

Rakontur Unveiled Its Upcoming Projects at Miami Film Festival 2017

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Alfred Spellman and Billy Corben at the Miami Film Festival.

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The Miami Film Festival event Straight Out of Miami: Rakontur Previews New Work, which took place at Regal South Beach this past weekend, began with the most pressing question of the night. Festival documentary programmer Thom Powers asked Billy Corben and Alfred Spellman: "What the fuck have you been doing?"

It's been two years since the duo behind the movie studio Rakontur presented the world premiere of *Dawg Fight* at MFF, a film codirected by Corben and Dhafir Harris and produced by Spellman. The normally prolific Miami-based directing/producing duo has not released anything since 2015.

It turns out they've been really busy. Corben started off by noting that the two have completed a six-hour miniseries for Spike TV about John McAfee and the murder mystery that sent the tech entrepreneur into exile in Guatemala. However, the miniseries was not among the clips shown to audience members, who had gathered to hear the duo talk about works in progress. The first clip was from the proposed documentary series entitled *A Sunny Place for Shady People*, which Corben explained as being composed of 30-minute documentaries of "Florida fuckery."

Corben said the episodes are inspired by the writings of famed Miami journalist Carl Hiaasen. Corben noted that many of the talking-head interviews are presented at a crooked Dutch angle, reflective of their subject matter. "Everything is on a Dutch tilt because everything in Florida is a little crooked," he said.

The audience was then treated to several minutes of one episode about former Bal Harbour Police Chief Tom Hunker and an ongoing investigation into money laundering on the police force. Actor Steven Bauer of *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* and *Scarface* fame narrated the episode, which was written with tongue planted firmly in cheek, as you might expect from Rakontur. Bauer was in the audience and stood to take a bow.

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Spellman noted that the project fulfills a dream that he and Corben have always wanted to produce: an ongoing series. For now, he says, they have ten episodes of various characters planned, and they hope an outlet such as Netflix will pick it up.

They showed clips for four other projects that night, including *Miami 1980*, which they hope becomes a six-part miniseries about the epic year that was 1980 in Miami. Corben said he would prefer that details not leave the room because they hoped for feedback from the audience before pursuing it. "Congratulations," he said, "you've just paid to be in a focus group."



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The clips showed events such as the McDuffie riots and the anti-gay crusade of Anita Bryant, the former brand ambassador for the Florida Citrus Commission who was forced out of her position after she divorced that year. There was also footage of the Mariel Boatlift, which spurred a very Miami immigration debate. Featuring vintage news images from the time, scenes were inter-cut with images of Donald Trump's inauguration and subsequent incidents that seemed to mirror issues unfolding in Miami in 1980, plus recent news pieces on police violence toward black men. "Everything that's an issue now all happened in Miami in 1980," Corben said.

Spellman said the concept came from an idea of "the collapse of institutions" in Miami. The audience members who spoke all praised the idea, and Bauer chimed in with his recollection of watching news in Miami from Los Angeles and how he dreaded the idea of ever going back to Miami during that time. "It was a city that was about to implode," the actor said.

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The third clip received arguably the strongest reaction of the night. *The Saudi Connection* is a proposed documentary that Spellman noted is based on the reporting of Florida Bulldog journalist Dan Christensen, who is suing the FBI to release documents about a Sarasota family that might have aided the 9/11 hijackers. Spellman said it was inspired by the documentary *Citizenfour*.

"I feel there's a different level of magnitude for this," festival programmer Powers noted. The filmmakers hope to make it a feature-length documentary even though "everyone wants a series," they said.

The fourth clip presented featured interviews with hip-hop mogul Damon Dash, who famously went bankrupt after becoming a multimillionaire. The idea came from seeing so many celebrities, like football players, get rich and end up in a mountain of debt. It was pitched to ESPN as a series called *Mo' Money, Mo' Problems*, but the sports network turned it down. Then CNBC came into the picture, and the news channel's execs asked the two who would be their number one choice as their first subject. They said Dash and were pleased to find him more than willing to talk about his issues. They shot the pilot for CNBC, but the channel didn't take it. Now the series hangs in limbo.

Finally, Corben and Spellman revealed they are once again returning to the world of *Cocaine Cowboys*, focusing on Willy Falcon and Sal Magluta, two of the more notorious characters of that dark period of cocaine trafficking and police corruption in Miami. The community, however, saw them as Robin Hoods, because they spread the wealth as flashily as they spent it (they were also speedboat racers, after all). Spellman said Falcon and Magluta are subjects he and Corben have wanted to focus on for a very long time; he remembers hearing stories about them when he was a kid in the early '90s while carpooling with his dad. He said they've been basically shooting this installment of the *Cocaine Cowboys* series for years, and viewers should expect to see it out early next year as a six-hour documentary produced by Brett Ratner.

With that, they also shared they are working on a *30 for 30* documentary for ESPN, which should be coming out in September. So, to answer Powers' question: These guys have been doing a fucking lot these past couple of years.

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