



Photo: Bill Hayes

# *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*

*A film by Ric Burns*

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# *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*

*Directed by Ric Burns*



*Runtime: 114 Minutes*

## Oliver Sacks: His Own Life

### Logline

*Oliver Sacks: His Own Life* explores the life and work of the legendary neurologist and storyteller, as he shares intimate details of his battles with drug addiction, homophobia, and a medical establishment that accepted his work only decades after the fact. Sacks was a fearless explorer of unknown mental worlds who helped redefine our understanding of the brain and mind, the diversity of human experience, and our shared humanity.

### Short Synopsis

A month after receiving a fatal diagnosis in January 2015, Oliver Sacks sat down for a series of filmed interviews in his apartment in New York City. For eighty hours, surrounded by family, friends, and notebooks from six decades of thinking and writing about the brain, he talked about his life and work, his abiding sense of wonder at the natural world, and the place of human beings within it. Drawing on these deeply personal reflections, as well as nearly two dozen interviews with close friends, family members, colleagues and patients, and archival material from every point in his life, this film is the story of a beloved doctor and writer who redefined our understanding of the brain and mind.

### Long Synopsis

On January 15th, 2015, a few weeks after completing his autobiographical memoir, the writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks learned that the rare form of cancer for which he had been treated nine years earlier had returned and that he had only a few months to live. A few weeks later, he sat down with Ric Burns for a series of marathon filmed interviews in his apartment in New York. For eighty hours, across five days in February and on three more occasions in April and June – surrounded by family and friends, books and minerals, notebooks from six decades of thinking and writing about the brain --he talked about his life and work, his dreams and fears, his abiding sense of wonder at the natural world, and the place of human beings within it. He spoke with astonishing candor and clear-sightedness, a profoundly gifted 81-year-old man facing death with remarkable courage and vitality while facing the end. He was determined to come to grips with what his life has meant and what it means to be, as he put it, “a sentient being on this beautiful planet.”

Drawing on these riveting and profoundly moving reflections, *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life* also features nearly two dozen deeply revealing and personal interviews with family members, colleagues, patients and close friends, including Jonathan Miller, Robert Silvers, Temple Grandin, Christof Koch, Robert Krulwich, Lawrence Weschler, Roberto Calasso, Paul Theroux, Isabelle Rapin, Billy Hayes, Kate Edgar, Mark Homonoff, Jonathan Sacks, Steve Silberman, Shane Fistell, Atul Gawande, and Lowell Handler, among others. The film also draws on unique access to the extensive archives of the Oliver Sacks Foundation. It is in part the biography of an extraordinary physician and writer who was dogged by his own neuroses and by the rejection of his medical colleagues but nonetheless redefined for millions of readers the nature of the human mind, through the simple act of telling profoundly compassionate stories. It is also a deeply illuminating exploration of the science of human consciousness and the nature of subjectivity, and a meditation on the deep and intimate relation between art and science and storytelling.

## Director's Statement

*From the start, this project has been one of the most moving and revelatory I've ever had the privilege of being involved with. We were called in to film Oliver Sacks only two weeks after he received the fatal diagnosis that would end his life seven months later, on August 30th 2015. From the moment my colleagues and I walked into his apartment on Horatio Street in New York in February 2015 - to begin what became eighty hours of filming with a remarkable 81-year-old man facing the end of life with courage and wonder and honesty - it was clear that virtually every issue of importance about what it means to live a life and to be a human being, was concentrated in his unusual life story: survival, beauty, art, science, storytelling, love, individuality, difference, dignity, autonomy, agency, wonder, language, meaning, consciousness, community, friendship, yearning, loss, connection with something larger.*

*The two dozen people we have talked to on-camera in the course of the production - writers, editors, scientists, neurologists, patients, journalists, family members, friends - have spoken with a depth of insight and feeling that has been humbling, illuminating, riveting. Brilliant, sometimes maddening, empathetic, driven, stubborn and filled with a kind of childlike wonder and gratitude, Oliver Sacks was a person obsessed throughout his whole life - as he put it in a deeply moving piece in The New York Times announcing his fatal illness - with what it means "to be a sentient being on this beautiful planet." His hard-won capacity for connection with an amazing array of patients, readers, colleagues, friends, collaborators, philosophers, and scientists - forged in the course of a lifetime filled with challenges, often self-inflicted but always overcome and transcended - is itself a moving testament to the power of growth and survival.*

*Some projects call to you because they are meta projects; and this is certainly one of them. Meaning they're not just about what they're about, so to speak - in this case, a brilliant, idiosyncratic doctor and writer hellbent on conveying the essential mysteriousness of what it is to be a human being. Meta projects tell you why it is you do what you do. They speak as much to the essence of the process you the filmmaker- and by extension everyone else looking on - struggles with and goes through as we search for meaning, order, beauty, truth, purpose and resonance in our lives. I knew in a heartbeat that working on this film would be that kind of meta project. Oliver liked to surround himself with people who belong to the freemasonry of the vulnerable, the open, the seeking - the uncynical. That's a pretty large group, obviously, but we sensed from the start he felt safe with us, safe in our hands; and all of us were deeply touched, and honored, to be so trusted. He was a dying man with a lot on his mind, and not a lot of time left; he brought everything he had to the table, and it was the least we could do to respond in kind.*

*At Oliver's memorial service in New York in the fall of 2015, David Remnick, the editor of The New Yorker, said something incredibly powerful and true about Oliver's work, and the uncanny impact it has on people, and certainly has had on me. "In nearly all of Oliver's pieces," Remnick said, "there comes that moment, that epiphany, that shock, when the reader realizes that Oliver was just as strange, and just as wonderful, and just as elusive as the person he was writing about. And there came the moment, too, when we his readers realized: so are we - so are we." My colleagues and I have had the privilege of an extraordinary adventure working on this film, and we are deeply grateful to have been included on the journey.*

