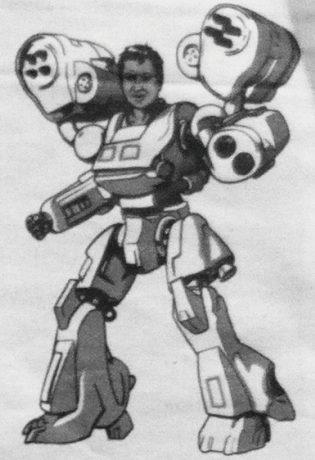


# Wag

NJ

NEWSY ENTERTAINMENT | MONMOUTH COUNTY EDITION



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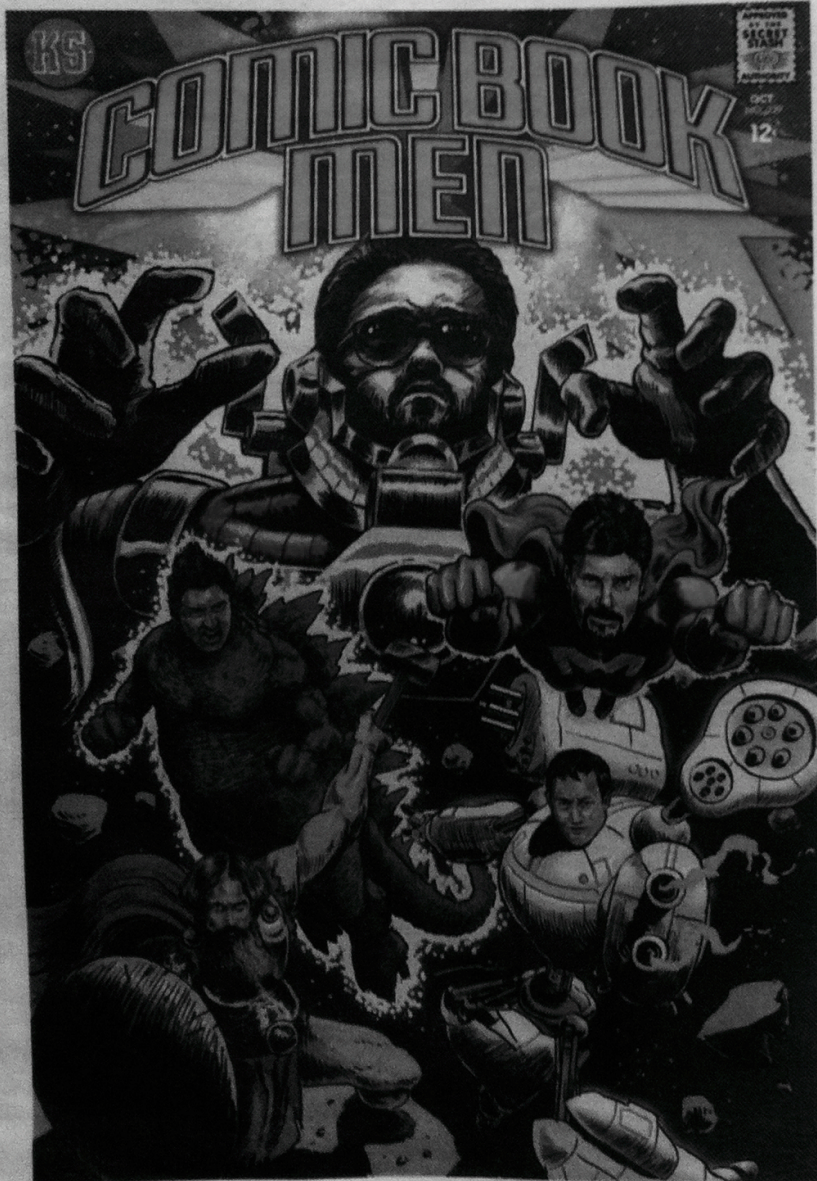
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# p.j. braceco

Don't let the name of his production company, Red Hook Films, fool you. P.J. Bracco has strong ties to the Red Bank Area. Though he was born in Brooklyn, P.J. is a product of the Holmdel school system and films extensively in Monmouth County. The award-winning actor/director has produced commercials for No Joe's Café in Red Bank and The Draft House in Long Branch. He can also be found playing the harmonica at Jamian's in Red Bank, Dive! in Sea Bright, The Wine Loft in Pier Village, and

known to all of us that a fairly large number of students would be cut during the course of the program. At one point my best friend and roommate was asked to leave the program. That was really tough. Fortunately, he eventually landed on his feet.

