

Ron Kovic Today: Warrior at Peace

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

"IT WAS AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE," Ron Kovic said of watching Tom Cruise portray him on the set of "Born on the Fourth of July" in Dallas last year. "I was looking at myself live through the most difficult periods of my life. I was forced to deal with the reality of the hell that I had lived through in a way that I never dealt with it before."

"Born on the Fourth of July" is based on Mr. Kovic's autobiography of the same title, published in 1976. The author also shares the credits with Oliver Stone, the director, for the film's screenplay.

For some, reliving such experiences might only reopen old wounds; but for Mr. Kovic, now 43 years old, it proved cathartic. "The movie has helped me make sense of my life," he said.

In a 90-minute telephone conversation with a reporter who knew him when Mr. Kovic lived on Long Island, Mr. Kovic said: "Soon after the book came out in '76, I got a call from my agent in New York who said that there was a production company interested in making a movie out of 'Born on the Fourth of July.'"

"Everything was set, and then, with four days to go before filming, the movie was canceled. I think it was because they couldn't raise the money."

"I was brokenhearted. I knew that a movie would really be able to reach people who would not pick up my book. I decided to go and see friends in California; and there, in a sidewalk cafe in Venice, I met Oliver Stone. He was a nobody then. I mean, he had just completed 'Midnight Express,' but nobody knew what a genius he was."

"I told Oliver what had happened with the movie, and he said, 'Ron, if I ever break through, I'll come back for you.'"

What followed for Ron Kovic were, as he put it, almost 10 years of "wandering and drifting."

"Every time my monthly compensation check came in, I was on a jet," he said. He lived in cheap hotels and in the extra rooms of friends' homes, but never, he said, for longer than six

'The movie,' he says of film made from his book, 'has helped me make sense of my life.'

months in any one place. During this time, he began novels and plays, sometimes working in manic spurts of energy that kept him awake for days on end.

In 1986, he said, his anguish and frenzied life style caught up with him. He fell ill with a high fever and a bladder infection that kept him hospitalized for several months. He was released around the time of his 40th birthday and decided to "stop running and put down roots."

Mr. Kovic purchased a small three-bedroom ranch house with a big backyard in Los Angeles. "It's very simple," he said of the house. "It is an old remodeled Levitt-type house on a quiet street, vaguely similar to Toronto Avenue in Massapequa, where we grew up."

"It was the beginning of the healing process," he said.

But he didn't sit still for long. "I bought a piano and began to play. I started painting in acrylics on 40-foot canvases five feet high. I would drag the canvas across the picnic table in my backyard and, à la Jackson Pollock, I'd create these brightly colored, celebratory, expressionistic pieces."

He spent hours in his garden, planting tomatoes and zucchini and roses. "I lived very privately, alone, by myself. I had friends, but they respected my privacy."

A year after Ron Kovic moved into his house, he got a call from Oliver Stone, who by this time had won an Academy Award for another Vietnam movie, "Platoon."

"Oliver said just three words. And since then, nothing's really been the same. He said, 'Ronnie, I'm ready.'"



Outline Press/Neal Preston

Kovic on a California beach near his house last week