



Woody Allen (born 1935) has been one of America's most prominent film makers, with a series of very Personal films about the subjects that have always obsessed him: sex, death and the meaning of life.

"I sat down to do something popular, I don't think I could" Woody Allen told interviewer Stephen Farber in 1985. "I'm not making films because I want to be in the movie business. I'm making them because I want to say something." When Allen was one of America's most popular stand-up comedians, his fans might have mocked those words, coming from a man whose first role models were Bob Hope and Groucho Marx.

Allen's own films have been made on modest budgets in New York City, where he lives, with no concessions to studio taste or control. Despite the growing seriousness of his work, audiences have never lost sight of Allen the performer and the character he created for himself in his days as a comedian: a nerdy neurotic whose only defense against a hostile universe is his sense of the absurd, which he fearlessly directs at any and all targets, beginning with himself. A very private man, Allen has reluctantly become a public figure, but through all the changes and controversies. "The Woodman" has remained a symbol of uncompromising integrity to his loyal fans. On that subject, he told Farber, "I never hold them cheaply... I never write down to them... I always assume that they're at least as smart as I am, if not smarter, and... I try to do films that they will respect."

Woody Allen was born Allen Konigsberg on December 1, 1935, in the Bronx and grew up in Brooklyn. He changed his name to Woody Allen when at age 17 he began submitting jokes to a newspaper column, eventually attracting the attention of a publicist who hired him to write gags for his clients. After graduation, Allen enrolled in New York University as a motion picture major and then in night school at City College, but dropped out of both to pursue his career as a comedy writer. Years later he told his biographer Eric Lax that when a dean recommended he "seek psychiatric help" if he ever wanted to get a job, he replied that he was already working in show business. "Well, if you're around other crazy people", the dean conceded, "maybe you won't stand out".

Fortunately, Allen had a remarkable gift for his chosen profession. In a *New Yorker* article, Adam Gopnik recalled, "Woody was famous among his contemporaries for possessing a pure and almost abstract gift for one-liners... that could be applied to any situation, or passed on to any comic, almost impersonally." Before he turned 20 Allen had sold 20,000 gags to the New York tabloids, married his childhood sweetheart Harlene Rosen and landed a job in the writer's development program at NBC. By the time he turned 23 he was writing for the network's biggest comedy star, Sid Caesar, and had signed with talent managers Jack Rollins and Charles Joffe, who would later produce his films. He had also hired a tutor from Columbia University to teach him literature and philosophy at home.

At the urging of his new managers, Allen began performing his own material in a small New York nightclub in 1960. Hoping his craft in painful encounters with the audience night after night, six nights a week, he struck a gold mine of comedy material when he and Rosen divorced in 1962. (His jokes about his ex wife eventually led to a law-suit from Rosen that was settled out of court.) By this time Allen was beginning to appear on network television and was a hit at Greenwich Village's legendary coffee house, The Bitter End.



Unlike other comics of the time, who favored political humor, Allen made jokes about his own comic persona, the little guy tormented by big philosophical issues and his unflinching hard luck with women. This fact was appreciated by a *New York Times* reviewer, who called him "the freshest comic to emerge in many months."

National recognition was not long in coming. Success in clubs and on television led to a Grammy nominated comedy album, *Woody Allen*, in 1964, followed by *Woody Allen, Volume Two* in 1965 and *The Third Woody Allen Album* in 1968. Allen's humor found a more upscale outlet when he began writing humorous essays in the style of S.J. Perelman for the *New Yorker* in 1966. Three collections of these essays have been published: *Getting Even*, *Without Feathers*, and *Side Effects*.

Allen had long been a lover of movies, American and foreign, but the first one he wrote and acted in, *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965), was a hard experience. Recruited to write a comedy for hip young audiences, he found the experience of sixties style, big budget improvisational film making appalling. "I fought with everybody all the time," he told *Cinema* magazine. "I hated everyone, and everyone hated me. When that picture was over, I decided I would never do another film unless I had complete control of it." But the film made a fortune and established Woody Allen as a "bankable" movie talent.