**■:** You started out as an actor, and enjoyed playing parts such as "Dopey" in *Balm in Gilead*, "Hamm" in *Endgame*, and "Paul Raimo" in *Raimo's Price*. What influenced you to start your own production company?

**i'm from the school of "if it's not available to you then make it happen on your own."**

other local venues as a member of The Red Bank Blues Band.

*Red Hook Films*, which P.J. started in the living room of his home in Red Hook, Brooklyn, produces films, music videos, and commercials. Among his films are *Goin Down*, *Ursa Minor*, *Stocks Bonds and Notes*, and *The Goner*.

*The Goner - Prologue*, part one of a three-part series, has garnered particular acclaim and was recently selected for screening at the 13th Annual Crossroads Film Festival in Jackson, Mississippi and has been a featured selection of the Big Apple Shorts Film Festival in New York City, the Love Your Shorts Film Festival in Sanford, Florida, and the Garden State Film Festival in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

We caught up with P.J. recently in Red Bank and chatted over a cup of joe. He is passionate and articulate about the art of filmmaking, and graciously answered our laundry list of questions.

**■:** You are a Boston University alum. How would you describe your experience there?

**■:** It was awesome. At the College of Theatre Arts, I learned from the best of the best. The curriculum was extremely challenging, however, and it was made

**■:** I'm from the school of "If it's not available to you then make it happen on your own." I've always had a desire and passion to create, whether from the ground up, or as a helping hand to move a project forward in the right direction.

During high school, I spent some time over at Red Bank Regional High School. There was a weekly meeting of a group called Theater Explorers, run by Joe Russo. He was a fantastic mentor who created a vibrant environment for the creation of improv scenarios and a forum for the birthing of new ideas.

In college I found myself in a similar environment, where professors were engaging, challenging, and extremely supportive of breaking out of the box. Boston University was a place of intense studies and exploring as an actor, where plays would be performed in hallways and written words turned into film projects. All of this was on top of the regular class studies. So really, I've always been in an environment where the creation of something original was a huge part of what was going on.

After college I hit the streets of New York City and started wearing out my shoes hopping from audi-



tion to audition. It was all I expected it to be. I knew that when I graduated I was facing a long road and that good things wouldn't just land in my lap. That's not the way it is, not where I come from.

As I darted my way through New York City, always retiring at the end of the day in my neighborhood of Red Hook in Brooklyn, a script began developing. There was something so special about the streets of Brooklyn. I spent a lot of time there as a child with my grandparents, so being back was special for me. I developed a script to capture the soul of the streets, and 28 drafts later it was time to make a movie. That was the moment. It was time to make it happen. And so, in 1997, I decided to start my own company and move forward with my dreams and goals. But again, I wasn't delusional. I knew from the start that this was not going to be a cannoli walk.

My first production, inspired by the streets of Red Hook, was titled *The Court*. We later changed the title to *Goin Down*.

**■:** Who is your favorite director?

**■:** I have a few favorites ... it's tough. Fellini, Coppola, Scorsese, Ridley Scott, Mel Brooks. I love *La Strada*, *Rumble Fish*, *Mean Streets*, *Blade Runner*, and *Young Frankenstein*.

These directors have an amazing ability to tell a story, focus on the little things, and create something huge. It's not necessarily about the big bravado moments, that's not what I mean by huge. It's the intri-

**■:** It's funny that you did not mention Jim Jarmusch, because I definitely see his influence in your work.

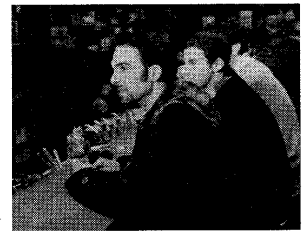
**■:** Actually, I have met Jim Jarmusch. I love his work, especially *Night on Earth*. If you haven't seen that one, you have to.

**■:** Are you a fan of remakes?

**■:** No, not really. In most cases, the remake just doesn't live up to the original. For example, I just love

**i decided to start my own company and move forward with my dreams and goals.**

cies that are paid attention to, it's the things that we might take for granted in life, or forget that we've noticed. That's what these directors know how to capture and put together. Of course, this is nothing new. Everyone loves these guys. But movies by those directors really meant something to me when I was growing up, and that sticks with you.



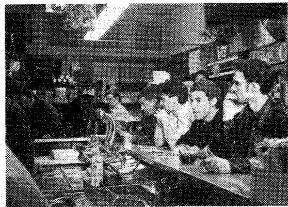
[top] P.J. Bracco  
[above] Behind the scenes of *Goin Down*.  
(center) P.J. Bracco, producer/director,  
(right) Fred Berman, Co-Lead

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Helen Mirren, but I just can't bring myself to watch the Arthur remake.

