

# Screenwriters

by [Alan Swyer](#) (May 2025)



Media Moguls (Charles Bragg)

**Looking back, Steve Altman understood** how his friendship with Gene Baldecchi seemed inevitable. But he could never have imagined the direction it would ultimately take.

When the two of them met, each was a fledgling screenwriter, relatively new both to Los Angeles and the movie business, yet graced with development deals that paid low-budget scale but included office space away from production centers in the not-yet-fully-gentrified beachfront town of Venice.

Both of them, they quickly discovered, had much in common above and beyond their script deals with up-and-coming producer Brian Clark. Each hailed from New Jersey—Steve from a suburb of Manhattan; Gene from a town near Philly. Each was a basketball junkie, addicted to shooting hoops at local playgrounds and watching countless games on TV. Even more surprising, both, they came to realize, were born not just on the same day in August, but in the very same year.

Beyond those coincidences, they also shared a dream. Inspired by the same classic movies—Orson Welles' "Falstaff," Godard's "Pierrot Le Fou," John Cassavetes' "Husbands," Louis Malle's "The Fire Within," Bruce Robinson's "Withnail & I," and Claude Sautet's "Mado" —each hoped to write and direct personal films.

In a business riddled with jealousy, backstabbing, and ruthlessness, the two Jerseyites became a study in cooperation. Each served not merely as a sounding board for the other's ideas and notions, plus a resource when a script—or real life—seemed to go awry, but also as a provider of that rarest of all things in Hollywood: constructive criticism. Even more important, when one was down, the other was there as a cheerleader, or as a shoulder to lean on. When one was wounded by cruel or nonsensical criticism from an agent, producer, or self-important studio exec, the other would come to the rescue with humor. "A Martian wouldn't say that" became a go-to joke when needed, often followed by "Does the Rabbi really have to be Jewish?" And always there was a much-appreciated reminder that the perpetrator had been involved in one or more of the worst fiascoes ever to blight the screen.

A painful lesson was learned by the aspiring filmmakers when their scripts for Brian Clark—Steve's inspired by a scandal in his hometown where a blue-collar father and son were involved with the same woman; Gene's about an ill-fated teenage romance—received glowing receptions at various studios, then

ultimately stalled. Yet some solace came when each of them became, in Hollywood parlance, "The flavor of the month."

That led both to additional writing assignments. Steve was persuaded by his agent, Mel Solomon, to adapt an adventure novel set in Africa, while Gene agreed to craft a contemporary version of an old black & white caper film.

No longer benefiting from Brian Clark's offices, they took to meeting for lunch every Tuesday, always at inexpensive ethnic restaurants.

"You happy?" Gene asked one week at an Indian place in Culver City featuring an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Steve shrugged. "I feel like I'm taking in laundry."

"Me, too," acknowledged Gene. "But at least I found an apartment where I don't hear gunshots every night, which means Chloe can finally move in with me."

"There's something else we have in common," responded Steve. "I found a little bungalow, and Claire's moving in."

Still perceived as young writers on the rise, both managed to get yet another deal when their second assignments went nowhere, seemingly proving that Hollywood is a place where it's possible to get by without anything getting made.

Scalded after toiling on a project to which he brought nothing personally, Steve pitched a largely autobiographical story about growing up white in a primarily Black neighborhood. After several glorious meetings that went nowhere, a deal was offered by a producer named Perry Lang. Gene, meanwhile, agreed to team up with someone the two of them had met while working in Venice—TV writer-producer named Rob Jatlow—on a feature script about a Him-and-Her karaoke team whose professional life was complicated by the ups-and-downs of their romance.

“What happens,” Gene asked Steve at one of their Tuesday get-togethers, “if we keep getting patted on the head and told how wonderful we are—”

“But nothing ever gets made?” said Steve, finishing his friend’s sentence. “Maybe we can get work at Big 5 Sporting Goods. Who knew when we got here that there’s something called Development Hell?”

“Which may be where both of us are headed. So what do we do?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m not doing, and that’s crawling back to Jersey with my tail between my legs.”

“So it comes down to finally getting a break?” asked Gene.

“Or making one,” replied Steve.

Steve’s experience on his personal project yielded yet another lesson in the ways of Hollywood. After being treated to lunches galore by Perry Lang, plus scores of “checking-in” phone calls, he turned in a draft that was praised to the skies by the producer and his development exec, Ariel Gordon. Given notes that ranged from insightful to inconsequential, Steve worked for a month on a rewrite, then a couple of weeks on a polish. High praise came his way, accompanied by promises from both Lang and Ariel Gordon that good things would be forthcoming.

