

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**‘Killers of the Flower Moon’**  
*A Remarkable 40-Year Journey from Lake Erie  
to the Cannes Film Festival*

**By David Frew**  
**July 2023**



*Director Martin Scorsese (at center) is surrounded at Cannes by the major players in the cast of “Killers of the Flower Moon,” including (from left): Janae Collins, Cara Jade Meyers, Robert De Niro, Lily Gladstone, Leonardo DiCaprio, Tantu Cardinal, and Jillian Dion*

Movies were an important part of 1950s' life for everyone that I knew. Growing up between "radio days" and the advent of television, films provided the opportunity to experience stories with images. While the small neighborhood places like the Gem Theater on West Fourth Street were a bit dreary, major downtown movie houses were almost as magical as the films themselves. The Warner Theater downtown, for example, was and still is an astonishing place. Huge brass and glass doors opened to a grand lobby with a formal stairway, and the oversized entry hall was lined with film posters, popcorn machines, and uniformed attendants. It was a glorious scene for a youngster. I still recall the excitement of watching "The Wizard of Oz" there as a young boy.

It may have been the magic of theaters and movies that captured my interest, but I somehow developed a lifelong fascination with films. My first year of college added to the allure as required English classes included films as well as books and introduced the "film classics." During the 1960s, Gannon also had a regular Saturday night film program, which featured the esoteric films of Fellini, Bergman, Rossellini, and others. Long before the days of modern television film critics such as Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, Gannon faculty member Paul DeSante introduced each film, placed it context with the series that he was curating that semester, and led lively discussions.

My love for film continues. I continue to track down lists of each year's best films and watch them. I also faithfully stay up late to watch the Academy Awards. Several film festivals have proven to be predictive of the best movies of each year and the annual event in Cannes, France is one of those. This year's most acclaimed Cannes movie is a film adapted from a recent book, "Killers of the Flower Moon." The semi-crime drama is set in Oklahoma during the 1920s and tells the story of injustices on a Native American reservation after oil was discovered there. Response to the first showing of the film at Cannes this year was a nine-minute standing ovation.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this 2023 release is the film's director, Martin Scorsese. If there is an American director who is regarded with the same degree of reverence that has been ascribed to earlier European genius directors, it is Scorsese. Born in 1942, he grew up in Manhattan and was raised by devout Roman Catholic parents of Sicilian descent. Even as a young boy he was obsessed with film. He loved old Italian and French masterpiece films and watched them repeatedly. In one amusing story, it was noted that a young Martin Scorsese used to spend his allowance to repeatedly rent and watch a 1951 technicolor, 8 MM film from a variety store on the same block as his Manhattan home. The store owner later said that Scorsese was one of very few who rented that movie. He attended NYU, where he studied film and the arts and graduated in 1964. He continued at NYU, earning a master's degree in 1968.

The film that Scorsese was obsessed with as a boy was “Tales of Hoffman,” an opera that featured a rich soundtrack created by the Royal London Orchestra. Watching “Tales of Hoffman” so many times seemed to have formed the essence of Scorsese’s cinematic interests. It is now apparent that his body of work revolves about operatic themes in combination with the grit that characterizes life in New York, Catholic guilt-redemption, and long, slow-paced narratives.



*Robbie Robertson, playing with The Band in about 1970*

Scorsese’s Lake Erie connection occurred in 1978 when he met musician Robbie Robertson. Robbie grew up near Port Dover, Ontario at the Brantford, Ontario Indian Reservation that had been home to Tonto, of “Lone Ranger” fame, and Graham Green, famous for “Dances with Wolves.” He also lived part time in Toronto with his father, who had left the family.

Robertson became a highly proficient, self-taught guitarist at a young age. After lying about his actual age, he earned a spot in Ronnie Hawkins’ backup band that played regularly at Port Dover’s Summer Garden, the venue that may have been most responsible for Robbie’s fascination with music. Before earning a spot in the backup band, he visited the Summer Garden regularly, watching the house band (Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks) after which he would go home and try to emulate their musical style.

At age 15, Robertson became a regular in the band and then in a few short years everything shifted. Hawkins quit, his backup group (the Hawks) broke up, and a new group formed. That talented five, mostly composed of youngsters from the Port Dover area, was discovered by Bob Dylan and became the group that helped launch Dylan’s controversial “electric phase.” Eventually, Robertson and his group went off on their own, calling themselves “The Band.”

Robertson and Scorsese collaborated on the filming and production of a 1978 musical documentary called “The Last Waltz.” It was a pivotal moment in both of their careers and each credits their “Last Waltz” meeting and collaboration with opening their minds to new and creative opportunities. Scorsese was on the cusp of recognition for his filmmaking genius and Robertson was at the end of a frenetic musical performing career.

The theme of the 1978 Last Waltz documentary was that it may have been The Band’s last live concert, at least for a while. Robertson had grown weary of the crazy life of a rock star and was calling for a respite. He has since said that he had hoped for a break and that he would have rejoined “The Band” for studio albums and limited touring. Sadly, however, in the years following the documentary, two band members died from what Robertson has called Rock ‘n’ Roll disease. Alcohol and drugs. After the 1978 documentary and then the deaths of his friends and band mates, there was no going back for Robertson.

