GUS VAN SANT

Vincent Lobrutto

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GUS VAN SANT

His Own Private Cinema

VINCENT LOBRUTTO

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PRAEGER

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For Rebecca Ann Roes,
my Sixties child who was born in 1968
and embodies the spirit and soul
of that tumultuous, artistically groundbreaking,
and deeply political decade

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Contents

Series Foreword

The Modern Filmmakers series focuses on a diverse group of motion picture directors who collectively demonstrate how the filmmaking process has become *the* definitive art and craft of the 20th century. As we advance into the 21st century we begin to examine the impact these artists have had on this influential medium.

What is a modern filmmaker? The phrase connotes a motion picture maker who is *au courant*—they make movies currently. The choices in this series are also varied to reflect the enormous potential of the cinema. Some of the directors make action movies, some entertain, some are on the cutting edge, others are political, some make us think, some are fantasists. The motion picture directors in this collection will range from highly commercial, mega-budget blockbuster directors to those who toil in the independent low-budget field.

Gus Van Sant, Tim Burton, Charlie Kaufman, and Terry Gilliam are here, and so are Clint Eastwood and Steven Spielberg—all for many and for various reasons, but primarily because their directing skills have transitioned from the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century. Eastwood and Spielberg worked during the sixties and seventies and have grown and matured as the medium transitioned from mechanical to digital. The younger directors here may not have experienced all of those cinematic epochs themselves, but nonetheless they remained concerned with the limits of filmmaking: Charlie Kaufman disintegrates personal and narrative boundaries in the course of his scripts, for example, while Tim Burton probes the limits of technology to find the most successful way of bringing his intensely visual fantasies and nightmares to life.

The Modern Filmmakers series will celebrate modernity and post-modernism through each creator's vision, style of storytelling, and character presentation. The directors' personal beliefs and worldviews will be revealed through in-depth examinations of the art they have created, but brief biogra-

phies will also be provided where they appear especially relevant. These books are intended to open up new ways of thinking about some of our favorite and most important artists and entertainers.

Vincent LoBrutto
Series Editor
Modern Filmmakers

Acknowledgments

Gratitude to my wife, Harriet Morrison. I will say again that she keeps our lives together—and this author functioning on a daily basis. This time, however, she was faced with a seemingly impossible situation that put the completion of this book in jeopardy. Harriet immediately mobilized—in other words, she saved the day, and that's why I love her so. Rebecca Roes, my daughter, to whom this tome is dedicated, has the heart of a lion and the soul of an artist. My son, Alex (aka Slick), sommelier, knows everything about wine and a lot about the cinema.

At Praeger, I thank Dan Harmon for getting this series off the ground and into reality and for choosing me to helm it. Dan is loyal and committed to film literature. I offer my gratitude to everyone at Praeger for their invaluable assistance.

To men who love men and to women and men who love each other, to lesbians and bisexuals—continue to follow your hearts.

To Gus Van Sant for proving film is an art beyond argument and for fighting against being pigeon-holed. He is a filmmaker, not a gay filmmaker or a Hollywood filmmaker or an independent filmmaking filmmaker or an experimental filmmaker. He embraces his love of cinema—openly. Gus Van Sant is not originally from Portland, Oregon, but has adopted the city as his own. The city of Portland captures the spirit of his life's artistic and personal commitment.

I thank Ed Bowes, motion picture creator and film instructor, for discussions concerning Van Sant and avant-garde cinema; John Campbell, for talking to me about his work as a cinematographer on *Mala Noche*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues;* May Kassem, for her constant support and for providing a tape of Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight;* Valdis Óskarsdóttir, for talking to me about Portland and the editing of *Finding Forrester;* motion picture editor Pietro Scalia for his insights on collaborating with Van Sant on *Good Will Hunting;* and Peter Tonguette, a Welles scholar, among other things, for discussing the influence of *Chimes at Midnight* on *My Own Private Idaho*.

At the School of Visual Arts I thank my chairman, Reeves Lehmann, for his constant support of me as teacher and author and Sal Petrosino, Director of Operations, for his friendship, support, and kindness. I also must acknowledge Gene Stavis, film historian extraordinaire, and historian Roy Frumkes, who always has an insight to share. My personal good wishes to the 2008–2009 Thesis Committee, Ed Bowes, Joan Brooker, Mary Lee Grisanti, and Elzbieta Litwin, for all the lively debates on film education and the art and craft of the movies—and for being there when the chips were down. I salute all my students past and present for sharing their thoughts on Van Sant and the cinema; they think I'm crazy every year when I tell them I've learned a lot from them.

