

DOCUMENTARY CULTURE

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PROFILES

Focus on Alan Zweig

The Curmudgeon turns Lovable

By [Janis Cole](#) • Published April 1st, 2011 • [Issue 82, Summer 2011](#) • [0 Comments](#)



Alan Zweig with his wife, Julie, and their baby daughter, Keely, March 2011. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

From behind his video camera, lone filmmaker Alan Zweig interrogates Chris, a record collector whose apartment is so congested with albums he can barely cut a trail to the window to shed more light on the overgrown disaster that he lives in. When Zweig steps on a record the camaraderie between them sours, but the camera remains pointed on Chris as they painfully hash out their differences on tape. We've already learned that Chris has survived cancer. Every moment he's on camera exposes any number of social phobias he suffers. In a film about record collectors it is disconcerting, yet not atypical, that Chris's personal life should overpower the more than 20,000 records that confine him. Chris is the most severe case in the film, but social disorders and feelings of inadequacy haunt most collectors, including Zweig himself, the derisive, self-deprecating main character of *Vinyl*.

Like *Vinyl*, Zweig's subsequent feature docs often end up unearthing a survey of something other than what he sets out to capture. *A Hard Name* is about ex-convicts but the most standout moments unravel scars from child abuse. In *Lovable*, Zweig questions the 'singles syndrome' while filming consistently smart, funny and by no means 'wallflower' single women. Only his film about negative people ends up being exactly that: *I, Curmudgeon* is Zweig's self-titled, literal mirror reflection of his own negativity and discontent, blended with a cast of equally surly people.

Zweig's image dominates his mirror trilogy films, *Vinyl*, *I, Curmudgeon* and *Lovable*, which are held together by his stream-of-consciousness diary-styled monologues performed into mirrors. His voice is present from behind the camera as he interviews people, a technique carried over to *A Hard Name*, which he doesn't appear in. All four lean heavily on stirring interviews to camera with fascinating people, and make generous use of jump cuts within the interrogations. They explore timely topics, offer quirky insights, entertain and rely chiefly on Zweig's unfussy cinematic method, personal diatribes and interposing interview style.

When I met Zweig in Toronto to talk about his retrospective at Hot Docs, he was on his way to Winnipeg for a smaller retrospective and the world premiere of *Vinyl, The Alternate Take*, which uses all-new footage to build on the popular saga. Like the original, it pays minimal attention to colour correction, sound cut or mix. Zweig believes the new version's appeal is in its presentation of material about records that *Vinyl* had only occasionally delivered. A scene with Guy Maddin and Greg Klymkiw sporting a portable record player outdoors in chilly Winnipeg is a typically fun moment, offering a romanticized notion of collecting that Zweig has inserted into his new cut.

With four successful films in 10 years, and a recent marriage and a baby, Zweig is cautiously happy, but admits it wasn't always so.

The Escarpment School: 1975 to '77, Trip Sheet and The Boys

After getting his B.A. at York University, Zweig gravitated to Media Arts at Sheridan College in Oakville. He requested advanced standing and was put on probation by his young and exacting film professor Rick Hancox. After the first 16mm editing exercise he was off probation, and part of the 1975 class that included me, Holly Dale, Lorraine Segato Phillip Hoffman and Richard Kerr. Our careers have been shaped by each other, the influence of a few key professors, and by attending Sheridan at what, in retrospect, turned out to be a critical creative period.

"Hancox encouraged his students to investigate questions of time, memory, landscape and documentary convention. He also explored the relationship of images to words in film, whether spoken or as super-titles on screen. Arguably, the trend toward personal cinema and experimental documentary in Canadian experimental cinema in the 1980s began with Hancox, thus indirectly establishing what has come to be known as the Escarpment School." — Peter Harcourt from *The Film Encyclopedia*, on website www.rickhancox.com/bio.htm

The Escarpment School is a term coined by Zweig's friend, filmmaker Michael Cartmell, to reference a movement of personal, diaristic, documentary and experimental filmmaking coming out of Sheridan in the mid '70s and stretching into the '80s to include Mike Hoolboom, Steve Sanguedolce and others.

Hancox encouraged personal filmmaking and experimental documentary on topics familiar to the lives of his students. Zweig was a cab driver and made his first student film on the topic. I also drove cabs and agreed to be in his film. Thirty-two years later we watched *Trip Sheet* together in Zweig's living room. The next day he sent me an uncharacteristically sentimental message about time passing, which I have kept.

Zweig sees *Trip Sheet* as his first attempt to make an experimental, impressionistic documentary without a narrative. It also adds to the historic documentation of a commercial landscape along Yonge Street that has disappeared.

