

One Bite at a Time

Walter Hill takes Fantastic Fest's Lifetime Achievement Award, remembers the El Paso heat of Extreme Prejudice, and names The Warriors as the Hail Mary that kept a career from vanishing.

Interview by Paul Salfen • AMFM Magazine



Walter Hill with the painted world of *The Warriors* — the film he names as the Hail Mary that brought him back. Composite still / promotional art.

Austin does not hand out lifetime hardware lightly. Fantastic Fest's previous recipients — Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, Yuen Woo-ping, Takashi Miike, Clint Mansell, Jess Franco, Malcolm McDowell — are a short list of people who bent genre until it remembered their names. This opening weekend, at Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar, the festival added Walter Hill.

Hill is the first Fantastic Fest honoree to receive a nationwide retrospective of his films, scheduled for January at select Alamo Drafthouse locations. Programmer Jake Isgar called him "one of the American cinema's greatest pulp artists." Festival director Lisa Dreyer went further: inarguably one of the greatest genre directors of all time. On the red carpet before the award and a screening of *Extreme Prejudice*, AMFM Magazine's Paul Salfen caught the man who wrote *The Getaway* for Peckinpah, directed *The Warriors* and *48 Hrs.*, and has stayed inside the *Alien* franchise from Ridley Scott's original through *Alien: Romulus*.

There is a lot to look back on. Salfen started with the Texas picture the festival chose to put on the screen that night.

EL PASO HEAT

Hill had been in Texas before. A few days in Rusk on *The Long Riders* — "there's that train there." *Extreme Prejudice* was something else. Most of it was El Paso. He remembers the heat first.

"I can remember how hot it was. Jesus. It was murder."

The fact that the story is about Texas, he allowed, might have something to do with why Fantastic Fest pulled that title out of the catalog. He had already worked with Nick Nolte. He had already worked with Powers Boothe. Rip Torn was the first-timer — and the warning.

“It was my first time working with Rip Torn, who everybody said, ‘Oh God, don’t work with him. Nightmare.’ He was great. I loved him.”

María Conchita Alonso was on the picture. Hill calls the shoot a good one. Positive feelings. Then the movie itself got lost at home.

“It kind of got lost. The finances were selling. They’re making distribution deals with the new company. It got a little bit lost domestically in the shuffle, but did well foreign. They got their money back.”

What else does he say about it? “I thought it was a good film. A tough movie.”

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— WALTER HILL



Powers Boothe and Nick Nolte in Extreme Prejudice (1987), the South Texas neo-Western Fantastic Fest screened after Hill's award. Studio still.

HOW YOU EAT AN ELEPHANT

Salfen asked the craft question that lives under every Hill set: when it is go time — on the floor, or facing the next script — what do you keep in mind?

Hill answered with the old joke. When you start a movie they all seem impossible. Too many scenes. Too many setups. Never enough time. Then you make the movie anyway.

“How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”

You have to carry the idea of the movie in your head before you start, he said — what it should be. Once cameras are rolling, the philosophy shrinks to a single operational question.

“When you’re shooting, it’s: What’s the next shot? And then finally it ends.”

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

— WALTER HILL

THE HAIL MARY

Salfen co-hosts with former Dallas Cowboy Drew Pearson. They talk Hail Mary moments — the play you throw because there is nothing left to manage. He asked Hill which one, across a career full of them, actually changed the score.

Hill did not hesitate.

“I think it’s probably *The Warriors*.”

He had just come off *The Driver*, a complete failure commercially and critically in this country. Foreign, the reviews were kinder. At home they were, in his word, excoriating. He finds it funny now. They show the movie a lot and tell him he did a good job. It was not always that way. You roll with it.

The Warriors brought him back. First film had worked out pretty well. Second film was a disaster. Third film worked out well.

“So I got a career, and they couldn’t get rid of me after that.”



*The Warriors (1979): the picture Hill credits with saving the career after *The Driver*'s American reception. Studio still.*

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SAM FULLER'S LAW

Last question, for the writers and directors still trying to get a story onto a screen. What does he tell them?

“Tell the story.”

Then he handed the line to Sam Fuller, the way working directors still do when they want the shortest possible sermon.

“Sam Fuller used to say, ‘Sam, what makes a good movie?’ ‘Story.’ ‘What makes a good story?’ ‘Story.’ He’s right.”

And then Fuller would take the script, throw it on the table, and say take a picture of that. You still have to shoot it. You still have to have a director.

Salfen told him they couldn’t wait to see him take the award that night. Hill thanked him, the way men who have already eaten the elephant thank the next person in line: short, civil, already thinking about the next shot.

THE CATALOG BEHIND THE HARDWARE

Before *Hard Times* in 1975, Hill had already written *Hickey & Boggs*, *The Getaway*, *The Thief Who Came to Dinner*, *The MacKintosh Man*, and *The Drowning Pool*. After *The Warriors* came *The Long Riders*, *Southern Comfort*, *48 Hrs.*, *Streets of Fire*, *Red Heat*. He won an Emmy directing *Deadwood*. He has been inside *Alien* since 1979 — executive producer on *Aliens*, producer through *Alien 3*, *Resurrection*, the *Predator* crossovers, *Prometheus*, *Covenant*, and *Romulus*.

Pulp, in Isgar’s phrase, is not a slight. It is the American vernacular Hill never abandoned: men with jobs, cities at night, heat that feels like a character, stories you can photograph. *Fantastic Fest* put *Extreme Prejudice* on the screen because it is that vernacular at full volume — Nolte and Boothe as childhood friends on opposite sides of the law, *Torn* walking in against every warning, *El Paso* doing what *El Paso* does in August.

January, the *Drafthouse* circuit will run the rest. Until then, the instruction on the carpet still fits on a card: tell the story. Take the next shot. Eat the elephant one bite at a time.

FIND WALTER HILL

Fantastic Fest Lifetime Achievement Award presented opening weekend, September 2026, Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar, Austin, Texas — followed by *Extreme Prejudice* and Q&A.

Alamo Drafthouse nationwide Walter Hill retrospective: January 2027 at select locations (*The Getaway*, *Streets of Fire*, *Red Heat*, *48 Hrs.*, and more).

Key films: *Hard Times* (1975), *The Driver* (1978), *The Warriors* (1979), *The Long Riders* (1980),

Southern Comfort (1981), 48 Hrs. (1982), Streets of Fire (1984), Extreme Prejudice (1987), Red Heat (1988). Emmy: Deadwood. Producer credits across the Alien franchise from Aliens through Alien: Romulus.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.