# Matt Wolf’s intimate documentary reveals Paul Reubens’s complex legacy and private struggles



For documentaries that rely on intimate access to their subjects, the relationship between director and participant is often an intricate balancing act characterised by the constant negotiation of creative control. This dynamic is especially pronounced in "Pee-wee as Himself," Matt Wolf’s ambitious three-and-a-half-hour portrayal of Paul Reubens, which premiered on HBO amid significant anticipation. The film, showcasing over 40 hours of interviews and an extensive collection of archival footage, emerges as both a comprehensive biography and a nuanced exploration of Reubens’s complex legacy.

From the outset, Wolf found himself navigating the challenges of working with a subject as multifaceted as Reubens, who is best known for his iconic character, Pee-wee Herman. Wolf recalls their early interactions as intensely stimulating yet fraught with tension. Reubens expressed a desire to have a hand in crafting the documentary, stating, “I want to make this documentary myself.” Their collaboration unfolded over a multi-year process marked by creative clashes but also profound breakthroughs. Wolf remembers the comedian’s spirited insistence that he would exhaust the director before conceding their lengthy interview sessions, leaving a lasting impression on the creative dynamic between them.

As production progressed, Wolf adopted a dual role: not only a documentarian but an active participant in Reubens's narrative. This approach involved embracing the push and pull of their conversations, a decision underscored by the unexpected challenges posed by Reubens's death in August 2023 after a private battle with cancer. Wolf, now charged with safeguarding Reubens’s story, faced the daunting task of translating their candid dialogues into a film that not only celebrates but also interrogates the artist's life.

The initial cut of "Pee-wee as Himself" paid tribute to key moments in Reubens's life, from his unique childhood influences to his rise as a cultural icon with "Pee-wee’s Playhouse." However, as Wolf honed the narrative, he found that self-censorship lingered in some segments of the film. Critics have noted this shift toward deeper introspection, allowing viewers to grasp the full spectrum of Reubens's identity. The documentary touches on his private struggles, including his reclusive nature, which he admitted stemmed from a reluctance to expose himself to public scrutiny, especially regarding his sexuality. Notably, Reubens disclosed his homosexuality on camera, reflecting on his complicated relationship with fame and societal expectations.

The film does not shy away from the dimmer corners of Reubens's career, including the arrest that shadowed his public persona. Wolf realises that these candid revelations are essential for understanding the artist behind the persona, illustrating a man who was constantly negotiating his identity in a world that often demanded conformity. Despite broader societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ figures in media, the fear of backlash shaped Reubens’s choices, leading him to retreat from visibility after personal heartbreaks.

Critics have lauded the documentary for striking a balance between humour and gravity, capturing the essence of a creator who embodied the spirit of radical acceptance. With a 100% ‘Fresh’ rating on Rotten Tomatoes and a commendable Metascore of 78, "Pee-wee as Himself" stands out not just as a biography but as a meditation on the complexities of a life lived under public scrutiny. This duality is emblematic of a creator whose work resonated with audiences, especially those who found solace in the offbeat charm of his characters.

The reflections of Wolf and those who have championed Reubens’s work illuminate his enduring influence. Many viewers, regardless of their backgrounds, have found themselves enchanted by the show’s unique blend of absurdity and warmth, noting that "Pee-wee’s Playhouse" introduced themes of acceptance and individuality long before these concepts became mainstream. The documentary’s heartfelt intent is evidenced by stories of fans who, even in their final moments, expressed a wish to witness Reubens’s narrative, underscoring the deep connections forged through his work.

"Pee-wee as Himself" ultimately transcends the confines of a standard documentary; it serves as a celebration of a powerful legacy that continues to inspire future generations. Wolf's commitment to honouring Reubens's story comes with the understanding that, while no one can ever fully encapsulate another’s experiences, he strives to do right by the man who devoted his life to bringing joy and acceptance to his audiences.