**–Ric Burns**

## Q&A with Ric Burns

**Q: How did you find out about this opportunity and were you familiar to Oliver's work prior to filming?**

**A:** I was familiar with Oliver's work in the way most people know him: from "Awakenings" and his essays in the New Yorker and the New York Times. In January 2015, I got a call from Kate Edgar who was Oliver's chief of staff and described by Oliver as his editor, friend, ghost writer, and companion. Kate played a huge part of Oliver's life for the last 30 years. She called to say, "I'm sorry to say Oliver is dying, would you come in and film him?" and without any thought or any preparation we just immediately dove in. Within a few weeks my colleagues and I were crowded into his apartment on Horatio Street in Greenwich Village in New York and for 5 days in a row, 10-12 hours a day accomplished some 60 hours of filming him in his apartment. It was an extraordinary way to begin a project, but we wouldn't have had time to stop and think and we wouldn't have had time to fundraise because Oliver would have been dead before we could have accomplished that.

**Q: What was it like to meet Oliver and to film with him?**

**A:** We met a man who was 81, who had just finished an extremely self revealing memoir talking about things which had been the hardest things, things he had assumed he would never talk about. He had just received a death sentence and nothing quite focuses the mind like knowing your own mortality. To be staring death in the face, it was almost like the value of his life was on steroids. We found a man at the end of his life talking directly with humor, passion, and profound perspective and who had a unique accommodation of bashfulness, a tremendous kind of curiosity and wonder about himself, about other people, about the process of being alive.

**Q: What surprised you most about Oliver as you were getting to know him?**

**A:** I don't think I ever met a more boundlessly curious person. Someone whose sense of wonder and curiosity about the world as he found it was inexhaustible. Although I met him when he was 81, it was almost like meeting a child - and I don't mean that in any patronizing way. The same quality of wonder, the same glee and excitement, and the same sense of wanting to share. He was a person who lived a life of awareness to the fullest.

**Q: What do you think was Oliver's biggest impact in the medical field?**

**A:** Oliver found a late career validation from the top tier of neuroscientists. Having been largely either ignored or in fact critiqued by his own discipline for being a popularizer, in the 80's and 90's Oliver was discovered by people studying consciousness: Francis Crick, Gerald Edelman, and Christof Koch. Oliver had this unique data on human beings. Data that you don't get from putting somebody's head in an MRI. Data you can only get by interacting with empathy focused on patients over a long period of time. Oliver called it the intersection of biology and biography: he tried to find out what it's like to be someone else. His friend Lawrence Weschler said his question was always, "How are you? How do you be? What is it like to be you?" Not just, "What disease do you have or what challenges do you face?" Sure, those were important and he never ignored that, but what is the interior subjective reality of having Tourette Syndrome or being autistic or having no ability to recognize faces, or to be deaf, or to be colorblind, or a whole range of neurologically atypical circumstances?

**Q: Was there ever a sense of fear that Oliver had about dying?**

**A:** His friends said after he died that he gave a master class on how to die. That master class was not morbid - it was inspiring, hopeful, and in line with every theme, intuition, and every aspect of what has made him a

vital person. Christof Koch saw him shortly before he died, and he said, "I left a dying man in a wonderful mood." He was filled with hope and inspiration - he had to overcome 35 years of celibacy, drug addiction, and often, despair. Oliver was embracing everything and lived right up until the end to the fullest.

**Q: What was your process in identifying the documentary's main focus out of all the countless hours of footage you shot?**

**A:** In your gut you know going in it is just not an accident to be invited into a dying man's living room and then talk with him for 60 hours. He was a fascinating, sometimes grumpy, shy, charming, funny, irreverent, often volatile, old man. We knew those 6 months as he faced mortality was one narrative strand in the film, but there's a second strand woven in as well: this retrospective of his amazing life going all the way back to his childhood. That was a challenge. Because of Oliver's own storytelling gifts, and because of his incredibly fascinating life and the enormous challenges he faced, it was possible for us to create our own double helix. The story of a man confronting the last months of his life and at the same time to look back at his entire life, which is the subtitle of our film. His life was really a series of set-backs and the story of Oliver's life is surprisingly like a roller coaster. You are sitting there saying "hang on, man," and just when you think he's out of the woods, he's back into the woods.

**Q: The film has such a wonderful collection of interviewees sharing their stories about Oliver. What were some of your favorite interviewees you had throughout filming?**

**A:** The people that surrounded Oliver over the course of his lifetime were just extraordinary. The 25 people we interviewed was the most remarkable group of people I've ever had the fortune to talk to. Lawrence Weschler (from the New Yorker), Isabelle Rapin (fellow neurologist), Christof Koch (the head of the Allen Institute for Brain Science), Robert Calasso (his Italian publisher), and Shane Fistell (a Touretteur from Toronto). All of them share something in their differences that is really remarkable. You really got a great sense out of all these people that he knew how different and unique they were and how they shared Oliver's truth-telling instinct and his empathetic genius. That was his family.

**Q: You're a writer of documentaries and you've won three Writers Guild Awards for your work. What's the difference between making a narrative vs. a non-narrative film and why did you choose to go without narration this time?**

**R:** The quality of a film shouldn't be determined by whether there's narration or not. A film's a film. A silent film, a written film, a cinematic film, a fictional film, a documentary film, we take it all in. It's all about the experience the viewer is having. We chose not to write any third person narrative because we had 25 or more of the greatest talkers we ever met. Oliver was an extraordinary talker and it became clear that the chief resource of the film is an individual first person reflection. However the process of making it is really, really different. The problem is you don't have any ability to create new logical connections when you need them. You just have to take the material as you find it and craft something from that.

