

Document Citation

Title	No Gus, no glory
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Source	<i>East Bay Express</i>
Date	2003 Feb 5
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	27
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Van Sant, Gus Burroughs, William S. (1914-1997), St. Louis, Missouri, United States Ginsburg, Allen (1926-1997), Newark, New Jersey, United States
Film Subjects	Good Will Hunting, Van Sant, Gus, 1997 Gerry, Van Sant, Gus, 2002 Finding Forrester, Van Sant, Gus, 2000 Drugstore cowboy, Van Sant, Gus, 1989 My own private Idaho, Van Sant, Gus, 1991 To die for, Van Sant, Gus, 1995 Mala noche, Van Sant, Gus, 1985



No Gus, No Glory

Gus Van Sant typifies the predicament of the indie filmmaker who breaks through. As soon as he makes a couple of stylish, influential films like *Mala Noche* and *Drugstore Cowboy*, he gets tapped for bigger, less personal projects such as *Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester*. The big-budget films aren't as fresh and original, even though they may sell tickets, and his original fan base begins to suspect he's selling out, but he keeps plugging along, making shorts and staying close to home.

Van Sant's home is Portland, Oregon, the damp green beauty and Western loneliness of which he celebrated so lovingly in his early work. We get to see a lot of Portland in the Pacific Film Archive's "A Tribute to Gus Van Sant," a five-feature miniseries that revisits the street lyricism of *Mala Noche*'s Walt and Johnny (tonight at 7:30), break-in artist Bob Hughes and his doper crew from *Drugstore Cowboy*, the elevated male-hustler poetics of the boys roaming *My Own Private Idaho*, and the small-town grasping careerism of broadcast personality Suzanne Stone in *To Die For*. As a special treat, Van Sant appears in person Thursday, February 13 (7:30 p.m.) to screen his latest, *Gerry* — another story of two lost boys, this time played by Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, wandering the desert. Best of all for hardcore Van Sant enthusiasts, the series gangs together seven of his infamous shorts: bursts of homoerotic energy and slices of lower-middle-class American life, with grace notes supplied by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Van Sant's own rock music.

He may be the perfect bohemian filmmaker. And despite the recurrent theme of family life in his work ("I guess it's from my own moving around and changing locations, changing relationships," he surmises), his strongest characters always seem to be his loneliest. Van Sant's newest film, now in post-production, is a narrative feature made for HBO, also set in Portland, about high-school violence. It's called *Elephant*, and most of its cast is student nonactors. *Mala Noche* all over again? We shall see. ■

BY

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