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AWARDS

For Martin Scorsese, it's all about forgiveness

BY GLENN WHIPP | COLUMNIST

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ve decent and then learn to become indecent? Can we change? Will others accept that change?" These are among the themes Martin Scorsese explores in his work. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

Forget the ghosts of Christmas past. Martin Scorsese has been thinking lately about dearly departed friends from another holiday celebration, a Los Angeles Thanksgiving at the small home off Mulholland Drive he was sharing with musician Robbie Robertson. It was an “extraordinarily joyous” occasion, Scorsese remembers, 45 years after the fact, as he had just been released from the hospital, a surprising turn of events, seeing as he very much believed he was going to die.

So, to celebrate, he hired someone to cook a Thanksgiving dinner — he barely knew

how to boil water — invited a bunch of friends over, including an Italian producer working on Michelangelo Antonioni's next movie. Is it OK if I bring Mr. Antonioni to your house, the producer asked. Of course. The more, the merrier. But as the evening wore on, Scorsese recalls that Antonioni, a filmmaker adept at conveying estrangement and emotional alienation, could not understand why Scorsese and Robertson kept laughing so much.

“Really, we could just not stop ourselves,” Scorsese says. “I was alive, for one thing. And I had started working on ‘Raging Bull.’ I was back on track after a long period of trying to find a way to continue, a reason to be excited about the prospect of going to a movie set. For a long time, I doubted if I still had enough to care about to make a movie. Now I did.”

It's a rainy winter day in L.A., and Scorsese is collecting his thoughts for a speech he'll give later this night at a celebration of Robertson's life and music. Robertson [died in August](#), not long after his final musical collaboration with Scorsese, the score for the filmmaker's latest masterpiece, [“Killers of the Flower Moon,”](#) had been heard by audiences at the Cannes Film Festival. After our conversation, Scorsese delivered a moving, 17-minute remembrance of his friendship with Robertson, which began with the concert film “The Last Waltz” and continued through collaborations on such movies as “The King of Comedy,” “Silence” and “The Wolf of Wall Street.”



n Scorsese and Robbie Robertson at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2019. (George Pimentel / Getty Images)

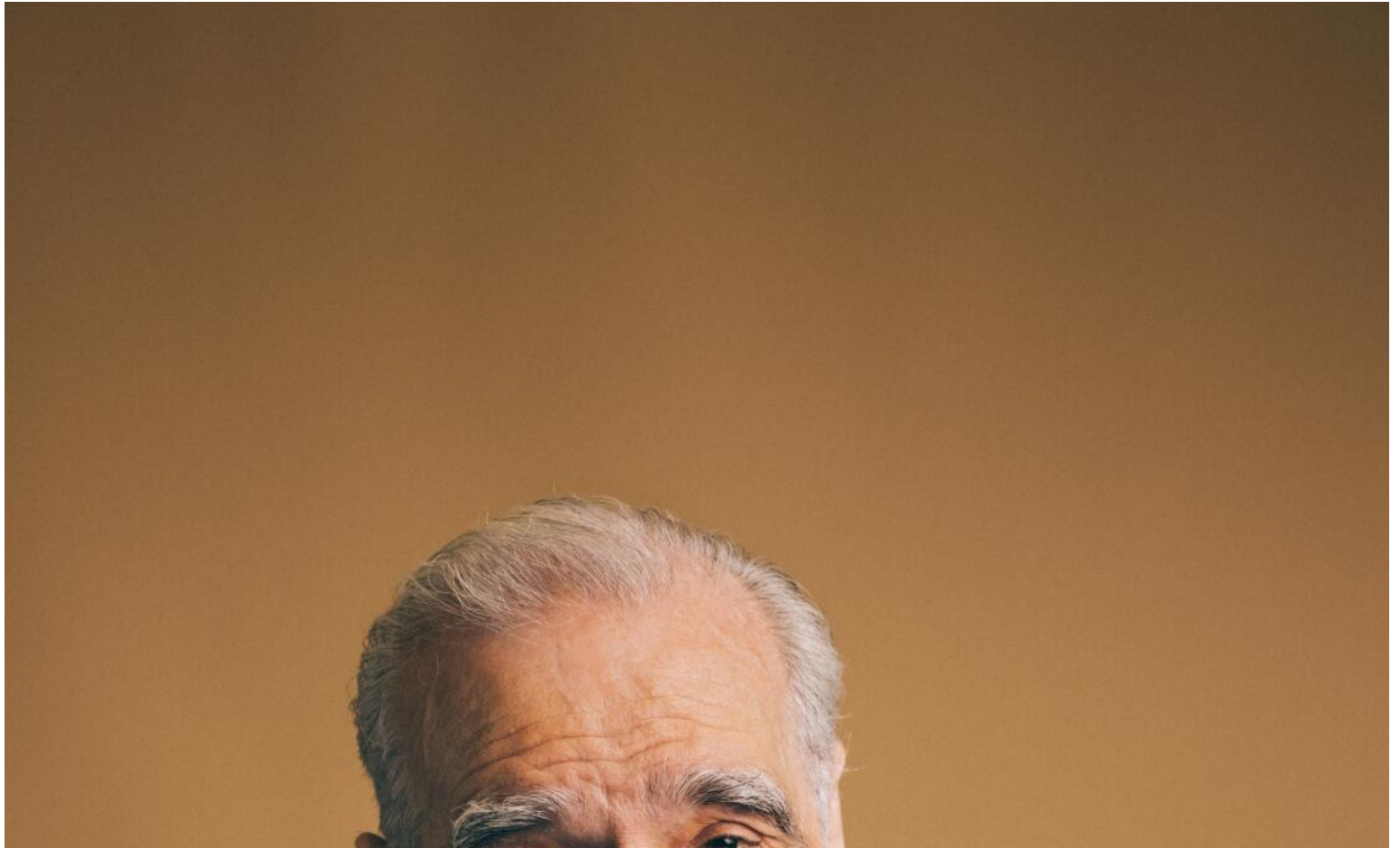
Given the circumstances, our thoughts couldn't help but drift to Robertson and the years Scorsese spent in Los Angeles in the '70s. Scorsese arrived early in 1971 at the behest of Warner Bros. executive Fred Weintraub, renting an apartment off Franklin Avenue in Hollywood because it reminded him of his native New York.

