

JOHNNY PHYSICAL LIVES



Runtime: 22:00

Year: 2015

Format: HD

Language: English

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About

Logline:

A young man battling leukemia draws incredible strength from the rock n' roll in his blood.

Synopsis:

Johnny Physical Lives is the story of the secret world of two brothers making a rock n' roll documentary as one goes through treatment for leukemia. When younger brother Jonathan passes away in the midst of the production, older brother Joshua must finish the project on his own. First time filmmaker, Joshua Neuman weaves footage of his brother Jonathan in and out of the hospital during treatment with an interview of Jonathan shot by famed documentarian Albert Maysles and live animation to “physically” bring to life Jonathan’s inner world, showing how he experienced cancer through the eyes of a rock star: the hospital became a seedy hotel; chemotherapy, the scandalous addiction fueling his music; and nurses, groupies at his beckon call.

This heart wrenching love letter from one brother to another challenges our assumptions about individuals battling illness and highlights the transformative power of music.

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Who is Johnny Physical?

Jonathan Neuman lived from February 19, 1980 to June 26, 2002. As a little boy growing up in suburban New Jersey, he would fall asleep listening to Buddy Holly's songs and dream about becoming a rock star. As a teen, he broadened his musical horizons by listening to the free form, independent radio station WFMU. Though his musical tastes would soon range from classical and early country, to the blues, he was especially in love with the early punk that sprang from New York City in the 1970s. He taught himself how to play the guitar, bass, and drums and spent many a night producing his own music in the makeshift recording studio he set up in his parents' basement. On weekends, he performed at open mic nights at a café in Montclair, NJ and gravitated to Sidewalk Café in New York City, where the anti-folk music scene was just burgeoning. In rooms with less than a dozen or so people, he watched Daniel Johnston, Jeffrey Lewis, and The Moldy Peaches, befriending the latter band's leader, Kimya Dawson, in the process.



When Jonathan started college in 1998 he founded the garage rock band, The Physicals. Jonathan wrote all of the music and lyrics, and as “Johnny Physical,” became the face of the band. Between 1998 and 2000, The Physicals played at Tufts University and along the East Coast of the U.S., playing on the same bill as The Recoys, Enon, and Kind Congo Powers. While his pompadour and black-rimmed glasses were a tacit nod to his childhood hero, Buddy Holly, his music reflected his major influences: The Ramones, The Stooges, T-Rex, The Velvet Underground, and The New York Dolls. The Physicals were voted the best band on the Tufts University campus and Jonathan found himself developing a small cult following.

Jonathan's life forever changed when he was diagnosed with leukemia in October of 2000 and started treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital in New York City. In the midst of chemotherapy, he staged an acoustic event, “Johnny Physical: Plugged” for friends, family, and fellow patients. During intermittent stays in the hospital, Jonathan continued to compose and record music—frequently from his hospital bed. He developed a legion of admirers, including Ari Up! of the iconic punk band The Slits, Miss USA Kandace Krueger, and famed documentarian Albert Maysles (who interviewed Jonathan for a series he was working on for PBS).

After a year and a half of treatment, Jonathan developed a lung infection and passed away at New York Hospital. The last song he heard was Buddy Holly's “Not Fade Away.” Like Buddy Holly, he died at the age of 22.

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Q&A with Writer, Producer, Director Joshua Neuman

How did *Johnny Physical Lives* come about?

My brother Jonathan started a garage rock band called “The Physicals” at Tufts University in 1999 and was known around campus as “Johnny Physical,” a sweet-talking ladies man from the mean streets of New York City. In other words, Johnny Physical was everything Jonathan was not. Yet when Jonathan was diagnosed with leukemia at age 20, I watched as his rock n’ roll alter ego became only more important to him. Two weeks into his first round of chemotherapy in late 2000, when he was at his most vulnerable, he decided to perform a concert in the hospital as Johnny Physical. It was the

single most moving experience of my life. He was making a statement: he wasn’t going to lose his identity and simply become a “cancer guy.” I captured the concert in the hospital on video and afterwards we decided to create a rock n’ roll documentary chronicling Jonathan Neuman’s experiences with cancer as well as Johnny Physical’s improbable new “stage.” When Jonathan passed away a year and a half later, I knew I had to finish the film we started. I aimed to make a film that wouldn’t shy away from the horrible ordeal that Jonathan went through, yet would still communicate his amazing spirit. In cold examining rooms, miserable waiting rooms, lonely hospital rooms,

Jonathan was never just a patient. He was a rock star. I tried to capture that and, ultimately, put my own spin on our story.