**Q: How would you best describe the legacy of Oliver Sacks?**

**A:** I think it's important to remember this is a person who literally changed medicine, and the way we think about people with uncommon neurological circumstances. I think he was responsible for a massive shift in how we think of mental illness, arguably more than anybody of the late 20th and early 21st century. Lawrence Weschler pointed out that the Head of Columbia's Neurology Department said that 70% of the doctors in training who choose neurology said they were deeply influenced by Oliver Sacks. He influenced generations of doctors and nurses and how we think about people with all types of atypical neurological situations. He helped us unlock the door to other people.

**Q: Did Oliver have an overarching message that you wanted to get across with the documentary?**

**A:** *In a sense his message was: we are all alike in our uniqueness and we are a tribe of irreducibly individual people linked by our connection to each other. That's an incredible message to be carrying abroad in a life's work. It is the definition of humanitarian and humane.*

**Q: What do you want the audience to take away with this film and what do you think Oliver would want the audience to take away from these interviews?**

**A:** *People who are religious, agnostic, or atheist all share the mystery of life. Oliver's message is how the mystery of life is profoundly affirming. Yes, there are challenges. Yes, some people suffer enormously, and that is sad and terrible. He wants to change, he wants to heal, but he also wants people to engage with reality. I think that that's really what he knew his own message was. It was the message that his life inculcated in him, and what he wanted to share. You can call it religious or you can call it atheistic. It is an understanding that we are, all of us, individuals engaged in something larger than ourselves. The universe is a mystery, a joy, and it's beautiful.*

**Q: What were your favorite scenes from the documentary?**

**A:** *There is a moment where Oliver goes on to talk about orange jello in scandalous ways and the unusual use he makes of refrigerated orange jello. You watch Oliver through the camera lens as he thinks. For me the beauty is not the scandalousness of the scene, but the beauty of watching a human being thinking and feeling. It's often just a nod of a head or a looking down or a look on a face that makes me really feel so grateful to be a documentary filmmaker. Because the most precious thing is seeing the inside invisible part of your subject. That is what every filmmaker is trying to do.*

*Another one of them is at the very end when he stops reading what is in a sense is his own obituary that he has written for the New York Times before he dies. He looks up and he sees the surrounding group of people are in tears and he says very simply, "Well, that's it." It's such a stunning moment because it has so many different resonances. Like every story, in some way, a wonderful life could end with a moment of, "That's it."*

## About the Filmmakers & Production Team

### On-Camera Interviewees

#### **Oliver Sacks**

*Oliver Sacks was a natural historian of the human mind: a storyteller at heart, an unraveler of mysteries, and a deep sea diver of a very special kind. He was part Sherlock Holmes, part Sigmund Freud, part Scheherazade – teasing out riddles, unlocking secrets, shining light in the darkness, spinning yarns.*

*The child of two doctors and the youngest of four boys – English-born and Oxford-educated – Oliver was at once shy and exuberant, immoderate and restrained, and prone all his life to furious bouts both of excess and self-discipline. He was obsessed from childhood with rocks and minerals, fossils and ferns, with chemistry, geology, biology and evolution, with the periodic table of the elements, and with words.*

*An atheist, a Jew and a homosexual in Alan Turing's England, he was denounced as an "abomination" by his surgeon mother after he admitted he was gay. In 1960, he fled to America to complete a residency in neurology in California, and after five vagrant years of motorcycles, drugs, and failed attempts at intimacy, he moved to New York where in a ward of frozen, unreachable catatonics, he finally found his calling. He went on to become an inspired and deeply empathetic clinician, chronicler and writer whose extraordinary six-decade career would parallel and track the rise of modern neuroscience. With an impeccable sixteen books translated into dozens of languages on a bewildering range of neurological ailments and conditions, his work garnered him praise from many publications including The New York Times, who once called him the "poet laureate of contemporary medicine."*

*A dogged and intrepid researcher who studied the most remote and inscrutable reaches of the human mind and nervous system, he was an explorer on a lifelong quest for consciousness, the natural world, and the human condition. Right up until the very end, his whole life was a kind of quest for meaning and redemption around the physical roots of human autonomy, dignity and individuality.*

*His final gift, in the end, would be the astonishing way he brought the story of his own life to a close. In 2015, during the last six months of his life, he showed that the art of living and the art of dying are inextricably commingled, and that redemption may lie in connecting to something larger--the human capacity for love, awareness and attention.*

#### **Roberto Calasso**

*Italian writer and publisher*

*Calasso has directed Adelphi, Italy's most prestigious publishing house, for forty years, while publishing twelve acclaimed books of his own, including an international best seller on Greek myth titled *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. He is a writer on esoteric topics, a book collector, a translator of Nietzsche and Karl Kraus, and an editor who oversees the publication of some ninety books a year, in every domain from the scientific to the poetic, with a fiction list that ranges from Nabokov and Borges to Kundera and Bolaño. He worked with Oliver Sacks, who regarded him as a trusted friend and intellectual companion, for three decades.*

#### **Kate Edgar**

*Long-time Editor for Oliver Sacks*

*Kate Edgar began working for Oliver Sacks in 1983. For more than three decades, she collaborated with him as editor, researcher, assistant and friend. She has been the Executive Director of the Oliver Sacks Foundation since 2015.*

#### **Shane Fistell**

*Artist with Tourette Syndrome*



Shane Fistell is a sculptor and painter living in Toronto. Oliver wrote about Shane in *Anthropologist on Mars*, and they appeared together in Chris Rawlence's *The Mind Traveller* series for the BBC and PBS.

