



Master Class with the Super Bowl King

By Ann Forbes Cooper



At 73, legendary commercials director Joe Pytka recently finished shooting his—76th? 77th? Even he's not sure—Super Bowl commercial, in this case for Pepsi, in his 44th Super Bowl (he's missed just one since it began in 1967). And he shows little sign of slowing down.

He's been directing commercials longer, with more style, humanity, authenticity, emotion and creativity, than any other director on the planet. Over the years he's shot one award-winning, star-studded, product-pushing paean after another, for America's blue- and not so blue-chip giants, such as Nike, Hallmark, McDonald's, Budweiser, Infiniti, Apple, AT&T, Pepsi, Bartles & Jaymes, HBO, ESPN, Snickers, and so on, and so on.

He's also directed some startling and effective PSA's, such as the anti-drugs spot, "This is Your Brain on Drugs," and the "New York City Miracle" post 9/11 campaign, which featured Woody Allen, Robert DeNiro and Henry Kissinger, among others. Then there are his videos for rock's royalty, including, "Free as a Bird," for the Beatles; "Starting Over," for John Lennon; and Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel" and "Dirty Diana." And if there have been some movie missteps along the way (anyone remember *Let it Ride?*), it just makes him seem, well, more human somehow.

A blue-collar Pittsburgh native who started out producing documentaries, the tales about his hot temper and temperament on set are legion. Yet an interview with him becomes a veritable Master Class on directing, as he turns reflective, erudite, entertaining, witty, and, yes, humble. Below, Pytka ponders his remaining challenges, emotes about the pro-bono spot that changed his life, describes his Obama commercial that never aired, and offers advice for improving the U.S. economy.

A typical working day in the life of Joe Pytka kicks off around 7 a.m. with a 15-minute warm-up game of basketball "to get the blood flowing" with his assistant director and assorted crew members. It wraps 16 or so hours later, when he collapses at home "like a vegetable," he says. After years in the business, he doesn't need an alarm clock—he has his own, an inner clock that tells him how much energy he needs. He also has an instinct for problem solving, and knowing how long it takes to do something.

His one concession to age is directing fewer spots a year. "I like dealing with stuff on more human terms," he says. "Before, we were overlapping like crazy. Phil Dusenberry had a hard and fast rule that a 60-second commercial should take two days. But that's gone by the boards. In many instances now, you shoot four or five commercials in a day."

He's "incredibly honored" by his One Club Creative Hall of Fame induction, adding that the real accolades belong to those he's worked with over the years. "I don't conceive the work. I don't fight for it with clients. I have all the fun and I've been blessed when I think of the incredibly creative people I've worked with." He singles out industry giants: Ed McCabe, Hal Riney, Mike Koelker (501 Blues), Phil Dusenberry, "and all his people—Ted Sann, Al Merrin, Michael Patti, and everyone else at BBDO, and all the guys at Wieden and Kennedy."

Surprisingly, he says he never met fellow inductee Steve Jobs. "I did stuff for the iMac and worked through Steve Hayden and Lee Clow. Jobs should have his own day all to himself. I'm embarrassed to be mentioned in the same breath."

Of America's annual homage to football, he remembers when it wasn't that big a deal. "Back then I did some commercials that I didn't even know ran on the Super Bowl. But once the USA Today Super Bowl Ad Meter rankings came out [in 1987], everyone wanted to win it and make a big reputation for themselves."

And though the megawatt Super Bowl spots may have cemented his reputation, fame and fortune, none impacted his life in quite the way as did his 20-year involvement with the American Indian College Fund. "I was completely unaware of the genocidal treatment of the American Indian," he says. "You hear about it in a sketchy way, but working with





Dan [Wieden] and Dave [Kennedy] and learning about the philosophy changed my view of American history. It's a difficult, misunderstood subject. This sounds corny, but there's an incredible spiritual quality when you visit the reservations—and we went everywhere—and also about these people, forced into places that were intolerable to white people. And yet they sustain and endure. Especially the Navajos, with their incredible artwork. Dave and I have just finished a project that's blown me away with its beauty."

