

Film director Matt Norman speaks with WSWS

Ismet Redzovic
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Filmmaker Matt Norman recently spoke with Ismet Redzovic about Salute, his documentary on Peter Norman, an Australian sprinter. The film will be released this month on DVD.

Peter Norman's sporting career was cut short after he publicly solidarised himself with medal-winning African American athletes John Carlos and Tommy Smith at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. (See "Salute: A moving tribute").

Ismet Redzovic: How and when did the idea to make a movie about your uncle Peter Norman come about?

Matt Norman: I've always wanted to do a film about him. I'm actually more of a drama director than a documentary filmmaker and it was by accident that it became a documentary. I started making the film in 2002 but was only really doing it in order get information to write a script. I like to film my own work and I like to think ahead and to produce a "making of" DVD and so on.

I got the opportunity of having John Carlos, Tommy Smith and Peter in the same place at the same time, during the 2004 Olympic trials for the American team held in San Jose. We shot interviews with every single person we could grab during a 1968 Olympic Games reunion and so the amount of footage, information and interviews we got was worth putting out as a film on its own.

We used digital cameras and I received no funding or any other help. I got federal funding afterwards because it would have been too expensive to get digital camera to look good on a cinema screen and so it's taken six years to get to this stage. When Peter died in 2006 this gave me more of a want and need to tell his story. So basically the story came about through research.

IR: You pay a lot of attention to the historical and political context of the 1968 Olympic Games. Can you

tell us why you felt it was important to show in your film that the act—the protest—wasn't an accident but rather part of an international process?

MN: Growing up with Peter and having a great relationship with him meant that I knew the story, but I'd never heard it from Tommy and John. I realised that in the US they'd never heard John's story, because John and Tommy don't get along.

I wanted to build the story almost as a diary of what actually happened and see what I could bring to the story without making it Hollywood. The whole idea of getting them together was because I didn't want the interviews to feel like interviews, but rather a relaxed chat. I wanted to push the political side of 1968 because this was a horrific year for racism.

Many people have asked me how on earth could you do a film about one single framed photograph and drag it out to 90 minutes. The truth is I had two-and-a-half hours in my original cut and considered making the film in two parts.

IR: Why do you think the Australian Olympic establishment carried out such a vendetta against Peter Norman and why was so little known about him?

MN: In Australia we have a tall-poppy syndrome. The reason for Peter not going to the 1972 Munich Olympic Games was because we lived in a racist country ourselves and it still is a racist country. We just like to hide behind some ocker sayings [Australian slang] and things like that.

The reason why Peter was black-banned was because he stood up for something the Australian Olympic establishment didn't. The community at large stood by Peter, but officials who ran the place didn't and as far as I'm concerned they are the people who didn't invite him to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games in any official capacity, even though he was the record holder in 200 metres 40 years on. I actually approached them to make a comment

but no one responded.

IR: What do you think of the fact that in Australia, people like Steve Irwin are promoted in the media as heroes, but principled and courageous people like Peter Norman are not even talked about?

MN: Peter died at the same time as Peter Brock and Steve Irwin. Now I absolutely love what Steve Irwin did to conservation and animal rights but the issue with that is that he's been hailed in highest regard, almost given a knighthood, if you like. Peter Brock the same, yet he only drove a car around the mountain, albeit very well.

Peter Norman, on the other hand, holds a record that no one has come even close to breaking in 40 years, not only in Australia but in the Commonwealth also. Yet I had to pay for his funeral. The way the officials treated Norman was a joke. The people, however, your average person, supported Peter tremendously. They loved him.

IR: Unfortunately your uncle didn't live to see the movie, but what was the response of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, if they have seen it yet?

MN: Tommy Smith and John Carlos still don't talk to each other and they haven't seen the film yet. After Peter's death they went their own way. It's strange because I always believed Tommy, John and Peter were inseparable.

IR: How has the movie been received internationally?

MN: Great! It won an audience choice award at the Rhode Island Film Festival in Providence, Rhode Island. We've won countless audience choice awards. People love it.

IR: What's your next project?

MN: Right now I'm making a fictional film about 1968. I'm shooting that in Mexico next year. It's going to be a dramatised version of *Salute*. It's actually not going to be about the Olympic Games but rather about what happened in 1968 from the perspective of a journalist.



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