**Atul Gawande, M.D.**

Surgeon and author

Atul Gawande, M.D., M.P.H., is CEO of Haven (the Amazon/Berkshire Hathaway/JPMorgan Chase healthcare venture) and a globally recognized surgeon, writer, and public health leader. For more than 20 years, he has been a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital and a professor at Harvard's T. H. Chan School of Public Health and the Harvard Medical School. He is also founder and chairman of Ariadne Labs, a center for health systems innovation, and chairman of Lifebox, a nonprofit organization making surgery safer globally.

Gawande has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine since 1998 and written four *New York Times* bestselling books: *Complications*, *Better*, *The Checklist Manifesto*, and *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. He is the winner of two National Magazine Awards, AcademyHealth's Impact Award for highest research impact on healthcare, a MacArthur Fellowship, and the Lewis Thomas Award for writing about science.

**Temple Grandin, Ph.D.**

Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, Autism Spokesperson

Temple Grandin first came to national attention when Oliver Sacks wrote about her in *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995). She had been one of the first people with autism to write her own story, in her 1986 autobiography, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*. In those days, it was still considered rare for a person with autism to excel at any profession. Today, in large part due to Grandin's advocacy, that has changed--indeed, as she points out, many people with autism are extremely successful precisely because of their unique strengths and abilities. She co-wrote the HBO film "Temple Grandin," in which she was portrayed by Claire Danes. Grandin is the author of numerous bestselling books, including *Animals in Translation* and *Thinking in Pictures*. In 2010, *Time Magazine* named her one of their 100 most influential people.

Grandin is also one of the world's foremost designers of humane livestock handling facilities and a Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, where she teaches courses on livestock behavior and facility design, and consults with the livestock industry on facility design, livestock handling, and animal welfare. She has authored over 400 articles in the field, in both scientific journals and livestock periodicals.

**Lowell Handler**

Photojournalist with Tourette Syndrome

Lowell Handler is a former *Black Star* contract photographer-journalist whose pictures have appeared in *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Elle*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The (London) Sunday Times Magazine*, *Hippocrates*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Intelligence Report* and *Teaching Tolerance*, as well as many international journals from Brazil to Japan. Handler's appearances on *Dateline NBC*, *The Phil Donahue Show*, and national television programs in Canada and the Netherlands have helped increase awareness and understanding of Tourette syndrome. Handler was also the star, narrator, guide, and associate producer of the Emmy®-nominated PBS television documentary *Twitch & Shout*. Handler is the author of *Twitch & Shout: A Touretter's Tale and Crazy and Proud*. The author's other written work has been published in *The New York Observer*, *Health*, and the American Psychological Association's *Contemporary Psychology*.

In the 1980s, Handler travelled with Oliver Sacks around the United States and Europe, assisting in documenting research on Tourette Syndrome. Sacks has chronicled their travels in his posthumous book, *Everything In Its Place* (2019)

**Mark Homonoff, M.D.**

Neurologist

Mark Homonoff is a neurologist affiliated with several hospitals, including Baylor University Medical Center and Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital. He received his medical degree from Albert Einstein College of Medicine

and has been in practice for more than 30 years. Dr. Homonoff worked alongside Dr. Sacks at The New York Psychiatric Center during the 1970s and '80s, and the two remained close lifelong friends.

**Anna Horovitz**

Cousin of Oliver Sacks

**Bill Hayes**

Author and photographer

Oliver Sacks' partner

*Bill Hayes is a writer and photographer. He is the author of four books – Sleep Demons, Five Quarts, The Anatomist, and Insomniac City – and has produced one book of photography, How New York Breaks Your Heart. Hayes has written extensively for The New York Times. His writing has also appeared in BuzzFeed, The Guardian, The New York Review of Books, T: The New York Times Style Magazine, and The Wall Street Journal. He served as a co-editor of Dr. Sacks' three posthumous books, Gratitude, The River of Consciousness, and Everything In Its Place. Hayes' fifth book, Sweat, a history of exercise, is set to be published in 2020.*

**Eric Kandel, M.D., Ph.D.**

Neuroscientist

*Eric Kandel is a neuroscientist and a University Professor of biochemistry and biophysics at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. He was a recipient of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his research on the physiological basis of memory storage in neurons. He is a Senior Investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and was also the founding director of the Center for Neurobiology and Behavior, which is now the Department of Neuroscience at Columbia University. He currently serves on the Scientific Council of the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation. Kandel's account chronicling his life and research, In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind, was awarded the 2006 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Science and Technology.*

**Christof Koch, Ph.D.**

Neuroscientist

*Christof Koch, the president and chief scientist of the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle, is a neuroscientist best known for his work on the neural basis of consciousness. His latest book, The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness is Widespread but Can't Be Computed, will be published by the MIT Press in September. He also writes a popular column, "Consciousness Redux," for Scientific American Mind, about topics pertaining to consciousness.*

*Koch received his Ph.D. in nonlinear information processing from the Max Planck Institute in Tübingen, Germany, and then worked for four years at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT before joining the newly started Computation and Neural Systems Ph.D. program at the California Institute of Technology in 1986. From 1986 until 2013, he was a professor at Caltech; he joined the Allen Institute in 2011.*

**Robert Krulwich**

Journalist and host of Radiolab

*Robert Krulwich is a radio and television journalist who currently serves as a science correspondent for NPR and co-hosts the program Radiolab. He has worked as a full-time employee of ABC, CBS, National Public Radio, and Pacifica. He has contributed pieces for ABC's Nightline and World News Tonight, as well as PBS's Frontline, NOVA, and NOW with Bill Moyers. TV Guide called him "the most inventive network reporter in television", and New York Magazine wrote that he's "the man who simplifies without being simple." Krulwich received his bachelor's degree in U.S. history from Oberlin College and his Juris Doctor degree from Columbia Law School. His radio programs have featured Oliver Sacks frequently since the mid-1980s, and he was a close friend of Dr. Sacks.*