At American Cinema Editor (ACE) I thank the board for achieving such great work in the promotion of the art of editing.

To my late parents, Rose and Tony LoBrutto, thank you for putting up with a rambunctious kid, letting me use the family movie equipment, and paying my tuition so I could attend the School of Visual Arts Film School which changed my life forever.

Two relatives were key in stimulating and sustaining my interest in the movies very early on. Gene (Gino) Damiani, who photographed all the family movies and projected them in front of my eyes, developed my passion for the American Western as we sat in front of his black-and-white television watching every cowboy movie that was broadcast. When I started film school and studied John Ford, I was thrilled to talk about this great master with my uncle, who replied "Who's John Ford?" Rest in peace, dear uncle.

Joseph Zoine, also departed, was the brother of the late Vince Edwards of *Ben Casey* fame. He went to the movies constantly, and we engaged in many stimulating conversations.

Bless the good people, the cows, and the corn that surround me in Hillsdale, New York, my upstate haven.

My gratitude to Dr. Jean Miller for her expertise and steadfast commitment.

My thanks to James Robert Parish for writing his wonderful *Gus Van Sant: An Unauthorized Biography*, the only book on the director before this one.

As always, my love and respect to all the paisans at Pelham Pizzeria. We lost Luigi Ruffolo this year, the man known as Gino, who fed me well and kept me close to my roots. His friendship will be missed.

I thank master film biographer Patrick McGilligan for his support and advice. Finally, I thank the late great film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who, at the New York Film Festival on the occasion of screening his masterpiece *Fox and His Friends* (originally *The Fist-Fight of Freedom*), pronounced "Life is precious, even now."

1

The Traveling Artist

This book is an intensive examination of the maverick, openly gay, sometimes-Hollywood, sometimes experimental, sometimes true-life, actually born in Louisville, Kentucky, on July 24, 1952, sometimes epic moviemaker Gus Van Sant—the man so indelibly linked to the city of Portland, Oregon.

PARENTS

His dad, Gus Greene Van Sant, a World War II Navy veteran, attended Purdue University on a football scholarship but left school to become a traveling salesman whose territory covered Kentucky to Colorado.

Van Sant Jr.'s mother, Betty, was from Kentucky. Married in 1950, both parents practiced the Episcopalian faith.

In the first year of their marriage, Gus Sr. became a round-the-clock salesman for a men's pants company, Mertit Clothing, while his wife taught second-grade students in an elementary school.

FAMILY AND EARLY LIFE OF GUS VAN SANT

Gus's Dad was constantly on the move, and in 1953 the family relocated to Denver, Colorado. On June 12, 1956, Van Sant Jr.'s sister, Malinda Anne, was born. She was nicknamed Sissy, a coincidental connection to Sissy Henshaw in the Tom Robbins novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), which the filmmaker would later adapt into a film.

Like Steven Spielberg, David Lynch, and Michael Moore, who reached various levels of the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and even Eagle Scouts (Lynch), Van Sant joined the Scouts (but had attendance problems because of his

father's caravan traveling show). The Scouts is a disciplined organization in which boys learn about the world they live in by studying and creating projects in different aspects of the sciences, nature, and environmental studies. Van Sant, who would later become an artist and be associated with the rugged terrain of Portland, embraced the spirit of the Scouts. The all-boy membership of the scouts made him feel comfortable, although this was not the venue of his first homosexual encounter.

Mr. Van Sant took another position with a higher-league firm and quickly became the regional manager. Eventually another move for the nomadic Van Sants occurred—this time to the extreme West Coast. Within half a year, Gus Sr. was promoted to company vice president. To keep Gus Jr. from having to face additional changes of school, his father settled the family in New York City, where the company's corporate offices were located.