True to his word, he made his directorial debut with a film so modest that no one ever thought to tamper with it. Released by AIP, a company specializing in low budget action and horror films, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) was a Japanese James Bond movie with new dialogue composed of dream like one liners put into the characters'

mouths by Allen and some friends. "All we did was put five people in a room and keep them there improvising as the film ran," Allen told *Rolling Stone*. Truly for the young and hip, *Tiger Lily* didn't make as much money as *Pussycat*, but it acquired an enduring cult following.

Besides the release of *Tiger Lily*, 1966 was also the year of Allen's marriage to actress Louise Lasser, who supplied one of the voices for *Tiger Lily*, and the Broadway opening of his first play, *Don't Drink the Water*, a comedy about an American Jewish family on vacation who get in hot water behind the Iron Curtain. *Don't Drink the Water* ran for over a year and spawned a movie directed by Howard Morris; Allen directed a television remake of *Don't Drink the Water* in December 1994. The marriage to Lasser ended in divorce after three years, but they remained friends, and she acted in Allen's first three hit comedies: *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask* (1972).

Allen's early comedies, made for United Artists a company that gave him complete control of his work as writer director recall the messy, anything goes style of classic American comedies built around such free wheeling talents as the Marx Brothers and W.C. Fields. Like the Marx Brothers, a reviewer for *Time* magazine wrote, Allen was ready "to subordinate everything -plot, plausibility, people to the imperative of a good joke."

Perhaps because it demanded a more controlled style, he entrusted the film version of his second Broadway hit, *Play It Again, Sam* (1972), to veteran director Herbert Ross. But he played the lead himself, as he had done in the stage version of this romantic comedy about a man who fulfills his dream: to play the last scene of his favorite movie, *Casablanca*, in real life, with himself in the Bogart role. His co-star on stage and in the film was his new off screen friend and romantic partner, Diane Keaton.



Keaton and Allen also co starred in the two films written and directed by Allen which mark the end of his "early, funny" period. In *Sleeper* (1973), Allen's character wakes up from a cryogenic sleep to find himself trapped in a future society that looks suspiciously like Los Angeles. And in *Love and Death* (1975), which Allen considers his best comedy, he takes on his favorite themes in an epic satire of all of Russian literature.

It was Keaton's talents as an actress that inspired Adlen to make his first serious film, a bittersweet comedy about a failed romance between two neurotics, and it was undoubtedly her personality that inspired him to create the title character, *Annie Hall* (1977). (She won an Oscar for her performance; the film won a total of four of the prized gold statuettes.) "What is Woody Allen doing starring in, writing and directing a rudely romantic comedy that is at least as poignant (distressing) as it is funny and may be the most autobiographical film ever made by a major comic?" asked *Time* magazine. "What he is doing is growing, right before our eyes, and it is a fine sight to behold."



Keaton went on to star for Allen in *Interiors* (1978), and *Manhattan* (1979), a somber black-and-white film about cheating New Yorkers which ends with a salute to the last scene of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*. His career as a serious film maker had definitely begun.

*Annie Hall* also marked the beginning of a nine-picture collaboration with cinematographer Gordon Willis in which Allen's growing mastery of film-making techniques enabled him to create a new style for each new film. He imitated the style of Italian director Federico Fellini in his next, most controversial film, *Stardust Memories* (1980), in which he plays a filmmaker who seems to hate his fans. Despite the ensuing hue and cry, Allen told an *Esquire* interviewer in 1987, "The best film I ever did, really was, *Stardust Memories*."