When did you come up with the idea to use animation to tell the story?

Jonathan's story was badass. It was strange, darkly comic, and also inspiring, but after he passed away in June of 2002, when I began showing the footage we shot together during his time in the hospital and in recovery at home, people had a hard time watching it. Maybe if I had written the story instead of filming it (I was a writer at the time), or if the outcome would have been different, people would have responded differently, but the image of a kid with a bald head made it super difficult for anyone to feel anything other than sadness. However, when I showed the footage to the two friends of mine who knew the most about documentary films, Edet Belzberg (who came on board as an executive producer) and Jason Spingarn-Koff (the film's original editor who went on to run Op-Docs for *The New York Times*), they pushed me to find an entirely different visual language to do justice to the complexity of emotions I was trying to evoke. After a successful Kickstarter campaign I hired Canadian animation studio Style5.tv, so that the audience could really get a window into our experience during that time.

I really wanted the animation to feel like it was the extension of Jonathan's imagination. Just as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* conjures the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion based on the appearance of her uncles, the characters Johnny encounters in the animated world are based on Jonathan's favorite rock stars: Frankie Lines is essentially Johnny Thunders of The New

York Dolls and The Heartbreakers; Danny Animal is Dee Dee Ramone, the bassist for The Ramones; Nick Fiction is The Rolling Stones' drummer Charlie Watts with some Rimbaud thrown in for good measure; Miss USA is Debbie Harry; the blood monsters were based on the Hell's Angels in *Gimme Shelter*, the Maysles Brothers' documentary about the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont; and Johnny himself is a mix of Jonathan's two greatest influences, Buddy Holly and Iggy Pop.

Astute observers might also notice iconic moments of rock n' roll history being incorporated into the animated narrative: The Rolling Stones in a recording studio, Sid Vicious shooting up in the Chelsea Hotel, and the cover of The Clash album "London Calling." We sort of took that crazy assortment of rock mythologies and dipped them into an ocean of colors from the cartoons Jonathan watched as a kid. So, you have these sordid adventures that seem right out of downtown Manhattan in the 1970s colored like they were out of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* with groupies who seem right out of *Jem and the Holograms* cartoons—not to mention sequences referencing Jonathan's favorite movies: *The Goonies*, *Trainspotting* and, of course, *Night of the Living Dead*. Hopefully, the end result is that the audience really feels like they're entering Jonathan's fantasy world, and not just mine.

How did Albert Maysles get involved?

Not too long before Jonathan was moved to intensive care, a friend of mine told me that famed documentarian Albert Maysles, responsible for *Gimme Shelter*—the infamous Rolling Stones concert at Altamont—was interested in shooting Jonathan for a project he was creating for PBS. Even though he intended to shoot

Jonathan for 20 minutes, Maysles and his assistant interviewed Jonathan in his hospital room for an entire afternoon. The PBS project never aired, but Albert generously shared that footage with me for use in my film. Whenever Albert and I talked about my project, the conversation would inevitably come around to his feelings about his late brother and creative collaborator, David Maysles. It deeply saddens me that Albert passed away before he could see *Johnny Physical Lives* because their relationship—not just Albert’s actual footage—inspires my film.

Was it emotionally taxing to make *Johnny Physical Lives*?

Eugene O’Neill famously described *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* as, “a play of old sorrow written in tears and blood.” I kept coming back to that line over the years. It wasn’t that my subject matter made me sad—to the contrary. I never felt closer to Jonathan than when I was re-watching old video footage of us from our childhood, or discovering new footage of him in college that I had never before seen. The very act of editing his voice—even if it was just to cut out a pause or an aside—made it feel like he was sharing a new sentiment with me when I played it back. So it was a lot more difficult to finish the film than to make it—if that makes any sense. Jonathan is, of course, the film’s subject, but I very much feel like he made this film with me, that the tears and the blood are not mine, but ours. And so, finishing the film meant accepting that this journey we were undertaking together would finally be coming to an end.

