the world. From his early years growing up in Wheaton, Illinois, Belushi showed an extraordinary talent for comedy and music. But, it was a visit to the Second City theater in Chicago where Belushi established himself and from that moment on he became an unstoppable and pioneering force in the comedy world. His audacious rendition of Joe Cocker singing the Beatles â??With A Little Help From My Friends,â?• proved to be the star shot launching pad. Cutler utilizes still photos, archival footage, home videos, animation, and telling letters from John to his high school sweetheart girlfriend and later wife, Judy, that paint a picture of Belushiâ??s passion, love and humanly struggles.

Never one to take a back seat, Belushi found himself behind the fame and popularity of Chevy Chase and SNLâ??s Weekend Update. Belushi pushed boundaries and raised the ire of SNL creator and producer Lorne Michaels in advocating for his performance routines. At SNL Belushi created some of the most-talked-about and memorable characters of all time. His Olympic gold-medal-winning breakfast of champions â?? coffee, cigarettes, and mini chocolate donuts â?? and his spot-on imitation of Hall of Fame Rock and Roll icon, Joe Cocker. Seemingly, everyone was caught by surprise when Cocker was the musical guest on SNL and Belushi came on stage and the two performed a stunning rendition of â??Feelinâ?? alright.â?•

While remaining a cast member of *SNL,* Belushi participated in the filming of *Animal House* as the lovable, disrupter â??Bluto,â?• and managed to form a stellar band, The Blues Brothers. To say John Belushi had arrived would be an understatement as was on the #1 television show (SNL), had the #1

comedy in movie history (*Animal House*), and the #1 record album (Blues Brothers Soundtrack) in the world. In addition, Belushi seemed to demand respect for his work and he also seemed to covet respect as a person. He and fellow SNL cast member, Dan Ackroyd, would eventually leave SNL and create two Blues Brothers films together. *The Blues Brothers (1980)* has become a cult classic.

Belushiâ??s insatiable drive for success and fame kept the candle burning at both ends. When his acting attempts in *1941*, *Neighbors,* and *Continental Divide* failed to provide him the accolades of *The Blues Brothers and Animal House*, Belushi sought consolation and creativity in dark habits as he continually pushed himself for greatness. As a performer, John Belushi grasped the importance of developing and recreating himself on stage and felt a high degree of compulsion to do this on the big screen. Belushiâ??s ambitious drive and need for approval reached its limits on March 5, 1982, at the hotel Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood. Belushi was found alone, not breathing, and unresponsive. The coronerâ??s report stated the cause of death was â??acute cocaine and heroin intoxication.â?•

Cutler captures what John Belushi was as a performer and scratches the surface of who Belushi was as a person. Told linearly using previously unheard audiotapes, the film also examines Belushiâ??s life in the words of his collaborators, friends, and family, including Dan Aykroyd, Jim Belushi, Penny Marshall, Lorne Michaels, Carrie Fisher, Chevy Chase, Harold Ramis, Jane Curtin, Ivan Reitman and his wife, Judy Belushi. As much as I enjoyed experiencing his comedic genius again, there is more to John Belushi than what appears in this screening of *Belushi.* Yet, Cutler does an excellent job of creating a framework of understanding some of the comedic legendâ??s motivation and unmet needs with a well-researched and documented biographical treatment. *Belushi* is scheduled to launch on November 22, 2020, on Showtime. Highly recommended.



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