Robertson and Scorsese were nearly contemporaries. Robertson, who was born in 1943, was just a year younger. For Scorsese, meeting Robertson helped him understand the power of modern music as well as the mythology and importance of Native North American culture. Robertson was smitten with the impact of film as well as Scorsese’s ability to capture music in a storytelling motif. Both men realized they should continue to collaborate. Scorsese asked Robertson to continue with him after the release of “The Last Waltz.” Trusting the young Rock & Roll guitar player-songwriter despite his lack of formal training, Scorsese hired Robertson to do the musical score for his next film.

Since that pivotal moment, Scorsese has reached the peak of his power as a filmmaker and Robertson has worked with him on 11 films, demonstrating his ability to create wonderful musical scores. Before “The Last Waltz,” they were introduced by The Band’s producer who was also working with Scorsese at the time. At their first meeting in New York, Robertson watched a screening of one of Scorsese’s first films. “Mean Streets” (1973) starred Robert DeNiro and Harvey Keitel. At the time, Scorsese, De Niro, and Keitel were all virtually unknown. Robertson was impressed by Scorsese’s ability to work with a small budget and find talented but little-known actors to create an award-winning, critically acclaimed film. He both wrote and directed “Mean Streets.”

Scorsese had already known Robertson’s work and was impressed by his overall understanding of musical scores as well as his writing genius. He was also eager to integrate the kind of music that Robertson was writing (gospel, blues, rock, and folk) into his films. They formed a fast friendship and pledged to collaborate on something, which was how the pair became involved in “The Last Waltz” project.

Almost 50 years have passed since their first meeting and during that time they have continued to collaborate. The newest Scorsese-Robertson partnership,

“Flower Moon,” manages to combine the most important interests of both men. For Scorsese, the story is both a narrative and a mystery, quite like the opera that captured his attention as a young boy studying the art of film. The project has also managed to reunite him with actors who have been long-time Scorsese partners, such as Robert De Niro with whom he has made nine films, including the controversial, award winning “Taxi Driver.” For Robertson it represents a return to subject matter that has been his most consistent focus lately, Native American heritage. Robertson’s haunting and rich soundtrack has already attracted significant attention and will be a contender for an Oscar in 2023.



*Robbie Robertson*

Next year I will have a special reason to stay up late and watch the Academy Award show on television. I will be watching to see if “Flower Moon,” which will almost certainly be nominated, wins for best picture or best director. But most of all I will be thinking about Port Dover, the town on the other side of Lake Erie that I have fallen in love with and thinking of Robbie Robertson.

As the ceremonies episodically feature music from the best film scores of the year, I will be imagining Port Dover’s Summer Garden dance hall before it burned, and the talented 15-year-old Indian boy from the Brantford Reservation who played guitar for the Ronnie Hawkins Band. I will be imagining an improbable career that led from the beaches of Port Dover to Hollywood.

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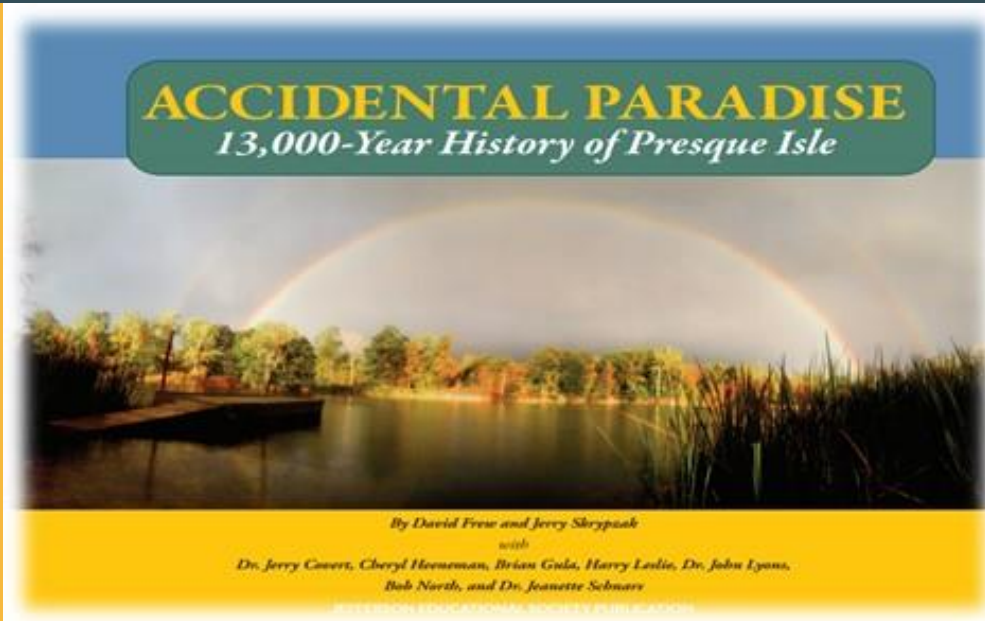
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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TRECF.org](mailto:aperino@TRECF.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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