

REAL



MEN

DOING REAL THINGS

TROLLING THE BIZARRO BEAUTY OF FISHING WITH JOHN

BY CHRIS MARTINS



THERE HE IS: OUR URBANE AND GAUNT-FACED GUIDE on the deck of a speeding squid boat, wind holding his hair out sideways as he looks over the Andaman Sea for a sign—something that says, “Here, there are fish.” He squints out toward the Thai mainland, focusing in, plotting; this could be it. Yes, his face says, here there *are* fi—just then, from across the deck, a brutish cry pierces the scene like an arrow shot straight from the Great Bow of Gonzo: “*Hey Johnny!*” Dennis Hopper screams over the din of the motor. “*You’ve got a screw loose, Johnny!*”

Yes, this really is a story about fishing. *Fishing with John*, to be precise. In 1991, by the grace of a soon-to-be-bankrupt Japanese investor, a true renaissance man and bizarre genius named John Lurie was able to accomplish a longtime dream: his own fishing show. It wasn’t enough that he’d become an icon of New York’s downtown scene as band leader and sax player of the Lounge Lizards—a fantastic, angular, punk-jazz-rock combo that saw two decades of success (1998’s *Voice of Chunk* is an undisputably need-to-own classic). It wasn’t enough that he was already a hero of indie cinema for starring in and scoring three of director Jim Jarmusch’s

flagship films (*Down By Law*, *Stranger Than Paradise*, and *Permanent Vacation*), for his character acting in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Wild at Heart*, and *Paris, Texas*, and for composing a dozen other soundtracks. It wasn’t even enough that that he’d go on to get a Grammy nod for his score to *Get Shorty*, become a regular on HBO’s hit prison drama, *Oz*, create a mythological African R&B alter ego by the name of Marvin Pontiac (whose “posthumous” *Greatest Hits* is another worthy purchase), and become a visual artist with work on permanent display at MoMA. The man had to fish too.

Lucky for us.

FISHING

WITH JOHN,



which was given the Criterion Collection DVD treatment in 1999, lasted for only six episodes broadcast sporadically on IFC and Bravo, but it's made a lasting impression. The series has all the dry, slow-moving cathartic charm of the shows that inspired it, but an unbeatable irreverence effected by oddly placed sound samples (dog barks replace the bounce of a ping-pong ball; schoolyard sounds suddenly appear in the middle of the ocean), absurd non sequiturs delivered by narrator Robb Webb ("Both fishermen are covered with sores and boners." "These are real men doing real things." "Oogly boogly."), and hours of painstaking editing by Lurie. And while there are very few fish in the water, the fish out of water—John's guests—truly make the show. Jarmusch, dressed all in black, goes fishing for shark off the coast of Long Island, struggling to maintain his deadpan cool despite the obvious heat. Tom Waits gets seasick and extremely cranky in Jamaica, shoves a red snapper down his pants, and refuses speak to John for the next two years. Matt Dillon bombs as a guest, evidently leaving his personality somewhere out in the Costa Rican jungle. Willem Dafoe and Lurie fake their deaths on a frozen lake while ice fishing in northern Maine. And Dennis Hopper joins John in Thailand on a futile quest to capture the elusive giant squid.

Here, John Lurie assumes the role of guide once again, as we revisit a whirlwind year of travel, trawling and talk. Let the fish stories begin.

Living in New York, making art and music and films...one doesn't just pick up fishing. Or make a show about it. I'm guessing you fished growing up?

I used to fish with my dad. He was a dreadful fisherman and couldn't have cared less—just liked being out with his kid on Saturday morning. I took it much more seriously. A large bass would jump near the boat and he'd casually start rowing in the other direction, and I'd scream in exasperation, "*What are you doing!?*"

How it turned into a show was sort of lazy. I'd come home at 8 in the morning from being out all night and there would be nothing on TV except for two idiots in a boat, fishing. I found it relaxing—that gentle plop of the lure hitting the water. I had fished a lot with Willem and we had videotaped it a couple of times. Saying that it was a project I was working on



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allowed me to take the trips off my taxes.