**M:** You and me both, even though I also love Helen Mirren.

**PJ:** If you love Helen Mirren, you have to see her in a movie called *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*. When that movie came out in 1989, I was working at the theatre on White Street in Red Bank. The film's distributor actually sent that movie to the theatre with a bag of kitty litter.



**i think my favorite film will be my next one. . . because it means that i'm back in the trenches and doing it again.**

**M:** Okay, I'll bite. Why?

**PJ:** They felt that the film's opening sequence was so disgusting that people might actually get sick. We could use the kitty litter to clean up the mess. I don't want to go into specifics, but the movie did have an opening scene that was pretty gross. That being said, the rest of the film was beautifully done and you really do have to see it.

**M:** And the kitty litter?

**PJ:** Thankfully, we didn't need it.

**M:** What is your favorite film that you did not produce?

**PJ:** I think I would have to say *Young Frankenstein*. It never gets old, and I always laugh out loud. I could probably go through the entire film word for word if you got me started.

**M:** Do you have a favorite among the films you did produce?

**PJ:** No, I don't. Each film has its own story behind the story. When I look back at each film, I honestly think to myself that I couldn't do it again if I had the opportunity to do it over . . . I truly don't know how I made that happen. It makes me laugh. Each project I work on is a challenge in its own way.

*Ursa Minor*, for instance. . . I had to recreate a two-block-long traditional Italian feast, so I modeled it on the Henry Street Mother

Cabrini feast from when I was a kid. I remember sitting in my office with a pint glass of hot coffee, saying to myself, "Who talked me into thinking I could make this happen?" Then it all came together.

I have to say though, that this last one, *The Goner - Prologue*, was pretty special. I got the opportunity to work with my daughter, who stars in the film. There were a couple of moments when I just had to step back and take it all in. Wild.

I think, though, that my favorite film will be my next one . . . simply because it means that I'm back in the trenches and doing it again.

**M:** What is your longest finished film? What is the shortest?

**PJ:** My longest finished film would be *Goin Down*. I've spent some time over the years re-cutting, working on an original soundtrack and some sound design with very talented artists. Hopefully it gets to see a few screens.

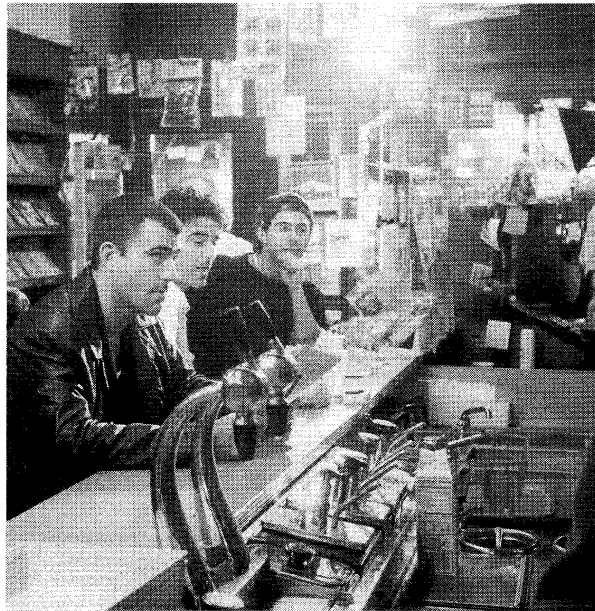
My shortest, I would have to say, other than the commercials and music video spots would be *The Goner - Prologue*.

**M:** Tell me about *The Goner* short film trilogy.

**PJ:** *The Goner* short film trilogy, a Shane Dewalt and Red Hook Films production, is a beautifully written end-of-life story. It's a sad piece. The Prologue is a bit eerie at times. However, the journey taken is quite delicately choreographed and revealing. The innocence that is the focus of the first film carries through in the scripts for the next two films in the series.

I first met the writer/director Shane Dewalt on his first film, *Raimo's Price*. I was playing the lead and kind of fell into a co-producing role. When that film was done, Shane asked me to read a new script he had written. I fell in love with it and offered to produce. Shane and I brought on a great team of people and got it all done. Everyone was in it for the love of making a movie. It's quite an amazing experience, when people take time out of their busy schedules to make art happen. So that film has been running around the festival circuit and at the same time Shane is finishing up the third script of *The Goner*. The goal is to shoot parts 2 and 3 together.

We shot *The Goner - Prologue* in Marlboro and Middletown. We plan on shooting parts 2 and 3 in the area as well.