In a world where authenticity remains contradictory and elusive, the film stands as a testament to the belief that individuality and eccentricity can both liberate and illuminate. Paul Reubens, through the lens of Wolf’s compassionate approach, reminds us that even in the most personal narratives, there is a universal chord that resonates across the many varied lives touched by art.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4
3. Paragraphs 1, 4, 5
4. Paragraphs 1, 3
5. Paragraphs 1, 3
6. Paragraphs 1, 2
7. Paragraphs 1, 4, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/may/21/pee-wee-herman-paul-reubens-documentary> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://press.wbd.com/us/ca/media-release/hbo-0/hbo-original-two-part-documentary-pee-wee-himself-debuts-may-23> - This press release announces the premiere of 'Pee-wee as Himself,' a two-part HBO documentary directed by Matt Wolf, debuting on May 23. The film offers an intimate portrait of Paul Reubens, featuring over 40 hours of interviews, 1,000 hours of archival footage, and thousands of never-before-seen photographs. It explores Reubens' influences, from his circus town upbringing to his avant-garde theater training, and his creation of the Pee-wee Herman character. The documentary also delves into his Emmy-winning show 'Pee-wee’s Playhouse' and his decision to keep his personal life private.
3. <https://www.whattowatch.com/features/movies-to-stream-in-may-our-experts-14-must-watch-movies-new-to-netflix-prime-video-max-and-more> - This article highlights 'Pee-wee as Himself' as a must-watch movie streaming in May. The two-part documentary, available on Max, provides an in-depth look at Paul Reubens' life and career, featuring rare footage and personal interviews. It premiered at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival and holds a 100% 'Fresh' score on Rotten Tomatoes. The piece emphasizes the documentary's exploration of Reubens' journey and the complexities of his fame.
4. <https://www.metacritic.com/tv/pee-wee-as-himself/> - Metacritic compiles reviews for 'Pee-wee as Himself,' noting a generally favorable reception with a Metascore of 78 based on five critic reviews. The documentary is praised for its nuanced portrayal of Paul Reubens, blending humor with introspection. Critics highlight the film's exploration of Reubens' personal and professional challenges, offering a complex and engaging narrative. The reviews underscore the documentary's success in capturing the essence of Reubens' multifaceted life.
5. <https://www.iconvsicon.com/2025/04/23/pee-wee-as-himself-hbo-documentary/> - This article provides an overview of 'Pee-wee as Himself,' the upcoming HBO documentary directed by Matt Wolf, set to premiere on May 23. It details the film's content, including over 40 hours of interviews with Paul Reubens, 1,000 hours of archival footage, and thousands of never-before-seen photographs. The documentary explores Reubens' influences, from his circus town upbringing to his avant-garde theater training, and his creation of the Pee-wee Herman character. It also delves into his Emmy-winning show 'Pee-wee’s Playhouse' and his decision to keep his personal life private.
6. <https://www.tribune.com.pk/story/2541948/pee-wee-as-himself-hbo-unveils-trailer-for-paul-reubens-documentary> - This article discusses the release of the official trailer for 'Pee-wee as Himself,' a two-part HBO documentary offering an intimate look into the life of Paul Reubens, the creator of Pee-wee Herman. Directed by Matt Wolf, the documentary compiles over 40 hours of personal interviews with Reubens, recorded before his death in 2023, and incorporates more than 1,000 hours of archival material and tens of thousands of never-before-seen photographs. It explores Reubens' early years, his education at the California Institute of the Arts, and his work with The Groundlings, where he developed the Pee-wee Herman character.
7. <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/pee_wee_as_himself/s01> - Rotten Tomatoes provides information on 'Pee-wee as Himself,' noting that the documentary has a 100% rating on the Tomatometer based on 12 critic reviews. The film is described as a heartwarming and ultimately heartbreaking documentary about a true creative genius, winding up being just as colorful, off-the-wall, and invigorating as its subject matter. Critics highlight the documentary's exploration of Paul Reubens' life and career, offering a complex and engaging narrative.