"Freddie said come out for two weeks, try it and it won't mess you up too badly," Scorsese says. "I spent the first year acclimating, learning how to drive. It was a new world." He smiles. "I started wearing jeans."

Actor David Carradine told Scorsese he needed a flashier car than the rental he was

driving and found a 1960 Corvette, white with red leather interior, for him to buy for \$500. It was hard to handle — “you had to be a real hotshot to do it,” Scorsese says — particularly since he didn’t know how to work the clutch. But Scorsese learned and began to enjoy driving the Corvette around town, if only to crank the radio and listen to new music from Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Eric Clapton and the Grateful Dead.

“The music always created images that precipitated dramatic scenes and ultimately became ‘Mean Streets,’ ‘Taxi Driver,’ ‘Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,’” Scorsese says. “Driving on the freeway at 2 in the morning with no cars and listening to the Allman Brothers could inspire so many thoughts. My first connection with creativity was always music, going back to the 78 records my father would play me when I was 5, 6 years old — Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Django Reinhardt in the Hot Club of France. Images would come into my mind as I listened. They were abstract, but they made me move in my head.”





He always use this phrase as a joke — ‘peace, love’ — but it’s not funny. Those are things to aspire to,” says director Martin Scorsese. (Jay Lenin/Los Angeles Times)

The early years in Los Angeles essentially allowed Scorsese the chance to deny where he was from and try on a new identity. He started wearing [cowboy hats and boots](#), big

belt buckles, Nudie shirts, lots of denim. People laughed at him. What? You're a cowboy now? But he was making "Alice Doesn't Live Here" around Tucson, and the clothes suited the climate and the culture. Plus, Scorsese grew up watching John Ford westerns. Now he could make like he lived in one.

But by the time Scorsese moved to the home off Mulholland — his doctor told him he needed to go above the smog line to help control his asthma — he was depressed, suffering his first flop, the 1977 musical "New York, New York," and battling creative paralysis. All the cocaine didn't help, either. When he was finally admitted to the hospital with internal bleeding, right before that 1978 Thanksgiving party, Scorsese had come full circle, facing who he was and where he came from.

"It was over," Scorsese says of his time out West. He had finally finished "The Last Waltz," the elegiac documentary of the Band's farewell concert, which, in itself, felt like a harbinger of change. "It was the end of that music and, sadly, people always use this phrase as a joke — 'peace, love' — but it's not funny. Those are things to aspire to."

Scorsese has been on a creative roll for the last decade, making an irreverent black comedy about unencumbered greed (["The Wolf of Wall Street"](#)), a passion project about faith and doubt ("Silence"), a crime epic tinged with betrayal and regret ("The Irishman") and now "Killers of the Flower Moon," an epic exploration of exploitation, injustice and erasure. "Freedom," he says, when asked about the key to this late run. He has gone from being a "barbarian pounding at the gates of Rome" to an elder statesman propelled by generous independent financing.