[upper left] Behind the scenes of *Goin Down*. (center to right) Scott Conte, Jeff Mackin, Fred Berman, P.J. Bracco. [top] Behind the scenes of *Goin Down*. (center to right) Peter Wiehl, Director of Photography; Arsenio Assin, 2nd A.C.; P.J. Bracco, Actor, Producer and Director. [above] Behind the scenes of *Goin Down*. (left to right) Scott Conte, Jeff Mackin, Fred Berman

**M:** What is your favorite filming location in Monmouth County?

**PJ:** That's a good question. I would say the location with minimal logistical problems.

**M:** Wow. Thanks, for being so specific.

**PJ:** Ok, there's a reason for that answer. Let me tell you a story. We were filming *Ursa Minor* and we had Thompson Street in Soho closed off. The street was lined with fog machines, and someone saw the smoke and called the New York City Fire Department. What had to be the entire fleet of fire engines in New York City de-

scended upon us. It was like someone opened up the gates of hell. I had my Producer's Book, showing that I had all my ducks in a row. But it was still a nightmare, and production was closed down for about 45 minutes.

**M:** The Waffle Stompers video looked like it was a lot of fun to produce.

**PJ:** That was insane! First, I really wanted to give the band a look and style they weren't accustomed to. They're a Ska Band, which means they combine elements of Caribbean music with American jazz and rhythm and blues. I was

thinking, let's put them in a retro Prohibition-era look to contrast with the music they're playing. I was thinking about how to best develop and coordinate this when one day I went driving into Red Bank with my kids. I saw these guys walking around in crazy-colored full-bodied stretch suits. I had never seen them before, and my first thought was, "That's perfect for the video." I found out that these strangely-attired men call themselves The Middletown Morphs, and they just show up to places and do their thing. It's a riot. Funnier yet, I discovered that I am second cousins with the Morph in the Green Suit. Long story short, they loved the idea of being in the video. I had my people "living on the moon and wearing special suits."

When all the pieces were finally in place, a hurricane hit the shore area and our original warehouse location wasn't available. The Holmdel Theater Company allowed us to use the Duncan-Smith Theater, and it was perfect. There were a couple of other issues that popped up, which forced me to

**it all starts out with a tall hot coffee. . . script breakdowns, budgeting, emails, phone calls, more emails, research, coffee, math, driving around scouting locations, coffee, taking photos, writing, and did i mention drinking lots of coffee? negotiating, casting, crewing up, scheduling, having it all fall apart, starting over, having everything in place and it all changes at the last minute only to find yourself somehow just making it all work out.**

rewrite the script on the spot and improvise. The story line, as bizarre and nonsensical as it was, had to make sense. At times it was torture behind the scenes, but the shoot was amazing. Everyone pulled together and worked really hard to make it happen.

**III:** I like the look and style of your commercials as well.

**II:** Thank you.

I always interview the owner and or manager first to find out



what they're all about. I look at what the business provides and what it is artistically that will catch people's eye and get them interested in the product or service.

With the Skinny MedSpa commercial, they had the idea of a woman lying on a table getting a spa treatment. I thought about taking that idea and focusing in on the body parts, the skin, getting up close and bringing the viewer closer to nature and youth. I wanted to evoke softness because of the spa's comfortable and serene environment.

The No Joe's spot was jazzy and vibrant and we wanted to focus on the great food, fun times and zippy atmosphere in a little local hot spot. Erin makes some great desserts and homemade cupcakes on top of an already wonderful menu. So, I grabbed some local artists and friends (Linda Chorney is featured and DefTet Jazz Trio did the music). They jumped in on that one and we had a great time.

**III:** Tell us about a typical day in the life of a film producer.

**II:** It all starts out with a tall hot coffee ... script breakdowns, budgeting, then on to emails, phone calls, more emails, research, coffee,

math, driving around scouting locations, coffee, taking photos, writing, and did I mention drinking lots of coffee? Negotiating with vendors, owners, casting calls, crewing up, scheduling, having it all fall apart, starting over, having everything in place and ready to go and it all changes at the last minute, only to find yourself somehow just making it all work out. I direct most of the films I produce, so I am usually wearing two hats.

It's a little bit exhausting at times. In the end, I honestly couldn't tell you how it all works out just right. I keep a detailed binder with everything I'm doing for each individual project, all the notes, letters, basically everything so that if questions arise I have the answer right at my side.

You have to stick to the vision, keeping everyone moving ahead and happy. You have to know when to think outside of the box and try to solve the problems before they happen. I would relate it to putting the pieces of a puzzle together, except first you have to find the right pieces. It's at times kind of a thankless job. It's funny, someone once said that if the film comes out great then the director did an amazing job, the cinematographer was amazing, the cast was phenomenal, etc, etc. But if it's a total failure, it's all the producer's fault - I love it.