Soon after, there was another move that took the family to Darien, Connecticut. For Gus Jr., this was his sixth home in only 10 years, and the transition was taking a toll on his psyche; however, it did teach the boy how to depend on and fend for himself. Eventually these qualities helped him morph into a rebellious young person with a mind of his own, a nonconformist who traveled his own route. Van Sant's sense of rootlessness, a yearning to remain in childhood, crept into the themes of many Van Sant movies.

Gus began to develop an interest in art and even won an award for one of his projects in a high school contest. The multimedia work was disturbing in its dark and, at times, bizarre point of view toward life, although his parents demonstrated their acceptance of his work by buying one of the paintings from the art show and hanging it in the family dining room.

THE ARTIST EMERGES

In 1966, living in Connecticut, Van Sant Sr. saw his career continue to rise, leading to another company move, but this time the family remained in the same state and city. Gus Jr. created a space provided for him into a place to live and paint. Illness struck as Gus Jr. came down with rheumatoid arthritis, but private home schooling kept him up to speed with his classmates.

Art teacher Robert Levine inspired young Gus Van Sant by working in a manner reminiscent of Andy Warhol, which involved artistic interest in the ordinary and a radical approach to tools and surfaces. The teacher was a role model that Van Sant could relate to in myriad ways—as a painter whose lifestyle the youngster understood and as someone who used cutting-edge art materials. He was also gay.

English teacher David Soan encouraged Gus Van Sant to make 8mm movies, which he did using the family Kodak Super 8mm camera.[1] The films were collaborations with two fellow students and resembled the films of Norman McLaren (*Begone Dull Care* [1949], *Neighbours* [1953], *A Chairy Tale* [1958]) and Robert Breer (*Eyewash* [1959], *Breathing* [1963], *What Goes Up* [2003]).

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Gus was already traveling into New York City to explore its vibrant art and movie scene; from a summer job he earned enough money to buy a Super 8mm camera. He bought *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* by Sheldon Renan, a book that taught him the history and concepts that would influence his lifelong work, especially, *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), *Gus Van Sant's Last Days* (2005), and *Paranoid Park* (2007).

At 16, Gus was working on Madison Avenue, but his parents deemed him too young to go to the Woodstock Music and Art Fair. He missed out on the festivities but managed to emulate his boss and ingest LSD 25—better known as acid. The psychedelic experiences expanded his artistic vision and linked him to the hippie subculture.

At this time, Van Sant was aware he was gay—he was attracted to the homoerotic films of Alejandro Jodorowsky (*Fando and Lis* [1968], *El Topo* [1970], and *The Holy Mountain* [1973])—but he was not overtly engaging in sex with men.

At the dawn of the 1970s, the Van Sant family relocated to the place that would forever define the filmmaker and person Gus Van Sant—Portland, Oregon.

In high school, Van Sant met cinematographer Eric Alan Edwards (*Kids* [1995], *Over the Edge* [2001], *Management* [2008]), who would shoot on six Van Sant films, in some cases as additional camera, other times as director of photography. Along with another classmate, Carl Stevens, the young men created a 16mm film[2] about a brother and sister. *The Happy Organ* incorporated time-lapse photography and had a score with songs by Frank Zappa and others.

Van Sant approached an important decision after high school. It was 1971; the Vietnam War was raging in Southeast Asia. The draft was active, but it seemed likely Van Sant would be eligible for a deferment because of his history of rheumatic fever. It is also possible that his homosexuality, though not common knowledge, became evident during the rigorous induction process, during which young men were asked about their sexual orientation.

COLLEGE: THE FILMMAKER EMERGES

So it was to be college for Van Sant for educational and artistic reasons. He had only one school in mind, the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), because of its cultural and academic reputation. Van Sant was still interested in a life as a painter, and the school had an excellent art department. Eric Alan Edwards and fellow high school classmate Catlin Gabel both were on the RISD track, as well. The school and its environs also had a hippie community filled with those who walked the road less traveled—a perfect atmosphere for the eclectically artistic Van Sant. There were plenty of rock bands and performance artists. Van Sant took courses in painting and filmmaking.

The Van Sant family moved again while Gus was at RISD, this time from Portland, with its rich counterculture, back to the more exclusive Darien, Connecticut.

In his sophomore year, Van Sant decided that he couldn't make a decent living or survive as a painter, and he shifted to filmmaking. The painting background would become instrumental in shaping Van Sant as a motion picture director. He has a painterly approach to cinema composition, texture, and color.

