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MOVIES

Interview: Patton Oswalt, Robert Siegel Explore The Sadness Of Big Fandom

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Big Fan follows an obsessive fan who meets his favorite player in a strip club and ends up having to choose between his loyalty and the law. These days, it's a scenario that most NFL fans can relate to.

This week I got to sit down with first-time director Robert Siegel (writer of "The Wrestler") and actor/comedian Patton Oswalt to chat about their movie. I learned how sports fans are like comic book geeks, Giants fans are classier than Jets fans, and what profession is crappier than blogging.

Oh, and I may have gotten someone fired in the process.

Robert: So you write for Deadspin, yet you're a woman.

Sarah: **Imagine that! We're quite progressive.**

Patton: Impressive.

Sarah: **In the movie breakdown, you call the lead character Paul a "complex everyman"...**

Robert: What?? Is that what it says? I didn't write that...

Sarah: **Well, Paul comes across as exactly the opposite of the everyman.**

Robert: Well, I think what that idiot meant - whoever wrote that - is that maybe he's relatable because he's passionate about something...

Patton: Right

Robert: ...like that we all have something we're passionate about maybe...

Patton: Despite all logic

Robert: ...but yeah, he's relate-able. I'm just covering the tracks of whatever asshole wrote that description.

Patton: "As mercurial director raged against his own PR people, flipping over the table upstairs at the Playwright tavern and polishing off his eighth Jameson's of the afternoon..."

Sarah: **Uh oh. Is someone getting fired?**

Patton: That's actually a good catch. I didn't think anyone ever read the crap the PR people send out.

Sarah: **I was bored on the bus.**

[At this point I sense I may have sent someone to the unemployment line, so I move on.]

Sarah: **You've mentioned previously in a couple of interviews that you aren't really a sports fan...**

Patton: Not at all. I have no...it's not that I hate sports, it's just that I don't have any knowledge.

Sarah: **So what did you draw on? Because your character is very passionate and obsessive about his team.**

Patton: Well I'm very passionate and obsessive about films, pop culture, politics, comic books, so I was able to draw from all of that. It's the same spark, just different thrill every time. These guys all move in the same lurching, lonely direction towards the thing that they worship.

Sarah: So you see a connection between sports fans and comic book geeks.

Patton: Well, with all enthusiasts, like foodies or people who follow a pop star or urban explorers who go exploring ruins of New York City. They're passionate people. The problem is most people use it to enhance their lives, Paul uses it to replace his life. That's the distinction.

Sarah: I found myself relating, as a sports fan, to a lot of the ways Paul reacts to his team and the way he handles his rivalry with the Philly fan...

Robert: Which parts did you relate to?

Sarah: I don't want to reveal too much about the movie, but for example when Paul and his friend were going over the upcoming season's schedule and tallying up the potential wins. Most sports fans I know do the same thing.

Robert: Yeah, I used to do that when the schedule came out too. That's part of what makes him relatable in that all sports fans take a certain measure of abuse. As a sports fan you have to eat shit, uh, whether it's your team losing or...in a league with...how many teams?

Sarah: 32

Robert:...32 teams, it's funny how you listen to pretty much any fan of any franchise, you'll listen to them and they'll talk like they are...like they have an intimate relationship with loss and pain that no other team or not other fans could possibly understand...

Patton: Like they feel responsible for the victory...

Robert: When in reality, 31 teams don't win the Super Bowl every year but they all think of themselves as the most long suffering. I can relate to this, believe me I can relate to this as a Kansas City Chiefs fan.

Patton: Sometimes you pick the wrong hero...

Robert: Right. So there's the pain of the losses and then the other indignity you suffer as a sports fan is when your heroes turn out to be creeps, cheaters, or steroid users or wife beaters. Not that they all are, but you know, it happens pretty frequently. It's often that you'll find that your hero is not what you hoped he'd be.

And then there's ticket prices...you know...if you're a Yankees fan, I mean \$2,500 for crappy seats. You can't help but feel like it's a big "fuck you", you know? It's just everything. It doesn't love you as much as you love it. It's really a one way street. Your loyalty is sort of tested and taken for granted and abused, you know? Yet your faith is strangely unwavering like [Paul's] is. You may not get actually punched in the face by your favorite player but you get metaphorically punched in the face. But you'd never consider dumping your team.

Sarah: Which makes your comparison to comic books and politics interesting because I don't think anyone would really feel that way about their favorite super hero.

Patton: Well, there really are people who do take it too far, you know, they do take their politics to far. Like, look at the people who are still following Sarah Palin after she's saying the kind things that would normally end a politician's career, people would not waver from her. It's getting too Orwellian now. She's a leader by quitting, don't they understand that? And there are people that get way to into power fantasies and comic books, like there are Star Trek fans who want to be addressed as commander and wear the uniforms. Or people who follow the Jedi religion. People translate Shakespeare to Klingon for crying out loud.