For his advanced student film, Zweig made *The Boys*, an improvised drama, which he says is partly verité in style and part almost mockumentary. *The Boys* shines a light on male bonding. Zweig brought four of his friends together, including a young Ralph Benmergui and school chum David Chudd, as they improvised during an evening spent hanging out together. That sequence is intercut with each one talking individually about what he gets from being with the boys. Hancox said, “You could see the person who made that film had a lot of documentary talent and was going somewhere.” However, Zweig’s road to “somewhere” was not direct.

Believing that audiences would not care about him mixing genres, Zweig developed scripts that didn’t take off as planned, and chased a feature film dream that took him into a two-decade acrimonious abyss, fuelled by career failure and failed love.

The Dry Years: 1979 to 1999, *Where’s Howie* and *The Darling Family*

“I learned to love film from Rick [Hancox] and Jeff [Paull], and got a lesson that was hard to shake, that anything goes. That’s true only if you can make it work. What I’ve found is that it’s easier to do what you want when you’re successful.” — Zweig

After *Trip Sheet* and *The Boys*, Zweig made more short films, including *Where’s Howie* and *Stealing Images*. He took small acting roles in features, developed mainly unproduced screenplays and held jobs in transportation. Looking back he sees that he veered off track from his experimental-documentary influence at Sheridan. The detour started after he approached NFB filmmaker Mike Rubbo for a reference letter and gave him *The Boys* to screen. During their brief encounter at the Montreal headquarters Rubbo told Zweig that anything good in his films was luck, and he had to write. Rubbo was switching to narrative film at the time and Zweig did the same.

Rubbo’s ‘tip,’ well intended and taken to heart by Zweig, encouraged his foray into the film industry, slogging it out in development for a few decades and culminating with his first feature film, *The Darling Family*, a small two-hander drama starring Linda Griffiths, which was released in 1994—and went away in a blink.

*“I thought *The Darling Family* was the end of my career. It didn’t work. I felt shot down at a time when I still had a chance to make it. A friend reminded me that I referred to it as a 20-year failed experiment [to become a filmmaker].”* — Zweig

After the failure of that film, Zweig was almost ready to call it quits. Instead he returned to his Sheridan roots to shoot *Vinyl*. Whereas nothing had clicked for him between film school and *Vinyl*, everything he has released since has been a hit.

The “Mirror Trilogy”: 2000 to 2007, *Vinyl*, *I, Curmudgeon* and *Lovable*

“What the Trilogy films are really about is me being alone. I’m looking for help or advice from people in the same boat.”
— Zweig



Vinyl, which took five years to make, was started in 1995 after Zweig got a grant to make a drama about record collecting. Instead of writing a script he bought a Hi-8 camera. Two days later he started to shoot a film, by himself, home-movie style. He recorded his mirror monologues whenever the mood struck him, talking about records and anything else in his life, like his dog dying, killing mice in his slovenly bachelor apartment and yearning to have a daughter—a foreshadowing that actually came to be 10 years after the film was released.

Zweig shot *Vinyl* mainly by himself, taking his camera out to conduct conversational-style interviews with people in their homes. Michael Cartmell helped him shoot parts of *Vinyl* and said there were locations Zweig couldn’t have gotten



Lovable, dir. Alan Zweig (2007)

into with even one more person, such as Chris's absurdly crowded apartment. For budget and intimacy, Zweig prefers doing his own location filming without a crew.

Shooting *Vinyl* amounted to hundreds of hours of raw footage to be logged and cut. Editors were not jumping at the assignment, until a lucky meeting with budding young editor Chris Donaldson secured a creative relationship that helped shape *Vinyl* and Zweig's subsequent films. Zweig calls Donaldson his one true collaborator.

"Vinyl was Alan's last shot in film, and my first shot. It felt like the two of us against the world, holed up in Alan's kitchen, smoking like crazy and learning how to make this film together." — Chris Donaldson, editor of the *Mirror Trilogy* films

Donaldson and Zweig edited *Vinyl* for 13 weeks in 1998, ran out of money, went looking for an angel (touting their three and a half hour cut), and found David McCallum, sound editor with Tattersall, who executive produced, providing another nine weeks of editing. Bruce McDonald was also a champion and financial supporter.

Donaldson watches all the raw footage with Zweig, and Zweig's skilled friend Lee Ferguson usually does the same. Their impressions help to shape the first six- or seven-hour rough cuts. Logging the diary footage of *Vinyl*, *I, Curmudgeon* and *Lovable* took Donaldson about eight weeks on each film.

Michael Cartmell watched 12 hours of diary footage for *Vinyl*. He continues to believe that Zweig should have released the three-hour version of that film, and still has a seven-hour cut of *A Hard Name*.