**Jonathan Miller**

## *Author and Director*

*Jonathan Miller, CBE, is an English theater and opera director, author, and television presenter. After training in medicine, and specializing in neurology, in the late 1950s, he came to prominence in the early 1960s in the comedy revue "Beyond the Fringe" with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Alan Bennett. Miller began directing operas in the 1970s and was one of the world's leading opera directors, working with the English National Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, Glimmerglass, and other venues around the world. In its early days, he was an associate director at the National Theatre and later ran the Old Vic Theatre. As a writer/presenter of more than a dozen BBC documentaries, he has become a well-known television personality and familiar public intellectual in both Britain and the United States. Miller was a close boyhood friend of Oliver Sacks, and they maintained a lifelong friendship*

### **Rachel Miller, M.D.**

*Doctor and wife of Jonathan Miller*

### **Isabelle Rapin, M.D.**

*Neurologist*

*Isabelle Rapin was a professor of both Neurology and Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. She was a leading authority on autism, and a fellow of the American Academy of Neurology. She started at the University of Lausanne Medical School in 1946, in a class of around 100 students that included about a dozen women. She decided to become a pediatric neurologist in 1951 after she spent twelve weeks at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital and at the Hôpital des Enfants Malades in Paris. Rapin interned in pediatrics at New York City's Bellevue Hospital, and completed her residency and a fellowship in neurology at the Neurological Institute at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. She joined the Albert Einstein College of Medicine faculty in 1958, where she first encountered Oliver Sacks--who remained a devoted lifelong friend-- and retired at the age of 84 in 2012. Dr. Rapin died in May 2017.*

### **Jonathan Sacks**

*Nephew of Oliver Sacks*

### **Anil Seth, Ph.D.**

*Neuroscientist*

*Anil Seth is Professor of Cognitive and Computational Neuroscience at the University of Sussex, where he is also Co-Director of the Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science. He is a Wellcome Trust Engagement Fellow, a Senior Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, and Co-Director of the Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarship Programme: From Sensation and Perception to Awareness. He is also Editor-in-Chief of Neuroscience of Consciousness (Oxford University Press), was Conference Chair of the 16th Meeting of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC16, 2012), and sits on the steering group and advisory board of the Human Mind Project. His research is, and has been, supported by the Dr. Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation, the EPSRC (Leadership Fellowship), the ERC, the Wellcome Trust, and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR).*

### **Steve Silberman**

*Author and journalist*

*Steve Silberman is an award-winning science writer whose articles have appeared in Wired, the New York Times, the New Yorker, the Financial Times, the Boston Globe, the MIT Technology Review, Nature, Salon, Shambhala Sun, and many other publications. He is the author of NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity, which Oliver Sacks called a "sweeping and penetrating history...presented with a rare sympathy and sensitivity." His TED talk, "The Forgotten History of Autism," has been viewed more than a million times and translated into 25 languages. His writing on science, culture, and literature has been collected in a number of major anthologies including The Best American Science Writing of the Year and The Best Business Stories of the Year. As a young man, he was Allen Ginsberg's teaching assistant at Naropa University. He lives with his husband, Keith, in San Francisco.*

### **Robert Silvers**

Editor, *The New York Review of Books*

Robert Silvers was a founder and editor of *The New York Review of Books* from 1963 to 2017. (He founded the Review with Barbara Epstein and the two co-edited the journal for 43 years, until Epstein's death in 2006; following that, Silvers was the sole editor of the magazine until his own death in 2017.) Silvers' many awards and honorary degrees include the National Book Foundation's Literarian Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Award for "Distinguished Service to the Arts," the Ivan Sandrof Award for Lifetime Achievement in Publishing, and a National Humanities Medal. He was also a Chevalier of the French Légion d'honneur and a member of the French Ordre National du Mérite.

### **Paul Theroux**

Writer

Paul Theroux is best known for his best selling travel books, including *The Great Railway Bazaar*. He has published numerous other award-winning works of fiction and nonfiction, several of which have been adapted into feature films. He was awarded the 1981 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *The Mosquito Coast*, which was adapted for the 1986 movie of the same name. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in the UK and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

### **Lawrence Weschler**

Author and former staff writer for *The New Yorker*

Lawrence Weschler, a graduate of Cowell College of the University of California at Santa Cruz, was for over twenty years a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, where his work shuttled between political tragedies and cultural comedies. Recent books include a considerably expanded edition of *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, comprising thirty years of conversations with the artist Robert Irwin and a companion volume, *True to Life: Twenty Five Years of Conversation with David Hockney*. He is a two-time winner of the George Polk Award and was also a recipient of a Lannan Literary Award. Weschler has taught at Princeton, Columbia, UCSC, Bard, Vassar, Sarah Lawrence, Brown, and NYU, where he was distinguished writer in residence at the Carter Journalism Institute. His book *And How Are You, Dr. Sacks?* was published in August 2019.

### **Max Whitby**

Natural Historian and Founder of RGB Research

Max Whitby started his career at the BBC, where he directed many science programs and led an early collaboration between the BBC and Apple. In 1994 Max co-founded the natural history digital publishing business *BirdGuides*, which was sold to Warners Group Publications in 2013. He continues to be involved in the field of natural history through *NatureGuides*, for which he has filmed wildlife around the world over the past 20 years. Whitby has a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Imperial College and a lifelong interest in science. He and Theodore Gray are now collaborating on a new venture, RGB Research, creating beautiful periodic tables for museums and collectors, and also working together on other educational scientific projects.