While trying not to get his hopes too high, Steve nonetheless often found himself thinking—especially while lying awake beside Claire at night—that maybe, just maybe, he might soon have a film in production.

That expectation was shattered one Monday morning when his agent called with what he called “Good news and bad news.” The “good,” Mel Solomon announced, was that a studio was buying the project. The “bad” was that another writer was being hired to flip Steve’s premise, making it a tale of a Black kid

growing up in a white neighborhood.

"That makes no sense," protested Steve.

"Welcome to the movie biz," countered the agent.

The lesson was clear: A screenwriter is important only until the moment a script is turned in. Then, instead of being "the writer," he or she becomes "only the writer, merely the writer, and nothing but the writer," then suddenly "no longer the writer."

"As rotten as you're feeling," offered Gene over lunch at an Ethiopian place, "at least the film may happen. While yours truly is again left out in the cold."

"Why?" wondered Steve.

"Jatlow bailed."

"How come?"

"An old pilot script he wrote has risen from the dead."

"Not cool."

"No shit," said Gene. "But can I blame him?"

"Not really. But you can still stick pins in a voodoo doll."

"Some fucking business, huh?" Gene said painfully.

Both of them shrugged.

The shared funk they experienced was compounded by the realization that the glow they initially experienced had given way to the fear that in Hollywood, as in baseball, three strikes might mean they were out.

Though each reassured the other that their scripts were far better than what was getting made, both began to be haunted by the sound of the phone not ringing.

“So what in hell do we do?” asked Gene when they met for a lunch at a taco joint.

“Either roll up our sleeves and write originals– “

“Or?”

“Buy lottery tickets and hope.”

“Know what we need?” moaned Gene. “Some *deus ex machina*”

“Like in bad plays and movies?” wondered Steve.

Gene sighed. “We damn well need something.”

To their surprise, each soon received a call seemingly from out of nowhere. It was from Rob Jatlow, who summoned them to his new office in Studio City.

Having gotten a green-light to go from pilot to series, Jatlow presented his plan. “Instead of rounding up the usual suspects for the writing staff,” he began, “I want to bring in new blood—feature writers like you guys—who won’t deliver the same tired old shit. With me?”

When Steve and Gene nodded, Jatlow told them about what he called “his dramedy,” whose central character was a newly-appointed white football coach with the seemingly impossible mission of rekindling school spirit—and academics—at a crumbling inner city high school.

“So what do you think?” asked Gene when he and Steve stopped for frozen yogurt before heading their separate ways.

“It’s nice to be wanted.”

“Is that a thanks-but-no-thanks?”

“Not 100 percent.”

“Sounds like at least 90 or 95,” commented Gene.

"How about you?" asked Steve.

Gene took a deep breath. "Will you hate me if I say yes?"

"More to the point," said Steve, "will you hate yourself?"

"I'm thinking mainly about Chloe, who's flipping out about no bucks coming in."

"Which doesn't thrill Claire either."

Gene nodded. "You sure about saying no?"

"I'll think about it," said Steve.

"Am I crazy?" Steve asked Claire after announcing his reluctance to accept Jatlow's offer.

"Maybe," she answered. "But crazy good."

"It'll mean no fancy dinners, no Porsches, no trips to the South of France."

"Poor, poor pitiful me. Plus, no eighty-hour weeks for you."

"Which means you'll be stuck seeing me."

"I'll survive," said Claire with a smile.

Due to the hours Gene was putting in, the weekly Tuesday lunches were replaced by a once-in-a-while Sunday afternoon basketball rendezvous.

"So is it rewarding?" Steve asked one afternoon when they hooked up at a playground.

"Financially, yeah," Gene answered. "Otherwise? It's better than bronchitis. I figure one season, and then it's back to doing what I want to do. And you?"

"I'm hoping something'll materialize."

That something, which came after three-and-a half weeks of silence that felt more like several months, came not from his agent, nor from any of the producers or studio executives who were presumably champions of Steve's work. Instead, as he was walking back to his car after a Saturday morning pick-up basketball game, one of the other players caught up to him.

"You're a writer, right?" asked Paul Steinberg.

"Guilty."

"From New York?"

"Jersey."

"Can I read something?"

"Sure," said Steve. "But can I ask why?"

"What do you know about Harlem playground basketball?"