What did you want to carry over from those other fishing shows?

As you can see, we didn't carry over much. I borrowed more from nature shows in a way. It's funny because while you are out there, the hunter nature takes over and you really want to catch a fish. But actually catching a fish isn't that interesting to watch—in the Jarmusch show, we caught five sharks but I edited down to one. But we got a really good shot of a giant alligator in Costa Rica, and I thought to myself, "This is a real show now." Of course, when I got back to New York, there seemed to be an alligator on every station.

Was there a certain pleasure for you in taking these people and dropping them in situations completely out of their element?

I wanted it to be real—like it would really be if me and Tom went fishing. These are interesting people and not because of their celebrity; really, they are celebrities because of who they are. I thought it would be fun to see these people once the show business veneer was down. And by filming for hours on end, we managed to capture that. But there was absolutely no pleasure the day that Tom got seasick. I thought it was the end of the show.

I had no idea, until watching the DVD commentary, how much work went into making the Waits episode even happen.

We were supposed to do it in Arkansas, where there are fish, but the money didn't come through from Japan in time. Tom was going to be on vacation in Jamaica. I thought, "This is a bad idea," but everybody said, "Oh no, it works perfectly." So I went down there and I met Leon, a local fisherman who'd go trolling for Mahi-mahi. But in his rickety boat there was no way to film—it

would be too loud and it would be impossible to get a decent shot—so we came up with an idea. He always fishes near driftwood logs because barnacles get on the logs and smaller fish come to the barnacles, then bigger fish, and then bigger fish again. So we found five or six driftwood logs, chained them up and anchored them about two miles from shore.

Then we needed some large boats—one to have the camera on that wouldn't shake too much, and another for us to be on—but I couldn't find a boat that was gonna work. The army brought a barge halfway around Jamaica from Kingston and then for some reason changed their minds and went back, so I was driving along the whole coast just looking for anything. I found this sunken tugboat that had a hole in it, I got it fixed; it had no anchor, we had an anchor sent in from Miami...

Wait—was the boat abandoned or did you have to buy it?

We rented it. It was fucked up.

Secondly, why in the world did you have to import an anchor from Florida?

Because there was no anchor in Jamaica that was going to hold this tugboat. Well, there probably was, but as soon as you go someplace where it's 100 degrees, the velocity at which things get done slows to a halt. So I've turned into Warner Herzog trying to get my boat set up, and finally we got the whole fucking thing together and it was fucking working! There were fish going to my spot, all the locals were going to my spot to fish, and I had invented, like, fish aggregating. And then, of course, Tom took one step on the boat and got sick and we had to move the whole thing into shallow water where there were no fish.

Wow. That's unbelievable.

Yeah, people see the show and say it looks like it was really

fun to do, and it's like, "Fuck you!" It wasn't fun to go through. But that's a part of the whole thing with me, with music or anything—I'm finding that my talent is nothing; it's my tenacity to get things done that has actually allowed me to have a career.

Was it difficult getting the locals to work with you?

In Costa Rica the most frequently heard phrase was: "Where is he going?" You'd have at least two boats with sound, camera crew, whatever, and then our boat, heading up this rushing, rushing river. And we were in the jungle, so the fishing guides were kind of the higher-ups of that society and they were really macho about their approach. They had this whole jungle sense of where the fuck the fish were, and they'd just decide to turn around unannounced, yet the camera boat is a hundred yards ahead. I actually started to scream at the guy once, which got Matt Dillon really upset with me.

Is that why Dillon's such a cold fish the entire time?

To be honest, I think that Matt was afraid of appearing dumb. He's often mistaken for being dumb and he's really bright. We'd have these great conversations and then the camera would come on, and he just wouldn't talk to me.

No kidding. You spend half of the episode trying anything—from dance rituals to borderline insults—to shake him out of it. But you never got through to him.

No, there was a point. He kind of lunged at me once and fell down on a bunch of fishing lures.

Really?