What films influenced your vision for *Johnny Physical Lives*?

Great rock n’ roll documentaries like *Gimme Shelter*, *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, and *Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten* were formative influences—as were rock n’ roll dramas like *Sid and Nancy*, *Rock N’ Roll*

High School, and *Velvet Goldmine*. I spent a great deal of time exploring indie biopics that artfully combined various media (archival and found footage, animation, re-enactment) to communicate the power of memory such as *In the Realms of the Unreal*, *Wild Combination*, and *Stories We Tell*. I also took inspiration from films that explore the power of imagination to forge personal narratives under duress—like *The Sea Inside*, *The Singing Detective*, and *Heavenly Creatures*.

Were there any non-cinematic influences?

Spending time at the headquarters of my non-profit partner, the Creative Visions Foundation was instrumental on several levels. The Foundation is inspired by the life and work of Dan Eldon, a photojournalist for Reuters News Agency who was killed in Somalia in 1993 (also at the age of 22) while covering the conflict there, and that really motivated me to get my story out there “into the world” and out of my head. Dan’s mother Kathy Eldon and sister Amy Eldon Turteltaub created the Foundation to provide critical guidance and resources to “creative activists” to assist them in making positive change through the power of media and the arts. In their painstaking efforts to cobble together the fragments that Dan left behind into a living memorial, Kathy and Amy were really important role models for me.

What do you think of the spate of new films approaching cancer in new ways?

Films that depict cancer, until recently, have followed the lead of *Love Story*, which came out in 1970. That film’s cultural significance was huge. It came out at a time when people were afraid to even utter the word “cancer” in anything but hushed tones. But the breakthrough of *Love Story*—and the generation or two of films that it spawned was double-edged. Although having the courage to speak

Q & A
with
Joshua
Neuman
(cont'd)

cancer's name stripped it of its linguistic power and gave voice to millions dealing with it, it also constructed characters who were ultimately defined by their disease, stripping them of their humanity in a way that unfortunately mirrored the way cancer did. These characters so often experienced a double-death, death by way of cancer and death from the camera stripping away their identity. Recently, filmmakers have been exploring richer conceptions of identity in films that depict cancer. In dramas like *50/50* and *The Fault in Our Stars* and docs like *Farewell to Hollywood* and *Thank You for Playing*, you end up feeling so much more for characters experiencing the disease when there is so much more to them than their experience of the disease. We've seen it on television too: whether it was *The Big C* or even *Breaking Bad*. In a sense, Johnny Physical is to Jonathan what Heisenberg was to Walter White.

What do you think people can learn from Jonathan?

Maybe it was because of his love of music, but he always felt remarkably in tune with the rhythms of the universe. He was always a much more grounded person than I was. While I would find myself routinely getting lost in my thoughts, Jonathan seemed to always be in a dialogue with the present. That's why when he was diagnosed with cancer, it didn't surprise me when he embraced the simple philosophy: "This is time, too." He bristled when people said stuff like "Don't worry, you'll be better before you know it," or, "The time you're in treatment will just fly by." He didn't want to be better "before he knew it." He didn't want his time in treatment to "fly by." He wanted that time he was fighting cancer to feel like it was part of his life's journey—not a detour. I think that's what really made him special.

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A JOSHUA NEUMAN PRODUCTION EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS EDET BELZBERG TREVOR HALL
CO-PRODUCERS KIMYA DAWSON JEREMY WANG-IVERSON ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS DANNY GREENSPUN TRACY STEIN
ANIMATION BY STYLE.5.TV SOUND DESIGN BY MATTEO GRILLI ADDITIONAL FOOTAGE BY ALBERT MAYSLES
EDITED, PRODUCED AND CINEMATOGRAPHY BY PETE LEE WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY JOSHUA NEUMAN