"I see the films as a collective story and I see my story as, more than anything else, a structuring device that allows me to make films that don't really have a 'story' in the classic sense of the word." — Zweig

"One of the charms of the Trilogy is his ability to talk anecdotally, and [to] do so coherently, humorously, touchingly. This is his master trait; it's who he is, as far as I'm concerned." — Michael Cartmell, filmmaker and participant in *I, Curmudgeon*

Alone with his video camera Zweig's yearnings to expose his foibles escalated from collecting (*Vinyl*) to negativity (*I, Curmudgeon*) to questioning the conundrum of an ever-elusive relationship (*Lovable*). His Trilogy films begin with self-examination and require willing participants. While *Vinyl* and *I, Curmudgeon* weren't so difficult to "cast," finding single women to film was initially so hard that Zweig shot a dozen men before interviewing enough females that he could insert himself as the only male in *Lovable*.

"Being interviewed by Alan certainly gave me the feeling of being a bug under a microscope because the personal nature of his inquiry brought me to a new level of self-reflection." — Emily Weedon, participant in *Lovable*

Zweig upgraded his camera to shoot *I, Curmudgeon* in the same solo style he'd shot *Vinyl*, and he added a light to his kit to shoot the intimate interviews for *Lovable* and *A Hard Name*, which earned him his first Genie Award.

The Genie Award: 2009, *A Hard Name*

"I thought some people saw the films as half standup comedy and half gutter journalism. I felt pigeonholed. After the Trilogy I set that method aside." — Zweig



No longer the central figure in his films, Zweig was troubled about coming up with an idea, but aging ex-convicts struck a cord. He had reservations about his ability to handle the intense footage, but Zweig and editor Randy Zimmer constructed the story beautifully, working with the interviews in similar ways to those that had been established in earlier films with Chris Donaldson, who wasn't available.

*"His subjects were personal and self-reflexive in the Mirror Trilogy. We took a direction outside that with *A Hard Name* to show he is capable of making something*



A Hard Name, dir. Alan Zweig (2009)

different.” — Michael McMahon, producer of *I, Curmudgeon*, *Lovable* and *A Hard Name*

“He was suspicious of our philosophy of personal filmmaking [at Sheridan], but then he makes the three Mirror films, which are all personal, and emerges making a film that wins the Genie Award.” — Rick Hancox, professor at Concordia

University

Zweig is quick to credit his return to documentary and personal filmmaking as coming out of his Sheridan roots. However, without the failed years that followed, the self-reflexive spiels that make his Trilogy films may not have ripened in the same way. Without the years of self-absorbed unhappiness, his films might not have struck the same “humorous and honest” chord with his audiences. That long period seems to have given him a rant fresh for its time, and the overwhelming success of the Mirror films set up his progression to *A Hard Name*.

Zweig is struck by the coincidence of his retrospective at Hot Docs happening in the same year that his daughter was born. Perhaps it signals an outer reflexivity for him and an audience reach beyond his certified Toronto popularity.

Retrospective at Hot Docs 2011, Career Recognition and Family Man

“I am negative by disposition and it’s not just charming, it’s pathological. Now I’m at peace with my negativity...which took me not being alone anymore.” — Zweig

Zweig, the burly onscreen curmudgeon, has turned his life around in 10 short years. Everything previously out of his reach has been grasped, in both his filmmaking and his personal life. His retrospective is high approbation. Most people would be 100 percent celebratory in his shoes, but the frown lines etched on his brow don’t ease as we discuss his achievements. Clearly, his films have come at a cost, but he has been duly rewarded. He can boast of a supportive team, appreciative audiences and a loving family. Yet even as the four films that bring him high praise are being celebrated, he worries about getting the next one, on the topic of forgiveness, financed and produced. It would not be Zweig if it were any other way.

*“Alan has a talent for taking a very particular human characteristic—like lovable or curmudgeon—and bearing down on it like a hungry dog with a bone, and not letting go until he’s done with it.” — Rudy Buttignol, commissioning editor of *I, Curmudgeon*, *Lovable* and *A Hard Name**

*“Zweig’s films stand out in the documentary genre because they’re self-analytical but you can tell that that’s for a larger purpose ... psychological, tragicomic, pithy, empathetic...” — Michael Hillis, participant in *Vinyl**

*“There is as much ‘truth’ in Alan’s films as in any, but it’s far from ‘raw.’ As in all films, it’s peeled, sliced, diced, chopped into a fine brunoise, puréed, macerated, delicately braised, fanned out across the plate, placed in a cunning little stack, seasoned, sauced and served, alongside a signature soup, piping hot or ice cold, as appropriate.” — Michael Cartmell, participant in *I, Curmudgeon**

As I finish my long chat with Zweig, he utters a parting line that sums up the radical turnaround his life has taken: “When Hot Docs asked me to write a press release, I ended it with something that I always envied in other people’s bios. I wrote, ‘Alan Zweig lives in Toronto with his wife, Julie, and their baby daughter, Keely.’” So poignant is his pride that perhaps Zweig is destined to point his lens on parenting.

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