### **VULCAN PRODUCTIONS**

Vulcan Productions believes that storytelling can change the world. The company produces and distributes content that informs, inspires, and activates audiences – putting stories to work with far-reaching impact campaigns that advance new policies, shift individual behaviors, and contribute to significant institutional change. Its team includes both expert producers and seasoned impact strategists and movement builders. Leveraging platforms ranging from film and television to XR and other emerging media, Vulcan Productions' content and campaigns are at the center of some of society's most pressing challenges.

Vulcan Productions films include [Ghost Fleet](#), [The Cold Blue](#), Netflix Original: [The Ivory Game](#), the Sundance Special Jury Award-winner [STEP](#), News & Documentary Emmy®-nominated [Going to War](#), [Girl Rising](#), [Racing Extinction](#), the Academy Award®-nominated [Body Team 12](#), and emerging media works including [Ghost Fleet VR](#), [X-Ray Fashion](#), [Drop in the Ocean](#), and [Guardians of the Kingdom](#). Films currently in production tell searing, eye-opening stories on issues including climate change, ocean health, public health, humanitarian

disasters, criminal justice reform, and more. Follow Vulcan Productions ([vulcanproductions.com](http://vulcanproductions.com)) on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

## **EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS for VULCAN PRODUCTIONS**

### **Paul G. Allen**

*Through four decades after co-founding Microsoft, entrepreneur and philanthropist Paul G. Allen explored the frontiers of technology and human knowledge, and acting to change the future. Through Vulcan, Allen worked to save endangered species, slow climate change, improve ocean health, share art, history and film, develop new technology, tackle epidemics, research how the human brain works and build sustainable communities. In all his endeavors, Allen constantly asked “What if...?” and pushed people to challenge conventional thinking, collaborate across disciplines and reimagine what’s possible.*

*As the idea man and original technologist behind Microsoft, Allen used his wealth to expand the horizons of human possibility. All told, Allen’s philanthropic contributions exceeded \$2.5 billion. Even before becoming a member of the Giving Pledge, Allen committed to giving away the majority of his fortune. He invested in brain science and robotics research, retail space and outer space, documentaries and feature films, global health and local education.*

*Through Vulcan Productions, Allen was dedicated to generating change using impact storytelling. His films, series and digital content include *Racing Extinction*, *Ivory Rising*, Academy Award-nominated *Body Team 12*, and *The Blues*.*

*Allen was deeply invested locally in his hometown of Seattle and the Pacific Northwest, and created public spaces including *Flying Heritage & Combat Armor Museum*, *MoPOP* and the *Living Computer Museum + Labs* – where people learn and interact with Seattle’s historic, cultural and musical heritage. The inaugural *Seattle Art Fair* put the city on the map as one of the premier art destinations in the country. He also acted globally, making impact investments that will help developing countries expand their health, infrastructure and nurture a diversified economy.*

*Many of his ventures were seeded in his youth, and reflected the depth and diversity of his passions. He endeavored to create a new kind of future — a future that maps the intricacies inside our head, sets hidden talent alight and upends conventional thinking.*

*If we can understand the mysterious organ, the brain, we can pave the way towards understanding diseases like Alzheimer’s. If we can change the economics of space launches, we can change space travel and exploration. If we can get the formula right for a new kind of downtown neighborhood, it becomes a guide for the innovation centers of tomorrow. Allen was motivated by his commitment to sharing his ideas and discoveries with the world to help catalyze a better future.*

**Rocky Collins** is an Executive Producer and Director of Production at Vulcan Productions. He works on a range of projects that use storytelling to entertain, educate, and promote change. He helped create and guide the 20-part *We the Voters* digital series; the 6-part documentary series *Ocean Warriors*; the 60-minute science doc, *Mind of a Giant*; a primetime live special, *USS Indianapolis Live: From the Deep*; and feature documentaries *Chasing the Thunder*, *The Cold Blue*, and *Ghost Fleet*. Before joining Vulcan, Rocky was Executive Producer at Science Channel where he oversaw many highly-rated and award-winning series, such as *Prophets of Science Fiction*, *Through the Wormhole with Morgan Freeman*, *Dark Matters: Twisted but True*, *Stuff You Should Know*, *How the Earth Works*, *Alien Encounters*, *Race to Escape*, and the feature drama *The Challenger Disaster* starring William Hurt, Bruce Greenwood and Brian Dennehy.

*Rocky brings decades of experience working in every genre, producing, directing, editing, and writing dozens of documentaries for HBO, PBS, NOVA National Geographic, History, Lifetime, TLC, FX and Discovery, including *Bioterror* for NOVA, which won an Emmy® for coverage of a breaking news story, and Executive Producing *How to Draw a Bunny*, a feature doc about artist Ray Johnson that won a special jury prize at Sundance.*

**Carole Tomko** is a recognized global media executive who has been managing portfolios of businesses and producing award-winning content for years. As a mission-driven leader, she has launched and led networks, studios, philanthropic and content ventures. Leading consumer-facing organizations, she has built deep

media and industry relationships across private and public sectors and secured financial investors and partners. She is known for her combination of creative, strategic and operational excellence, leading high performing and matrix teams with innovation, authenticity, and integrity. She has extensive experience working with networks, streaming services, content platforms, creative partners, boards, funders, policy leaders, and NGOs.

She is a strategic advisor to content and non-profit partners as well as an executive producer on a variety of projects. Carole previously was General Manager and Creative Director of Vulcan Productions, where she strategically shaped and developed projects across genres and platforms, increasing volume, scope, and impact of documentaries, series, digital content, campaigns, and scripted programming. The body of work under her Vulcan tenure represents a wide range of substantive projects that have won over 200 industry awards at prestigious film festivals including Tribeca and Sundance, and receiving an Oscar nomination and winning an Emmy® for *Body Team 12*. Her leadership brought Paul Allen's historic expeditions from remote locations to live-streamed broadcasts and specials for the discoveries of the USS *Indianapolis* and IJN *Musashi*, delivering millions of viewers for networks and news outlets.