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Crew Bios



Joshua Neuman (Writer, Producer, Director) is a Los Angeles-based storyteller and content creator and the older brother of Jonathan Neuman. He grew up in Paramus, New Jersey, went to college at Brown University, and after a year of touring with his own band, Floorwalker, received a Master's Degree from Harvard Divinity School, where he studied under Cornel West. He taught courses in the Philosophy of Religion for five years at New York University before joining the founding editors of the Brooklyn-based, satirical Jewish culture magazine, *Heeb*. Over the course of eight years as the magazine's editor, Neuman was invited to The White House by two different Presidential administrations, was twice featured in *The New York Times*, and collaborated with Brett Ratner, Sarah Silverman, Shepard Fairey, Robert Crumb, and Roseanne Barr. Los Angeles Weekly called Neuman "one-part philosopher, one-part Beastie Boy" and Marc Maron called his *The Big Book of Jewish Conspiracies* (co-authored with David Deutsch, published by St. Martin's Press, and optioned by Plant Films) the "smartest silly book ever written." He has appeared on The Travel Channel, BBC Radio, VH1, The Sundance Channel, A & E Biography, Court TV, National Public Radio, and Extra and his speaking engagements have taken him around the globe. Since moving to Los Angeles in 2010, he has written jokes for The Friar's Club Roast of Quentin Tarantino, edited the international fashion magazine *FLAUNT*, and served as the head of content for the lifestyle magazine, *GOOD*. Over the course of three years at *GOOD*, Neuman spearheaded partnerships with some of America's leading brands, including FORD Motors, Walgreens, and Target—and *GOOD*'s website was twice a Webby Award honoree. This is his first film.

Crew
Bios
(cont'd)



Pete Lee (Editor, Producer, Cinematography) is a San Francisco-based filmmaker who specializes in music videos, fight scenes, and making food look really, really sexy. He has directed comedian Patton Oswalt, hip-hop artist Aesop Rock, martial arts legend Patti Li, celebrity dwarf cat Lil' Bub, and many others. His directorial work has premiered in Rolling Stone, MTV, NPR, Vice, Comic-Con, and the San Francisco International Film Festival. On days off, Lee enjoys inventing Taiwanese dishes, faking martial arts, and singing Mariah Carey songs. While working on the film, he also worked his way through mastering Jonathan's catalog on the piano.



Edet Belzberg (Executive Producer) is known for elegant, in-depth, and powerful storytelling. Her debut feature, *Children Underground*, was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Sundance Film Festival's Jury Prize, the International Documentary Association's Documentary Award, and the Gotham Awards' Documentary Achievement Prize, among many others. Her film *The Recruiter* had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and aired on HBO. *Watchers of the Sky*, her most recent feature, had its world premiere at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, where it won a Special Jury Prize for the Use of Animation. The MacArthur Foundation, in selecting Belzberg as a Fellow, praised her for her "graceful and insightful" films.



Trevor Hall (Executive Producer) is an educator, writer, business consultant, and the President of the Creative Visions Foundation, an agency that supports creative activism around the globe. Hall has a Masters of Education from Harvard University, where he was awarded a three-year fellowship to serve as the head teaching fellow for the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and professor, Robert Coles. In 2010, he edited a collection of Coles' lectures into the book titled, *Handing One Another Along* (published by Random House). Hall has also served as a Director of the Chicago Sister Cities International Program where he established relationships with Motorola, The Boeing Company, and United Airlines.

Crew
Bios
(cont'd)



Kimya Dawson (Co-producer) is a Portland-based musician and was one-part of the seminal, anti-folk band, The Moldy Peaches. She has collaborated with Ben Kweller, The Mountain Goats, and Aesop Rock. Her “Anyone Else But You” was the anthem for the 2007 film, *Juno*. A former friend of Jonathan’s, this is the first film she is co-producing. She claims to have been totally naked while recording her cover of Jonathan’s song, “Lightning Dream” for *Johnny Physical Lives*.



Jeremy Wang-Iverson (Co-producer) is a Brooklyn-based publishing professional who has worked for *Granta Magazine*, *Oxford University Press*, and *Bloomsbury*. During his freshman year in college, he lived in the same dorm as Jonathan and the two became close friends. Over the course of the time he knew Jonathan, he was a close friend and de facto publicist. He still is.