He avoids doing political commercials, but made an exception for the Obama election campaign in 2008. "It was going to run in the last week of his campaign for president, in case there was a backlash because he was black. But in the end they didn't need it," he says. What grew out of it was a proposal. "Their communication to the public had been horrible. I proposed that they should use the commercial medium to communicate what was going to be done during their administration. They said, 'That's a great idea and we're going to do it internally.' But they never did. It was not to get political, but because PSA's can be a powerful, creative way to communicate issues through a medium like TV. It's still the greatest medium ever for this kind of stuff."

What challenges him today remains the same as always: To do justice to the script, understand what the client and ad agency want, and make it

as honest as possible. "Every ad is a challenge; sometimes it's technical, sometimes it's dealing with the acting," he says. "I try to make each one somewhat unique."

His day rate remains the same as it was 25 years ago: \$15,000, according to his assistant. "I don't know what other directors make. Our company has profits built in," he says, adding, "Today, you do twice as much work for half the money. Cost consultants have run roughshod over everything."

There are few current commercial directors he admires. "I don't know who they are anymore. I'm kinda cloistered. In the old days, I admired Ridley and Tony Scott; Steve Horn was great. Howard Zieff was a good friend, and one of the greatest directors ever."

Despite his vast repository of knowledge and expertise, he refuses to lecture on his subject any more. "It's always a disappointment," he says. "Most students are mundane. They don't have a vision; they're worried about getting a job, whereas I'm worried about aesthetics. Years ago, a friend asked me to give a lecture at Carnegie Mellon University. And I prepared this thing to death. I showed examples of my commercials and documentaries, and I expected to get hammered by the students about how I was coping out working on commercials, when I should have

been working on documentaries. Well, it never happened. All they were worried about was how to get a job."

Any advice he'd give wannabe directors? "I was talking to someone recently, and I said, 'You'll never make it in our industry because you're never on time.' He said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'I've never had a crew person ever that I can remember be late. You have sixty or seventy people due to show up at seven in the morning, and they will all be there ahead of time. And everyone knows their job.' If we could get these production values into the U.S. economy, I think we'd be a much more efficient nation."

Movies remain a big influence—he's seen just about every one ever made. "If I have to reference a style, I'm close to what cinematographer Gordon Willis did with *The Godfather* and Woody Allen's movies: a very naturalistic, classical, simple style." He says he never stops learning. "If I see mistakes, or missed opportunities in my work, I feel like the dumbest director that ever lived. It's heartbreaking. Never ends."

When he's not working, he's skiing, or restoring old houses and boats. "I just restored an old schooner and two Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr. homes," he says. "For the past 20 years I've been restoring an Adobe house in Santa Fe. We've been experimenting with traditional techniques that have disappeared. People laugh at me because it's such a difficult process."

He has two daughters. The eldest is a fashion designer, the younger, a model, surfer, painter and photographer. "They're everything I couldn't be," he says.

If he had to interview himself, what questions would he ask? "The first thing would be: Have you achieved what you wanted to achieve?" And the answer? "Not even close. I originally wanted to be a painter, which takes courage, like a writer facing the blank page. Directing doesn't take much courage because you're given work someone else has created. That's why I admire painters so much."

So what does he still want to achieve? "If I had the time and resources I'd do something completely my own, without having to serve a master. I'd probably fall flat on my face. Been close a couple of times." And he says it would be nice to find a new way to communicate. "I don't think the potential of film has been fully exploited. Look at surrealist literature and painting; film hasn't come close to that level yet."

His career, by his own admission, has been an incredible ride. "I'm surprised by the fact that I'm able to endure and keep working with great people." As for retiring, don't bother asking. "What would I do? I've thought about it, not seriously. I like the film-making process too much. If people still want to work with me, I'll work with them." 