[Ten minutes into the interview, Robert's attention has drifted to some point behind me in sort of an empty gaze. It's like most dates I've been on, except I'm pretty sure this interview won't end in me leaving with my underwear in my purse.]

Sarah: You've written this character, a guy who lives with his parents, masturbates, and is obsessed with his team. I, for one, am grateful you didn't make him a blogger.

Robert: Ha, yeah. He's kind of a pre-internet guy.

Patton: He just missed the internet.

Sarah: Right. So then what made you decide to make him a parking lot attendant?

Robert: (to Patton) See, I didn't know that your King of Queens character was a...

Patton: He was a token booth salesman in the subway...

Robert:...I had no idea. I found that out way after. People are going to be like "He's playing the same character..."

Patton:Those are the "King of Queens" nerds.

Robert:I didn't know, just for the record. So why the parking lot attendant? Uh, it just seemed like a really shitty job, you know, his interaction all day long is with people who have just come out of the hospital and he's asking them for a lot of money for parking. His day is filled with abuse and negative interactions all day long.

Patton: It's just a horrible job to have.

Sarah: OK, so I get the whole New York angle, but why the Giants?

Robert: You mean the Giants as opposed to the Jets?

Sarah: Yeah

Robert: Well I didn't want him to be in the Stadium, I wanted him to be watching outside in the parking lot. I had this image of that. I thought it would be much more realistic that he's a Giants fan because it's not nearly as hard to get Jets tickets as it is for the Giants. There's that history with the Giants where tickets are handed down from generation to generation. The idea that he was kind of an outsider, even within the culture of Giants fans, there are kind of the cool fans and the un-cool fans, the haves and the have-nots. I just wanted him to be a fan of a more upper class...uh...

Sarah You can say it. Giants fans are better than Jets fans.

Robert: Well, yeah. Or, well, there's a higher percentage of upscale Giants fans.

Sarah: I know a few Jets fans who would beg to differ.

Robert: Well, it's kind of like Giants, Yankees, Rangers are more Manhattan, kind of white collar teams and the more blue collar side of things I always think of as the Jets and the Mets. The Giants are further up in the hierarchy of New York sports. Now that I think about it, he probably should have been a Jets fan. It seems like more of his personality...

Sarah: A loser?

Robert: Yeah...well...I don't really think he's a loser. He's just more blue collar. And growing up in New York you sort of associate different areas, like Queens or Long Island with certain teams. Staten Island is more Giants country.

Patton: I wish I knew what he was talking about, but I have no idea.

Robert: That's ok.

Sarah: We can translate this into Klingon for you...

Patton: (laughing) Can you put this into Greedo's language?

[Patton breaks into impressions and I'm dying.]

Sarah: Did you get any push back from the Giants, especially with this whole Plaxico situation?

Robert: It's actually been nice and quiet so far. Howard Cross, do you know him? Tight end?

Sarah:Yes

Robert: He's done a few Q&A's for us. He actually interviewed me for a New Jersey news piece. He's kind of been our ambassador. But no, we do not have any formal relationship with the team. We haven't had any issues yet.

Sarah: Until the movie comes out and the phone starts ringing.

Patton: Right

Sarah:So you didn't need permission to use the team name?

Robert: No, we didn't need permission. The first amendment affords us certain rights that are rarely executed in Hollywood. They usually opt not to exercise those rights and make movies about the New York Wizards, you know? As a sports fan, fake teams take me out of the reality the movie. The teams are a part of our culture. They have significance and a resonance. Whenever I see a movie with a fake sports teams, I just don't get it.

Sarah:Last question. In the movie, Paul ultimately has to choose between his team loyalty and money. As a sports fan, which would you choose?

Robert: I don't like suing people...

Patton: The whole idea about these lawsuits, there's something like a lack of pride. There's something about it that rubs me...

Robert: You know, even if it was the right thing to do, I think I'd feel like a real shithead fuck-face asshole if I ever were like...

Patton: I would be very uncomfortable doing it...

Robert: ...even if I were at McDonalds and someone poured hot coffee in my lap...

Patton: Like, where do you pull \$40 million out of the air? It's like, really? I think McDonalds had to pay \$20 million or something.

Sarah: I think the woman you're talking about actually spilled it on herself.

Patton: Really? That's even dumber then.

Robert: See, I'm Jewish, you know? I feel like, you know, there this stereotype...

Sarah: So, no, then?

Robert: I'd just feel like a real dick.

So there you have it. I got a chance to watch the screener and it's definitely worth checking out. Sports fans will find themselves strangely connected to this character, a die-hard radio call-in fan, who clearly needs a reality check. The casting was great (Michael Rapaport plays the nemesis Philly fan) and you leave questioning whether your own fandom goes a bit too far.





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