

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Drink Your Milk. Mind Your Mom. Don't Take Any Shit From Anybody.

Johnny Knoxville and the kid army of Tiny Fugitives talk camp-set football, craft-services sugar, and the Hail Mary that built a career — just as their R-rated sleepaway comedy hits theaters.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Official key art for *Tiny Fugitives*. Courtesy Inaugural Entertainment / Point Grey Pictures.

Summer is supposed to end. That is the whole point of a calendar, a school year, a last-night campfire. *Tiny Fugitives* — the Point Grey comedy that opened in theaters September 18 from Inaugural Entertainment — treats that idea like a dare. A pack of twelve-year-olds decides the only sane place left on earth is sleepaway camp, and they mean to stay. Standing in the path of that plot is Bob, a fifty-year-old lifer counselor played by Johnny Knoxville with the scowl of a man who has printed out every email he has ever received.

Writer-director Michael Lewen and co-writer Jacob Kaplan built the picture out of actual camp DNA. The producers went to camp. The department heads went to camp. The kids were cast at park “camp days” in Los Angeles — face paint, egg toss, lip-sync battles — then dropped onto a real campsite to work. When Paul Salfen got Knoxville on the line with three of those kids — Benjamin Pajak (Jacob Udell), Aaron Harris (Charness), and Isa Bernal Steiner (Tali) — the set still sounded like a place nobody wanted to leave.

IT FELT LIKE CAMP BECAUSE IT WAS

Salfen opened where most civilians open when they finally land on a movie set: it looks cooler from the couch. “When we grow up, we think, oh, how cool would it be to be in a movie or TV show. And then we get on a set. It’s not that fun. This looked like it was so much fun to make.”

The kids did not argue. One of them compared the job to going to camp. Another came back from lunch and found the extras waiting with a football. “I made friends with a lot of people in the crew too,” he said. “If I wasn’t an actor, I would be something in football.” They asked him if he wanted a flag-football game before cameras rolled again. He said yes. He got to be quarterback. “It was awesome. A lot of stuff like that.”

Between takes they played volleyball. They ran the usual camp circuit in the hours the call sheet did not own. “We also did film on an actual campsite,” one of them added. “So both of those things contribute to the feeling of making the movie more real.” Lewen has said he wanted the young actors in natural environments where they could take risks and be themselves. The tape backs him up. Nobody on this call sounded like they had been handled.

I just like listening to kids swear, and these guys are really good at it. Yeah. The best.

— JOHNNY KNOXVILLE

THE LIFER AND THE SWEARERS

Salfen turned to Knoxville for a favorite memory and got the Jackass version of a compliment. The kids swear. They are good at it. In an R-rated camp picture that is not a small part of the assignment. Lewen wrote Bob as a deranged disciplinarian of twenty-six years — the man who will be electrocuted, run over, drop-kicked, and bitten, then stand back up with more love for the children than he started with. Knoxville, a father, was hired in part because that tenderness lives somewhere under the wreckage.

On this call he kept the wreckage light. When Salfen asked what he tells himself before doing something wild on camera, Knoxville drew a line. “Well, it depends on how wild you’re talking about. If I’m just doing a movie, I try to keep it pretty mellow. And luckily, I didn’t have to have those little discussions with myself on this one. But it was a lot of fun. It was like they were saying — there was a really good vibe on set.”

Salfen, who has spent two decades chasing Hail Mary stories, wanted the discussion anyway. What kind of talk does a man have with himself before a stunt? “When I’m about to do a stunt,” Knoxville said, “you just — whatever little trick you can play on your brain. Me? I just keep it short. It’s like, this is what I’m doing today. Might as well. Let’s do it.”



Johnny Knoxville as Bob, the camp lifer who will not let summer end on anyone else's terms. Courtesy Inaugural Entertainment.

SUGAR, CRAFTY, AND THE RIGHT HEADSPACE

The kids had a less philosophical system for going to battle. Salfen asked what they keep in mind when it is time to get in the right headspace. The answer arrived from craft services. Energy drinks. Coca-Cola. “We kind of lived at crafty,” one of them said. “They had these little tiny things of candy in them that we would get. Sugar, sugar, sugar got me through this.”