The eclectic artist also played guitar and wrote songs, as well as studying still photography. Van Sant is among a handful of filmmakers, including Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and Stanley Kubrick, who understand how to apply music to their films and to use music and lyric as an interpretive tool. The cinematography in every Van Sant film carefully tells the story in light, form, and movement. His personal study of and work in still photography have enhanced Van Sant's abilities to openly and creatively collaborate with his directors of photography.

There was a lot of video work being produced at RISD, not television but a creative, experimental use of the electronic medium, and Van Sant drank in this multimedia mix available to him.

Trains, traveling, and the hobo life play a significant part in Van Sant's films. When he was 20, he rode the rails, and the sights and sounds of those experiences are revealed in visual images and especially in sound design in films throughout his career.

During the RISD years, Van Sant made several films: *Little Johnny* (1972), a 40-second black-and-white short; the two-minute black-and-white 16mm *1/2 of a Telephone Conversation* (1973); and his senior project, *Late Morning Start* (1975), 16mm color, 28 minutes. This last film he describes as being Godardian, although Van Sant continues to state that he knows little about the French maverick. This is a curious fact because his tendency is to rediscover traditional movie genres, color, structure, and content seem markedly influenced by Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless* [1960], *Perrot le Fou* [1965], *Hail Mary* [1985]).

Van Sant graduated from RISD with a B.F.A. on May 31, 1975. He was 22 years old.

OUT IN THE REAL WORLD

After graduation, Van Sant and a group of film majors from RISD traveled to Italy to observe some of the country's finest filmmakers at work. Van Sant arrived in Rome, where he would return to shoot pivotal scenes of *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). The choices were remarkable. The group watched Federico Fellini (who died on the same day as River Phoenix, star of *My Own Private Idaho*) direct *Fellini's Casanova* (1976). Van Sant would be influenced by another self-named Fellini film, *Fellini's Satyricon* (1969), which in the main was a gay story interpreted by a heterosexual director.

From studying Fellini up close and on the screen, Van Sant learned about cinematic whimsy and saw a kind of surrealism that was in a manner different from that practiced by most experimental filmmakers. Also observed was Lina Wertmüller, Fellini's former assistant director, shooting *Seven Beauties* (1975), which contained a flashback structure important to the lexicon of Van Sant's storytelling style. Pier Paolo Pasolini, arguably the finest gay film director in the history of cinema, was making his difficult and disturbing masterpiece *Salo* (1975). A group of students sat while the great filmmaker sound-mixed a sequence from the gruesome yet somehow brave and beautiful film. Van Sant was able to get a personal invitation to Pasolini's home. They discussed the adaptation of literature to the screen.

Back in the states, Van Sant met a person who would change his life, the Beat writer William S. Burroughs. This led the young filmmaker to adapt a film from the Burroughs short story "The Discipline of D.E." (1973). Burroughs's influence grew out of the writer's experimental approach to his work as part of an early generation of gay men and out of his bohemian life style.

HOLLYWOOD

Van Sant decided to move to the West Coast to see if he could enter the Hollywood film industry. Once there, he decided against living in the gay community of West Hollywood and rented a small apartment not far from Hollywood Boulevard.

Van Sant loved walking up and down the once-illustrious but by-then seedy street of dreams, talking and hanging out with the dregs of society. He found a favorite restaurant, Johnnie's Steak House, where he could get a steak and potato dinner for around three dollars. Gay hustlers, drug dealers, and users abounded on the street. Van Sant considered writing one day about this subject—which ultimately led to *Mala Noche* (1985).

For eight months, Van Sant made the job-hunting rounds, with no success. He was slowly running out of money. He wanted to be on his own, so he didn't write home to his father for reinforcement funds.

His ship came in when he decided, out of the blue, to phone a person he had heard of but never even met—Ken Shapiro. Shapiro was an actor who had become an elementary school teacher in Brooklyn, New York. Shapiro had bought a video tape recorder and begun creating and taping satires of television series and commercials. In East Greenwich Village, he and a partner conceived of and opened the first video theater, where they produced *Channel One*. This was a program of television spoofs that were not ready for prime time. It was a success that led to *The Groove Tube* (1974), a feature film in living color. Produced for $400,000, it grossed more than $30 million.