AWARDS

Through 'Silence,' Martin Scorsese examines his own spiritual journey

Jan. 10, 2017

“But still scrapping or scraping or however you want to put it,” Scorsese says with a laugh. “‘Silence,’ ‘The Irishman,’ ‘Killers of the Flower Moon’ ... these were not movies studios were eager to make.”

“Do you see those three films in conversation with each other?” I ask.

“I tried finding with ‘Kundun’ and ‘The Last Temptation of Christ,’ even ‘Gangs of New York,’ to a certain extent, ways into redemption and the human condition and how we deal with the negative things inside us,” Scorsese says. “Are we decent and then learn to become indecent? Can we change? Will others accept that change? And it really is, I think, a fear of a society and culture that’s corrupted because of its lack of grounding in morality and spirituality. Not religion. Spirituality. Denying that.”

“So for me, it’s finding my own way in a ... if you want to say the term ‘religious’ sense, but I hate to use that language, because it’s misinterpreted often,” he continues. “But there’s basic fundamental beliefs that I have — or I’m trying to have — and I’m using these films to find it.”



Lily Gladstone and Martin Scorsese on the set of "Killers of the Flower Moon." (Melinda Sue Gordon / Apple TV+)

"Killers of the Flower Moon" tells the true story of morally reprehensible men bent on murdering dozens of members of the Osage nation to obtain their rights to oil-rich land in Oklahoma in the 1920s. Ernest Burkhart, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, marries an Osage woman, Mollie (Lily Gladstone), and then, acting on instructions from his uncle, William Hale (Robert De Niro), sets upon a scheme of helping to kill her kin. Yet Ernest seems to genuinely love Mollie. Can a man be devoted to his wife and exterminate her family?

"Yes, exterminate her family and, for all he knows, helping to exterminate her," Scorsese answers. "His weakness reminds me of the character of Kichijirō in 'Silence'

who keeps apostatizing and then keeps asking for forgiveness and then, on top of it all, informs on the priests and then goes to Confession and asks the priest for forgiveness. Hence, what is the Christian way? Must the priest forgive him? And if he does forgive him, how does he control his own hate and anger toward this guy?"

Scorsese shakes his head, ruminating on the question for a moment.

"It's almost an impossible goal for human beings, that kind of forgiveness," he continues, lowering his voice to a whisper. "But I really believe in it. If we nurture forgiveness, maybe the world could change, ultimately. I'm not saying next year. It could be a thousand years from now, if we're still around."

After "Killers of the Flower Moon" premiered at Cannes in May, Scorsese traveled to Italy with his wife, Helen Morris, to attend a conference titled the Global Aesthetics of the Catholic Imagination. Afterward, he met briefly with Pope Francis and later announced, "I have responded to the pope's appeal to artists in the only way I know how: by imagining and writing a screenplay for a film about Jesus."



MOVIES

Martin Scorsese rewrote 'Killers of the Flower Moon' to make sure it wasn't just 'about all the white guys'

Sept. 13, 2023

Scorsese has completed the screenplay for that film, collaborating with critic and filmmaker Kent Jones, and plans to shoot it later this year. They're still "swimming in inspiration," he tells me, still figuring it out. It'll be based on Shūsaku Endō's book "A Life of Jesus." (Endō also wrote "Silence.") And it'll be set mostly in the present day, though Scorsese doesn't want to be locked into a certain period, because he wants the film to feel timeless. He envisions the movie to run around 80 minutes, focusing on Jesus' core teachings in a way that explores the principles but doesn't proselytize.

“I’m trying to find a new way to make it more accessible and take away the negative onus of what has been associated with organized religion,” Scorsese says.

Every time the word “religion” has come up since we started talking, I say, you’ve tried to find a way around it.

“Right now, ‘religion,’ you say that word and everyone is up in arms because it’s failed in so many ways,” Scorsese says. “But that doesn’t mean necessarily that the initial impulse was wrong. Let’s get back. Let’s just think about it. You may reject it. But it might make a difference in how you live your life — even in rejecting it. Don’t dismiss it offhand. That’s all I’m talking about. And I’m saying that as a person who’s going to be 81 in a couple of days. You know what I’m saying?”

He’s asking. But he’s not asking. Who wants to go there and dwell on *that*? Later, though, we start talking about the scene in “Killers of the Flower Moon” where Mollie’s mother, Lizzie, dies and peacefully enters the afterlife, greeted and guided by her ancestors. The weather was perfect that day, Scorsese says, and when Lizzie walked away with her mother and father and ancestors, he kept the camera rolling for a long time.

“The whole crew could feel it. It was the Elysian Fields,” Scorsese says. “And we thought, ‘That would be the best way to go. They just take us home.’”



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