I had just had it. The assistant director, who was from

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MTV, was basically on the porch doing her nails, I had loaded the boat myself with the fishing rods and sound equipment, we had two hours before the sun was going down, with one boat on the side of the river and one boat traveling ahead, and the guy, Tatcho, turned around for the 900th time. I just lost it: “*You have to go this way!*” And he says, “*No! Fish this way!*” “*I don’t care!*” Then Matt got pissed because I was yelling at the poor local guy, and he lunged at me.

But there had already been a lot of things...I had that fish dance I wanted to do and he didn’t want to do it...it’s a weird situation and I understand why people are nervous. It’s like what Michael Moore does. He interviews somebody and then cuts it to shit to make them look like an idiot. I videotape our vacation together and then I edit out the parts I don’t want. It’s scary for people, but they should know I’m making fun of myself more than anybody else.

Was it hard to simultaneously play the engaging host, director and eventual editor?

You know I have a knack for this a little bit. With a band you’ll be arguing with the promoter about travel after the show, then you walk on stage and play. But I think it was a little difficult for the guests, except for Willem who would play to it. Going in and out of me pretending to be there alone with them fishing, and then rushing over and giving directions to the camera...I think that was a bit disconcerting.

Did you know that Tom was going to shove the snapper down his the pants?

Well, he kept saying he was going to do it, so I said “You’re gonna have to do it now.” We didn’t even catch those fish. We bought them from a guy who caught them in a trap, so they were just barely alive at the ends of our lines. My favorite line from all of the shows comes out of that. Tom catches his fish and I leave mine in the water. And I’m aware of the phoniness of it, so when I’m catching mine I say, “It looks

like the same fish, Tom.” He says, “It can’t be. The first one’s in my pants.”

Some of the greatest lines are delivered by the inimitable Robb Webb. What were you looking for in choosing a narrator?

The voice of authority. Robb can say whatever he wants, he can give completely wrong information about nature, and it sounds like it’s absolutely true. But I was nervous. I listened to probably 200 narrator’s tapes; Rob Webb was the first one I liked, and he was expensive. So it’s the first episode and I give him the “fishermen are covered with sores and boners” line and I just... From the voice, you think the guy is going to be really uptight. I thought he might walk out, but no. He loved it.

That voice is a dangerous weapon. Seems like it could’ve easily gotten out of hand.

Here’s the thing: We were doing the episode in Jamaica and I had him say completely out of nowhere, “I’d love a bite of your sandwich.” And I couldn’t decide, I went back and forth and back and forth: “Do I want this in here?” And we showed it live somewhere and I was in the back and I saw everybody’s shoulders kind of scrunch up...people found it uncomfortable. But people are still quoting that one to me all the time on the street: “Hey John, I’d love a bite of your sandwich.”

Fishing always comes with a heaping helping of vanilla boredom. Seems like it’d be pretty surreal to feel that, then look over and see Dennis Hopper sitting next to you.

I actually went from one of the best moments of my life to one of the worst moments of my life with Dennis. I had been fishing with [Thai fishing guide] Lon a bunch of times, but always in the morning, and I wanted to get a shot of me and Dennis alone in the boat with the sun going down. So Lon was dropped off

and we went alone, except that the tide had changed completely and the landscape was nothing I’d ever seen. I go from this moment where the sun’s going down, the breeze is on your body, I’m in a boat with Dennis Hopper, we’re laughing, we’re singing, what could fucking be better? And then I can’t find my way back, it’s getting dark, and the walkie-talkies, of course, don’t work.

So I think, “Oh fuck, I don’t want to run out of gas,” so I turn off the boat, except that these fucking boats are started up with these weird cranks like some homemade lawnmower. And I try and start it and the thing snaps off in my hand. It’s getting darker and we’re drifting out to sea, and I’m thinking, “*Mother fucker!* This is the beginning of one of those catastrophe movies.” Eventually they found us, but to go from complete exaltation, to looking at Dennis, saying, “Are you going to kill me?”...

How did he handle it?

He was fine! He was so fucking gentle with me. He just sort of took me under his wing in this really great way. He told me at the end of the trip that it was the best time he ever had. I told him he doesn’t remember the best time he ever had.

If another investor approached you about doing another set of episodes, would you consider it?