"You mean the Rucker Tournament, and guys like Herman the Helicopter?"

Steinberg beamed. "I knew you'd know."

To Steve's amazement, Steinberg, who with a partner named Larry Lattanzio, had optioned the life rights of a legendary Harlem basketball ballplayer, read his largely autobiographical script in record time, then asked for his agent's number. Steve's jubilation, however, was quickly stymied by Mel Solomon.

"No fucking way!" the agent reported to him.

"Why not?"

"All he's offering is low-budget scale. You can't lower your price."

"Whoa!" said Steve. "You'd rather see me do nothing, or take



some meaningless gig, than something I'd kill for?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. You obviously don't know the way things work."

"And you obviously know nothing about me," said Steve, who promptly fired the agent.

Having gotten Steinberg and his partner to spring for a week in Harlem so that he could hang with the aging legend while refreshing himself on sights and sounds, Steve managed to quiet his Hollywood-fed fears that something, somehow, would go awry.

"Somebody looks like he having fun," commented Claire over Thai food once Steve started scripting. Nor was she the only one to notice the changes.

"Haven't seen you this upbeat in ages," remarked Gene Baldecchi two Sundays later when they got together to shoot hoops.

"This is what happens when work doesn't feel like work," Steve replied. "What's the latest with you?"

Gene sank a jumpshot, then shrugged. "You'll think I'm a wimp."

"Because?"

"I agreed to a second season, with a bump up to story editor. And over hiatus I'm taking Chloe to Italy."

Steve chose not to comment.

There was excitement when Steve turned in his first draft. That increased to jubilation when he finished a rewrite, then even more with the polish. Then came silence, silence, and more silence.

Without an agent, Steve spent a week, then a second, then a

third, determined not to ask if there was news.

Ten days after that, Steinberg called. "Bet you're wondering what's up."

"Who me?" joked Steve.

"You'll never believe what happened," Steinberg reported. "Our money man did a Houdini and disappeared."

"Now there's a first," said Steve sarcastically.

"But I promise you, we're gonna get the fucker made. What studios do you think make the most sense?"

"Frankly, I think the best hope is cable."

"Nah," muttered Steinberg. "The big screen or bust."

Though aware that existentially—and financially—his wisest move would be to write an original screenplay strong enough to attract an agent and reignite his career, Steve found himself frozen, blocked, immobilized. Days turned to weeks, then to months, with nothing to show but frustration and an ever-growing pile of bills.

On a Thursday morning when he was fighting the urge to bang his head against a wall, another call came from Paul Steinberg, who wanted to know which cable network made the most sense. With Netflix not yet on the scene, Steve advocated HBO.

"Okay," said Steinberg. "I know somebody in the office here."

"Not here," pleaded Steve. "New York, where a Harlem basketball story means more."

"Great fucking news!" Steinberg exclaimed two weeks later. "They wanna fucking make it!"

Though thrilled that the film was headed toward production,

Steve gulped when he learned that production would be in Toronto.

“What are you going to do?” he asked an HBO production exec named Ted Merricks. “Dress the streets with litter?” Steve tried and tried to stress the need for the verisimilitude of filming in Harlem. When refused, he begged for one week of what’s called second unit.

At the premiere nearly a year later, Merricks approached him apologetically. “If we’d listened to you,” he acknowledged, “the film would have warranted a big screen release.”

“C’mon,” said Claire as she and Steve were leaving the screening. “It’s still terrific. But didn’t you invite Gene and Chloe?”

“Of course.”

“Did you see them?” asked Claire. “Because I didn’t.”

“I don’t think they showed up.”

“I hope—” said Claire, who chose not to finish her thought.

“Hope what?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes,” said Steve.

“It wasn’t out of jealousy.”

Steve flinched. “With all the money he’s making?”

Claire nodded. “You’re doing what he wishes he was doing.”

Steve flinched.

“Am I wrong?” asked Claire.

Steve’s only answer was a shrug.

The following week, while stepping into a restaurant in Burbank for a lunch meeting, Steve unexpectedly crossed paths with Gene.

"Hey, man," said Gene, uncomfortably. "Sorry we missed your screening."

"No big deal," replied Steve.

"And it's my bad that I didn't call."

Steve eyed Gene warily. "You okay?" asked Steve.

"Actually I'm great. They're making me a producer on the series, and there's talk of a deal developing new shows."

"So you're a mogul?"

"Not yet, but getting there," said Gene. "Gotta run, but let's talk soon."