Shapiro relocated to Tinsel Town and teamed with Paramount Pictures and Lorne Michaels of *Saturday Night Live* fame. Michaels set about forging his future, and Shapiro planned his next movie for Paramount. Ironically,

Van Sant has been quoted as saying that he had been told you could call Hitchcock up for a job, but he skipped over the director of *Psycho* (1960) and moved on to Ken Shapiro, who said "Yes" when Van Sant asked if there was a job available.

Van Sant's job was to take notes and organize materials for Shapiro and his comedy team as they worked on Shapiro's second movie. Van Sant was paid by Paramount, a studio he wandered around while soaking in its hallowed back-in-the-day achievements. He now sums up his job as the guy who rolled the joints to give creative stimulation and inspiration to the writers.

The Shapiro feature project, *Ma Bell,* concerned a teenager who works the telephone system to get free calls and depicts his relationship with "phone freaks," as Parrish calls them in his biography of Van Sant. Occasionally, Van Sant would offer up a sketch idea, and it was summarily shot down by the seasoned pros.

Van Sant moved out of his apartment for better digs on North Argyle Avenue in Hollywood. He shared the apartment with John Howell, an old buddy who was also interested in breaking into show business. Then Shapiro offered Van Sant the pool house at his home, which for a time Gus shared with another childhood pal, Jim Evans.

Paramount was not forthcoming in support of *Ma Bell,* so the team began working on *Groove Tube II* and other movie ideas, eventually arriving at *Modern Problems* (1981), which was given the go-ahead at Twentieth Century Fox. Shapiro moved to Brentwood, and Van Sant had to move out of the pool house.

Shapiro couldn't give Van Sant a position on the project. He gave out jobs to all his friends, and his wife got an assistant spot, so that was it for Van Sant's Shapiro period.

The job had been part-time, so Van Sant had had time to work on his own material, and he received a sobering inside look at how the studios chew up directors and spit them out for breakfast. Shapiro gave his charge excellent advice—stay away from the studios and go indie, which was just what Van Sant now planned on doing.

BECOMING GUS VAN SANT

As the 1970s came to a close, and while Van Sant worked for Ken Shapiro, he continued his private study of the cinema, planning a career in film for the future. At the local library, he read screenplays such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Jaws* (1975). He was most impressed with the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's production of the Anthony Burgess novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The form was unconventional and read like a poem, with the description down a narrow middle column and the dialogue stretching across the page. The lesson learned was that you could do anything you wanted to make a movie; what counted were content, story, characters, and craft.

Although he hated production assistant work, Van Sant needed cash, so he toiled on *Skateboard* (1977) (he would later make *Paranoid Park* [2007], a skateboard movie like no other), directed by George Gage (*Fleshburn* [1984]).

Next, Van Sant took Ken Shapiro's advice and made a short, *The Discipline of D.E.* (1982), and a feature that didn't become a feature, the notorious *Alice in Hollywood* (1981).

As Van Sant slaved over the editing of *Alice in Hollywood,* he periodically found his finances under a strain, forcing him to take jobs that were available. During any free time, Gus would go to the movies and write screenplays. One of these, called *Mister Popular* (originally titled *The Projectionist*, but not the cult classic directed by Harry Hurwitz), concerns a high school projectionist who puts subliminal messages in audiovisual presentations. He becomes *numero uno* in the school through mind control. It was to be Van Sant's next film after the disastrous *Alice in Hollywood*.

Although Van Sant lived near gay bars and the L.A. gay scene, he did not participate, explaining that he was in a film world writing movies that he hoped to make someday. He continued to watch and "study" the gay hustler lifestyle but lived life through his screenwriting and filmmaking activities. Van Sant told *The Advocate* that he was "a late bloomer" who didn't begin to participate in his now acknowledged sexual mode until he was around 30 years old.

Van Sant was a solid Kubrick admirer, viewing the 9 A.M. show of *The Shining* (1980) for seven days when the film opened at Mann's Chinese Theater, a legendary Hollywood Boulevard theater in its own right. Ironically, just as Kubrick had told actor Vince Edwards that *High Noon* (1952), the classic Oscar winner, "wasn't a very good movie," Van Sant said the same thing about Kubrick's attempt to make the scariest film ever made: that it wasn't "such a good movie." However, because he thought he could learn and be inspired by the master's newest motion picture, he watched it repeatedly.

