

BEN LEE: CATCH MY DISEASE



A FILM BY AMIEL COURTIN-WILSON

2012 / Australia / English / Documentary

86 min / HD / 1.78

"...fun, frenzied, colorful doc Ben Lee: Catch My Disease..."

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SYNOPSIS

Logline:

A playful yet profoundly intimate portrait of singer-songwriter Ben Lee, and a fascinating portrayal of celebrity.

Short Synopsis:

Charming, intelligent and iconoclastic, Ben Lee is an Australian singer-songwriter whose creative growth since his early adolescence has undergone almost relentless media scrutiny. This is a playful yet deeply intimate portrait of Lee, exploring his meteoric rise to pop stardom and the issues of celebrity and spirituality that arise when launched into the spotlight. Ex-girlfriend Claire Danes and long-time friends Jason Schwartzman, Michelle Williams, Mike D, Zooey Deschanel and Winona Ryder give insight to Lee's almost impenetrable public persona, as well as to his private hopes and insecurities.

Long Synopsis:

One of Australian music's most notorious self-styled icons, Ben Lee once said he had made the greatest Australian album of all time. Signed by a record company at 14 and having released seven solo albums in the sixteen years since, Ben Lee is loved by fans worldwide, while also famous for being, in the words of one of his peers, a 'precocious little c...'.
Ben Lee: Catch My Disease examines Ben Lee's life as a unique Australian artist – from his angst ridden days as a punk fuelled thirteen year old, to his starring role in a feature film, to the recording of his sixth album in the United States.

By 1995 a 16-year-old Ben had written two solo albums of Dylan inspired Indie folk pop – all while still in high school. Ben then left Australia to live in New York with actress girlfriend Claire Danes. Once based in the States, he collaborated and cavorted with underground music luminaries including Sonic Youth, Sean Lennon and The Beastie Boys.

But it was in 1999, while promoting his third album *Breathing Tornados* that Lee said he had made the greatest Australian album ever. As Ben put it: "People went ballistic – it's embarrassing in Australia if you have ambition. It's seen as being a traitor."

Then after several years of emotional turmoil including the sudden collapse of his US record label and the death of Ben's father, Ben recorded his fourth album in the United States. When this album met with poor sales and lukewarm reviews, Ben then found himself starring in his first feature film, *The Rage in Placid Lake*. With absolutely no acting experience whatsoever, the naturally charismatic Ben approached the role extremely casually – a move many critics said left a lot to be desired in his on screen performance.

Ben faced a huge crossroads in his life when his music's popularity began to dwindle in 2003 and he broke up with actress girlfriend Claire Danes. Ben dealt with this crisis period by turning to spirituality and regularly travelling to India to study with his Hindu guru Amma. With the release of his album *Awake is the New Sleep* in 2005, everything changed for Ben and with four ARIA Awards and a new fan base worldwide, this album has been his most successful yet.

This highly personal documentary follows Ben as he tours tirelessly to maintain an international profile, reflects on the effects of fame during his youth, records his sixth and seventh albums in 2007 and 2008 and finally travels to India in 2008 to marry the new love of his life, Ione Skye, daughter of English pop

sensation Donovan.

Charming, intelligent and iconoclastic, Ben Lee is an Australian artist whose creative growth since his early adolescence has undergone almost relentless media scrutiny. *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* portrays Ben's almost impenetrable public persona, as well as the private hopes and insecurities he never shares with the general media.

A highly authored portrait of a charming, confounding, artist, *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* is acerbic, playful and intimate – the fairytale story of an Australian pop star who stepped through the looking glass of fame.

FESTIVALS

Melbourne International Film Festival
Miami International Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I have been shooting material for this documentary in Australia, India and The United States for the last ten years – giving me unprecedented access to Ben as well as his family and friends in Australia and the United States. *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* is the culmination of this ten-year process – a highly intimate portrait of an extremely successful young musician trying to redefine himself as an adult artist.

Like my last feature documentary *Bastardy*, this film is a longitudinal labour of love. *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* is an intimate documentary about a cultural iconoclast who polarizes his public – a child prodigy who took it upon himself to provoke Australia about its own fears of success through his precocious public persona.

Stylistically, the documentary utilizes lively yet intimate observational material, interviews, as well as an amazing wealth of archival footage. As Ben's outlook on life is fundamentally informed by the punk D.I.Y. ethos, the film's aesthetic mirrors this personal philosophy, utilizing a plethora of visual sources to create an at times kaleidoscopic stream of consciousness style.

This almost essayist use of a wide range of archival material not only relates directly to Ben's personal experience but also reflects the zeitgeist of Australian pop culture over the last 25 years.