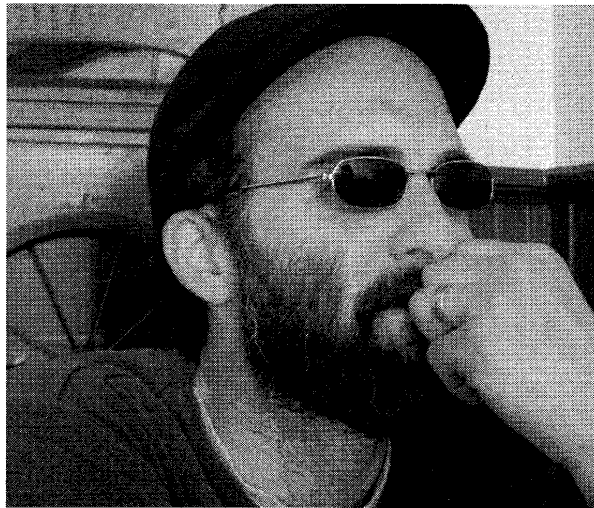
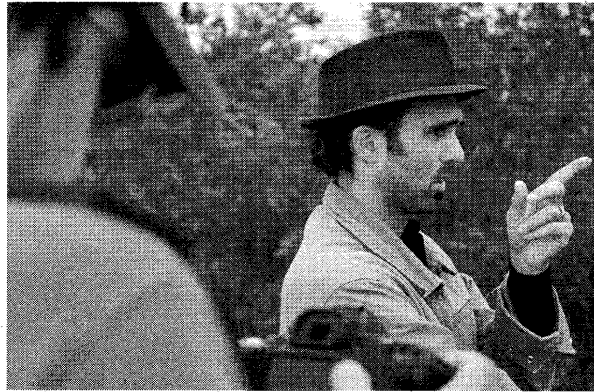
**III:** How difficult is it to cast parts for your films?

**II:** Sometimes it's easy, and sometimes it just isn't. In general, I want the actor walking in to be THE ONE. I'm an actor myself. I know how hard it is. I like to give a good audition to each actor that comes in. That's usually not the way it is in this business.

I am usually looking for something very specific and if the actor can hit the mark without me giving specific direction - sweet! I don't usually do open calls. In the past, when I've put casting notices out, I have gotten a lot of submissions. I'd narrow it down to about a dozen actors that I wanted to see. There were maybe two actors out of the casting call that I would consider and want to see again, but then the project may be put on hold for a bit, so then it's all going to change again.

**III:** What are you working on currently?

**II:** I am working on getting my



[upper left] Behind the scenes of *No Joe's*, (left) P.J. Bracco, producer and (right) John M. White, Director of Photography.

[top] Behind the scenes of *The Goner - Prologue*, John M. White, Director of Photography (left) and P.J. Bracco (right). Photo by Shane Dewalt

[above] *The Red Bank Blues Band*, (left to right) Paul Bracco, Alex D'Agnese, Kendall Scott, Melissa Murray, P.J. Bracco.

visit [redhookfilms.com](http://redhookfilms.com) to view film trailers and music videos, and to find out more about Red Hook Films. You can also contact P.J. directly at [pjbracco@redhookfilms.com](mailto:pjbracco@redhookfilms.com). To find out where the Red Bank Blues Band will be playing in our area, visit [theredbankbluesband.com](http://theredbankbluesband.com).

next two features off the ground, and producing and directing music videos and commercials.

One feature film I have in the works is titled *25806*. Set mainly in a place called "Bar Zodiac" and a deserted bus stop, it is a film that asks the question "If you had a chance to redeem yourself, would you take it or just repeat the same behavior?" This film will be like a cross between *Night on Earth* and *The Twilight Zone*. I came up with the title because 25806 is the square root of 666. I plan on filming it entirely in New Jersey, as I have recently become inspired traveling the country roads of the state.

Also in the works is a return-to-Brooklyn feature called *The Gowan Appointment*, which will be filmed in Brooklyn and New Jersey.

I am also collaborating with Adi Chand of Through the Lens Entertainment on his film *The Watchmaker*. I will be acting in Sean Guess' next feature, *Asbury Park*. And I'm in talks with Brian Neuls and Marianne Paine of Creative Paradigm about developing and co-producing their next feature, *DNR*.

**III:** Let's pick a dream cast for one of your upcoming features, *The Gowan Appointment*.

**II:** I would love to work with Frankie Vincent, Dean Stockwell, Dennis Farina, Danny DeVito, Jamie Farr, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, Joe Pantoliano, Steve White and Marisa Tomei.

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