During 1980, Van Sant was disillusioned. Although he got an editing job here and there, he mostly temped as a secretary. It was during this process that Gus Van Sant discovered his artistic and actual home, in Portland, Oregon. Gus Van Sant senior continued his successful climb to business success. He had left one job at Warnco, then on to Consolidated Foods, Inc., as their Group Vice President. He then made the leap to owning his own business by taking over a woman's sportswear firm and asked his son to relocate to New York City to work for one year in the company's warehouse located in Secaucus, New Jersey. The warehouse was not far from midtown Manhattan, so Gus could get himself together for another try at big-time moviemaking.

While in the factory, Gus continued taking notes for screenplays. One screenplay concerned vampires. Another was *Fizzlem,* concerning an honor student who becomes the town's stumblebum. Other creative ruminations in Van Sant's imagination were about country clubs, commuters, and

debutantes, the latter possibly inspired by the classic Bob Dylan line from *Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again*—"Your debutante knows what you need, but I know what you want."

On his own, Van Sant Jr. got in touch with the Cadwell Davis advertising agency, where he had worked for a decade back in the day, and procured a job as an assistant production manager for $44,000 a year, although it was basically an organizational position.

Van Sant saved up all the money he could—it wasn't much of a life, but he was heard to say that he was waiting for his cinematic break. He continued to write screenplays, practice still photography, and make short films.

My Friend (1982) was a three-minute 16mm color autobiographical film about a sexual attraction Van Sant Jr. felt for a pal. It sports narration, like many of his features. For decades, many film editors and film teachers have said that when a film isn't working, you put in a narration. On the contrary, narration has existed since the beginning of sound films and is a legitimate storytelling technique.

Where Did She, Go? (1983), also three minutes long and in color 16mm, was about his departed grandmother, who gave him the deathbed advice to "buy IBM."[3] The seven-minute black-and-white *Nightmare Typhoon* (1984), also known as *Hello, It's Me,* is about a caller who continuously phones the director.

Van Sant also worked on his musical interests, writing songs, playing instruments, and adding sound effects like rain and thunder (which is why the sound design in Van Sant's films is so well done and so effective). An album of his called *18 Songs about Golf* was marketed by Pop Secret Records. Van Sant's love of music would lead to great soundtracks and his one music-themed movie, *Gus Van Sant's Last Days* (2005).

This is who the young Gus van Sant was. Who he would become was a blender-mix of his sexual orientation, his artistic talent, and his love for Portland, Oregon, and the movies. He painted, sang, and wrote, but now he was also a film director.

2

To Feature or Not to Feature: The Beat Gay Mentor and the Openly Gay Opus

ALICE IN HOLLYWOOD (1979)

After returning from Europe and then working in Los Angeles with Ken Shapiro, Van Sant, who had directed and executed several short works, decided to make his first feature.

His original idea would come to fruition later with *Mala Noche* (1985), a film about male hustlers. He shot footage on Sunset Boulevard of the men plying their trade, but only one shot eventually got into *Alice in Hollywood*.

Van Sant scrapped the idea for a film that would satirize the movie business. His initial concept was to do a version of Peter Pan[1] in Hollywood, but that was replaced by a plan to tap into Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland,*[2] a fable that was beloved by hippies and the drug culture and that spawned the Jefferson Airplane's hit song "White Rabbit" (Carroll as a photographer shot pictures of very young children that got him in trouble with the authorities). Van Sant called the adaptation a combination of Carroll's work and Voltaire's *Candide,* in which an optimistic young man becomes disillusioned when he sees corruption in the world.

Van Sant had always been interested in street youth and underground cultures. He began hanging out on the Sunset Strip, which by the late 1970s no longer had the thriving hippie and music communities it had enjoyed in the 1960s. The famed Whiskey A Go Go had launched Johnny Rivers, the Doors, and other legends of the 1960s, but, by the end of the 1970s, punk music played in the hallowed hall. The Strip in the 1970s was inhabited by bums, druggies, and culture freaks—the lowest of the low. Van Sant, who had a nearby apartment that contained a cot and his film equipment for production of *Alice in Hollywood*, got to know many of the Strip's denizens and began making mental notes for a feature.