

PITTSBURGH-FILMED MOVIE WILL TELL STORY OF THE GASLIGHT CAFE

Michael Machosky

MICHAEL MACHOSKY | Thursday, March 21, 2019 12:00 a.m



As legend has it, Pittsburgh used car salesman John Mitchell was taking a road trip to New York City in the late '50s, when he got a flat tire on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village.

"He basically got out of his car and thought, 'This might be a great place to open up a coffee shop,'" says actor Dave Buglione. "Not knowing that it would change the music industry, and change the world."

Buglione (who recently finished season three of Marvel's "Daredevil") plays Mitchell, in an independent film, "116 MacDougal" that's filming in late spring or early summer in Pittsburgh.

On April 7, there will be “A Night at The Gaslight Cafe ... The Festival Concert” featured as the finale of the Carnegie Mellon University International Film Festival, at the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in East Liberty with many of the performers from the film.

Luminaries like Warhol

That spot Mitchell opened was The Gaslight Café, in a cramped, dingy, converted coal cellar. From that perch, patrons could witness the rise of the folk music movement of Bob Dylan, Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul and Mary), Dave Van Ronk, Woody Guthrie, Tom Paxton and the Beat Generation poets and writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg. On any given night, the crowd could contain luminaries like Andy Warhol, Marlene Dietrich and Salvador Dali, whose pet ocelot had his own chair.

The way the building was constructed, loud clapping would carry through the air shafts and annoy the neighbors, so patrons snapped their fingers instead. Soon, snapping one’s fingers was the mark of hipness to people in the know around the world.

“I knew about the Gaslight and that it existed on MacDougal Street,” says Buglione, a native New Yorker. “But like most people, I didn’t know the story about what really went on. People don’t know the story of John Mitchell. To tell the world about who this guy was, is a complete honor.”

Protecting his ‘family’

“Basically, during that time, what I’ve learned is that there were a lot of things going on,” says Buglione. “The Civil Rights movement, feminism, the gay rights movement, the McCarthyism, TV blacklist. There wasn’t really a safe place for artists to go to express themselves. Having the Gaslight and John Mitchell allow these performances of all races and genders to express who they are and what they are, was kind of a powerful moment in time.”

The film was directed by David Castro, who also plays Albert Grossman, the surly but prescient manager of Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary. It was written by Pittsburgh-based lawyer and screenwriter Vincent Restauri.

Things didn’t always go smoothly at the Gaslight Café. In fact, Mitchell had to come up with creative ways to keep the doors open despite direct opposition from New York City’s police, government and mafia families.

“They (the mafia) felt threatened, in a way,” explains Buglione. “They were trying to control New York City and the streets and the businesses that were there. They’d go to John Mitchell for ‘protection’ money. He’d say ‘If I give you protection money, I can’t pay my performers. If I can’t pay them, they can’t eat. So, no I’m not going to pay you protection money. My family comes first.’”

“Obviously, standing up to the mafia really pissed them off.” Mitchell would go to extraordinary length to protect his “kids,” as he called the Gaslight’s performers, and have their voices be heard.

His relationship with Victoria D’Angelo (played by Donna D’Errico, best known for “Baywatch”) wife of a powerful mob boss, was one of the many tightropes Mitchell walked.

Locals cast

Much of the cast for the film was found in Pittsburgh. This included Pittsburgh rock musician Clinton Clegg (of The Commonheart) as Dave Van Ronk, actress Aenya Ulke as Billie Holliday, model/actor Douglas Tjelmeland as Salvador Dali, musician J.J. Mason as Woody Guthrie and musician Matt Westin as Johnny Cash.

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