

Jim Jarmusch Shines a Light on Working-Class Artists and Iggy Pop

We caught up with the veteran filmmaker at Cannes to talk about his two newest films, the poetic 'Paterson' and the Iggy Pop and the Stooges documentary 'Gimme Danger.' By Brandon Harris
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Jim Jarmusch and Iggy Pop at the 69th annual Cannes Film Festival on May 19, 2016, in Cannes, France. Photo by Stephane Cardinale/Corbis via Getty Images

[Jim Jarmusch](#) wouldn't shake our hands, but the veteran filmmaker immediately apologized for it. He had a cold and didn't want any of the assembled journalists to get sick. It was the second and final Friday of the 12-day [Cannes Film Festival](#), where Jarmusch first made a name for himself as a prematurely gray but still quite young auteur in the mid 80s,

and outside a private inn near the French Riviera, the northern Ohio native appeared right at home.

Although he was aware of the middling reviews for his Iggy Pop and the Stooges documentary *Gimme Danger*—one of the few nonfiction films in Cannes's official selection—his mood seemed as bright and even as the clear skies above. Perhaps in part that was because Jarmusch was in Cannes with not one but two films. His latest fictional effort, *Paterson*, had premiered the previous weekend to the [best reviews](#) Jarmusch has landed in a decade.

"These characters might seem on the surface to be clichés," noted the gently self-deprecating director at the press conference for *Paterson*, an often very funny drama about the daily comings and goings of a bus driver, played by Adam Driver, who is also a very serious poet, a quietly committed husband, and a technological philistine. He writes all of his poems longhand, in a small notebook, in the context that so many of the great poets have forged their art: while working at a day job. The movie is well steeped in the culture of hybrid poet/laborers, reminding its audience that Wallace Stevens sold insurance and that William Carlos Williams was a doctor.

Still of Iggy Pop and the Stooges from 'Gimme Danger.' Photo courtesy of Amazon Studios

So full of style as a narrative filmmaker, Jarmusch is still finding his way with nonfiction. "I don't know if we can even call it a documentary," said Jarmusch outside the inn as sunlight beat down on him and the gathering of journalists, iPhones, and baby mics in front of him did as well. He compared his own film negatively to *20,000 Days on Earth*, Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth's stunning Sundance prize-winner about Nick Cave that weaves archival footage and staged scenes with moments of verité documentary. "I watched that and was just ready to give up, man," he said with a smile, adding that the use of fictionalized scenes got to the truth about Cave with more authority than a traditional documentary would have. Jarmusch knows that his film isn't trying to "push documentary form" and seems to have no problem with that, even if he is well aware of

how exciting things were becoming in that hybrid space between fiction and nonfiction.

One leaves *Gimme Danger* wondering why Jarmusch didn't give such a strategy a try. Perhaps overfamiliarity set in. The director and his subject have been friends for over 20 years now, and *Gimme Danger* was a collaboration from the start—Iggy Pop had approached Jarmusch to make the film. When I asked Jarmusch what he learned about Pop in the process of making the film that he hadn't already gleaned in 20 years of friendship, Jarmusch struggled to come up with an answer.

Initially planning to interview a lot more individuals who had worked with Pop over the years, Jarmusch narrowed the focus of the piece, which opens with one of the Stooges' notorious early 70s breakups. It ultimately relies heavily on a few interviews and the scant archival footage that exists of early Stooges performances. The movie unearths some bravura archival moments (Jarmusch's archivist on the project, Sierra Pettengill, is one of the best), and his sit-downs are relatively revealing, but the movie is fundamentally lacking a formal character.

Adam Driver in 'Paterson.' Photo courtesy of Amazon Studios

One can't say the same thing about *Paterson*, which feels both like a culmination and a rebirth for the director. Repetition and *temp morts*, as ever in Jarmusch, have their place, as do the laconic humor, slow fades to black, and the droll protagonist. But there's a sweetness to the film, and a sense of longing too, that feels new to his work. He remains in thrall to flat narrative and to the mundanity of everyday life, but not at the expense of feeling. Although not much fuss is ever made about it, Driver is the only white adult character in the film—our working-class artist inhabits a world entirely populated by people of color, from his Iranian wife to his black drinking buddies.

Both films, soon to be released by Amazon Studios, are in their own ways portraits of working-class artists from off the beaten track, whose need for self-expression trumps the quotidian facts of their existences. Iggy Pop is,

like Jarmusch, a child of the post-industrial Midwest; Jarmusch described his upbringing as middle class; Iggy Pop famously grew up in a trailer park. In a country that provides little support for young artists that they, or more likely, their families, can provide on their own, the arts are often an iconoclastic pursuit.

When asked who he was when he discovered his kinship with the Stooges, Jarmusch answered quickly: "[I] was probably a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old kid in a post-industrial city—Akron, Ohio—looking for some kind of cultural release, for some kind of hope of freedom," he said, and it's a similar release Driver's driver receives from writing poetry. " *Gimme Danger* is about choosing your own path and both of these films on some level are about that," he said. Fortunately for cinephiles, one could say the same thing about Jarmusch's singular career.

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Amazon Studios will release Jim Jarmusch 's Paterson and Gimme Danger later this year.