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The Great Santini

Supplemental Liner Notes

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The Great Santini

The Water Is Wide, Pat Conroy's memoir of the year he spent teaching poor children on a remote island off the South Carolina coast, met with success upon publication in 1972, reaching the big screen two years later as *Conrack* (with Jon Voight playing Conroy). For Conroy's first work of fiction, the author turned to similarly autobiographical material, basing the title character on his father and even using Col. Donald Conroy's real-life nickname, "The Great Santini," as the book's title. Col. Conroy, a World War II vet who had flown with the "Black Sheep Squadron" in the Korean War and served two tours of duty in Vietnam, helped his son lend authenticity to the fighter jet scenes, but took an ambivalent attitude toward the book. In the press kit for the novel's film adaptation, the younger Conroy recalled his father actually throwing a copy at him halfway through reading it, to which the son replied, "Finish reading it. Then, if you still feel the same way, you can throw it at me again. And this time I won't duck." When the elder Conroy finished the book, he told his son "It's the truth." Rumor had it that Pat Conroy's mother presented her son's book to the judge in her divorce from Col. Conroy, telling him, "It's all true. Everything you need to know."

Conroy's novel found a receptive audience in Charles A. Pratt, the head of Bing Crosby Productions, responsible for such films as *Willard*, *Walking Tall* and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud*. Pratt told *The New York Times* that he loved the novel from the first page: "Maybe it's because I'm kind of a Santini character myself. He's a gung-ho Marine flyer and I was an infantry man who fought from New Guinea to Luzon in World War II. I liked it so much, in fact, I decided to act as my own producer." Pratt felt Conroy's novel had "what you look for in the raw material for a movie—warmth, humor, conflict, colorful characters and a real sense of time and place." He purchased the film rights in 1977 for BCP and convinced United Artists executives to put up half the film's budget, with BCP supplying the other half. When several of UA's top executives left to form Orion Pictures, Pratt convinced Orion to take on Santini, with Warner Bros. agreeing to distribute the film.

Director Lewis John Carlino was a playwright/novelist whose first produced screenplay was for John Frankenheimer's 1966 sci-fi thriller *Seconds*. In the years since, he had written such diverse films as *The Fox*, *The Mechanic* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (which earned him an Oscar nomination), making his directorial debut with the 1976 film version of Yukio Mishima's novel *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*.

Conroy discovered that his father became more ac-

cepting of the novel when the film version went into pre-production, suggesting that the late John Wayne would have been an ideal choice to play himself on the screen, for "only he could've gotten my incredible virility across to the American people." Pat Conroy convinced Orion executives to send a telegram to his father: "Dear Col. Conroy: We have selected the actor to play you in the coming film. He wants to come to Atlanta to interview you. His name is Truman Capote."

The filmmakers' actual choice, Robert Duvall, had played only a handful of leading roles since his film debut in 1962's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, including the thief Macklin in the caper thriller *The Outfit* and the title role in George Lucas's *THX-1138*. Duvall was best known for his Oscar-nominated performance as family consigliere Tom Hagen in *The Godfather*, a role he reprised in *The Godfather, Part II*. He had played a precursor to Bull Meechum in *Apocalypse Now*'s memorable Col. Kilgore, but that film, shot in 1976 and 1977, would not reach theaters until the middle of 1979.

Young TV veterans Lisa Jane Persky, Julie Anne Haddock and Brian Andrews were cast as the youngest Meechum children, but the pivotal role of Ben proved the hardest to cast, with Carlino auditioning more than 200 young actors before settling on 23-year-old Michael O'Keefe. "Several gave us the sensitivity we wanted, but they missed one vital element. As the story evolves, Ben puts up with a lot of emotional heavy artillery from his father. You have to sense he's taking it not out of weakness or cowardice, but for other reasons. He has to project an inner resolve. Otherwise, he's a victim. And Bull is a monster." O'Keefe had made his film debut in the submarine thriller *Gray Lady Down*, and his impressive theater résumé included the original cast of David Rabe's *Streamers*, directed by Mike Nichols.

While scouting locations, the filmmakers traveled to Beaufort, South Carolina, the setting of the novel as well as one of Conroy's real-life childhood homes. According to Carlino, "Beaufort has changed remarkably little since Conroy lived there. We used the novel as a map in scouting locations. And wherever we looked, we found what we wanted." Conroy wrote to the Marine Corps public relations department to ask for their cooperation in making the film: "The leatherneck aviator lives life at high acceleration—on the cutting edge. He is a man of action, not of introspection. He is a warrior never quite comfortable in the milieu of his own home. He is motivated by the powerful mythology of the Marine aviator."