Even more fascinating are the home videos of Ben dating back to his childhood right through to the final days of his relationship with Claire Danes in 2002. This poignant and at times almost uncomfortably intimate material provides a series of deeply personal and thematic punctuation points throughout the film.

A highly layered story that subverts the well-worn form of the rock documentary, *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* gives the viewer intimate human insights into Ben Lee's hopes and fears, while also being an evocative and playful portrait of how Ben's spiritual and pop sensibilities converge and contradict each other.

BIOGRAPHIES OF INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

THURSTON MOORE Legendary lead singer of the seminal U.S. guitar noise group Sonic Youth, Thurston Moore was so impressed with Ben's talent as a fourteen year old song writer that he recorded with Ben and also organised for his band Noise Addict to tour with Sonic Youth across America in the early 1990s.

MIKE D (BEASTIE BOYS) Hugely influential U.S. hip hop artists, the Beastie Boys signed Ben to their now defunct record label Grand Royal in the mid 90's- making Ben an instant darling with the New York music scene and a celebrity on the international circuit of cool.

CLAIRE DANES U.S. actress and long time partner of Ben, Claire's career recently skyrocketed and after many mutual periods of separation, Claire recently left Ben for older actor Billy Crudup. While the two are still acquainted, Ben was devastated by Claire abandoning him and is still trying to cope with the loss of his first love.

JASON SCHWARTZMAN A renowned young U.S. actor whose roles include the lead in *Rushmore* and *Spun*, Jason was also the drummer of the indie rock band Phantom Planet. A close friend of Ben's and also related to Francis Ford Coppola, Jason's career has many parallels to Ben's as he is also a child actor / performer who had fame thrust upon him at a very young age. Part of the clique that Ben fell into when he moved to New York, Jason and Ben have collaborated on musical projects and supported each other emotionally over the years. As Ben put it, "We all found ourselves in this big city with no family, so we created our own family to keep ourselves sane."

'GRANDMOTHER LEE' Ben's frail yet lively 94-year-old Russian Jewish Grandmother provided Ben with his initial inspiration as a musician - suggesting he take piano lessons when he was nine years old. Ben always makes sure to spend a lot of time with his Grandmother while in Bondi, seeking solace and advice from her especially in this fraught period of his life.

MICHELLE WILLIAMS Acclaimed actress and long-time friend of Ben's who helped him through his break up with Claire, with an insight into the US/Australian cultural clash through her relationship with Heath Ledger.

WINONA RYDER A generation X icon and controversial celebrity in recent years, Winona has known Ben for nearly twenty years. It was Winona who introduced Claire Danes to Ben's music and who orchestrated their first meeting.

NOISE ADDICT MEMBERS The various members of Ben's first band were culled from his Jewish Orthodox College - subsequently causing many problems when the band was thrown onto the world stage. In retrospect, the four band members have differing views on Ben's megalomania and some still hold grudges against Ben after he broke up the band to go solo in 1995.



CREW BIOGRAPHIES

AMIEL COURTIN-WILSON

WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/CINEMATOGRAPHER

Amiel Courtin-Wilson made his first film at age 9 and at 17 won the Longford Nova Award at the 1996 St Kilda Film Festival. At age 19, Amiel Courtin-Wilson wrote, directed and produced his debut feature documentary, *CHASING BUDDHA*, which premiered at Sundance in 2000. *CHASING BUDDHA* was nominated for an Australian Film Institute (AFI) award for Best Direction and won a slew of awards, including Best Documentary at the 2000 Sydney Film Festival's Dendy Awards and the IF (Inside Film) Awards.

With 15 short and 3 feature documentary credits, he has also directed and produced music clips, exhibited his video art internationally and presented guest lectures at the likes of UCLA in California. Amiel has directed work for Opera Australia, Chunky Move contemporary dance company and musical artists such as the Avalanches and Mix Master Mike. His films have screened at the National Gallery of Victoria, the Gallery of New South Wales and he is a regular contributor to national and international film and art magazines and journals.

After forming the production entity Flood Projects in 2008, Amiel's feature documentary, *BASTARDY* won the Best Documentary Jury Prize at the 2009 Film Critics Circle of Australia Awards (FCCA), Best Documentary at the ATOM Awards, was released theatrically to huge critical acclaim across Australia and was nominated for three Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards.

Amiel's latest short film *CICADA* had its international premiere at the Cannes Film Festival as part of Directors' Fortnight in 2009, won the SBS Television Award at the 2009 St Kilda Film Festival and was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2009 Australian Directors' Guild (ADG) Awards and the 2009 ATOM Awards.

