EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

"It's Really the Sum of All the Ordinary Days"

Aaron Burns brings Jimmy Stewart's war, faith, and return to the screen to life in Jimmy, starring KJ Apa. He talks about finding his leading man, watching the film with Stewart's daughter, the prayer behind It's a Wonderful Life, and why meaningful stories begin with everyday kindness.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Aaron Burns knew Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey before he understood the man who came home from war to play him. In *Jimmy*, the director follows Stewart from his Academy Award for *The Philadelphia Story* through World War II combat service and the making of *It's a Wonderful Life*, with KJ Apa taking on one of the screen's most beloved figures. Now in theaters nationwide as of November 6, 2026, the Burns & Co. Entertainment film is, for Burns, a story about faith, brokenness, and the ordinary acts of kindness that add up to a meaningful life.

Paul Salfen caught up with Burns over Zoom ahead of the film's Lone Star Film Festival appearance in Fort Worth. After two years of living with the project, Burns was finally watching other people meet it. Some brought a military perspective. Some had known Stewart himself. What connected those experiences was the hope that the man behind George Bailey could still help people find a way forward.

OUT OF THE HARD DRIVES

A film belongs to its makers for a long time before it belongs to an audience. Burns knew that feeling well. "It lives in your heart, in your head, on your hard drives, you know, for two years," he told Salfen. Then comes the strange, rewarding experience of sitting in the dark with people who have never seen it.

One early invitation took him to the Air Force Academy to show the film to three- and four-star Air Force generals. His response was immediate: "Yes sir, I'll fly out there."

"Just to get to watch it through their eyes was incredible," Burns said. At the Heartland Film Festival, the perspective was different and just as personal. He watched alongside Stewart's daughter and the film's executive producer, Kelly Stewart-Harcourt, with his own family there too.

Screenings in New York and Los Angeles brought another kind of anticipation. Burns did not know what critics would think. He described a warm response in both cities and was especially encouraged that viewers were recognizing the value of a hopeful story.

Getting the film out of the production bubble was its own reward. After all that time on a hard drive, *Jimmy* was finally becoming a shared experience.

THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

Making a film about a beloved figure comes with a particular kind of pressure. Salfen pointed out that people who knew Stewart are still here to see how the filmmakers handle his life. Burns did not pretend that was an easy thing to carry.

The response from Stewart's daughter mattered enormously. So did the reaction of Karolyn Grimes, who played Zuzu in *It's a Wonderful Life* and has a cameo in *Jimmy*.

Burns recalled Grimes pulling Apa aside when she first arrived and expressing her doubts about whether he could pull off the role. She was direct, he said, and not inclined to hide what she thought. Then she saw the performance.

"KJ, you crushed it," Burns recalled her telling the actor.

For the director and his star, that change of heart meant something beyond a good screening. Here was someone with a connection to the original film responding to their interpretation of the man at its center. Burns also described an encouraging email following a screening for the Jimmy Stewart Museum's staff and friends.

"To see the core crowd love it, it gives me a good feeling for the rest of the country," he said. Still, he knew a crowded release week brings distractions and competing demands. His hope was simply that people would make time to experience the film.

SOMEONE CRAZY ENOUGH TO TRY

Finding an actor to play Jimmy Stewart meant finding someone willing to risk comparison with Jimmy Stewart. Burns needed more than a familiar voice or a recognizable silhouette.

"I needed someone who was crazy enough to try it, and who would be willing to go on the adventure with me, and take the risk with me," he said. Some actors, he found, were intimidated by the challenge.

Apa came to their first Zoom conversation looking for exactly that kind of opportunity. Burns said the actor later told him that, three days before they spoke, he had asked his father to pray that he would find a role with character and integrity, someone he could be proud to play.

That story stayed with Burns. So did the impression Apa made when they connected.

"I could tell that he was willing to embrace Jimmy's heart, and willing to embrace his spirit, and to work from the inside out on bringing this legend to life," he said.

