

Remembering Eric Zumbrunnen, ACE

BY BOBBIE O'STEEN



Eric Zumbrunnen, ACE, – or “EZ” – to many of those fortunate enough to know him, passed away on August 1st at the age of 52 after fighting a brave battle with cancer. He left behind a singular legacy: an exhilarating range of music videos, commercials, documentaries, shorts and feature films.

I had the honor of interviewing Zumbrunnen for our panel at EditFest in 2014, and was struck by his cool persona and bone-dry humor. But what burned through was a laser intelligence and genuine empathy for the artists he worked with, the characters in his films and his audience.

He was a movie fan from the start, a theater usher in high school and college. He majored in journalism at University of Southern California and realized later how much that helped him as an editor to tell a story clearly and economically. He also had a passion for music, was an accomplished guitarist and – after landing a job at a post-production facility building shelves – eventually got the chance to prove his talent at editing music videos. Among his early efforts was the indelible “Been Caught Stealing” for the band, Jane’s Addiction. He went on to work with many musicians and directors, including Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, for whom he edited Smashing Pumpkins’ “Tonight, Tonight” in 1996, receiving an MTV Video Music Award nomination.

His stunning contribution to music videos shows his untethered imagination, but Zumbrunnen also said, “My mind always wanted to make order out of chaos.” So even though there was often no clear narrative, he would find a way to fabricate some sort of throughline, some sort of structure beyond the song itself.

Zumbrunnen was editing at director Tamra Davis’ house when she introduced him to director Spike Jonze, who admired his “obscure” Vans tennis shoes, which they were both wearing. Synchronicity

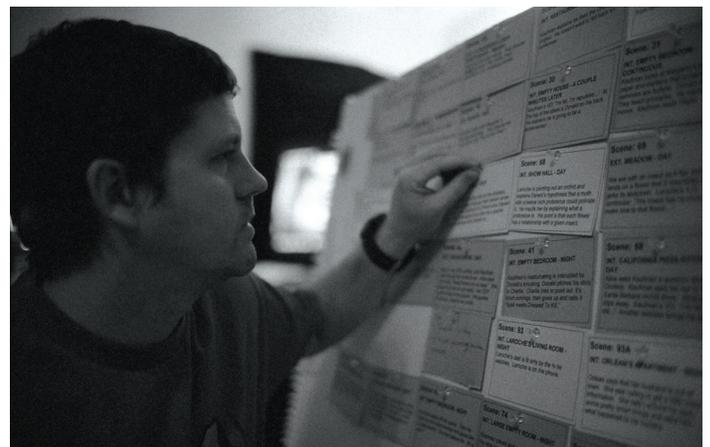
from the start. He initially edited music videos for Jonze – including Weezer’s “Buddy Holly” and Fatboy Slim’s “Weapon of Choice,” both of which earned him MTV VMA Awards for editing – but during their remarkable 23-year relationship they collaborated on every genre, from performance art pieces to big-budget films.

Although Zumbrunnen had been successful at editing both music videos and commercials by the late 1990s, he found the world of feature films impenetrable until Steve Golin, a producer on some of Jonze’s projects, was able to bring along key members of his crew, including Zumbrunnen, for Jonze’s feature-film debut.

Being John Malkovich, made in 1999, earned Zumbrunnen an Eddie Award and a BAFTA® nomination. He presumed when he started working on features that “since they were spending millions, everything would be figured out ahead of time,” particularly since the screenplay was so intricate. But he soon learned and embraced how “malleable a movie could be.” The screenplay by Charlie Kaufman was wildly inventive, focusing on a puppeteer who finds a portal into the mind of John Malkovich. Yet the audience was not alienated by the surreal storyline because the film was grounded in humor and a surprising sweetness and melancholy. Zumbrunnen talked about “feeling for these people, not just enjoying the cleverness of it” and fortunately there was plenty of opportunity to achieve that equilibrium since Jonze believes in finding the film in the cutting room. He is, Zumbrunnen said, “a wonderful collaborator who is always willing to entertain new ideas.”

Joe Hutshing, ACE, was an additional editor on that film. “Editing is a solitary pursuit; you’re alone much of the day (and night), immersed in the footage and telling a story – and the light of stardom doesn’t shine brightly on those behind the scenes. But Eric was a star. He edited more cool movies than most people ever see. His unique intelligence, sensitivity and humor are embroidered into each of them.”