She served as President and General Manager of several Discovery Networks and Discovery Studios. She has been recognized by CableFAX as one of the Most Influential Women in Cable. She heads the nominations committee for Jackson Wild, served on the executive committee of the Jackson Wild Film Festival, was a board member of the King Country Sexual Assault Resource Center (KCSARC), and is a member of the Television Academy.

### **STEEPLECHASE FILMS**

Steeplechase Films is an award-winning production company founded in 1989 by Ric Burns. Over the past two decades, Steeplechase films has produced 40+ hours of award-winning films for PBS, garnering 13 national Emmy nominations, six Emmy awards, three Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia Journalism awards, two George Foster Peabody Awards, and two Organization of American Historians' Erick Barnouw prizes. Steeplechase has completed numerous historical documentaries, including *New York*, *Eugene O'Neill*, *Death and the Civil War*, and *The Pilgrims*. Each film connects the audience with characters and ideas that inform the shaping of this nation and the lives of its people.

**Ric Burns** is a documentary filmmaker and writer, best known for his eight-part, 17-hour series *New York: A Documentary Film*, which premiered nationally on PBS to critical acclaim (1999, 2001, 2003). Burns has been writing, directing and producing historical documentaries for over 25 years, since his collaboration on the PBS series *The Civil War* (1990), which he produced with his brother Ken and co-wrote with Geoffrey Ward. Since founding Steeplechase in 1989, he has directed many films of note for PBS including *Coney Island* (1991), *The Donner Party* (1992), *The Way West* (1995), *Ansel Adams* (2002), *Eugene O'Neill*, *Andy Warhol* (2006), *Into the Deep: America, Whaling & the World* (2010), *Death and the Civil War* (2013), *American Ballet Theatre: A History* (2015), *Debt of Honor: Disabled Veterans in American History* (2015), *The Pilgrims* (2015), *VA: The Human Cost of War* (2017), and *The Chinese Exclusion Act* (2018). His work has won numerous film and television awards including six Emmy awards, three Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia Journalism awards, two George Foster Peabody Awards, two Organization of American Historians' Erick Barnouw prizes, three Writers Guild of America Awards for Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Writing, and the D.W. Griffith Award of the National Board of Review. Burns was educated at Columbia University and Cambridge University. He lives in New York City with his wife and two sons.

**Bonnie Lafave** is senior producer at Steeplechase Films. Prior to working at Steeplechase, she was a producer with national news and documentary units at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto. Prior to working in journalism she was a nurse at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. She attended the University of Saskatchewan and was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University.

**Leigh Howell** has worked for filmmaker Ric Burns at Steeplechase Films since 2010. During that time, Leigh has gone from intern to producer, working on a number of films for PBS, including *Death and the Civil War* (2012), *American Ballet Theatre: A History* (2015), and *The Pilgrims* (2015). With Burns, she is currently producing a feature-length biographical film about the writer and neurologist, *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*; a three-hour film about Dante, *The Divine Comedy and Florence at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries*; and

*New York: The Future of Cities*, a new chapter of the award-winning, 17½-hour public television series *New York: A Documentary Film*. Prior to joining Steeplechase, Leigh worked for the Oxygen Network and NBC Universal. She moved to New York City in 2006 after graduating from Indiana University.

**Kathryn Clinard** joined Steeplechase Films in 2015 after spending two years as an educator with Teach For America – Greater Nashville. At Steeplechase, she has had the pleasure of working on several films produced for public television across a breadth of styles and subject matter. Most notably, she produced *VA: The Human Cost of War* (2017), a one-hour film for broadcast on PBS *Stories of Service*. She co-produced *The Chinese Exclusion Act* (2018) and led outreach and engagement in coordination with the Center for Asian American Media. Currently, she is producing several upcoming Ric Burns films, including *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life* (2019) and *Driving While Black* (2020). She is a graduate of the University of Virginia's Distinguished Honors program, *Political and Social Thought*, with a concentration on the ethical considerations in documentary filmmaking.

**Li-Shin Yu** is a New York-based film editor who has collaborated with director Ric Burns for the past twenty-five years and most recently co-directed *The Chinese Exclusion Act* with him. Yu and Burns are best known for their epic series *New York: A Documentary Film*, an eight-part production chronicling the city's rise from a remote Dutch outpost to the cultural and economic center of the world, for which Yu received a *Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Editing*. Their films have garnered multiple awards including *Emmys*, *Peabodys*, *Writers Guild of America*, *Dupont-Columbia* awards amongst many others.

Yu began her career collaborating with other New York independent filmmakers including Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Sara Driver and Peter Wang and more recently with documentarians Christine Choy, Bill Moyers, Thomas Lennon and Stanley Nelson amongst others.

#### **MOTTO PICTURES**

*Motto Pictures* specializes in producing and executive producing documentary features and series. *Motto* has been honored with three Academy Award nominations and multiple Emmy Awards. Founded in 2009, *Motto* secures financing, builds distribution strategies and creatively develops films with an eye toward maximizing the position of each project in the domestic and international markets. *Motto* has produced a wide range of award winning films, working with a line-up of talented and acclaimed filmmakers, that have been featured at the most prestigious film festivals and distributed around the world. These films include: *One Child Nation*, *Ringside*, *The Apollo*, *Abacus: Small Enough To Jail*, *The Final Year*, *The Cleaners*, *Charm City*, *The Raft*, *Take Your Pills*, *Life, Animated*, *Weiner*, *The Music Of Strangers*, *Best Of Enemies*, *Art And Craft*, *The Kill Team*, *3 1/2 Minutes*, *Ten Bullets*, *1971*, *Solitary*, *Enlighten Us*, *Southwest Of Salem*, *Indian Point*, *Buck*, *Sergio*, *God Loves Uganda*, *Manhunt*, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Beware Of Mr. Baker* among many others.