The physical work followed. Burns said Apa lost about 15 pounds to capture Stewart's thinness during this period of his life and worked with a dialect coach on the voice, regional details, intonations, and mannerisms. But those tools could not become a wall between the actor and the audience. There had to be a person underneath them.

Burns described their guiding question this way: "What if it was Frank Capra's last movie he ever got to make with Jimmy?" That was a directing perspective, an invitation to approach the performance through the spirit of those films rather than settle for imitation.

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THE MAN BEHIND THE PRAYER

Salfen noted that faith had remained part of the film rather than being pushed to the margins. For Burns, that was not an addition to Stewart's story. It was one of the discoveries that made him want to tell it.

He had seen *It's a Wonderful Life* many times without understanding the depth of Stewart's personal faith. Reading Stewart's reflections in Guideposts Magazine changed the way he saw the actor and the film.

Burns described an article in which Stewart looked back on returning from war, carrying a copy of Psalm 91 given to him by his father, and relying on prayer and scripture. What moved Burns was the connection between that experience and George Bailey's prayer in Martini's Bar.

"I remember just reading this story and being so moved that Jimmy Stewart and George Bailey become one in this moment," he said.

In Burns's telling of Stewart's account, the prayer on screen was also deeply personal. He described Stewart envisioning people around the world crying out in pain and fear, and a Heavenly Father who loved them. Burns saw that moment as part of the actor's spiritual healing, a way toward the life that came after the war.

His admiration was not limited to Stewart's performances. He pointed to the husband, father, and citizen Stewart became, and to the example that offered him in his own life.

To tell that story, Burns said, "was just a joy of a lifetime."

THE ORDINARY DAYS

When Salfen asked whether a particular prayer or verse had helped Burns through the filmmaking process, the director offered something else: a thought he attributed to Stewart about what makes a wonderful life.

As Burns recounted it, the idea was simple. An ordinary man lives each ordinary day with faith in God and a selfless concern for others. The meaning comes from the accumulation, not from one spectacular achievement.

That became a useful lens for a film production, where the big breakthroughs can seem to define everything. There was the day they found Apa. There were moments when funding or a location came through. Burns was grateful for those answers, but they were not the whole journey.

"You have these big moments, but it's really the sum of all the ordinary days as you continue to have faith, and you do your best," he said.

Doing that best includes making mistakes. It also includes treating the people around you with kindness, even when the work is difficult and the outcome is uncertain. Burns saw kindness as a defining quality in Stewart, not just a pleasant detail.

For a filmmaker trying to honor him, that offered a standard that applied off camera too. A movie about a meaningful life ought to leave room for living one while you make it.

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A STORY CAN OUTLAST A STATUE

Asked what he would tell someone who wants to follow him into storytelling, Burns went back to an experience he had as a teenager in London.

He remembered entering an old cathedral and seeing imposing statues of warriors with swords and horses. They looked important, but he did not know who they were. Farther back, in the area he recalled as Poet's Corner, he recognized the names of writers, including Jane Austen, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Dickens.

The contrast made an impression. The grand figures meant little to him personally, while the stories were still alive. Scrooge returned every Christmas. *It's a Wonderful Life*, Burns noted, was still resonating 80 years after its release.

"I would encourage you that storytelling is a noble vocation," he said.

He did not mean only directing movies. Bedtime stories for children, teaching Bible stories at church, writing books and articles, making podcasts, and working in theater all belonged in the same conversation. The form was less important than the opportunity to inspire someone.

"Nurture it, and don't feel like you have to make a feature film to be a storyteller," he said. "But follow God's heart, and see where it takes you."

For Burns, that impulse comes from his faith, from the belief that God is weaving stories through people's lives and allowing them to become storytellers themselves. It was advice about recognizing a calling without measuring its value only by the size of the screen.