Amiel recently had his first solo exhibition of drawings at Utopian Slumps Gallery in Melbourne; Amiel is also currently editing a feature-length concert film with infamous outsider musician Jandek. His latest feature-length documentary *BEN LEE: CATCH MY DISEASE* about renowned Australian pop singer Ben Lee will premiere at Melbourne International Film Festival in 2011. Amiel's dramatic feature film debut *HAIL* will screen in Official Competition at the Venice International Film Festival in 2011 as part of the Orizzonti (Horizons) section.

RICHARD LOWENSTEIN

PRODUCER

Richard Lowenstein has produced five feature films including *Strikebound*, *Dogs In Space*, *Say A Little Prayer*, *He Died With A Felafel In His Hand* and the feature documentary *We're Livin' On Dog Food*. He has also produced two award-winning satirical TV series for SBS Independent, *John Safran's Music Jamboree* and *John Safran versus GOD* as well as the documentary *Intangible Asset #82*. He is a partner in the Melbourne-based production company GHOST, and an active partner in the feature film production company Fandango Australia Pty Ltd with producer Sue Murray. Richard is currently producing Amiel Courtin-Wilson's latest feature documentary *Ben Lee - Catch My Disease* (ABC pre-sale) and the feature documentary *Autoluminescent: Rowland S. Howard*. His next dramatic feature

film as a producer, *Jump Into The Fire*, is currently being financed.

ANDREW DE GROOT

PRODUCER

Andrew de Groot is one of Australia's most notable cinematographers. He graduated from Swinburne Film & Television School with the Kodak award for Best Cinematography. Two years later, he received an AFI nomination for his first feature as Director of Photography on *Strikebound*. He has photographed further feature films for Richard Lowenstein, including *Dogs in Space* and *He Died With A Felafel In His Hand*. Other projects include John Hillcoat's feature *To Have & To Hold*, and documentaries including Lynn-Maree Milburn's *Memories & Dreams*, which won the AFI Open Craft award. Andrew has received a multitude of awards for his work including music videos for U2, INXS, Crowded House, Pete Townsend, Midnight Oil and Hunters & Collectors. He has also received a number of Gold ACS awards for his feature and documentary work as well as work on over 80 television commercials and music videos. More recently, he shot the telefeature *Call Me Mum*, which also won the AFI Open Craft award. Andrew's dedication, passion and experience has seen him involved at the development phase of many projects, both features and documentaries, including as Associate Producer of Amiel Courtin-Wilson's documentary *Chasing Buddha*, as Producer on *Bastardy* then as Co-producer on Edward Martin's *Jisoe* and Emma Franz' *Intangible Asset Number 82*. His production slate is continuing with Lynn-Maree Milburn's and Richard Lowenstein's current documentary projects *In Bob We Trust* and *Autoluminescent: Rowland S. Howard*, as well as Amiel Courtin-Wilson's feature documentary *Ben Lee - Catch My Disease*. Andrew is a co-founder and partner in the film production company GHOST.

PHILLIPA CAMPEY

PRODUCER

Philippa Campey's company Film Camp began with Van Sowerwine's *Clara* (2004), which won the Palme d'Or Jury Special Mention for short film at Cannes 2005, the Gold Hugo at Chicago Film Festival, and screened in competition at Sundance. Since then Philippa has produced a number of award-winning feature documentary films including *Words from the City* (2007), nominated for five AFI Awards; *The Fibros and the Silvertails* (2007) which won the AWGIE Award for Best Documentary; *Ben Lee: Catch My Disease* (with Ghost Pictures); Amiel Courtin-Wilson's *Bastardy* (2008) which won the FIFO Special Jury Prize, the FCCA's Jury Prize, an ATOM Award and was nominated for three AFI Awards including Best Documentary; and most recently *Murundak: Songs Of Freedom* with Daybreak Films. In November 2008 Philippa was awarded the SPAA Independent Documentary Producer of the Year and in 2009 received Film Victoria's prestigious Greg Tepper Award for outstanding achievements in producing.



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THE MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PREMIERE FUND AND
THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION PRESENT BEN LEE IN A
FILM BY AMIEL COURTIN-WILSON "BEN LEE: CATCH MY DISEASE" PRODUCED
BY RICHARD LOWENSTEIN, ANDREW DE GROOT, PHILIPPA CAMPEY, AMIEL
COURTIN-WILSON FEATURING BEN LEE, CLAIRE DANES, WINONA RYDER,
JASON SCHWARTZMAN AND IONE SKYE
COMPOSED BY STEVE BENWELL SOUND DESIGN BY ROBERT MACKENZIE
EDITED BY AMIEL COURTIN-WILSON AND KEN SALLOWS
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY AMIEL COURTIN-WILSON

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