Yeah. I couldn’t put the amount of work in I did before but I would absolutely love to do more. There are a million people I would like to go with. I’d love to do Bill Clinton, and I bet he would do it. I think, number two, I would just pick some random old guy and say he was J.D. Salinger. And I’d like to do Charles Barkley on a very small boat.

And if you could go fishing with anyone dead or alive at any location?

Well, Jesus was a fisherman wasn’t he? **F**

REMINISCING

WITH JOHN

THREE FISHING WITH JOHN GUESTS STOP BY TO SHARE THEIR MEMORIES FROM THE SHOW.



JIM JARMUSCH: I'd known John for some time—we met in 1977—and sometimes on Saturday mornings we'd still be awake when those fishing shows would come on. I remember John saying, "Wouldn't it be cool doing a fishing show, but different?" I thought it was another John Lurie thing because he was always spouting out wacky ideas. Who knew he would realize it and actually make the damn thing? I don't know how many people know this, but part of him always wanted to become a marine biologist.

I'm not a seafaring type of guy, so going out on that boat was kind of daunting. The ocean is so powerful...so changeable and strong that it was kind of...I didn't feel the most comfortable. Plus everyone on our crew got pretty seasick. I remember John picking me up at my house in a rented crown Victoria, and him driving us out there, just joking around for two or three hours—I remember that was pleasant. And then being on the boat itself...somehow my memory gets a little blurred when the seasickness sets in.

They used a clip of our episode on *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which I think more people have come up to me about than my film work: "I saw you on *SpongeBob*, man!" I had people calling me about it—that was kind of cool.



WILLEM DAFOE: We stayed at this hunting lodge in the Allagash area. The winter in Maine is very brutal, but there was something so beautiful about waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning, having this big farm breakfast with the crew, everybody revving up the snowmobiles outside, then putting all this high-tech gear on and just going out into the wilderness to make something. It was a like an expedition. We really sort of made it up as we went along; it was pretty much improvised and pretty abstract.

I remember going up there...I'd been working and I hadn't seen John for a little bit; I think he was nervous about arrangements. It was a very long and involved trip: you have to fly from New York to Bangor, and then take a car from Bangor to someplace else, and then a four-wheel drive vehicle takes you to the lodge. But when I got there I was very happy to see John. We went out, we had something to eat, and then very late at night, we went out onto the frozen lake. It was a full moon and we lay out on the lake and it started to snow these gigantic flakes. They were so gigantic that when they fell on your face they wouldn't melt. And I remember looking over at John, laying on the ground on the frozen lake, and just having a transcendental moment.



DENNIS HOPPER: John and I were models for designer Rei Kawakubo in Tokyo when we met, wearing her clothes and walking down the fashion ramp. So he said, "Hey, I'm doing this show. I'll take you anywhere you can imagine and we'll go fishing." And I said, "Well...I've never been to Thailand." And he said, "Thailand? Are there any fish in Thailand?" I said, "There's fucking fish everywhere, John, come on." And that was the beginning of our adventure. By the way, Thailand has been pretty well fished-out in case anyone wants to know.

My greatest memory has nothing to do with fishing, actually. When I woke up in Bangkok on the first morning, I was in this incredible hotel that John had put me in, and when I opened the blinds and looked out, there was a race track to run horses, and in the middle of the race track was a golf course. And I thought, "Man, that's the most incredible thing." My friend Sahid came with me, and he bets on horses and I play golf. I woke him up really early, he gets mad and I say, "Just look out the window." It was great.

But it was fun just hanging out with John; he's a terrific personality. We had fantastic conversations. I can't remember the show that well, but I remember having a lot of conversations with him about John Coltrane and Miles Davis. He was really curious about my friendship with them and that whole period. Everything about the experience was beautiful—the sea was so wonderful and all the little islands look exactly like they do in the picture books. It was something I would never have done for myself, and it was a terrific trip. Would I go fishing with John again? Damn right.

WOULD I GO FISHING WITH JOHN AGAIN? DAMN RIGHT.

— DENNIS HOPPER