Carlino filmed dogfight sequences from a Learjet converted to a camera plane, equipped with three cam-

eras and a video monitor. The director felt “the cooperation of the Marines was sensational. Just clearing the airspace over Beaufort... and the communications problems entailed for constant retakes was an adventure. But they were determined to make the aerial sequences accurate and exciting.”

Carlino found the Beaufort residents appearing as extras in the film “refreshingly unprofessional. Nobody asked about the next coffee break.” The filmmakers used a local fishery for a fight scene between Stan Shaw, the martial-artist-turned-actor playing Ben’s ill-fated friend Toomer, and David Keith (who later starred in the film of Conroy’s *The Lords of Discipline*) as his redneck nemesis.

The studio considered changing the title, worried that *The Great Santini* sounded more like a magician than a fighter pilot, but Carlino felt the title was right because Meechum himself was a performer. “He’s a juggler, a clown, a daredevil, a bully, a rogue, a man who thrives on danger, who has incredible energy and drive.” The film screened as *The Ace* in Cincinnati in February 1980, in San Diego in April, and in Sacramento, Stockton and Modesto in May, and was a failure in each city. Pratt pointed out that “The local reviews were very good but business was very disappointing, to put it mildly. We had always figured it would not be an easy picture to sell, since it didn’t lend itself to quick description, but we were convinced we had a strong, visceral drama about the conflicts in the family of a Marine Corps officer. We couldn’t figure out what was wrong.” Having spent \$800,000 on prints and advertising as well as half of the film’s \$4 million budget, the studio decided to cut their losses, and made deals for *The Ace* to screen on HBO and on American Airlines flights. Summer explained that “we all agonized over it, and we all came to the same conclusion. The movie had had every opportunity and it didn’t look like there was a chance of turning it around.”

In a *Hollywood Reporter* article about the film’s advertising strategy, Carlino agreed with Pratt’s assessment that Santini’s last hope was opening on a single screen in New York: “If a movie is not an event picture, a genre picture, or if it lacks a huge star, it is, of course, harder to sell. You have to rely on critical and media endorsement, and the quickest way to get that is a single house in New York. New York is better than L.A. because its population is more concentrated, the national media is New York-based, and that seal of approval is out of New York.”

Santini was hardly the only film of its time that had

trouble reaching theaters: among other 1980 releases whose fates initially seemed questionable were such ultimate Oscar contenders as *Melvin and Howard*, *Resurrection* (written by Carlino), *The Stunt Man* and Best Picture nominee *Tess*. Pratt managed to book *Santini* at New York’s Festival Theater—until theater operators discovered the film was already scheduled to play on HBO. In mid-July 1990, the studio negotiated a nine-month booking at New York’s Guild Theater, where *Santini* finally found success.

One of the film’s biggest fans was novelist-screenwriter William Goldman, who devoted several pages in his classic *Adventures in the Screen Trade* to lauding a scene in which Bull, having lost a backyard basketball game to his son, taunts Ben by bouncing the ball off his head. According to Goldman, “speaking purely as a screenwriter... no scene in recent years has rocked me as much as the basketball-playing scene,” praising its “power and brilliance” and especially Duvall’s performance, for, as Goldman wrote of the scene, “no major star would ever ever ever in this world play it.” Goldman even supplied a hilarious rewrite of the sequence, in which Bull’s sore-loser bullying becomes a loving father’s attempt to toughen up his son.

The film ultimately grossed \$4 million in the U.S., earning two Oscar nominations—Best Actor (his first in the category) for Duvall, and Best Supporting Actor for O’Keefe. Despite widespread acclaim, they lost the awards to two even more talked-about performances—Robert De Niro in *Raging Bull* and Timothy Hutton in *Ordinary People*—but Duvall went on to win Best Actor for 1983’s *Tender Mercies*. The film’s success came a little too late for producer Pratt, as Cox Broadcasting—owner of Bing Crosby Productions—folded the company. Pratt remarked, “At 56, I’m looking for another job.” He went on to produce several projects for television before his death in 2005.

Pat Conroy used elements from his real life in all of his most famous books—his education at The Citadel inspired *The Lords of Discipline*, while his brother’s suicide and his sister’s battles with mental illness partly inspired the bestseller *The Prince of Tides*—but it was *The Great Santini* that had the greatest effect on his relationship with his family. The older Conroy would make public appearances with his son and autograph copies of the novel, writing “Donald Conroy—The Great Santini. I hope you enjoy my son’s work of fiction!” In the last weeks of his life, the father told his author-son, “I was always your best subject.”

—Scott Bettencourt