Zumbrunnen told the EditFest audience what it felt like to experience the different stages of working on a feature film, starting with: “‘This is gonna be amazing,’ and at some point it’s, ‘I don’t know what I can do with this, this is gonna be horrible. What if everyone finds out I’m a fraud? Dang this thing, I gotta get this done, the deadline’s coming up,’ and then, ‘This isn’t as bad as I thought it was.’ Then you reach the, ‘I’m a genius’ point.” His colleagues laughed uproariously, fully identifying with that ego rollercoaster.



In The Edit Room with Eric

Spike Jonze

I first met Eric Zumbrennen in Tamra Davis' kitchen – she was directing a music video that he was editing. I was 24 and had just started making music videos myself, and Tamra was my unofficial film school teacher. I had stopped by her house, where they just finished editing, at the end of the day. She introduced me to Eric, and she said, “You guys should definitely work together!” We said hello and scoped each other out – he seemed very cool, with Buddy Holly glasses, bleach-blond punk rock haircut and the same Vans tennis shoes I had on. He had been editing a few years at that point, and I could instantly tell he was somebody I wanted to work with – I could tell from the look in his eyes that he knew stuff. We started working together immediately and ended up continuing to for the next 23 years. Thank you, Tamra, for that.

I was talking with Catherine Keener after Eric passed, and we were trying to understand the impossibly profound loss of losing him. One of the things she said that really struck me was: “He shaped your life.” I knew instantly what she meant. Eric and I have spent thousands and thousands of hours in a dark edit room together. I've spent as much time with him as I have anyone in my life.

In those rooms together, the most obvious thing he did was shape my work and profoundly affect what it was that we were creating together, but the other thing he did was shape me as a person.

As a director, the edit room and the editor are your safe haven. When you're shooting, you have to keep up the illusion that you know what you're doing, the confidence that it all is going to make sense and be worth it. But when production wraps and you are washed up to shore into the edit room, you can let it all hang out – you have to let it all hang out – and sit and figure out what you actually have and what to do with this mess of footage you shot. And Eric was always that rock for me. He was always there to sit with me and see all my mistakes and methodically calm me down and begin the work. It's such a vulnerable feeling to bare that all with someone but Eric was a rare man. Eric had that elusive combination of honesty, kindness and immaculate taste that made me feel so loved and safe. And wit ... brutal, beautiful, take-no-prisoners wit. He could find a laugh at any time about anything, and do it with grace. Who knows how to do that?

What he gave my work is something I'll never be able to explain, because it was in every conversation, every kindness, every time he went back into a scene to figure out how to make it better – because it could always be better in his mind – but what he gave me was even greater.

His next feature, directed by Jonze in 2001, was *Adaptation*, also written by Charlie Kaufman, for which Zumbrennen received an Eddie nomination. This shape-shifting screenplay about a writer and his twin is interwoven with a plot involving a book he is adapting about the author and her adventures with an orchid thief. The film went through dramatic evolutions. In fact, the first two thirds were intentionally designed to be somewhat modular and could be completely rearranged. Zumbrennen relished the process. “We threw it all up in the air and put it back together differently.”

Another visionary film, co-written and directed by Jonze, soon followed: *Where the Wild Things Are*, based on the beloved Maurice Sendak children's book, was released in 2009. Most of the story is inhabited by monsters, but not in the traditional sense, since they display raw human emotions. The first stage of realizing these monsters involved recording the actors' voices and movements, before filming the final scenes with creature-suited performers. Until the monsters' facial expressions were animated, they were able to rewrite, rerecord, reshoot and re-edit, a process that lasted for about three years. The film was also bookended with live-action sequences that tenderly and hauntingly captured the life of a nine-year-old boy, which Zumbrennen was particularly proud of.



James Haygood, ACE, was co-editor on that film and said, “Though I had known EZ for years, our year-plus together on *Where the Wild Things Are* gave me the chance to see him in all the circumstances a project like that throws at you. Throughout, he remained humbly generous, committed to creative discovery, with a drive to find unique ways to express the human condition in moments of cinema. Working with Eric was a gift.”

