



Introduction to Billy Corben: 1:03 min. Photo & montage: Raymond Elman.

Billy Corben: A Video Chat with “One of the Miami Guys”

By Elman + Perez-Trujillo

Billy Corben (b.1978), is an American documentary film director. As a co-founder of the Miami-based studio “rakontur” (not a typo), along with producing partner Alfred Spellman, he has created films such as Cocaine Cowboys, Dawg Fight, and ESPN’s 30 for 30 The U.

Corben was born in Fort Myers, Florida, and raised in South Florida. As a child actor, he spent a large portion of his early days in Los Angeles, California. He graduated with honors from the University of Miami, where he majored in political science, screenwriting, and theater.

His feature documentary directorial debut, Raw Deal: A Question of Consent, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2001, making him one of the youngest directors in Sundance history. Examining the alleged rape of an exotic dancer at a fraternity house at the University of Florida, the film utilized extensive clips from videotape footage of the alleged assault. Anthony Miele of Film Threat said of Raw Deal, “Billy Corben has stumbled onto one of the most controversial films of the modern day,” calling it “one of the most compelling pieces of non-fiction ever produced.”

Following Raw Deal, Corben and producing partner Alfred Spellman founded rakontur, a Miami Beach-based content creation company, where they made Cocaine Cowboys. The New York Times called Cocaine Cowboys, “a hyperventilating account of the blood-drenched Miami drug culture in the 1970s and 1980s.” Through firsthand accounts of some of the most successful smugglers of the era, the deadliest hitman of the cocaine wars, and the law enforcement agents who pursued them, the film tells the story of how the drug trade literally built Miami – founding new banks, developing large swaths of real estate, opening new restaurants and hotels.

After a limited theatrical release in 2006, Cocaine Cowboys became the highest-rated documentary ever on the Showtime cable network.

The U, a feature documentary about the championship history of the University of Miami football program, produced by rakontur for ESPN’s 30 for 30 series, became the highest-rated documentary in the network’s 30-year history when it debuted on December 12, 2009, following the Heisman Trophy presentation.

In March 2011, Square Grouper: The Godfathers of Ganja, examining the free-wheeling pot smuggling era of South Florida in the 1970s, premiered at the South By Southwest Film Festival. In April 2011, Limelight (a 2011 documentary), about the rise and fall of Peter Gatien, New York City’s biggest nightclub owner, premiered at Tribeca Film Festival, and premiered in New York City in September 2011.

In 2012, Corben produced Dawg Fight, a brutal exposé of underground backyard MMA fighting in one of Miami’s toughest neighborhoods; Cocaine Cowboys: Los Muchachos, about the sensational Miami-based federal trials of Sal Magluta and Willy Falcone, the most successful Cuban drug traffickers in history; and Broke, a feature documentary project for ESPN examining the explosion of big money in sports and the epidemic of professional athletes who have gone broke.

Corben oversees the soundtracks for all of rakontur’s productions, assembling the ideal artists for each project and working hands-on throughout the music production process. For Cocaine Cowboys, Grammy-winner Jan Hammer (Miami Vice) composed and performed the original score; hip-hop artist Luther Campbell performed the opening titles song for The U; Miami music fixture DJ Le Spam wrote his first ever film score for Square Grouper; on Limelight (a 2011 documentary), Corben consulted with Grammy-winning electronic music pioneer Moby, while the original score was written by Fast of the Fun Lovin’ Criminals. In addition, Corben has contributed his own original songs to the soundtracks of Raw Deal: A Question of Consent, The U, and Square Grouper.

Corben also serves as film critic on the Paul and Young Ron Show, a South Florida radio morning show, doing live segments every Friday. Corben and rakontur are regular supporters of Miami-based Hope For Vision, a not-for-profit organization that donates money to fund scientific research to develop cures for blindness; the Borscht Film Festival, a group that supports and showcases Miami’s independent filmmakers; and The 200 Club, an organization that gives financial support to the families of law enforcement officers and firefighters who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

The videos below are organized by topic and run between 30 seconds and 7 minutes. Click on any video. You must be connected to the Internet to view the videos.

EXPOSURE TO BROAD INFLUENCES: 2:19 min.

What was your earliest awareness of movies, and art in general?

SELF-CONFIDENCE: 1:23 min.

Did you have access to a camcorder and make movies when you were young?

SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES: 3:21 min.

What was the most successful project you made when you were a teenager?

BUSINESS ACUMEN: 1:21 min.

It’s so difficult to add anything to the public school curriculum. How did you add your AIDS movie?

SELF-RELIANCE: 3:26 min.

Where did you go to college, and what did you learn that still informs you today?

BUSINESS ACUMEN: 1:40 min.

What was the justification to investors for making the movie “Cocaine Cowboys?”

CREATES A UNIQUE BRAND: 5:33 min.

Describe the evolution of your Miami-based film company and your films.

UNDERSTANDS THE AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE: 0:25 sec.

How do you characterize the appeal of Miami?

CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY: 3:37 min

Did you have a whole vision for Cocaine Cowboys when you started?

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION: 4:31 min.

How did you pace the funding of “Cocaine Cowboys?”

CRITICAL THINKING: 1:00 min.

Talk about the Rap and Hip Hop artists who like Cocaine Cowboys.

PERSEVERANCE FURTHERS: 1:28 min

Did you read William Goldman’s 1983 book, “Adventures in the Screen Trade,” which starts off with something like: “Remember, nobody in Hollywood knows anything”

CREATES A UNIQUE BRAND: 0:44 sec.

Do you want to make other genres of movies besides documentaries?

SEIZES OPPORTUNITIES: 3:07 min.

Do you ever feel in harms way when you make movies?

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION: 6:38 min.

How would you categorize the type of films you make?

BUSINESS ACUMEN:

1:04 min.



Why do people want to make films in Miami?

BUSINESS ACUMEN:

5:50 min.



What is your position on film incentives provided by the State of Florida?

CRITICAL THINKING:

4:13 min.



What are your criteria for taking on a new project?

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION:

3:30 min.



What brought about the demise of the Cocaine Cowboys era?

CREATES A UNIQUE BRAND:

4:26 min.



Tell us about ESPN's "30 for 30" series.

INSIGHT & INSPIRATION:

1:46 min.



The Surf Club at 90th & Collins Ave. was developed during prohibition, and hosted everyone from Frank Sinatra to Winston Churchill. It has been reimaged by architects Richard Meyers & Kobi Karp, and will open as a Four Seasons Hotel and condominium complex in 2017. Is there a mob backstory to the Surf Club?

EXPOSURE TO BROAD INFLUENCES:

1:57 min.



Who are your most important influences?

UNDERSTANDS THE AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE:

1:42 min.



It's difficult to get most Millennials to watch black & white movies. Do you agree?