That is not a joke the movie would refuse. *Tiny Fugitives* is proudly sophomoric — Lewen’s own director’s note admits the film comes from “the deepest part of my soul. Maybe that does not speak well of my soul.” The kids on the tape sound like they understood the assignment and also understood the job: stay loose, stay fed, stay friends with the crew that will still be there after lunch.

Drink your milk, mind your mom, and don’t take any shit from anybody.

— JOHNNY KNOXVILLE, ON ADVICE FOR A LONG CAREER

ADVICE FROM THE LIFER — AND FROM THE ROOKIES

Salfen asked Knoxville what he would tell the young actors about getting through this business. Knoxville did not reach for a master class. He reached for a T-shirt. “Drink your milk, mind your mom, and don’t take any shit from anybody.” Somebody on the call said it should be a quote. Somebody else said it should be a TikTok. Both were correct.

Then Salfen flipped the question toward the kids — what would they tell other kids watching who want to do this. Humility came first. “Stay humble. Be the nicest person you could be.” Acting, one of them said, is a small enough pond that you keep seeing the same faces at auditions and callbacks. “You never know when they’ll get a role that you auditioned for, vice versa. So it’s just best to be friends with everybody.”

Another voice on the tape refused the guru seat. “Me personally, I don’t think you should take any advice from me. I don’t know what I’m doing. I got lucky.” Then the luck got a doctrine attached to it, the kind you only learn by collecting no’s. “If you don’t get the role, it’s not your role. It wasn’t meant for you. You have to move on. Nine out of ten auditions, you’re not even going to get a callback. Even if it’s like, oh my God, this is so awesome, I really want to do this — you can’t get hung up on it. Forget about it.” Half the time, they added, you are doing the room for the casting directors. They will remember you. “They will probably remember anything else that goes to stunts too. If you don’t do the stunt, the stunt’s not meant for you.”

It is a hard little philosophy for a twelve-year-old to carry, and it is also the cleanest thing anyone said on the call. The movie is about kids who refuse to leave the one place that makes sense. The actors talking about it already know that most rooms will send them home.

THE HAIL MARY

Before Salfen let them go, he ran the question that has become an AMFM signature — the one he inherited from a conversation with Dallas Cowboys Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, the man who caught the original Hail Mary. What was the moment in Knoxville’s life or career when he just had to go for it, and it worked?

Knoxville did not pick a single catch. He picked a weather system. “It was a constant cycle of having to do that. I just kind of shot out of a cannon to begin with, actually. For real. I just had to make something happen for myself because no one was calling me in on things, so I just had to create some stuff with my friends.”

That is the Jackass origin story sanded down to one sentence, and it is also the sentence that explains why he belongs in a movie about children inventing a life because the official one does not fit. He looked at Pajak, Harris, and Steiner and named the moment they were sitting in. “Hey, for you guys, this is a Hail Mary moment for you.”

One of them said making it happen was really exciting. Salfen closed the way the magazine likes to close — with the work, not the victory lap. “It looks like you had the best time making it. We had a great time watching. Check it out.”

SUMMER AIN’T OVER YET

Lewen has said he hopes *Tiny Fugitives* makes you feel twelve again. The press notes talk about a promised land with no pain and no rules, a place where everyone loves you and you love yourself, and where Johnny Knoxville can take a beating from children and stand up more human than he was before. The interview is smaller and better than that manifesto. It is a quarterback sneak after lunch. It is candy from crafty. It is a man who keeps the pre-stunt speech to one line. It is three young actors who already know most auditions will not call back, and who still showed up to a park in Los Angeles and pretended it was camp until it was.

Bob will try to stop them. That is his job. Summer will try to end. That is the calendar. The picture, and the people who made it, are not convinced either one has to win.

FIND TINY FUGITIVES

Tiny Fugitives is in theaters now from Inaugural Entertainment. Written and directed by Michael Lewen; screenplay by Lewen and Jacob Kaplan. Produced by Point Grey Pictures (Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, James Weaver, Josh Fagen), Tango, and Public House Pictures. Rated R. 99 minutes.

Starring Johnny Knoxville as Bob, Benjamin Pajak as Jacob Udell, Aaron Harris as Charness, Isa Bernal Steiner as Tali, with Jai Soundar, Alyssa Gervasi, Blake Anderson, Jay Baruchel, Rob Yang, and Briana Templeton.

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.