The experience on *Where the Wild Things Are* helped prepare Zumbrennen for *John Carter*, released in 2012, a highly-ambitious venture with director Andrew Stanton who – after successfully directing Pixar movies – was doing his first live-action film. Based on the Edgar Rice Burroughs novel about a Confederate soldier lost on another planet, the production was a hybrid of actors and CG characters on real locations. And, typically, Zumbrennen relished the challenge.

Zumbrennen's final feature was *Her*, in 2013, for which he garnered another Eddie nomination. The audience once again went down a Spike Jonze-ian rabbit hole in this high-concept film, an

(In The Edit Room with Eric *continued*)

So, when Keener said, “He shaped your life,” it’s true, because it’s the same qualities he brought to his work that he brought to our friendship. And the same love he gave his work – that he gave our work – is the same love he gave me.

It will take me a long time to wrap my head around the idea that I don’t have him in my life anymore, but I know for certain I’ll always be grateful for how much he loved me and how much love he gave me.

You are deeply missed, my friend.

Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton

We met Eric in the mid ‘80s when he was a PA in a post-production facility, Varitel Video. He stood out immediately – a punk rock nerd in Doc Marten boots, Buddy Holly glasses, and curly longish hair, but what really struck us was his dry wit and razor-sharp mind. A few years later when we hired him to edit a music documentary, we quickly discovered Eric had editing superpowers. As a musician he had an incredible sense of timing and ability to sync music and visuals. Watching a music video cut by Eric you could hear the song better. He had other super skills ... he could push the capabilities of the Avid edit system to do effects work that no one else knew how to accomplish. On our Smashing Pumpkins video, “Tonight, Tonight,” he built shots with 27 layers that would take 45 minutes just to render. As he set the computer to work, he would summon his best Homer Simpson impression, “MMM ... Rendering” (a reference to Homer’s frequent reaction to the smell of the local animal rendering plant). Eric’s many gifts were well utilized in editing, but those of us who were lucky enough to work with him know just what a remarkable person he was, an artist who brought his humor, his integrity and his humanity to every part of his life. He was just interested in people and their foibles. It made being with him a blast and made the work infinitely better. Husband, father, friend, collaborator ... Eric leaves us all wanting more, but eternally grateful for having him in our lives.

Andrew Stanton

I met Eric interviewing him for lead editor on *John Carter*. I interviewed early, before principal photography, because I knew from past experience that the chemistry between director and editor was crucial on making a picture succeed or fail. The best editors are co-writers, and I wanted that asset alongside me as I shot. Boy, did I get a gift greater than I could have ever imagined. There are less than five creative people I’ve met in my career where we seem to have connected

unlikely story about the intimate romantic relationship between a man and a female-voiced computer. Once again, Zumbrunnen and his co-editor helped shape the movie so that an audience would relate to and ultimately, buy into the relationship. This film also went through periods of transformation. The actress who originally voiced the computer was recast, which involved changes in the content and rhythm of interactions. The editors also had to find ways to avoid dehumanizing her, to get inside the head of the man and – with judicious use of POVs and cutaways – to avoid the claustrophobia of showing mostly just a single actor on screen.

Jeff Buchanan, the co-editor on that film, recalls Zumbrunnen being, “funny, curious, kind, fearless, patient, full of energy. But what I came to learn was his greatest strength was that he was a fighter. He never gave up on anything. Not a small scene in a movie, a piece of music, a sound effect, or a single line delivered by an actor. He always worked tirelessly until everything was just right. He didn’t believe in ‘good enough.’ If he was going to do a job, whether it was a 100-million-dollar movie, a no-budget music video, or a small commercial, he would fight his hardest to make it the best version of itself that it could possibly be.”



Zumbrunnen confirmed his perfectionism. “The overarching process of working with Spike is that neither one of us is willing to give up. We share a tenacity, a stubbornness, if you will.” As he worked on these films he continued to burnish his reputation as a technically-masterful and highly-inventive editor of music videos and commercials. In 2014 he teamed up with editor Kirk Baxter, ACE, executive producer Carol Lynn Weaver, and editor Matt Murphy to launch EXILE, a full-service editorial company, based in Santa Monica and New York.