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THE HAIL MARY

Salfen's co-host, Dallas Cowboys great and Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, caught the original Hail Mary. Salfen asks guests about their own version: the moment when they have to launch it and go for it.

For Burns, *Jimmy* qualified. He said his team had never taken on a project this big, with the potential to reach so many people from such varied backgrounds. At a certain point, preparation and effort could only carry them so far.

"You can only do what you can do, and then the rest you have to rely on other people and rely on the Lord for it," he said.

He described people appearing to help, answers to prayer, and the ways timing and funding forced the team to recognize they could not do everything alone. The Stewart family's willingness to trust them with the rights to tell the story remained a privilege he did not take lightly.

There was a surreal physical reminder of that trust too. Ahead of the premiere, Burns said he had borrowed Stewart's Oscar and would be bringing it back down for the event. A few years earlier, he said, that would have sounded impossible.

Still, he was not selling a fantasy of effortless filmmaking. Premiere-night excitement is followed by box office reports, obligations to investors, and reviews that may not be kind. Sometimes the help is not there. Sometimes the filmmaker feels alone.

"Highs are high and the lows are low," he said, crediting his wife, family, church community, and hardworking team for their support. The joy was in getting to participate in the whole thing, not just the celebratory parts.

HAVE FUN, DO YOUR BEST

When Salfen asked about the mindset required to fill such big shoes, Burns began with preparation. Then he made room for something that can disappear when a production gets tense: having fun.

"If you're having fun, the people around you are having fun generally," he said.

He had found that yelling and getting upset did not help him direct big scenes. Nervousness could be real without becoming the atmosphere everyone else had to work inside.

"Just let it go, do your best, trust God with the results, and have as much fun as you can," he said. "And generally, that breeds a better team atmosphere and a better team spirit while people are helping you."

That did not mean pretending failure was impossible. Burns joked about what happens when your best is not good enough. But the answer was still to do the day's work as well as he could. The final results were not entirely his to control.

HOPE FOR THE NEXT SEASON

Burns does not expect every viewer to take the same thing from *Jimmy*. That is part of what he values about entertainment: a story arrives, people spend time with it, and something stays after they leave.

For some, the point of connection may be Stewart's relationship with his father, with its generational tensions and differences in values. Burns said viewers had already told him how meaningful that thread was to them. Others may recognize the struggling creative trying to make *It's a Wonderful Life*, or connect with the grief and loss of the wartime story.

His hope was that those different routes would lead audiences toward an understanding of Stewart's struggle, and perhaps toward recognizing something of their own.

"I hope that the film meets people where they are, and gives them a hope to move on to their next season as well," he said.

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Before wrapping, Burns looked forward to warmer Texas weather after Michigan's fall and to sharing *Jimmy* with the Lone Star audience. He was still in full *Jimmy* mode, but mentioned an animated project in the pipeline, *The Myth Makers*, exploring the imaginations of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien through a graphic-novel story.

It was a fitting next subject for a director who had just explained why stories can outlast monuments. For now, *Jimmy* is in theaters, offering audiences the story of a familiar screen presence who had to find his own way back to hope. Burns's measure of a wonderful life remains smaller and more personal than an opening weekend: faith, kindness, and the ordinary days that become something more when you add them together.

FIND *JIMMY*

Film: *Jimmy* (2026)

Directed by: Aaron Burns

Written by: Justin Strawhand

Starring: KJ Apa as Jimmy Stewart; with Kara Killmer, Neal McDonough, Max Casella (Frank Capra), Jason Alexander, Christopher McDonald, Sarah Drew, Rob Riggle, Julian Works, Jen Lilley

Studio: Burns & Co. Entertainment

Theatrical release: Nationwide, November 6, 2026

Website: jimmythemovie.com

Social: @jimmystewartmovie (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok); X @jimmymovie2026

First look: youtube.com/watch?v=LmaWSb7WQ1E

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine over Zoom, November 2, 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.