"You bet," responded Steve, sensing that was unlikely.

Instead of his longed-for screen credit resulting in a qualitative change in his career or his life, what Steve got was yet another lesson. Meetings, he saw more clearly than ever, no matter how upbeat and promising, rarely yield a follow-up. It was as though producers were doing nothing but filling their day. As for the agents who reached out, their come-ons reminded him of a joke told to him by a veteran screenwriter named Larry Marcus. *Q: What's the definition of an agent? A: A heat-seeking missile.*

When another opportunity presented itself, it was via someone else from Saturday morning basketball. After raving to Steve about what he called "your movie," Art Avakian asked a favor. "Mind reading a psychological thriller a friend and I are gearing up to produce?"

Fearing awkwardness if the script proved to be a dud, Steve

procrastinated for much of the weekend before dutifully sitting down with it.

As though he had a telescope fixed on Steve, Avakian called the moment he reached *Fade Out*. "So what do you think?" the producer asked.

"How truthful do you want it?"

"Give it to me straight."

"It's neither psychological nor a thriller."

"I was afraid of that," moaned Avakian. "Since we've got a start date, tell me how it can be fixed."

"First, you're focused on the wrong guy. Instead of the killer, the hero should be the father whose daughter was murdered years before."

"Because he thinks the same murderer's back?"

"Exactly."

"And?"

"Instead of a local cop heading the case, you need an outsider—a female FBI agent."

"Because?"

"With her and the father you've got a potential love story."

"I knew you'd help!" gushed Avakian. "When can you start?"

"On what?"

"A rewrite."

Taken aback, Steve asked about the timetable and the budget. Informed that filming was to start in three weeks, and the budget was barely above minuscule, he grimaced. "Thanks, but

no thanks.”

“But I love your ideas!” protested Avakian.

“Take ‘em. They’re yours.”

“C’mon,” urged Avakian. “What would it take to get you to say yes?”

“How about I coin a phrase?” said Steve. “Let me direct.”

“Why you?” asked Avakian.

“At your budget, midway through filming somebody else’ll be hustling a next gig. But me, I’ll be trying to make it my calling card.”

“Gimme some time to talk to my partner,” said Avakian with a sigh.

Assuming that was the last he’d hear, Steve was about to go for a bike ride when Avakian called to set up a lunch the next day.

After introductions, Avakian’s partner, Larry Lattanzio, glared at Steve. “What if I say forget directing?”

“Then lunch is on me,” said Steve, slapping a 50 dollar bill on the table and starting toward the door.

One, two, three seconds went by before Avakian’s voice was heard. “Wait!”

After pushing back the start of principal photography by two weeks, Steve began a rewrite fueled by adrenaline, caffeine, trail mix, Red Bull, and ambition. The only interruptions, other than dinners with Claire, were meetings with cinematographers, actors, a line producer, a location manager, and other crew members.

It was a race against time, with Steve handing over pages of his work-in-progress for budgeting, permits, wardrobe, and other needs.

So that the film wouldn't have the same look as most SoCal indies, Steve insisted that instead of the San Fernando Valley, every scene would be shot in San Pedro, with its waterfront, hills, refineries, and small town feel.

A week-and-a-half into shooting, when Steve got home close to midnight on a Wednesday, Claire greeted him with a kiss, then asked how the day went.

"We had a permit problem at one location," Steve reported wearily. "Then some jerk tried to shake us down by blasting his radio. Plus a day player with an 11 AM call got lost, and I had to break up a near fight between Johnny the AD and Marco the DP."

"Must have been brutal."

Steve laughed. "But I loved every minute."

That was also true of the vicissitudes that followed. Despite Avakian's claims that the money was all in place, Steve discovered in post-production that there were no funds for what's called "needle-drop": the songs heard from car radios or inside stores. Fortunately, he was able to call on a Soul singer friend named Jimmy Lewis, who had a deal with a New Orleans label and was happy to provide what Steve needed.

When a screening was scheduled for cast, crew, and special friends, Claire asked a question as she and Steve were eating breakfast. "Are you including Gene and Chloe?"

"How can I not?"

"And if they don't come?"

Steve winced. "I guess life will go on."

That's what happened.

Though the film found a distributor and made money for Avakian and his partner, Steve was not hounded, chased, or beseeched by Warner Brothers, Paramount, or Columbia.

But he did hear from Jimmy Lewis, who asked if he would produce and direct a music video.