When the executives who had given him artistic control of his work left United Artist and founded Orion Pictures, Allen worked off his contract with UA and Joined them. Coincidentally, partner, actress Mia Farrow. Their first four films together all have a fairy-tale quality: *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) mixes fairies and moonstruck lovers on a country estate; *Zelig* (1983) uses special effects wizardry to tell the story of a human chameleon who achieved a peculiar kind of fame in the 1920s; *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) transforms present-day New York into a never-neverland of show-business losers for a poignant romance between a brassy beauty and a hapless agent, and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) darkens the fairy-tale mood when a hero of the silver screen steps down into real life with tragic consequences for a Depression-era housewife, touchingly played by Farrow.



Hollywood bestowed three Oscars on their next collaboration, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, in which Hannah (Farrow) is divorced from a hypochondriac, played by Allen, and married to a philanderer, played by Michael Caine. "Tracking the career of Woody Allen is exhausting but exhilarating," began the *New York Time* review of *Hannah*, "just when we reach the top, another peak appears." But Allen, who told Eric Lax that "the whole concept of awards is silly," was worried by the film's success. "When

I put out a film that enjoys any acceptance that isn't mild or grudging," he explained to Lax, "I immediately become suspicious of it."

After *Radio Days* (1987), a light-hearted look at Allen's childhood and the Golden Age of radio, the most of his films darkened again. *September* (1987) replays the grim psychological dramas of *Interiors*, and *Another Woman* (1988) pairs Farrow with one of America's greatest actresses, Gena Rowlands, in a story of mid-life crisis. Allen briefly returned to comedy in the short *Oedipus Wrecks* (1989), about a man whose problems with his mother take a supernatural turn. He then made his most pessimistic film to date, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), in which a respectable married man (Martin Landau) murders his mistress (Anjelica Huston) and gets away with it, while Allen's character loses the woman he loves (Farrow) to a shallow fool (Alan Alda).

Before their off screen relationship ended in a bitter child custody suit, Allen and Farrow made three more films together: *Alice* (1990), a fairy tale recalling their early col-laborations, in which a neglected housewife discovers love and life with the help of a Chinese herbalist who dispenses magic potions; *Shadows and Fog* (1992), a comic salute to the novels of Franz Kafka set in a Middle European country out of some German silent film, and *Husbands and Wives* (1992).

Released in a firestorm of publicity over the custody battle, Allen's last film with Farrow had the press looking for parallels to Allen's real life romance with Farrow's 21 year-old- adopted daughter, Soon Yi Farrow Previn. It also marked another new beginning for Woody Allen the film-maker. Orion's impending bankruptcy obliged him to make the film for Tri Star, while a less controlled style of filming, with a hand held camera scampering to keep up with the actors, brought a new sense of life to this savagely funny contemporary look at marriage and infidelity. "It's a good movie," observed the reviewer for *New York* magazine, yet a decade or so may have to pass before anyone can see it in itself."



The hand held camera still wobbles noticeably in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, which reunites him with Diane Keaton, playing a married couple who suspect their next-door neighbor of murder. A pure comedy, Allen's first in many years, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* was a pit stop for the filmmaker and his loyal fans before his 1994 film *Bullets Over Broadway*, the critically acclaimed melodrama set in the 1920s that focuses on a group of old Broadway stereo-types. He continued with comedy in 1995, releasing *Mighty Aphrodite*, a contemporary tale of a man obsessed with his adopted son's mother interspersed with scenes parodying Greek tragedy. The next release, *Everyone Says I Love You*, surprised his cast and fans alike, marking the director's first foray into musicals. Reports noted that he waited until two week, after the film's stars signed their contracts to mention that he was making a musical, and that he chose actors who were not necessarily musically trained on purpose in order to evoke more honest emotion in the songs. Reviews were mixed.

Allen's interest in music extended to his off screen life as well --starting in 1997, he regularly began playing clarinet for the Eddy Davis New Orleans Jazz Band every Monday at a club in New York City. Despite his diverse talents, however, Allen in real life can demonstrate his neurotic tendencies that are trademarks in his films. He told Jane Wollman Rusoff on the "Mr. Showbiz" website, "I've never made a movie where scholars sat around and said, "This ranks with the greatest. It's a goal, but the trick is to have a great vision. That's not so easy."