Sam Chou (Animation Director) is the Toronto-based founder of the boutique animation studio, Style5.tv. He co-created and directed the award-winning, web-series *CRIME: The Animated Series*, which premiered at Sundance Film Festival and directed the animation for the award-winning documentary, *The Real Superhumans* and the *Future Fantastic*. He wrote and co-directed for the award-winning short film, *The Wrong Block*, and directed the animation for the award-winning, feature documentary *Fly Colt Fly: The Legend of the Barefoot Bandit*. His animation of Johnny’s guitar was largely influenced by Walt Simonson’s treatment of Thor’s magic hammer in the famed comic book series.



Miranda Quesnel (Animation Director) is a Toronto-based animator and artist. After studying animation at Sheridan College in Ontario, she worked as an animator on the first season of the Disney XD show *Penn Zero: Part Time Hero*. As part of the animation studio, Style5.tv, she co-directed the comedy/noir web series *The Wrong Block*. In depicting the universe of *Johnny Physical* she channeled the era of Glam Rock, specifically early Iggy Pop and David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust years.

JOHNNY PHYSICAL LIVES

Production Credits

Written, Produced and Directed by

Joshua Neuman

Edited, Produced and Cinematography by

Pete Lee

Additional Footage by

Albert Maysles

Animation by

Style5.tv

Executive Producers

Edet Belzberg, Trevor Hall

Co-Producers

Kimya Dawson, Jeremy Wang-Iverson

Associate Producers

Danny Greenspun, Tracy Stein

Consulting Producers

Oliver Noble, Lara Rabinovitch

Additional Editor

Jake Hamilton

First Assistant Editor

Alyssa Venetucci

Second Assistant Editor

Hedia Maron

Animation Directors

Sam Chou, Miranda Quesnel

Production
Credits
(cont'd)

Animators

Martin Macintosh, Miranda Quesnel

Background Painters

Melissa Allen, Sam Amanfi, Jean Liang Lettie Lo, Tim Melnyk

Sound Design

Matteo Grilli

Mix Supervisor

Dan Cubert

Sound Mix

Monkey Land Audio

Second Unit Footage

Joseantonio W. Danner, Bradley Wagner

Archival Footage

Chris Eichler, Joshua Neuman, Lewis Neuman, Justin Picone, David Raskin, Harris Smith

Still Photography

Jonathan Neuman, Joshua Neuman, Lewis Neuman, Irina Rozovsky, Jill Sherman

Graphic Design

Oliver Munday

Production Assistants

Jay Kaufman, Catherine Paolillo, Yeshe Parks, Kaveh Veyssi

Grips and Gears provided by Steve Forbes

Camera provided by Studio B

“Miami”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical

“Dandy In The Underworld”

Written by Marc Bolan
Performed by T.Rex

Published by and Master Courtesy of Spirit One Music obo Spirit Services Holdings, S.à.r.l.

“Get Physical With the Physicals”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical

Production
Credits
(cont'd)

“Being Alone”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical

“Baby Baby Baby”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by The Physicals at Tufts University, September, 1999

“I am a Man”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by The Physicals at Tufts University, September 2000

“New Blood”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by The Physicals at Tufts University, September 2000

“Miami”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical at Memorial-Sloan Kettering Hospital, October 2000

“Treat You Well”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical

“Fresh Samantha”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical and Alessandro Ricciarelli at Memorial-Sloan Kettering
Hospital, December 2001

“Don’t Break My Heart”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by The Physicals at Tufts University, September 2000

“Lightning Dream”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Johnny Physical

“Lightning Dream”

Written by Jonathan Neuman
Performed by Kimya Dawson in Portland, OR

The Physicals (1998-99)

Nick Falwell/Nick Fiction
Dan Fromm/Danny Animal
Franklin Hess/Frankie Lines
Jonathan Neuman/Johnny Physical

The Physicals (1999-00)

Nick Falwell/Nick Fiction
Drew Devane/Carlo Rossi
Franklin Hess/Frankie Lines
Jonathan Neuman/Johnny Physical
Kyle Vannater/Boppin’ Bobby Swiss

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