"I've got to be honest," Steve replied. "I've never done one."

"But your movie's hot shit. And I trust you."

After two whirlwind days of filming at a recording studio and a living room, plus a fantasy sequence with Jimmy surrounded at a pool by bikini-ed lovelies, Steve was too wound up to fall asleep. While Claire dreamed beside him, he tossed and turned, then started contemplating his situation.

Through luck, timing, and persistence, plus perhaps some measure of talent, he had stumbled upon, or maybe created, a path of his own. Without the relative security of episodic TV chosen by Gene, every new project seemed to thrust him into an entirely different realm. Still, operating without a safety net was scary, since any failure might spell the end.

As Steve joked to Claire and others on occasion, it was a life that was *ad hoc*, but hopefully not too often *in hock*.

Steve was getting restless during the subsequent lull when a call came from Brian Clark, who suggested they meet for coffee.



“See much of Gene these days?” Clark asked.

“Not really,” replied Steve, choosing not to elaborate.

“I heard his development deal’s going nowhere. Word is he’s a sidekick—what they used to call a second banana—not a creator. But now that you’re directing, maybe you can bail me out. I’ve hit a wall the last few months, and I’m tired of sitting on my hands. What can you and I make at a price with the bucks I’ve got squirreled away?”

“How about a documentary?”

“Ever done one?”

“No, but I’d never directed a thriller or a music video either. You a boxing fan by any chance?”

“I used to love watching Sugar Ray Leonard, De la Hoya, guys like that.”

“What if,” said Steve, “we do a doc about the Latinization of the sport, both in the ring and in the stands?”

Clark thought for a couple of moments, then nodded. “How much will it cost?”

“Know what the contractor said to the guy who wanted work done on his house?”

“Tell me.”

“How much you got? The key is that instead of New York, the center of the boxing world is now LA and Vegas. We can even interview guys from elsewhere when they show up for big fights.”

Though his career was still ad hoc, the documentary world brought a healthy dose of cause-and-effect into Steve’s

professional life. Instead of languishing in Development Hell, his projects were getting made. Added to that was continuity, albeit in a haphazard, often out-of-the-blue kind of way. Plus there were other benefits. Rather than being cloistered in front of his computer, he was among people, many of them fascinating. Because he was in charge, there were no notes about what a Martian might say or whether a Rabbi needed to be Jewish. Best of all, the subject matter was of interest to him, as opposed to what a producer or studio exec deemed "commercial."

Thanks to his boxing film's success on the festival circuit, plus an award for the best Latino-focused documentary, Steve was approached about a seemingly anomalous topic: Eastern Spirituality in the Western World. Featuring swamis, rinpoches, Zen masters, plus an assortment of academicians and scholars, that one led to his being recruited by NBC to explore the breakthroughs in the treatment of diabetes. That yielded yet another award, the Golden Mic for Best Network documentary.

Other films followed, some generated by Steve, others brought to him. One focused on an aging rock & roller Steve dubbed "The most famous person most people have never heard of." Another dealt with a daring judicial system experiment in which chronic criminality was treated the same way as a chronic disease. Then came a look at the artists and poets who created a Black cultural mecca in Los Angeles. Next, an even greater labor of love called "When Houston Had The Blues," dealing with the extraordinary Black music scene there that fell apart after integration.

Periodically, Steve thought of contacting Gene, especially when their mutual birthday neared. But given what Claire had diagnosed as jealousy, he didn't.

His fears were confirmed when, on an evening in early August, he bumped into Rob Jatlow at a Dodgers game.

“Heard things are going well for you,” said Jatlow.

“Fighting the good fight. And you?”

Jatlow shrugged. “Better than your buddy Gene.”

“Bad times?”

“Worse. His development deal went belly-up. Then he got fired from some b-level series after a dust-up with the star. Now I hear he’s pouring out his woes on a shrink’s couch three times a week.”

“Tough business,” said Steve with a sigh.

“On its good days,” countered Jatlow. “But it’s great you had a plan to do things your way.”

“Some plan,” Steve told Claire once he returned to Claire with hotdogs and told her about the conversation.

“Plan or no plan,” responded Claire, “you made things happen. But since you guys have a birthday coming up, maybe you should— ”

When Claire paused, Steve finished her sentence. “Call Gene?”

“Can it hurt?” asked Claire.

“You win,” said Steve with no great glee.

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**Alan Swyer** is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions. His newest production is called "When Houston Had The Blues."

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