

“Are they going to throw him away?”

Alien Boy: The Life and Death of James Chasse

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Brian Lindstrom’s 2013 film *Alien Boy: The Life and Death of James Chasse*, available through Amazon and in theatrical release, makes no attempt at an evasive “even-handedness” in presenting the case of 42-year-old James Chasse, a schizophrenic man who was cruelly beaten by Portland (Oregon) police officers and later died in custody of his injuries.

Lindstrom’s film unhesitatingly indicts the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) as a body, and the officers directly involved.

Interviewing Chasse’s family members, friends and fellow artists, the filmmaker reconstructs James Chasse’s life with care and sympathy. Sensitive as a child, and constantly searching to express himself through various musical and artistic outlets, Chasse comes across as a kindly, gentle, funny, quirky young man. His friends and acquaintances speak freely to the camera, which Lindstrom lets roll unobtrusively. The troubles Chasse faced as schizophrenia manifested itself are related with concern; it was clear to everyone that he needed help, that he was slipping away at times.

Using footage of Chasse as a youth, along with his poems, drawings, music and writings, Lindstrom allows Chasse to speak for himself as well. Deftly selected works, along with the narration, show the youth’s descent into paranoia, and anguish. James’ struggle to regain normalcy—including stays in hospitals and the use of medication—and live an independent life is unsentimentally drawn and at times painful to watch. One sees the potential and creativity of James Chasse eaten away by illness. He becomes quieter, unable to take care of even his basic needs, and withdraws, as his fear (especially of the police) increases.

On September 17, 2006, Portland Police Officer

Christopher Humphreys and Multnomah County Sheriff’s Deputy Brad Burton spotted Chasse on the streets of downtown Portland. When they tried approaching him, a frightened Chasse ran. Humphreys, who had about 100 pounds on Chasse, tackled him, “like a football player,” according to one witness, bringing him down hard onto the pavement and landing on top of him.

Witnesses to the struggle are interviewed. Jamie Marquez, a waiter at one of the upscale restaurants in the Pearl District where the encounter took place, managed to take a few pictures as the police assaulted Chasse, who lay prone on the ground, screaming in pain. Officers kicked, punched and tased Chasse, and, after he’d passed out, handcuffed and leg-cuffed him. Images taken by Marquez and others show the police, firemen and medics standing at a distance from the prone Chasse, none seeming terribly concerned about the bleeding man, few even looking at him.

Constance Doolan, one of the witnesses interviewed, says Chasse was “clearly not a dangerous person—he’s a frightened person.” She and other witnesses noted at the time, and later testified, that the police involved treated Chasse so violently that there were moments when they thought Chasse was dead after he’d lost consciousness.

That James Chasse had been tackled, tased, beaten and had passed out was not related by the officers to the medics on the scene, who released him into police custody. He was picked up by the police, and witness Randall Stuart, still clearly affected by what he saw, says in an interview, “to see another human being taken away from an already chaotic and violent scene—somewhat like a shot deer ... I thought, are they

going to throw him away?”

Doolan tells of being called over by one of the officers. He asked her if she wanted to know what was going on. Doolan said yes, of course, and the officer told her that Chasse had numerous crack cocaine-related arrests and had cocaine on his person at the time of the pursuit.

These were all lies. Chasse had no record, in fact, and carried no drugs. His toxicology report showed no traces of alcohol or drugs. The police, despite his having an ID with a nearby address, also listed Chasse as a transient.

The brutality of the chase, subduing and arrest of Chasse continued once he was in custody. Seen on tapes from the police department cameras, Chasse is clearly in extreme pain—his autopsy notes 26 breaks to 16 ribs, and the official cause of his death is “blunt force chest trauma.” Humphreys is heard describing to his fellow officers the tackle he later denies in court.

Footage of testimony by the officers involved shows various levels of unrepentance, and Humphreys—who at the time of Chasse’s death ranked second highest on a list of officers who used force—verges on belligerence. Asked if he would take the same course of action if confronted with the same situation, Humphreys gestures to indicate the court proceedings, asks, “Assuming none of this were happening?” and answers, “Yes.”

None of the officers involved were dismissed from their positions.

In the wake of the case, officials—including PPB Chief Rosie Sizemore and then-Mayor Tom Potter (a former police officer himself)—initially spun the case as a matter of the need for more mental health care, and training was instituted for officers to better engage with the mentally ill.

Under a 2012 investigation of the PPB for bias requested by Mayor Sam Adams, the US Department of Justice found that the PPB “engaged in a pattern and practice” of using “excessive force” particularly when dealing with the mentally ill, including excessive and “unnecessary” use of tasers, and that this pattern is in “violation of the Constitution of the United States.”

Since the death of Chasse, PPB officers have continued their savage treatment of the mentally ill and distressed in Portland, as well as the public at large. The additional sensitivity “training” police have

received, of course, has done absolutely nothing. Portland police called in by those in distress have been known to shoot the caller.

The treatment of Portland’s Occupy protestors, as in many cities, was likewise often brutal, with the deployment of riot police and mounted officers against peaceful marchers.

As one friend of Chasse put it, “Jim happened to be mentally ill, and he happened to get scared when he saw the police and ran. But he wasn’t beaten because he was mentally ill and the cover up didn’t happen because he was mentally ill. It happened because of who the police are and what the police get away with.”



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