#### **AMERICAN MASTERS PICTURES**

Launched in 1986, *American Masters* set the standard for documentary film profiles, accruing widespread critical acclaim and earning 28 Emmy Awards — including 10 for *Outstanding Nonfiction Series* and five for *Outstanding Nonfiction Special* — 14 *Peabodys*, an *Oscar*, three *Grammys*, two *Producers Guild Awards* and many other honors. To further explore the lives and works of masters past and present, the *American Masters* website offers streaming video of select films, outtakes, filmmaker interviews, the *American Masters Podcast*, educational resources and more. The series is a production of *Thirteen Productions LLC* for *WNET* and also seen on the *World* channel. *American Masters* is available for streaming simultaneously on all station-branded PBS platforms, including *PBS.org* and the *PBS Video* app, which is available on *iOS*, *Android*, *Roku*, *Apple TV*, *Amazon Fire TV* and *Chromecast*. PBS station members can view episodes via *Passport* (contact your local PBS station for details).

**Michael Kantor** is an Executive Producer for *American Masters Pictures*. Kantor joined *American Masters* as the series' executive producer in April 2014 during its 28<sup>th</sup> season on PBS, and founded its theatrical imprint *American Masters Pictures* in January 2016. *American Masters Pictures* was represented by three films at the 2016 *Sundance Film Festival*: *Norman Lear: Just Another Version Of You*, *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise* and *Richard Linklater – Dream Is Destiny*. An Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, Kantor has worked on projects for PBS, HBO, Bravo and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. His PBS series include *Broadway: The American Musical* (hosted by Julie Andrews), *Make 'em Laugh* (hosted by Billy Crystal) and *Superheroes* (hosted by Liev

Schreiber). Kantor also wrote, directed and produced the award-winning profile *American Masters: Quincy Jones: In The Pocket* and served as executive producer of *Give Me The Banjo* with Steve Martin. He is president of *Almo Inc.*, a company that distributes the *American Film Theatre* series, including Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, starring Katharine Hepburn, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters* with Laurence Olivier. Kantor has co-authored three books, served as a Tony nominator, and taught producing at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

### **HHMI TANGLED BANK STUDIOS**

HHMI Tangled Bank Studios is a production company established and funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute as an extension of its longstanding science education mission. The Institute is the largest private, nonprofit supporter of science education in the United States. Dedicated to the creation of original science documentaries for broadcast, theatrical and digital distribution, HHMI Tangled Bank Studios award-winning films address important contemporary issues and capture compelling stories of discovery across all branches of scientific inquiry. Recent films include Emmy Award-winning *The Farthest – Voyager in Space*, Emmy Award-nominated *Spillover – Zika, Ebola & Beyond*, and GSCA Award-winning IMAX® films *Backyard Wilderness* and *Amazon Adventure*.

### **PASSION PICTURES**

Passion Pictures' first feature documentary *One Day In September* was conceived and produced by John Battsek and went on to win an Academy Award® in 1999. Passion has since been at the forefront of feature documentary production – as evidenced by a prolific run of multi-award winning films, a reputation for securing international theatrical releases, and – as of 2018 – an unprecedented thirteen consecutive years premiering films at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival.

Notable titles include: *Restrepo*, *The Tillman Story*, *The Imposter*, *Searching For Sugar Man*, *Winter On Fire* and *Listen To Me Marlon* – these films and others see Passion collaborate with some of the most exciting filmmakers, writers, journalists, editors, composers, cinematographers and production partners working in the industry today. We hope our films connect, move and inspire through the power of extraordinary true stories.

### **ITVS**

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, *OVEE*. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

### **SANDBOX**

### **FILMS**

Sandbox Films is a mission-driven documentary studio that champions excellence in science storytelling. Through co-productions and co-financing opportunities, we collaborate with production partners and visionary filmmakers around the world to tell new stories about science. We seek to illuminate the pursuit of discovery, in all its beauty and sometimes messiness, with stories that humanize science in relatable ways for diverse points of view. Sandbox Films, LLC is a registered affiliate of the Simons Foundation. More info at [sandboxfilms.org](http://sandboxfilms.org).



# *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*

***DIRECTED BY***  
*Ric Burns*

***PRODUCED BY***  
*Leigh Howell*  
*Bonnie Lafave*  
*Kathryn Clinard*

***EDITED BY***  
*Li-Shin Yu*  
*Tom Patterson*  
*with*  
*Chih Hsuan Liang*

***DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY***  
*Buddy Squires, A.S.C.*

***MUSIC COMPOSED, ORCHESTRATED, AND PERFORMED BY***  
*Brian Keane*

***SENIOR CREATIVE CONSULTANTS***  
*Kate Edgar*  
*Bill Hayes*

***EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS for VULCAN PRODUCTIONS***  
*Paul G. Allen*  
*Carole Tomko*  
*Rocky Collins*

***EXECUTIVE PRODUCER for AMERICAN MASTERS PICTURES***  
*Michael Kantor*

***EXECUTIVE PRODUCER for the ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION***  
*Doron Weber*

***EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS for MOTTO PICTURES***  
*Julie Goldman*  
*Christopher Clements*

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Geralyn White Dreyfous  
Margaret Munzer Loeb  
Nion McEvoy  
Regina K. Scully

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**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER for ITVS**

Sally Jo Fifer

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS for PASSION PICTURES**

John Battsek  
Nicole Stott

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER for SANDBOX FILMS**

Greg Boustead

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Greg Andracke

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