Baxter described their first meeting, years earlier: “Late one evening on Hollywood Boulevard, Spike Jonze said to me, ‘You should talk to Eric about doing something together. He’s the sexiest editor in Los Angeles.’ About 15 years later we created an editorial company together and I had the privilege of learning how correct Spike was. Whilst always connecting with character and narrative, Eric’s work was undeniably cool, he oozed style in his craft. He was naturally gifted, but he was always hard on himself to improve all things he touched. The best artists always are, and he was one of the very best. As a man he was even better, generous, patient and kind with a wicked wit that was fast enough for live radio.”



Carol Lynn Weaver recalls meeting him around the same time, when she was an assistant editor. “EZ had heard through a mutual friend that I was inspired by his music video and commercial work with Spike. He took the time to call and talk to me about the business. In a state of happy shock I remember nothing of what he said, but that’s just the type of person he was. EZ was always incredibly thoughtful, kind and loyal. He had impeccable taste and an irreverent wit. He was the smartest person in the room.”

Matt Murphy also described Zumbrunnen as “one of the great editors of his time. To me, he was a friend, colleague, mentor and finally, business partner. He taught me how to be better at each of those roles for others in my life, and I’ll forever be grateful for the time we had together.”

The last short film Zumbrunnen edited was for Kenzo World. *My Mutant Brain*, directed by Jonze, thrillingly upended the notion of what a perfume ad should be, and won Zumbrunnen the Bronze Lion for Editing at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity. He was also recently admitted as a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, based on his impressive body of work.

Zumbrunnen continued to challenge himself as an editor, his final accomplishment being on the Netflix series, *Mindhunter*. As Baxter describes it, “David Fincher and I asked him to take a pass on Episode 5. Eric was not in full health at the time, so he worked from his home office and we didn’t interact much during his process. He simply forwarded us a cut when he was happy with it. Fincher and I reviewed it together and at the end of the episode Fincher stood up and said, ‘Tell Eric, bravo!’” Baxter agreed, “He hit it out of the park.”

That degree of commitment permeates his work – and his life. EZ was described by those who were close to him as a man who adored and was completely devoted to his family: his wife, Suzanne, and his children, Henry and Greta.

He also maintained a childlike spirit: “Before I was ever in this business,” he said, “I loved movies ... When you’re a kid or teenager you just got caught up in it. That’s the experience as a filmmaker you want the audience to have, even though you are so inside it, you would think it would be impossible.”

Well, you made it possible – and we are the beneficiaries. Thank you, EZ. **CE**

on some hidden, deeper plane, as if we’ve met in another life. Eric was one of those few. Even though Eric could be very reserved at times, and selective in his choice of words (like his editing), there’s a wit and impishness that betrays him in his eyes, and I recognized it immediately on our first meet. We just got one another. Eric was beyond smart, he was wise. Such a rarity in this world. He could discuss, debate and deconstruct for hours on film, music, literature, society, almost any subject, but where we would constantly return to in our time together was family. He loved his family; eternally proud of his kids, and blissfully humbled by his wife. And it wasn’t superficial talk. We would delve deep sometimes into difficult territory. It always felt like our focused wrestling with the correct cut of the film was inseparable with our grapples with the human condition. I guess that’s it, when I type it all out like this – when you were working with Eric ... you were living. Eric cared. He cared about everyone and everything around him. He did not suffer fools, and he did not take the bait. In my experiences with him, he knew where ‘true North’ was in all pursuits, and I think that shows in all he’s touched. I will always miss him. **CE**

THE ERIC ZUMBRUNNEN FELLOWSHIP

With the support and encouragement of EXILE, American Cinema Editors, Adobe Systems and others, Eric’s friends and family are establishing a fellowship to mentor promising would-be editors. You can participate by:

- Sending an email to ezfellowship@gmail.com indicating your interest in the program
- Making a check out to the **ACE Educational Center** and mailing it to
Eric Zumbrunnen Fellowship c/o EXILE
1819 Colorado Boulevard
Santa Monica, California 90404

We’ll contact everyone who gives us an email to clarify the specifics of the fellowship as soon as we have the details ironed out.

THANK YOU

All contributions made to the ACE Educational Center are considered charitable tax deductions.